

The Body Positive Project: Incorporating an Educational Body Image Program at Cal Poly

A Senior Project

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by

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Abstract

The following study explores the presence of eating disorders on Cal Poly's campus and how the implementation of the Body Positive program as a part of Campus Health and Wellbeing (CHWB) will assist those struggling with eating disorders. 13.5 percent of college women suffer from eating disorders, (Eisenberg 2011), and 20 percent of college students say they have suffered from an eating disorder at some point in their lives (NEDA). The Body Positive at Cal Poly is a program specially designated to address concerns around eating disorders by educating a group of student facilitators on how to hold discussions about eating disorders, the social pressure to look and act a certain way, and how to overcome these societal demands and expectations of beauty. The facilitator training used the Body Positives' 5 Core Competencies to teach these principles: Reclaim Health, Practice Intuitive Self-Care, Cultivate Self-Love, Declare Your Own Authentic Beauty, and Build Community (The Body Positive 2021). Using social media and the help counselors and student educators at Campus Health and Wellbeing, the goal of this study was to bring the Body Positive, which is a national nonprofit organization with chapters at universities and high schools across the nation, to Cal Poly, by making the Body Positive a subsection of Campus Health and Wellbeing. Once established, the program would be supervised by Amelia Ramirez, a Cal Poly counselor, and run by student facilitators, who would hold meetings like one would a club: weekly meetings with students, holding events, and having a consistent social media presence to keep interest in the program.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Statement of the problem

Eating disorders have plagued young men and women in our modern society for years. The problem has been exacerbated recently by the ubiquity of images from social media, especially Instagram, where the idea of beauty has been intertwined with the idea of thinness. Unbeknownst to viewers, these women in magazines, TV advertisements or Instagram photos are oftentimes photoshopped so as not to delineate from the idolized “perfect body type.” Though the Body Positive movement is inclusive to all, and men are also subject to pressure to look and perform a certain way, women are especially targeted by these intense societal expectations regarding their appearances. The Body Positive Institute started in 1996 in Berkeley, California as a nonprofit organization aimed at dismantling damaging societal expectations for body image that lead to eating disorders, using research-backed educational platforms to develop programming for the general public to raise awareness about these eating disorders. They have created programming specifically intended for college campuses, where students can be trained using the Body Positive’s online program to become certified facilitators—meaning that these student leaders are taught how to hold discussion forums and create peer support groups for their fellow college students struggling with body image issues, eating disorders, or other socially constructed health standards. This pressure leads to psychological damage in the form of anxiety and depression that often manifest in the form of eating disorders. Over 30 million Americans have been diagnosed with an eating disorder, and 95 percent are within the ages of 12 and 25, with an overwhelming number of these being women in high school or college. A study in 2012

showed that in 28 public universities, 13 percent of students had an eating disorder and 46 percent were at high risk for developing an eating disorder (Fitzsimmons-Craft, et al, 2012). Although the limitations of this study did not allow for adequate data analysis of eating disorder data specific to Cal Poly, there is an abundance of casual observations to suggest that many men and women suffer from eating disorders here—the overemphasis on health and fitness, Greek life organizations that have been known to encourage a certain “look” for their members, and lastly and most poignantly, the lack of diversity on Cal Poly campus that fosters an environment where a certain appearance is considered the norm. The most widely accepted standard of beauty appears to align with being thin. The Body Positive program attempts to combat this singular standard of beauty, addressing the intersectionality of eating disorders and working to create a community that challenges societal standards and expectations to ultimately give people the confidence to accept and love their bodies as is.

Background of the problem

Cal Poly has a wonderful Campus Health and Wellbeing Organization (CHWB), which has a variety of services for those struggling with mental or physical health problems, sexual assault, food insecurity, and programs that promote general well-being. Although counseling services are apt to provide support for those struggling with eating disorders, there is no program that exists mostly for the purpose of being a safe space to discuss eating disorders and to seek treatment for those struggling with body image-related concerns. Considering the number of individuals that the data suggests are actively struggling with body image and disordered eating on college campuses in general, the necessity for an eating disorder-specific program is overwhelming. There have been clubs in the past at Cal Poly that have attempted to serve as this resource for people, but a lack of funding and a lack of student leaders have led clubs like the

ASI Body Positivity club to fizzle out in 2018. The Body Positive program, however, would become a part of CHWB with student facilitators selected on a yearly basis to serve as the outreach to the student body. Students need to know there is a safe place to come to, even if it means just a conversation.

Purpose of the study

The purpose of the study is to implement an effective program here on the Cal Poly campus that ultimately will answer the question: will the Body Positive actually help those struggling with eating disorders and help to revolutionize campus culture, so that there is an overall lessened emphasis on body image? Statistics from numerous sources confirm that eating disorders are an issue on college campuses, oftentimes fueled by a diet and health-obsessed culture. The Body Positive is a national organization, with research-backed training and outreach programs already. A quick survey to gather the prevalence of eating disorders specific to Cal Poly campus, however, is the additional information needed to ensure that the Body Positive training and program will truly be utilized here.

Setting for the study

This study will be conducted using data collection, implementation of outreach, and the resources of CHWB. As mentioned previously, the goal is to establish the Body Positive as a part of CHWB, set up under the guidance of certified and licensed Cal Poly counselors. The majority of involvement, however, depends on student participation and student-led groups facilitating the continuation of the program. We relied on social media, mainly Instagram, and sending emails to various clubs whose members we thought might be interested in becoming facilitators to spread the message. The Body Positive's online facilitator course teaches students the science behind eating disorders, how to work at shifting the mentality of the current culture around dieting and

eating disorders, and most importantly, how to hold discussions in an environment where students struggling with issues surrounding their bodies feel inclined to open up and talk with others who might feel similar. As their website states, this kind of open and honest conversation allows people to understand diet and health culture myths, with the ultimate goal to eliminate eating disorders and recognize that perfection is an absurd standard. We received funding from the Body Positive Institute to sponsor a select 10 student facilitator training.

Research questions

The following research questions were designed to interpret the amount of Cal Poly students who struggle with anxiety around eating or their bodies, and if situational circumstances impact the number of students who suffer from eating disorders.

1. How many Cal Poly students suffer from eating disorders?
2. What is the “health” culture on campus? Do students feel pressure to look and eat a certain way?
3. How well would a program like the Body Positive fit into Cal Poly’s CHWB program?
4. How effective would outreach via social media be in garnering student interest for this project?

Definition of terms

According to the National Eating Disorder Association (NEDA), the following terms are defined:

- Eating Disorders: serious but treatable mental and physical illnesses that can affect people of all genders, ages, races, religions, ethnicities, sexual orientations, body shapes, and weights.

- Body Dissatisfaction: a negative attitude towards one's own physical appearance
- Shape/Weight Overevaluation: judging the self-worth exclusively or predominantly in terms of his or her shape, weight, and their control

Chapter 2

Literature review

The review of literature focuses on research around the prevalence of eating disorders and how effective eating disorders prevention and awareness programs are.

Prevalence of Eating Disorders on College Campuses

In general, screening for eating disorders on college campuses nationwide is extremely limited. A study done by the NEDA showed that only 22 percent of college campuses offered programs and services for those recovering or struggling with eating disorders. That same study also stated that 87 percent of responses to the survey considered these services important (NEDA 2011). Cal Poly is not one of these universities that currently offer these services, and the implementation of the Body Positive program will hopefully change that. Numerous studies have been done that assess how effective various programming has been at actually improving body image culture on college campuses, where women, in particular, are considered high risk. There are two overarching goals of prevention programs: primary and secondary prevention. Primary prevention is aimed at healthy individuals and focuses on preventing new cases from arising, while secondary is focused on the detection and treatment of eating disorders. Primary and secondary program prevention programs have actually shown slight adverse effects or no substantial effect of decreasing those with disordered eating, as the two prevention methods are inherently based on opposing methods. Primary prevention is informationally educationally based, which might stress the abnormality of eating disorders and the difficulty in treating eating disorders. Secondary prevention would, for example, encourage people to come forward and receive help, but stressing the abnormality and difficulty of treating eating disorders in primary prevention decrease the desired effect of secondary treatment (Mann et al, 1997).

The Body Positive, on the other hand, aims at neither of these prevention strategies. The Body Positive takes a holistic approach to minimize the number of those suffering from eating disorders. The approach centered closely on “helping people develop balanced, joyful self-care and a relationship with their bodies that is guided by love, forgiveness, and humor” (The Body Positive 2021). Like other modern body positivity movements, there is an emphasis on shifting current paradigms about body image, societal expectations of beauty, and in general, battling the constant emphasis on a female’s appearance as being one of the most important aspects of herself. A 1997 Psychology today study found that 56 percent of women were dissatisfied with their overall appearance, and 89 percent of the female participants said they wanted to lose weight (Psychology Today, 1997). This antagonistic relationship with body image is detrimental to mental and physical health, and it is this antagonistic relationship that escalates to eating disorders. The Body Positive is working to shift this mindset entirely, where there is less emphasis on appearances and bodies in general. While Body Positive does certainly focus on educating its audiences about eating disorders, this is not the main focus of the program. The program is working with changing society to shift norms and expectations, drawing stress away from appearances and towards the most substantial indications of a person’s value.

Chapter 3

Methodology

Data sources

For this study, a survey was sent out to students to measure interest level in becoming facilitators, who would then work closely with the CHWB to establish a peer-support group that would likely become a club-like branch of CHWB.

Participants

The participants in the study are largely Cal Poly students, mostly students who happened to be involved in PULSE (Peers Understanding, Listening, Supporting, Educating). While this is the main target for this study, we have also largely depended on counselors from CHWB to aid in establishing the program and garnering the much-needed support from campus resources.

Survey design

The entirety of this project fundamentally concerns eating and exercise habits among students at Cal Poly, which in turn, allows us to gauge (but not diagnose) the prevalence of disordered eating or negative body image amongst students. In order to gauge this, we created an Institutional Review Board (IRB) approved survey where we asked participants questions about their eating habits, how they feel about the current campus culture surrounding health and dieting, if they've ever dieted, felt pressure to diet, etc. This survey was written to provide a solid, data-based conclusion from what my partner and I experienced during our time at Cal Poly—pressure to look and appear healthy, implying “fit and thin.” This pressure, from our own experience and observation, can lead to orthorexia, which is the obsession with being healthy, especially in regards to diet and exercise. It is a dangerous obsession as it leads to intense anxiety over food, fosters a mindset where exercise “permits” eating, and other obsessive habits. It is

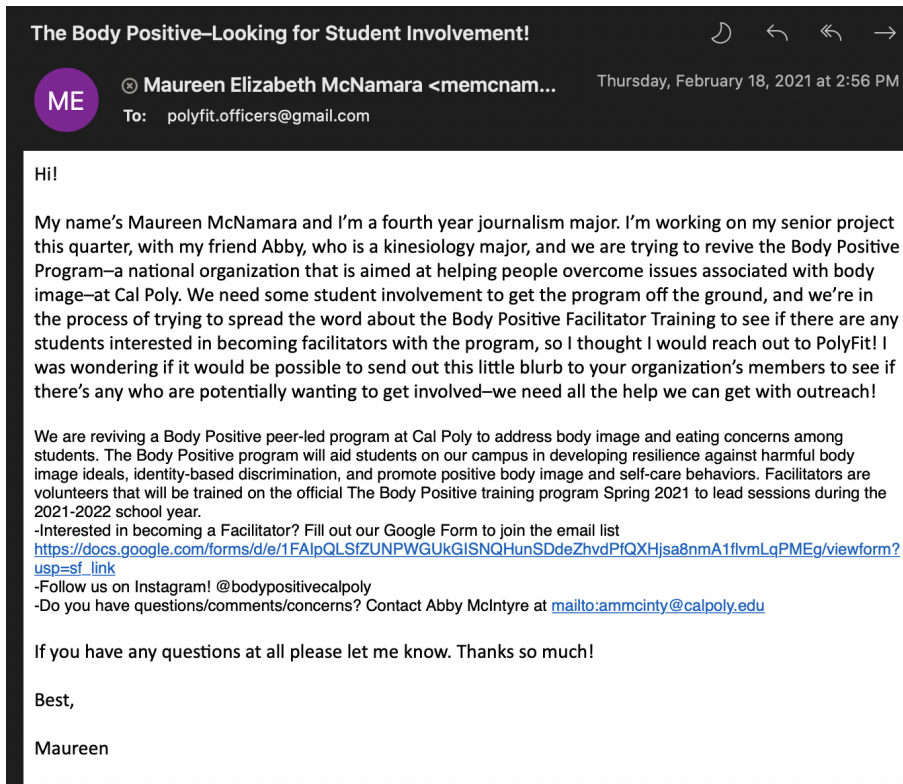
officially a diagnosable eating disorder (NEDA). The results of the survey, due to limitations and protections set by the IRB, do not allow us to view the results of the survey until late May.

Unfortunately, they will not be included at this point in the research process. However, some of the questions (besides background questions such as year, major, involvement, etc.) asked about body image, exercise, and how this has changed with the pandemic (i.e., made one more or less conscious of their weight and eating habits, including fear of weight gain or loss). The results of this survey would quantify our observations and hypotheses about the health culture at Cal Poly, however, the limitations of IRB do not allow us to disclose this information right now.

Outreach via E-mails

Bringing the Body Positive to Cal Poly during the COVID-19 pandemic was done entirely by tediously sending out email after email, starting an Instagram account to promote the cause, and numerous meetings with the Cal Poly counselor who previously was the advisor for a similar ASI “Body Positive” club, students involved with PULSE, and contact with the Body Positive Director, from whom we received funding to sponsor 10 trainings for student facilitators.

We reached out to numerous Cal Poly clubs, student organizations such as New Student and Transition Programs, as well as asked that department chairs send out a short informational blurb about the Body Positive. Here is a screenshot of an email sent out to the Polyfit, Nutrition, and Kinesiology clubs, with similar emails sent out to department heads and several other student groups:



The Google form in the email displayed above was a set of a few simple questions that asked the year, major, and how the participant heard about the Body Positive. We received 20 responses to this survey, showing that student interest was indeed present, and an informational session is planned for early next quarter to provide more information on the responsibilities and duties of becoming a facilitator. We plan to ask those who responded to the survey to attend the informational session, and from this, we will select 10 individuals to get trained as facilitators, completely free of charge, as mentioned earlier.

Instagram Campaign

A significant portion of the virtual outreach plan was heavily dependent on social media to reach student and professional audiences. The NEDA organization has created a week, which occurred during February 21-28 in 2021, dubbed “National Eating Disorder Awareness Week.” The theme for this year’s week was “Every Body Has a Seat at the Table,” in which the intersectionality

of eating disorders was emphasized. This was done to highlight the fact that people of all genders identities, races, ethnic backgrounds, etc., are theoretically equally susceptible to eating disorders and suffering from negative body image. Recent research papers have studied the divergence of white feminism and intersectional feminism (Lewis 2019), and frustration towards the dominance of white women in both feminist and body-positive movements has been expressed on social media and explored in recent scholarly literature. That being said, NEDA week was dedicated to ensuring the intersectionality of eating disorders is better understood. We held an Instagram campaign, posting daily for NEDA week, using some content created by NEDA, but mostly creating original content throughout the week (see figures 1A-1H below). There has been regular posting on this account to keep our followers engaged.

Data collection

As mentioned before, the official research for data collection was limited by IRB legal restrictions. However, the results that are already recorded via the google form, which measured student interests and willingness to participate, indicated a relatively high interest level. This information will allow us to plan for an informational session later, where more information will be provided on the responsibilities of being a facilitator, i.e, how they will work closely with Amelia Ramirez, the CHWB counselor, as well as peer-educators from PULSE to hold discussions and maintain and expand outreach to the student body, especially when the pandemic is over and these meetings can be held in person.

Limitations

The limitations to this study are numerous, due to the unfortunate situations delineated by the global pandemic. Outreach during this time was extremely difficult: the lack of a physical campus to go to, to spread the word, talk to classes, people, put up flyers, etc., was an unprecedented adjustment during this time. We had to entirely rely on email and social media

outreach, which is effective, but not nearly as effective as a combined effort working on campus would be. Another issue was initially finding funding: we were at first at a loss for funding to pay for the facilitator training because CHWB was unable to secure the additional money to subsidize the student training. Thankfully, the Body Positive organization provided some funding, but at first, our project was increasingly difficult to finance and therefore slow to get established at first. The second major limitation to the project was the simple limitation of time. Establishing the Body Positive with longevity in mind was the main goal, as both myself and a partner on this project are graduating this year and want the Body Positive to become a permanent part of CHWB, and have eating disorder screening and treatment become a priority for Cal Poly campus. Lastly, the final limitation is the aforementioned inability to record the results from our IRB-certified questionnaire in a timely manner.

Chapter 4

Data Analysis

Strategy

The strategy for this entire project was outreach: via an Instagram account, @bodypositivecalpoly, and an Instagram campaign during National Eating Disorder Awareness Week. We were able to get reposted by Cal Poly ASI, the official Body Positive Instagram account. PULSE and CHWB, working with us on the project, regularly reposted @bodypositivecalpoly. This was an essential part of getting the word out about our project, considering the aforementioned limitations of the pandemic.

The second significant strategy, as mentioned earlier, was to work closely with professional staff as well as student leaders in CHWB. The Body Positive program easily falls under the umbrella of CHWB, so the only way to accomplish what was initially desired was completely dependent on their help.

With both the social media campaign and the help of CHWB, the word about the facilitator training was successfully spread. The Google form received 20 responses and more continue to come in. Most of the responses to this survey were received during NEDA week, when we posted on @bodypositivecalpoly twice a day, and with the help of other aforementioned Cal Poly Instagram accounts reposting our content, we received nearly double the traffic to our homepage where the Google form was linked. During NEDA week, we also received the highest numbers of content interactions, meaning that those posts were shared the most and received the greatest amount of “likes.”

Tactics and tools

The global pandemic forced us to rely on an outreach plan that relied solely on digital platforms and word of mouth. The Instagram account has been the most consistent method of outreach, through tagging other accounts and asking that certain Cal Poly accounts repost the content proved to be the most effective method for garnering student interest. We received most of our responses to the facilitator application we guessed was accessed mostly through the link to our Instagram bio. See the figures below for the posts about the facilitator application and the campaign for NEDA week.

Chapter 5

Discussions of Recommendations

Summary

The Body Positive Project was initiated by both a Cal Poly journalism student and a kinesiology student, Abby McIntyre to complete this project. Both students felt that Cal Poly has tendencies towards an unhealthy attitude towards physical health that is not symbiotic with mental and spiritual well-being. The emphasis on health and fitness culture at this school is aimed at being “thin,” and equates this with beauty. This can lead to eating disorders and disordered eating in all types of people, especially women. The Body Positive project will hopefully challenge this campus culture and create a mindset here on campus with a holistic view of health, as a mental, physical, and spiritual concept. The Body Positive also creates a safe space for those who struggle with eating disorders to talk and find comfort with others. The purpose of this entire quarter was to implement this program and garner student involvement in the program so that it remains a permanent part of CHWB.

Promoting the program was done through social media campaigns and regular meetings with student leaders in PULSE and counselors in CHWB also helped to get the word out about this project. We used Instagram analytics to find out which of our posts were receiving the most attention and found that posts that involved other Cal Poly-related Instagram accounts received the most attention. Those that followed accounts similar to the @calpolybodypositive, like @mycpwell, the CHWB Instagram, or @pulse, PULSE’s Instagram, or @calpolyrecenter, the ASI Recreation Center’s official Instagram were most likely to follow us back.

Findings

This study found that there is indeed student interest in the Body Positive program at Cal Poly, as well as that there exists a willingness from CHWB to incorporate this program into their institute. This study also discovered that selective outreach to students and Cal Poly organizations who had been theorized to be more inclined to become involved in the Body Positive due to similar interest was more successful than a mass outreach plan. Gaining a following on Instagram was succeeded through reaching out to various Cal Poly organizations, like the official ASI accounts, CHWB accounts, and other clubs with similar interests, like kinesiology and nutrition clubs. The longevity of this project has not been determined, but should the programming continue to hold student interest into the future, we are confident of the program's survival.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the timing for this study was the greatest challenge: finishing and completing a project based on outreach and connectivity during the times of a global pandemic was no easy task. Cal Poly campus closed for in-person classes in March of 2020 and transitioned to a fully virtual platform for Spring 2020, which continued for all of the 2020-2021 academic school year. In addition to no longer having access to a physical campus to attend classes, study, or gather, the limitations of living during a global pandemic extended beyond academic hindrances. To minimize the spread of the coronavirus, socializing was revolutionized at an early stage during the pandemic. The default form of communication shifted from in-person, physical meetings to completely digital meetings. We encountered initial difficulties in communicating regularly and effectively with the members of PULSE and other interest groups who have aided us during this project, as well as encountered difficulties with funding during this financially stressful time. However, the project was a success and the Body Positive is now a

part of CHWB and students will imminently be selected for the facilitator training process. With the help of counselors and Cal Poly peers involved in various realms of Cal Poly social, wellbeing, or special interest groups, this project has a solid foundation that will be permanently incorporated into Cal Poly programming and will be a resource for those struggling with eating disorders, body dysmorphia, the pressure to look or behave a certain way, and ultimately lead to a shift in the culture on Cal Poly campus to be more accepting of body types.

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Figures

Figure 1A

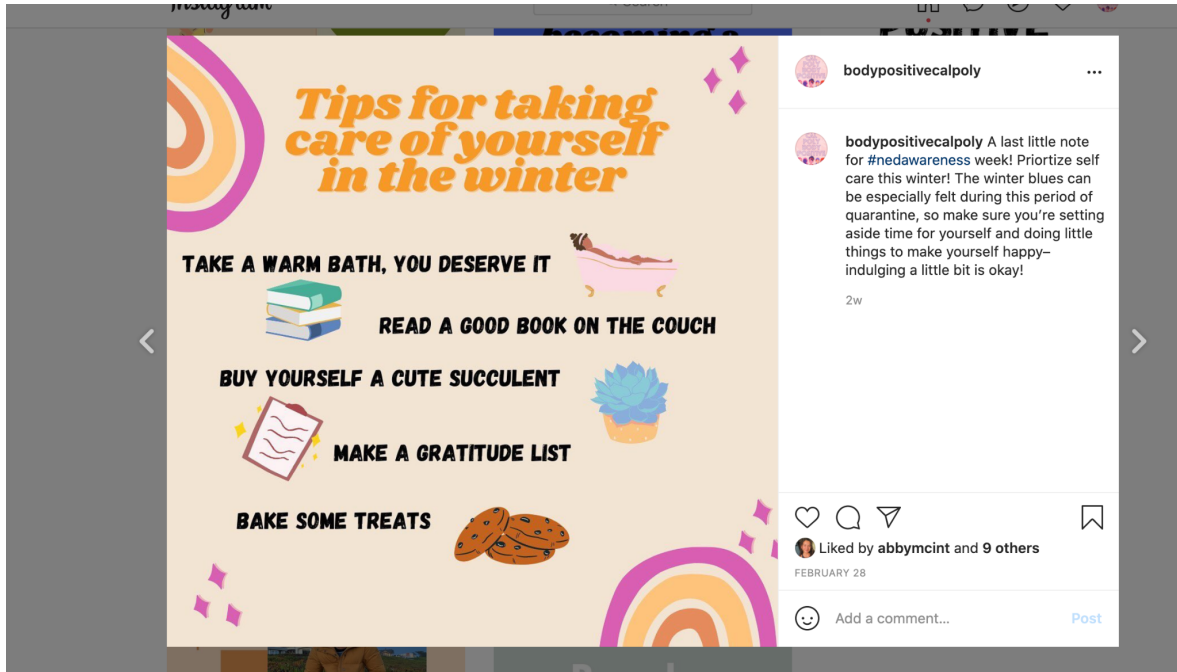


Figure 1B



Figure 1C



Figure 1D



Figure 1E

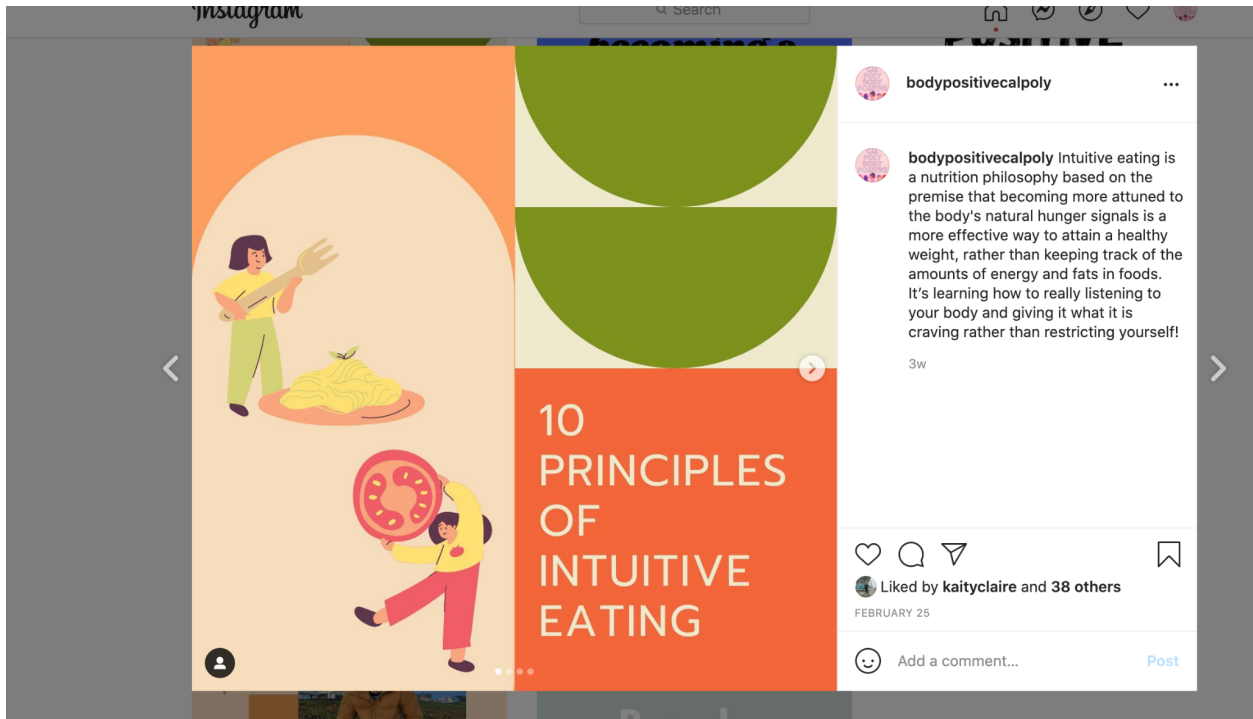


Figure 1F

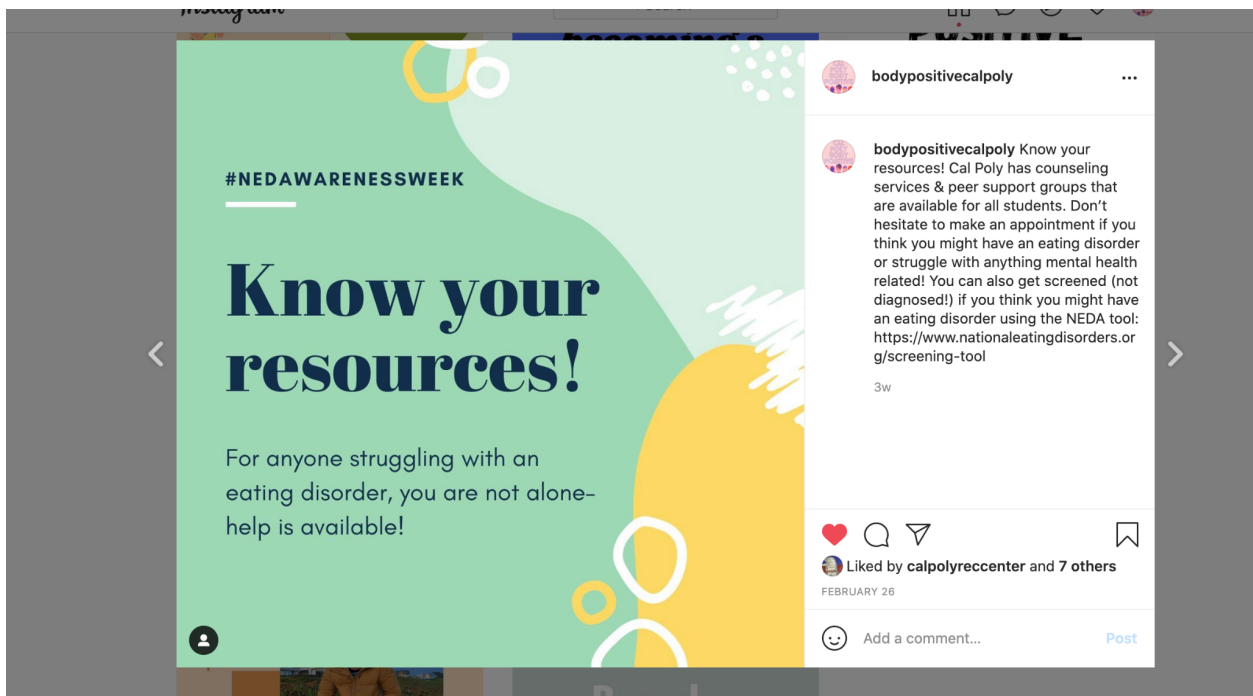


Figure 1G

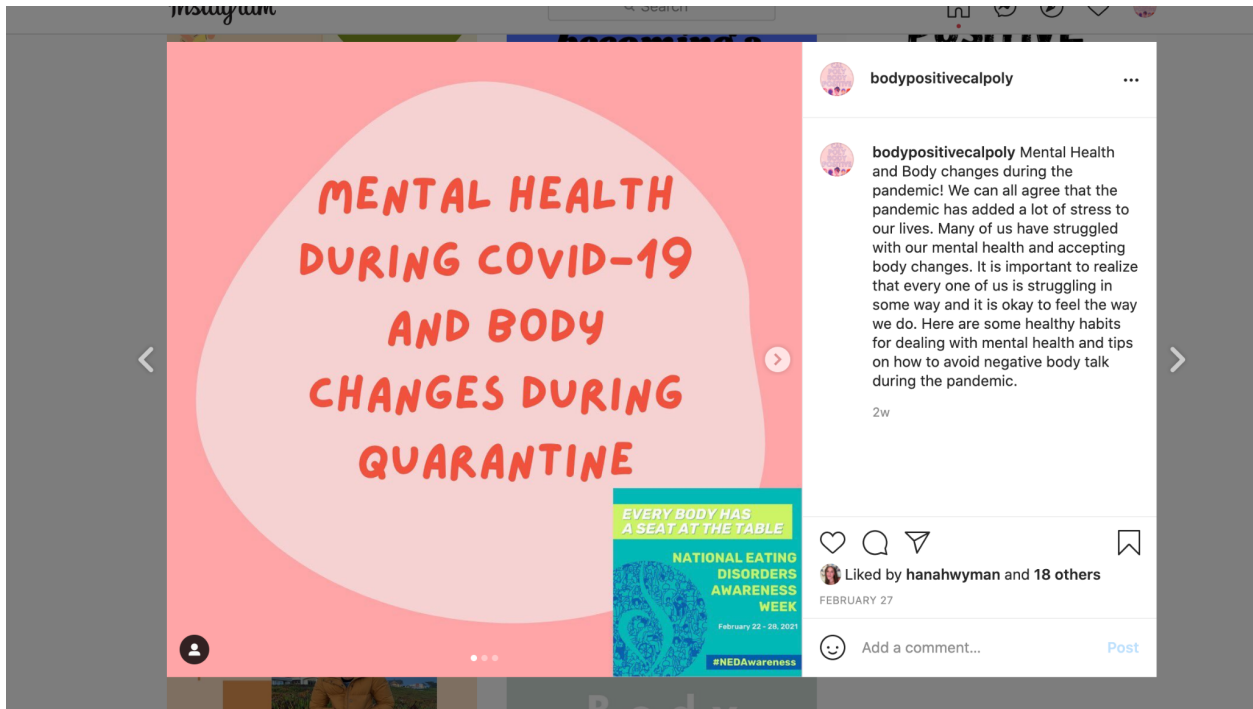


Figure 1H

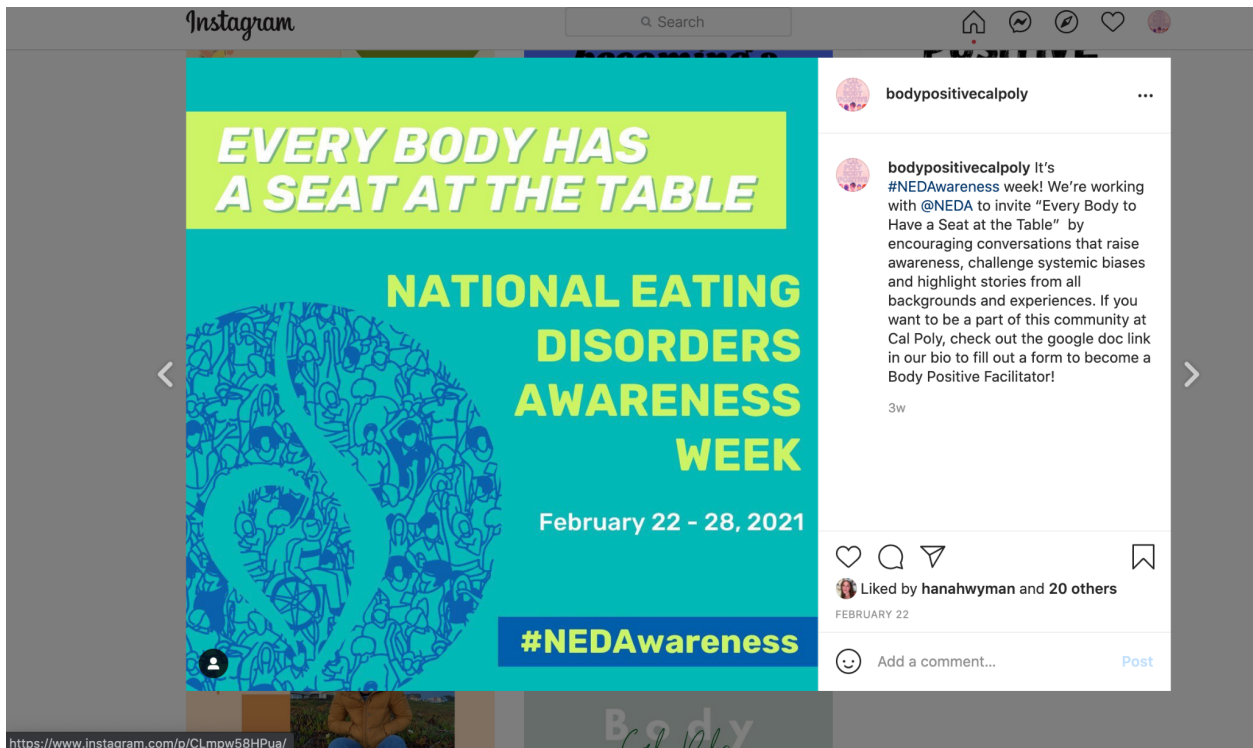


Figure 2

THE BODY POSITIVE

*We are looking
for facilitators!*

What is The Body Positive?
A peer-led program that will help you cultivate a
positive
relationship with your body so you can live happily and
healthfully

INTERESTED IN BECOMING A FACILITATOR?
SCAN THE QR CODE BELOW OR EMAIL ABBY
MCINTYRE AT AMMCINTY@CALPOLY.EDU



FOLLOW US ON INSTAGRAM @BODYPOSITIVECALPOLY