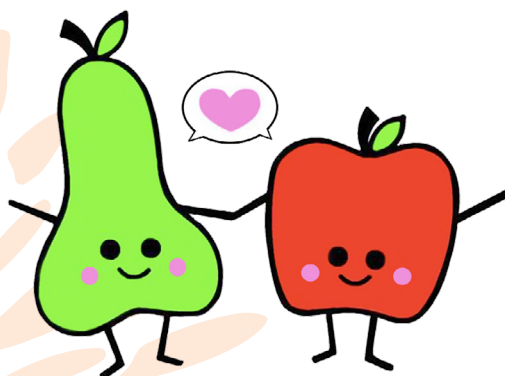




Maxine Platzer Lynn Women's Center  
AT THE UNIVERSITY OF VIRGINIA



# Body Positive Toolkit for Parents

# Thank you!

The Women's Center's Body Positive program is funded entirely by donors. We are grateful to all of the alumni, parents and other members of the University community whose support has enabled us to partner with many offices around Grounds and with student organizations to create a more informed, healthy and supportive community.



A special note of appreciation goes to the UVA Parents Fund for their support! They have made possible many of our efforts to ensure that students are getting the most from their time on Grounds unencumbered by disordered eating and exercise habits that would otherwise limit them in their education and in their lives after college.

# Welcome, Parents

Greetings from the Maxine Platzer Lynn Women's Center!

Like so many things at the Women's Center, this toolkit began with our students. Interns working to improve body image and address eating and exercise concerns around Grounds saw the need for an additional resource to assist U.Va. parents. This toolkit was created for you from their suggestions along with our staff's trained eye for the best resources available for prevention of eating disorders in college populations.

We hope that the information and resources in this toolkit will help you address body image issues confidently in your family and that you will join us in working to bring about a more body positive culture at U.Va.

As parents, you know that adolescence and early adulthood are times of rapid change and development. All of us who have experienced this can look back and see that the transition to adulthood happens on every level from the emotional to the spiritual to the physical. Yet many young people focus on what they can see—the body—as they develop their sense of who they are as a person. They lack the life experience needed to understand that what we look like is not all of who we are. Many of them need our support to accept that fact of life which is so fundamental to healthy adulthood.



But adolescence can be a loaded time for parents as well, filled with fear about how to teach our children about healthy self-concept when we may be struggling with changes in our own bodies. And communication with adolescents can be daunting! Advice or concerns we offer about body image, diet, or exercise can be misconstrued as criticism or lack of understanding.

Along with being cognizant of the developmental challenges that the young people in your family face, it can help for you to be mindful of the context in which your children live. Especially in the case of students who have earned their place at schools like U.Va., many young people have experienced a certain amount of success by applying intense effort to everything they do. It can seem to them as though an *ideal* body should be achievable if they try hard enough. We talk to many students who wrestle not only with poor body image but with issues like perfectionism, competition, over-scheduled calendars, little sleep, and a desire to maintain a body ideal. Unhealthy eating and exercise behaviors can be, in part, efforts to deal with the stress resulting from all of these elements of college life.

# What is body image?

Body image can be defined as:

- How we perceive our bodies visually.
- How we feel about our physical appearance.
- Our sense of how other people view our bodies.
- Our sense of our bodies in physical space.
- Our level of connectedness to our bodies.



Body image is shaped by:

- Social feedback: Comments from family, friends and others about our, their, and other people's bodies, both positive and negative.
- Learned ideals: Ideals that we develop about physical appearance based on modeling by parents, teachers, mentors and peers.
- Monitoring behavior: The frequency with which we compare ourselves to others.
- Media: Exposure to photoshopped images of idealized bodies versus real bodies.
- Physical experience: The experience of physical activity and sense of physical competence.
- Personal history: The experience of being well cared for, versus the experience of abuse, including sexual, physical, and emotional abuse.
- Sociocultural context: The experience of belonging and being valued, versus the experience of prejudice and discrimination based on race, ethnicity, religion, ability, sexual orientation or gender identity.
- Sensory experiences: pleasure, pain and illness.

## What You Need to Know

There is an intense focus on appearance and obtaining an unrealistic beauty ideal in our culture. With this pressure comes a potential for negative body image.

Poor body image (and some of the behaviors used to try to change weight) can negatively affect a young person's academic, social, and career

development. If the brain time and space that a college student should be spending on academic focus, mastery of new skills, development of interests, and new relationships goes instead into self-criticism and focus on one aspect of living (food, for example), development toward independent adulthood is delayed.

Poor body image is tied to higher anxiety, especially social anxiety, as well as greater use of substances like alcohol, tobacco or food to control that anxiety, as well as manage other feelings.

“Poor body image increases the risk for extreme weight/body control behaviors. Researchers have found that increased preoccupation with appearance and body dissatisfaction put people at greater risk for engaging in dangerous practices to control weight and size. Extreme dieting, exercise compulsion, laxative abuse, vomiting, smoking and use of anabolic steroids have all been associated with negative body image.”

[\(Brown University Health Promotions\)](#)

## U.Va. Students Speak

After a fight with my parents I was eavesdropping and I heard one of them say I was fat (even though I am definitely not considered obese or severely overweight!). It felt awful to think that someone who is supposed to love me said something so awful, even out of anger.

## Helpful Resources

- [NEDA General Information](#)
- [Brown University Body Image Information](#)
- [National Association for Males with Eating Disorders, Inc. \(N.A.M.E.D.\)](#)
- [GirlsHealth.gov - Information for Girls, ages 10 to 16](#)

## How You Can Help

- ***Listen to your child and express concern in a loving way.*** Reflect their feelings, not the negative body talk. Reflect and note any positive and accepting things they have to say in their self-assessments.
- ***Model healthy self-talk.*** Consider your own assumptions and values about weight, health, and body image issues.
- ***Become media literate*** (see page 10). Openly question media depictions of what constitutes a meaningful, healthy life.
- ***Eat intuitively yourself.*** Don't rely on external guides like charts, formulas, and tables to determine how to care for yourself. Instead, listen to your body. Eat intuitively balancing meals full of nutritious foods,

treats that you enjoy, and regular, moderate exercise. Encourage your family to do the same.

- ***Avoid judging yourself and others based on weight, shape, or size.*** Chances are your children are aware of your feelings. Because you are the most important role model to your child, it's important to consider that children may internalize your body image comments and behaviors.
- ***Appreciate people's character and accomplishments.*** Send your own kids positive messages about these things, rather than focusing on appearance-related talk.



## Survey Says

- 27% of college women and 13% of men said their appearance was traumatic or difficult to handle. (From the [2011 National College Health Assessment Report](#) including U.Va. students.)
- 91% of women surveyed on a college campus had attempted to control their weight through dieting; 22% dieted “often” or “always.”
- 67% of women ages 15-64 withdraw from life-engaging activities such as giving an opinion, going to school, and going to the doctor because they feel badly about their bodies.
- 74% of women choose an ideal body shape that is 10-20% underweight.

## SCENARIO

***Your daughter says that she feels fat after going swimsuit shopping with her friends. How might you respond?***

Consider the following options:

- Reflect with a feeling word, or ask her about what she was feeling when the ***thought*** occurred that she is fat. (Fat is not a feeling. Sad, angry, frustrated, left out, anxious, etc., are feelings. Those are the feelings you want to help her acknowledge.) Explore what happens when she thinks and then focuses on “fat” self-talk.
- Talk about how everyone has a different body shape and that our bodies change over time.
- You can ask if this is the first time she has felt this, or when it started. If it is a new feeling, what caused it? Is it a reaction to a friend's comment, i.e., situational? Or, has she been feeling bad for a while? How much does she think about it, and how much does it affect what she does day-to-day? Constant focus, or avoidance of activities she likes, may indicate that further intervention is needed.

# Communication: Words Can Hurt!

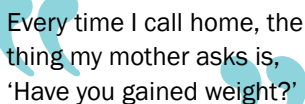
## What You Need to Know

We all grew up with the motto “sticks and stones can break your bones but words can never hurt you.” If only that were true. In fact, it’s often words that hurt the most. “Fat talk” is any statement focused on appearance, size and weight that may contribute to dissatisfaction with one’s body or reinforcement of the “ideal” body. You may be surprised to learn that even statements intended to be positive can be considered fat talk when the focus is on appearance.

Body image can be vulnerable during college for many reasons including the cultural messages that fuel dissatisfaction, your child’s still changing appearance, and the appearance-focused comments we hear and say on a daily basis. Being criticized about appearance can be very hurtful emotionally. They also can affect a person’s ability to focus on the other aspects of living critical to the maturation process.

Research indicates that both women and men who often make comments about their weight are more likely to have a poor body image and to suffer from depression. Negative comments and teasing about weight and shape contribute to the development of excessive weight and shape concerns, which is a risk factor for the development of eating disorders.

### U.Va. Students Speak



Every time I call home, the first thing my mother asks is, ‘Have you gained weight?’

Family criticism about weight and shape, even only a few negative comments, can result in long-lasting, negative effects. In fact, in families that are otherwise supportive, a few negative comments may have a detrimental impact, because they stand out against patterns of little or no criticism. The harmful effects of frequent negative comments are substantiated in the data, which showed that higher emotional abuse scores were associated with poorer self-esteem and lower perceived social support.

Results from one study indicate that hurtful weight-related comments from family members and significant others are commonly experienced during young adulthood by both young men and young women and that this type of talk tends to persist over time. In addition, the prevalence of this experience was significantly higher among Hispanic young men and Asian young men and women, which is consistent with other literature suggesting that social norms around weight issues differ across racial and ethnic communities.

## How You Can Help

- **Learn all you can.** Genuine awareness will help you avoid judgmental or mistaken attitudes about food, weight, body shape, and eating disorders.
- Discourage the idea that a particular diet, weight, or body size will automatically lead to happiness and fulfillment.
- **Avoid categorizing foods as “good” vs. “bad.”** Very few foods are, by themselves, inherently bad, dangerous or unsafe.
- **Listen to yourself.** Pay attention to the thoughts that go through your mind (called self talk) when you size up another person. Are you making assumptions that are based purely on appearance? If so, take a moment and stop yourself.
- **Stand up for others.** Next time you hear someone make a snarky comment about someone’s weight, don’t laugh along or stay silent.
- **Give thoughtful compliments.** Provide lots of reassurance about kids’ looks and about all their other important qualities. As much as they may seem not to notice or care, simple statements like “you’ve got the most beautiful smile,” or “you worked so hard on your school project, tell me more about it” really do matter. Compliment them on physical and non-physical attributes. When you hear “I hate my hair” or “I’m so dumb” provide a valuable counterpoint. Reflect the feeling, and listen, rather than arguing or agreeing with them.
- **Accept our body’s genetic predisposition.** Understand that all bodies change developmentally in ways that are not in our control through healthy means. Educate your children on this topic. We may positively influence our body’s appearance and functioning by making healthy lifestyle choices, but no one can fully “control” physical body change over time. Attempts at full control often lead to just the opposite – feeling out of control.

### Helpful Resources

- [Confidence Coalition](#)
- [Operation Beautiful](#)
- [AED Guidelines for Childhood Obesity Prevention Programs](#)



- **Be a model of healthy self-esteem and body image.** Constantly complaining about your appearance teaches kids to cast the same critical eye on themselves. Talk instead about what your body can do, not just how it looks. Instead of griping about how big your legs are, talk about how they’re strong enough to help you hike up a mountain. Having a healthy and positive body image means liking your body, appreciating it, and being grateful for its qualities and capabilities. It stands to reason that when parents care for and appreciate their own bodies, they help teach their kids to do the same.



## Frequently Heard

### Fat Talk Statements

- You'd be prettier if you lost weight.
- He has gained a lot of weight since I saw him last.
- She's too fat to be wearing those pants.
- Why is he dating her? She's chubby.
- Wow, that girl has a big butt!
- Did you gain the freshman 15?

### Considerations & Responses

- Focusing on health as a value instead of weight as a goal.
- Resist mentioning weight gain/loss, or comments about one's size. Focus on accomplishments, non-physical qualities.
- Young men and women are still growing and their bodies are changing.

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#### Alternatives:

- Do I look fat in this?
  - I need to lose 10 pounds.
  - You think you're fat? Look at me.
  - I'm too fat to wear a swimsuit.
  - I can't eat that, it will make me fat.
- I love my strong legs because they allow me to hike in the woods.
  - I can't wait to lie on the beach, read a book, and go swimming. It's my favorite summer trip!
  - I want to stop watching so much TV after work and instead try a dance class. It will help me improve my health and reduce stress.
- 
- You look great! Have you lost weight?
  - How are you so thin?
- These comments seem positive but are deceptive. They still focus on appearance instead of health. These comments can still have a negative effect.
  - Comment on positive aspects. Stop at the "You look great!" Better yet, just say "Wow, it is great to see you! How have you been?"

## SCENARIO

*You overhear your daughter and her boyfriend having a discussion in your home. He says to her: "You need to work out more and tone up because I don't date fat girls".*

How do you respond?

You have a choice between talking with both of them together or asking to speak to your daughter alone.

- If you talk with your daughter alone, you can ask her how that comment affected her. Ask if this is a pattern in their relationship, and what she thinks about it. Explain to her that threatening to leave a partner as coercion to lose weight (or do anything else to change her appearance) is emotionally abusive. If it is a one-time occurrence, then you can coach her in different ways she can respond to him to let him know it is not okay to talk to her this way. If it has happened before, coach her through her choices about staying or leaving a relationship that is hurtful.
- If you choose to talk with them together, set a tone that is non-judgmental and non confrontational. You can talk in general about the fact that people who care about each other communicate in caring ways and not in the way you heard him speaking. Ask him what judgments he is making about a girl he thinks is fat. Ask him what he wants in a girlfriend. Ask him what qualities he has that he brings to the relationship and what qualities your daughter has that he admires. Ask your daughter the same question, as well as, what she needs to feel safe in a relationship. This models a different way to think and communicate.



# Media Literacy

## U.Va. Students Speak

I often think of anorexia as a loaded gun that someone pulled the trigger on. I would never blame my body image on someone else, but at the same time, I know that society really affects the way I view my body. When I first started viewing my body negatively, I was 14 or so. I remember reading a lot of women's magazines (*Allure*, *Self*, *Cosmo*, etc.) and thinking that I didn't look like the women in them. I also think that my mom put a lot of emphasis on appearance, and I had an abusive boyfriend who would constantly tell me things about my body and appearance that I needed to 'work on.'

## What You Need to Know

It's not surprising to say that our society has an unhealthy obsession with unrealistic standards of beauty and perfection. We see it constantly through media sources - television, Internet, movies, and print.

Although cultural ideals have always shaped the public's perception of the ideal female body type, today's culture is unique in that the media is a far more powerful presence than ever before. ([Academic Psychiatry](#))

A 1996 study found that the amount of time an adolescent watches tv, movies and music videos is associated with their degree of body dissatisfaction and desire to be thin.

While you are an extremely influential figure in your child's life, they are exposed to media, peers, significant others, and society daily. It is important that at home your child feels comfortable in their own skin because often times these other influences simply promote an ideal body type that is completely unachievable.

## What about guys?

Although fewer men meet criteria for eating disorders than women, more men are becoming concerned with shape and weight. While some of the signs are similar to the disordered eating found in women, there are important differences. Men concerned with weight and shape are more likely to focus on building bulk and muscle mass, which can lead to over-exercise, dietary restriction, and abuse of anabolic steroids.

Men too are bombarded by media pressure. Pictures of thin, muscular, and perfectly coiffed models appear in men's magazines, TV, and movies. Duggan and McCreary found that reading muscle and fitness magazines correlated with levels of body dissatisfaction in both gay and straight men. Additionally, action figures have become increasingly muscular and devoid of body fat. ([Academic Psychiatry](#))

## A Potent Example: Fiji Gets TV

No discussion of body image and the media would be complete without referencing Anne Becker's landmark study comparing rates of eating disorders before and after the arrival of television in Fiji in 1995. Ethnic Fijians have traditionally encouraged healthy appetites and have preferred a rotund body type, which signified wealth and the ability to care for one's family. Strong cultural identity is thought to be protective against eating disorders; there was only one case of anorexia nervosa reported on the island prior to 1995. However, in 1998, rates of dieting skyrocketed from 0 to 69%, and young people routinely cited the appearance of the attractive actors on shows like "Beverly Hills 90210" and "Melrose Place" as the inspiration for their weight loss. For the first time, inhabitants of the island began to exhibit disordered eating. ([Academic Psychiatry](#))

## How You Can Help

- ***Become media literate!*** One way to protect your self esteem and body image from the media's definitions of beauty and acceptability is to become a critical viewer of the media messages. Recognize and analyze media messages' influence and remember that the media's definitions of beauty and success do not have to define your self-image. All media images and messages are constructions! Advertisements and other messages have been carefully crafted with the intent to send a specific message and convince us to buy or support a specific product.

### Survey Says

- Commercials aimed at female viewers during television shows most often watched by teen girls frequently used beauty as a product appeal ([56% of commercials](#)). By comparison, this is true of just 3% of television commercials aimed at men.
- 42% of 1st-3rd grade girls want to be thinner.
- 81% of 10 year-olds are afraid of being fat.
- One study reports that at age thirteen, 53% of American girls are "unhappy with their bodies." This grows to 78% by the time girls reach seventeen.
- The percentage of female characters whose looks are commented upon is:  
58% in movies  
28% in TV shows  
26% in commercials.  
  
For male characters, numbers are far lower:  
24% in movies  
10% in TV shows  
7 % in commercials.
- One in every three (37%) articles in leading teen girl magazines also included a focus on appearance, and most of the advertisements (50%) used an appeal to beauty to sell their products.
- 70% of young women say they want to look like a character from TV. 69% of TV characters are underweight.

- ***Share your knowledge with others, especially your children.***

Discuss this information with your family and friends. Point out unrealistic images on TV and in magazines and ask your child about them.

- ***Speak up and use your purchasing power.*** Be a Media Watchdog. When you see a TV show or an advertisement that creates negative weight-based assumptions, contact the producers with your thoughts. They will listen!

- ***Enjoy a variety of activities.*** Playing games or engaging in outdoor activities provides a break from the focus on appearance that is so prevalent in media and our culture.



### Helpful Resources

- [Parent Further](#)
- [National Eating Disorders Association](#)

## SCENARIO

***Your daughter calls to talk and tells you that she and a group of friends from her dorm watched the Victoria's Secret fashion show on TV together last night and then felt so bad about their weight and body image afterwards that they went as a group to the gym to run on the treadmill for over an hour.***

- Ask her how she feels about the experience of watching the fashion show.
- Share information about the media and fashion industry and let her know that the vast majority of women at their healthy weight will never meet this unattainable beauty ideal.
- Ask her what about the models' life appeals to her and why, as well as how sustainable she thinks that life would be over 60-70 years.
- You suggest a fun, positive movie or TV show that you think they would enjoy.
- Tell her about body positive resources you know of at U.Va. and suggest that your daughter and her friends contact these organizations to learn more.

# Be a Body Activist!

## How You Can Help

- Make your child aware that everyone has unique physical characteristics that don't need to be seen negatively.
- **Express appreciation of thoughts and accomplishments over physical values.** Instead of saying "you look great today" it's often more reassuring to a child to hear "you did great on your test" or "we are proud of you."
- **Help your child recognize how unrealistically the media represents the ideal person.** Make sure she realizes how much airbrushing is used. You can even ask how these images make her feel about herself.
- **Remember that health should be the goal, not weight.** While it's important to encourage your child to be active and eat well, it will be much more effective if you come from a health standpoint (after all that is what matters) instead of making your child feel that they must weigh a certain amount.
- **Don't get down on yourself for past mistakes.** It's important to focus instead on how you can change the home environment to ensure your child has a healthier mindset about their body in the future.
- **Have a mistake positive attitude.** Not only will it be beneficial for you, but your child will notice that you aren't beating yourself up over your own mistakes and will be more likely to follow suit.
- **Allow your child to express their thoughts and feelings with you and share some of your own.** This will greatly reduce the likelihood of your child bottling up emotions that could cause them to use body image as a way to cope.
- **Set a body positive standard for your child.** If you are constantly worrying about your weight not your health, your child will be too. Make sure your child sees that you stay active and balance healthy meals with sweets or other special things that you enjoy. After all, you are their biggest role model.
- **Don't compare your child to other people (especially other family members).** Comparisons are often the most difficult thing to get over because each person is so individual and one will never look exactly like another.

## U.Va. Students Speak

Be good role models for healthy eating habits. Don't let your kids see you restricting or dieting regularly. Focus on your children's accomplishments and strengths that are unrelated to appearance as much as possible. Teach media literacy!

## Helpful Resources

- [Health At Every Size \(HAES\)](#)
- [Proud2BMe](#)



## A Potent Example: Parents Taking Action

In March 2012, CNN wrote an [article](#) about how weight has become an issue for young children in schools. One mother that has 17-year-old triplets decided the best way to discuss body image issues was to have a group of mothers and daughters start a book club. They each read a book related to the body image culture and met at the end of the month to discuss what they learned. The mother said that all the girls were open and acknowledged that looks are not associated with many of the things that the media wants us to associate them with (such as the perfect life). Instead, she emphasized that there are negative consequences for trying to pursue such an ideal. It also stimulated a positive body culture between mothers and daughters.

## Talking with a Loved One Who May Have an Eating Disorder

- ***Learn all you can about eating disorders.*** Then, prepare yourself to listen with compassion and without judgment.
- ***Plan a private, uninterrupted time and place to start a discussion.*** Be calm, caring, and non-judgmental. Directly express, in a caring way, your observations and concerns about the person's behavior.
- ***Explain the reasons for your concerns without mentioning eating behavior.*** The person may deny the situation because of overwhelming feelings, such as shame and guilt. Avoid expressing frustration with the person. Stay calm.
- Ask if he or she is willing to explore these concerns with a healthcare professional who understands eating disorders.
- Remind your loved one that many people have successfully recovered from an eating disorder.
- ***Take a break if your loved one continues to deny the problem.*** Revisit the subject again soon, but not in a confrontational way.
- ***Lastly, being a good support means that you also have to take good care of yourself.*** Find ways to attend to the stresses you feel from the situation.
- For detailed steps, visit the [National Eating Disorders Association Parent Toolkit](#).

## In Closing

We appreciate your interest in understanding the challenges young people face in forming and maintaining a positive body image and learning what you can do to help. The scenarios you've read in this toolkit are real experiences that students have shared with us. For each scenario we have provided suggested several responses so that you can find one that fits with your parenting style and the type of communication that works best for your family. Should you have suggestions for future versions of this toolkit, we would love to hear about other challenges that your family has faced, how you have met those challenges, and resources you have found helpful.

## Sources

The digital version of this publication is available in the Body Positive area of our website. From the digital version you can easily access the websites and studies referenced in this toolkit. Links to those sources are included throughout the digital version.

## For More Information

Please visit us at:

[womenscenter.virginia.edu/body-positive-eating-disorders](https://womenscenter.virginia.edu/body-positive-eating-disorders)

You will also find contact information on our website should you have other questions or want more information about what you can do to promote a body positive culture in your home or community.

On Grounds, our Body Positive Initiative works to reduce the incidence and prevalence of eating disorders, disordered eating, and exercise and body image concerns by translating current scientific research into practice. We conduct an evidence based body image intervention with groups of undergraduate women, provide educational outreach and referrals for U.Va. students, coordinate efforts with pan-University organizations, and offer eating disorders-related resources to U.Va. students and community members. You can stay tuned to the calendar page of our website and our social media channels to see our Body Positive events and initiatives.

Should you wish to support the Body Positive programming that we provide for U.Va. students, you can do so via the *Donate* page of our website, by sending a contribution to the Women's Center's mailing address on the back of this toolkit, or by contacting us to discuss the option that would suit you best.



# Maxine Platzer Lynn Women's Center

Established in 1989, the Women's Center's overarching mission is education in the broad sense that Thomas Jefferson envisioned it. As we teach students how to create change on the personal, local and global levels, we advocate for gender equity and have become a national model for outreach to women.

[womenscenter.virginia.edu](http://womenscenter.virginia.edu)

Visit our website to learn more about our engaged scholarship opportunities, information resources and services we offer for University students, faculty, staff, alumni and the general Charlottesville community.

## Engaged Scholarship Opportunities

Body Positive  
Gender Violence and Social Change  
*Iris Magazine*  
Legal Clinic  
Men's Leadership Project  
Marketing Communications  
Women, Girls and Global Justice  
Young Women Leaders Program

## Community Services

Babysitters List  
Counseling Services  
Jill T. Rinehart Library  
Legal Clinic  
MLK Women's Hope Project

## Services for Students

Tips and How-To Guides  
Counseling Services  
Support Group for Survivors of Sexual Assault  
*Reflections*  
Survivor Support Network Training  
Post-Assault Advocacy  
Screenings for Mental Wellness or Eating Disorders  
Room to Breathe  
Rape Aggression Defense Training



Transportation to the Women's Center  
CAT Free Trolley to University Ave. & 14th St.  
or U-Loop Bus to 14th & Wertland St.