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EATING DISORDERS IN ADOLESCENTS: POSITIVE INTERVENTION FOCUSED ON STRENGTHS AND BODY IMAGE

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Abstract

Eating disorders (EDs) represent a serious public health problem, especially among female adolescents exposed to sociocultural pressures. The objective of this study is to design a primary prevention psychological intervention proposal grounded in Positive Psychology for adolescents aged 13 to 16 in Caracas, Venezuela. Methodologically, the research is a feasible, non-experimental, field-based, cross-sectional study with a quantitative approach to data collection using a pre-post test design. The program, titled *"The Power of Being You*," consists of six sessions focused on developing personal strengths, self-esteem, and body appreciation. The results of the prior systematic review and expert judgment confirmed that variables such as gratitude and positive body connection act as significant protective factors against the development of eating disorders. The program integrates tools such as mindfulness and emotional education to shift the preventive paradigm toward a salutogenic approach. It is concluded that strengthening character strengths, particularly gratitude, fosters self-awareness and enables adolescent girls to build a solid identity based on self-acceptance. This universal intervention minimizes the risks of developing EDs by enhancing psychological well-being and body image satisfaction. The program is feasible and relevant, given the scarcity of preventive strategies focused on personal assets in the region.

Keywords: eating disorders, adolescents, positive psychology, strengths, body image.

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"Health is not the absence of disease, but the presence of the capacity to flourish."
Martin Seligman

"It is not about changing the body to be seen, but about changing the way we look at it so we can inhabit it."
Anonymous

1. Introduction

Since adolescence is "the best of times, the worst of times" (Coon and Mitterer, 2010, p. 102)—a highly sensitive period in identity formation, and with body image perception being an essential element within that process—both of which are grounded in deep self-knowledge—this research aims to propose an intervention design based on positive psychology designed to enhance personal strengths and appreciation of body image, promoting self-knowledge, self-acceptance, self-esteem, and positive habits that can be established as part of their personal growth.

Body image perception plays an essential role in the identity formation process that occurs during adolescence, where concern about body shape and weight—if it becomes excessive or dysfunctional—can significantly increase the risk of developing eating disorders, which have become a global public health problem; although they can affect people of any age and gender, they are more prevalent among female adolescents. "Although the overall incidence rate of anorexia nervosa has remained fairly stable in recent decades, the incidence among younger individuals (under 15 years of age) has increased." (Van Eeden, 2021, p. 515).

According to the World Health Organization, the global prevalence of EDs ranges from 3.5% to 7.8%" (2021, para. 9) and they are defined as:

> Eating disorders, such as anorexia nervosa and bulimia nervosa, typically emerge during adolescence and young adulthood. These disorders are characterized by abnormal eating behaviors and preoccupation with food and, in most cases, with weight and body shape. Anorexia nervosa can lead to premature death, often due to medical complications or suicide, and is associated with a higher mortality rate than any other mental disorder (p. 10)

However, in countries such as Venezuela, the magnitude of the problem is uncertain due to a lack of reliable epidemiological studies and underreporting of cases. The stigma associated with mental health, denial of symptoms, and the tendency to mask risky behaviors under the pretext of "staying in shape" delay the search for professional help (Ruiz and Martin, 2022).

EDs are characterized by a distorted relationship with food, weight, and body image, which minimizes a person's value beyond their physical appearance. Given that eating disorders are often diagnosed only when they have reached an advanced stage—even putting patients' lives at risk—it is essential to raise awareness and promote research and prevention programs at the primary care level, particularly among adolescents who are at a critical stage in the development of their identity. To this end, it is important to understand the etiology of EDs, considering not only risk factors but also protective factors (Losada and Rodríguez, 2019). And because the approach to EDs has focused on the deficit model and the correction of the pathology, there is an urgent need to shift this paradigm toward primary prevention. In this context, Positive Psychology emerges as an effective salutogenic approach that seeks to strengthen protective factors before the disorder takes hold. Promoting the conscious use of character strengths enables adolescent girls to build a solid identity based on self-knowledge and self-acceptance (Garassini, 2010), counteracting social pressure toward thinness and body dissatisfaction. Character strengths are understood as personality traits that can be identified using self-report instruments and developed through conscious practice in daily life, thereby enhancing their impact on psychological well-being and the appreciation of personal individuality. The objective of this study is to design a psychological intervention proposal for the primary prevention of eating disorders, grounded in Positive Psychology and aimed at female adolescents aged 13 to 16 in Caracas, Venezuela. The program focuses on the development of personal strengths and the appreciation of body image as key tools for human flourishing and mental health.

2. Method

The research is part of a feasible, non-experimental, field-based, and cross-sectional project, following the guidelines of the Libertador Experimental Pedagogical University (UPEL, 2001). It was structured in four phases:

(1) *Theoretical foundation*, consisting of a literature review in databases such as Google Scholar, PubMed, and Scielo on preventive programs for eating disorders, with an

emphasis on those based on positive psychology and personal strengths as protective factors. From this review, 11 studies were selected whose findings were relevant to the design of the intervention program, allowing the information to be organized into sections of documentary interest, initially those providing prior knowledge on risk factors and protective factors in the incidence of eating disorders, another section addressing the importance of primary prevention and preventive intervention designs, and a final section on preventive designs based on the positive psychology approach and the most significant character strengths to be addressed.

The reviewed studies emphasize that effective prevention of eating disorders goes beyond simple psychoeducation and must focus on intrapersonal variables such as self-esteem, self-efficacy, and body appreciation. Furthermore, they allow us to confirm that working with personal strengths—particularly gratitude—represents a new way to promote the prevention of eating disorders. Personal strengths enable us to cultivate our inner life in order to make happiness depend on ourselves rather than on external factors (Arguís, 2012). Our inner attitude and our deliberate actions foster our well-being

(2) During the *literature review* phase, findings from previous research were examined and selected to incorporate conclusions and recommendations into the structure of the designed primary intervention program. A summary of this research is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Relevant Research Background

No.	Title	Author(s)	Link	Key Finding
1	Eating Disorders from the Perspective of Positive Psychology: The Role of Embodiment, Self-Esteem, and Identity Coherence	Voica et al. (2021)	https://doi.org/10.1016/j.bodyim.2021.06.006	The results suggest that positive embodiment—specifically, positive body connection—was a significant predictor of lower rates of eating disorders, followed by self-esteem. Based on these findings, the authors propose further research on the positive aspects of identity as a protective factor against eating disorders.
2	Risk and Protective Factors for Eating Disorders in Adolescents by Gender and Body Mass Index	Argyrides & Alexiou (2020)	https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph17249238	Among other findings, the study highlights that body appreciation is an important protective factor for both genders.

3	Eating Disorders and Primary Prevention	Losada & Rodríguez (2019)	http://www.scielo.org.bo/scielo.php?script=sci_arttext&pid=S2077-21612019000100010&lng=es&tlng=es.	Their comprehensive review highlights the importance of primary prevention and identifies risk factors at the individual level that may influence the development of an eating disorder, such as: feelings of inadequacy, emptiness, a sense of lack of control, self-punishment, personal conflicts, disrupted socialization, low self-esteem, dissatisfaction with body image, and perfectionism.
4	Prevention of Eating Disorders in Secondary Schools	Belmonte-Cortés et al. (2022)	https://dx.doi.org/10.20960/nh.04183	Based on their literature review of eating disorder prevention programs, they highlight that while a great deal of knowledge is promoted, there is little change in attitudes, habits, and intrapersonal variables.
5	School-Based Eating Disorder Prevention Programs and Their Impact on Adolescents' Mental Health: A Systematic Review.	Wong et al. (2024)	https://doi.org/10.1192/bjo.2024.795	The findings from the ten effective programs consistently support the use of body acceptance strategies to improve the mental health of adolescent students.
6	Prevention of eating disorders in Latin America	Scappatura & Lievendag (2018)	https://www.aacademica.org/000-122/66.pdf	Based on their review of eating disorder prevention programs, they found that the most commonly used approaches are: the informational model, the feminist model, the general skills model, cognitive models, and the media literacy approach. They recommend developing more universal programs to expand the impact on the overall well-being of the adolescent population.

7	Prevention of Eating Disorders from Different Psychological Perspectives	Iturbe & Maiz (2022)	https://dx.doi.org/10.20960/nh.04181	Among other findings, they concluded that interventions aimed at improving self-esteem have a significant effect on reducing eating disorder risk behaviors, such as dieting, and that this effect is greater in women than in men.
8	Effects of Personal Strengths Training on Physical Symptoms in Adolescents	Molina & García (2021)	https://www.redalyc.org/journal/4596/459669143010/html/	The results of the program showed that participants who received personal strengths training exhibited lower levels of physical symptoms than the other two groups on all assessed subscales. In the follow-up phase, the results showed that those trained in personal strengths maintained the effects achieved on the subscales for cardiovascular, respiratory, gastrointestinal, neurosensory, and skin-allergy symptoms.
9	Effects of the "Growing Strong" Program on Psychological Well-Being and Generalized Self-Efficacy in Adolescents: A Preliminary Study	García & Cobo (2018)	https://repositorio.cecar.edu.co/handle/cecar/3085	As a result of implementing the "Creciendo Fuertes" program, there was a significant increase in psychological well-being and generalized self-efficacy.

10	An Intervention Approach to Improve Body Image Perception from the Perspective of Positive Psychology	Venegas & González (2018)	https://doi.org/10.11144/Javeriana-cali.PPSI16-1.iaib	When integrating different approaches, the importance of positive psychology tools in prevention is emphasized. Among the final recommendations outlined in the proposal is the suggestion that this approach should not be applied to individuals who already have an eating disorder or to the male population, as it is believed they have different needs.
11	The Relationship Between Body Positivity, Intuitive Eating, and Gratitude: A Systematic Review	Robledo et al. (2021)	https://doi.org/10.22201/fesi.20071523e.2021.2.735	Based on a systematic review of scientific articles published between 2010 and 2021, which included 32 selected studies, it was concluded that gratitude predicts body appreciation, which in turn mediates the relationship between gratitude and intuitive eating; intuitive eating was found to be positive and significant in both men and women, as well as in adults and adolescents.

(3) Phase three involved the *design of the proposal*, which consisted of developing a psychological intervention program at the primary prevention level, including instruments and strategies.

Intervention proposal

The intervention program is an interactive, in-person, multi-session workshop that promotes changes in attitudes and intrapersonal variables, not merely the acquisition of knowledge. It is based on positive psychology, focusing on the development of character strengths and body appreciation. Character strengths are understood as a set of positive traits that manifest in a range of thoughts, feelings, and actions (Park and Peterson, 2009a). Emphasis will be placed on the strength of gratitude, as scientific evidence indicates that it is significantly related to body appreciation and self-esteem. Furthermore, since all strengths are interrelated, developing one will have an impact on the others.

Target population

The program can be implemented in any educational or training institution capable of conducting the intervention with a group of up to 20 female adolescents (maximum) aged between 13 and 16 years old over the course of six 1.5-hour sessions. It could also be applied to a male population in order to subsequently compare its effects.

Objective

The proposed intervention program aims to provide a group of adolescent girls, aged 13 to 16, with universal training focused on primary prevention. This training seeks to enhance self-awareness, self-esteem, body appreciation, and psychological well-being, with the ultimate goal of reducing the likelihood that participants will develop an eating disorder (ED). To this end, the approach will be based on positive psychology, specifically through the conceptualization of character strengths, the identification of each participant's specific strengths, and the recognition and appreciation of their unique identity and body image.

Content

The program centers on an overarching theme of understanding each participant's personal strengths, consciously working to cultivate gratitude as a key strength, and the specific strengths they choose to develop. Additionally, the program will cover topics such as self-concept, self-esteem, body appreciation, intuitive eating, and the appreciation of inner beauty through meditation. The content of each of the six sessions is detailed below:

Session 1:

Theory of positive psychology. The PERMA model. Character strengths. Self-knowledge and self-concept. "Growing Strong" strengths test. Based on the studies by Molina and García (2021) and García et al. (2018).

Session 2:

What is self-concept and how is it formed? What is self-esteem? Perception of our body. Functions of each body part. Importance of knowing, accepting, and valuing every part of our body and personality. Body appreciation. Personal strengths; importance of recognizing and cultivating them. Ways to cultivate strengths. The importance of developing gratitude as a key strength. This is inspired by the work of Voica et al. (2021) on positive body connection and the study by Argyrides et al. (2020).

Session 3:

The concept of gratitude; scientific evidence regarding its impact on psychological well-being. Being aware of and appreciating the good things that happen; knowing how to express gratitude. Acceptance and appreciation of individuality. Based on the review by Robledo et al. (2021).

Session 4:

The influence of the media and social media on our self-concept and mental health. Pressure to conform to unrealistic beauty ideals. The importance of recognizing our individual power to cope with adverse situations by drawing on our strengths and using them as a shield. This aligns with the review by Wong et al. (2024).

Session 5:

Body appreciation. Self-esteem. Using meditation to reconnect with our bodies. Based on the research by Iturbe and Maíz (2022).

Session 6:

The power of mindfulness. Integration of the topics covered: character strengths, body appreciation, self-esteem, self-concept, and mindfulness. Based on , the review by Belmonte et al. (2022), and the approach by Venegas and González (2019).

Table 2 summarizes the objectives and activities for each session.

Table 2: Objectives and Activities of the Workshop: "The Power of Being You"		
No.	Session	Objectives
1	Discovering My Character Strengths	1. Introduce the program.
		2. Introduce the positive psychology approach, the PERMA model, and character strengths.
		3. Build rapport with the group.
		4. Assess the participants' character strengths.
2	Delving Deeper into Myself	1. Foster body appreciation by reflecting on the body, its importance, and its value.
		2. Promote self-awareness through the participants' personal assessments of their character strengths.
		3. Encourage the use of individual strengths.
		4. Encourage the use of the connection journal
3	Gratitude: The Star Strength	1. Explore the concept of gratitude as a protective factor and reveal its power over well-being.
		2. Practice acceptance and appreciation of oneself and others.
4	The Challenge	1. Promote the development of critical thinking to cope with social pressures regarding body image or eating habits.
		2. Strengthen autonomy and self-efficacy.
		3. Use character strengths as a form of protection.
5	Inner Beauty	1. Promote body acceptance as a conscious choice.
		2. Recognize and value each person's unique set of strengths.
		3. Strengthen social support and boost self-esteem.
6	This story will continue	1. Foster the mind-body connection through mindfulness.
		2. Explore ways to consolidate what has been learned.
		3. Develop a plan for the future.

(4) In the final phase, an *expert review* was conducted, in which the proposal was submitted to two experts for review and evaluation so that the necessary adjustments could be made. As a cross-cutting theme, the program focuses on helping each participant recognize their personal strengths, fostering gratitude as a "star strength," and addressing topics such as self-concept, self-esteem, body positivity, intuitive eating, and appreciation of inner beauty through meditation.

Required resources

To participate in the program, participants must provide the following:

- A notebook for designing and completing the connection journal.

The facilitator must provide:

- A space equipped for the workshop meeting and activities.
- Tables or desks for the participants.
- A projector and prepared presentations.

Printed copies of the "Growing Strong" strengths test. (A scale for measuring virtues and character strengths in adolescents, developed by psychologist Diego García Álvarez in 2019. Version designed for Montevideo, Uruguay, based on the theoretical approach of Peterson and Seligman. Validated by Criollo Laura in Maracaibo, Venezuela, in 2022.

Forms of the Rosenberg Global Self-Esteem Scale (a scale designed to provide a unidimensional measure of self-esteem, developed by sociologist Morris Rosenberg in 1965 and translated into Spanish by Echeburua in 1995; validated in 50 countries. Similarly, it was validated in Argentina by Gongora V. and Casullo M. in 2009, demonstrating robust psychometric properties.

The Body Appreciation Scale-2 (BAS-2), which assesses the three aspects of body appreciation: body acceptance, body respect, and body protection by resisting media influences regarding appearance. Developed by Tylka and Wood-Barcalow in 2015, it was validated in Argentina by Góngora V. and colleagues in 2020.

3. Results

Based on the literature review, 11 key studies were selected whose findings form the basis for the program's design. First, two studies (Voica et al., 2021; Argyrides et al., 2020) demonstrated that positive body connection, self-esteem, and body appreciation are significant predictors and protective factors against eating disorders. Second, the literature review revealed a methodological evolution in preventive programs: there has been a shift from a purely psychoeducational approach to a " " approach that integrates internal work on attitudes and intrapersonal variables (Belmonte et al., 2022; Wong et al., 2024). Furthermore, it was found that interventions focused on improving self-esteem have a significant effect on reducing EDs (Iturbe and Maíz, 2018); there was also a recommendation to implement universal programs in Latin America to maximize their impact on adolescents' overall well-being (Scappatura and Lievendag, 2018). Regarding positive psychology, studies such as those by Molina and García

(2021) and García et al. (2018) reported that training in personal strengths reduces physical symptoms and increases psychological well-being and self-efficacy. Particularly noteworthy is the finding by Robledo et al. (2021), who identified gratitude as a predictor of body appreciation, suggesting that cultivating this strength can foster a positive body image. Based on this evidence, the workshop *"The Power of Being* You" was designed, consisting of six (6) sessions that address: (1) assessment of character strengths, (2) deepening self-awareness and body appreciation, (3) gratitude as a key strength, (4) critical thinking in the face of social pressures, (5) body acceptance and self-esteem, and (6) a closing session focusing on mindfulness and future planning.

4. Conclusions

The literature review reveals that primary prevention psychological intervention programs grounded in the salutogenic approach of positive psychology are still in their infancy. However, the available evidence demonstrates their effectiveness in promoting self-awareness, self-worth, and the development of personal strengths as protective intrapersonal variables. This scarcity of programs reinforces the need for and relevance of the proposed program.

The "The Power of Being You" program is grounded in findings from previous research that identify as risk factors feelings of inadequacy, emptiness, a sense of lack of control, self-punishment, personal conflicts, disrupted socialization, low self-esteem, dissatisfaction with body image, and perfectionism; from a sociocultural perspective, the following stand out: society's ideal of beauty, overprotective and demanding family models, family conflicts, family concern about weight, dieting, and/or atypical eating behavior within the family, obesity—especially in the mother—alcoholism—especially in fathers—inappropriate parenting, physical, sexual, or psychological abuse, irregular eating habits during childhood, and professions and/or activities that place excessive value on thinness. In contrast, the identified protective factors—self-esteem, body appreciation, self-efficacy, and positive body connection—are intrapersonal variables that can be effectively addressed through the development of character strengths.

An analysis of the reviewed research confirms that effective prevention of eating disorders (EDs) must go beyond mere psychoeducation and address intrapersonal variables in depth. In this regard, training in personal strengths emerges as an effective strategy for improving adolescents' psychological well-being, with gratitude standing out as a significant predictor of body appreciation.

Based on the synthesized evidence, the interactive, multi-session workshop methodology is presented as the most appropriate approach for primary prevention programs. The selected strategies and exercises were carefully designed with consideration for the target population, the proposed objectives, the feasibility of implementation, and their potential to bring about changes in the development of character strengths, the enhancement of self-esteem, body appreciation, and the incorporation of well-being techniques such as mindfulness.

Finally, validation through expert judgment enriched the program by incorporating a test-retest measure to evaluate the intervention's impact on the adolescents' intrapersonal variables, thereby strengthening its methodological rigor.

5. Recommendations

We suggest implementing the "The Power of Being You" program in educational settings to obtain empirical validation. Additionally, we propose a follow-up design at 6 and 12 months post-intervention to assess the long-term sustainability of the changes achieved in intrapersonal variables.

It is recommended to replicate the program, evaluate the results, and make appropriate adjustments to achieve increasingly effective outcomes in the fundamental goal of preventing the development of eating disorders and improving the overall psychological well-being of adolescents.

We propose the formal incorporation of positive psychology, based on a salutogenic approach, into primary prevention programs. This involves prioritizing the identification and development of character strengths as protective factors.

It is recommended that this line of research be expanded to include samples that are not limited to women. The inclusion of diverse populations will facilitate the collection of comparative data, allowing interventions to be adapted and tailored to the specific needs of each group.

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