



HAS FASHION GOT ITS HOUSE IN ORDER?

Report from beat's inquiry

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INTRODUCTION

beat invited our supporters and members to send us their views on the fashion industry and its response to eating disorders. We held a public meeting of our inquiry on 6th October 2007, as part of our Annual General Meeting.

This report reflects the views and opinions we received – emailed, posted on our website or spoken from the floor at the public meeting, and sets out **beat's** view on this important issue.

beat Ambassadors – young people with direct experience of an eating disorder – were present at the inquiry public meeting. They were invited to give their own appraisal of the evidence presented and to be part of **beat's** call to action.



BACKGROUND

The role and influence of fashion in our lives is an international issue and a global concern. This creative industry sets the aesthetic for beauty – driving an aspiration that leads from haute couture to the high street.

Global culture spread by the instant access of media coverage and driven by the cult of celebrity worship means few individuals can truly claim to be beyond its reach. Even to disdain its influence is to acknowledge the role it can play in all our lives.

But fashion has begun to take flak – for leading a worrying trend towards extreme thinness, for causing young girls to emulate an unhealthy body ideal, and for the deaths of at least two catwalk models from eating disorders.

Fashion is fragmented. What appears to an outsider as a cohesive, uniform entity that changes our clothes from long to short, from grey to pink and back again on a regular seasonal rhythm – is on closer inspection composed of a multitude of aspects.

Designers, Models, Agents, Fashion Houses, Major Retailers, Advertisers, Photographers, Magazine Editors – each has a distinct and proscribed role to play. A change from the long, grey clothes of one season to the short, pink ones of the next takes the collective will and momentum to set the trend and drive it out to our high street mass markets.

Harnessing that collective will to get fashion to set a trend that is healthy, life affirming and no longer potentially dangerous is a real challenge. We need to overcome a culture of blaming that makes the issue always someone else's fault – someone, somewhere else in fashion's complicated supply chain.

"Having suffered from anorexia from the age of 11 (I am now 23 and recovering) I find it difficult to define what is a normal female body shape when I see women in magazines and in the windows of shops looking so willowy. What therapists tell me is normal is contradicted every time I see models and celebrities being praised as beautiful when they weigh less than me at my height"

HAS FASHION GOT ITS HOUSE IN ORDER?

We posed this question because we are committed to bringing about change. We know that changes are needed to the working practice of the fashion industry which has inadvertently developed and adopted some toxic aspects. Aspects that are harmful to young people employed in the industry and to those people vulnerable to its powerful influence.

We also posed this question because while we welcomed the British Fashion Council's Model Health Inquiry, and the recommendations it contained, we want to see those recommendations enacted. We are committed to holding the fashion industry to account, speaking out on our views and representing the interests and concerns of people directly affected by eating disorders and their families.

We know we have a particular stance on this issue – informed by our expertise and the insight we have into the dreadful, devastating and deadly effects of an eating disorder.

That insight – gained from our daily contact with people from all walks of life who find their lives overturned when an eating disorder takes its grip on them means that we are committed to doing everything we can to prevent the condition.

This expertise means we also know that eating disorders are a complex condition, a mental illness that does not have one single cause, but rather requires a series of interrelated risks and vulnerabilities to combine to create the circumstances that lead to an individual's illness.

Blame isn't helpful. We don't blame individuals for their eating disorder, and we don't blame their parents either. We haven't blamed the fashion industry; but we do call on them to take responsibility for making things better without it being seen as 'their fault'.

"I have had a long battle with anorexia (25 years) but have never felt that the fashion media was to blame. However, I am in no doubt that the fashion industry has a huge part to play in helping models with eating disorders. I feel the industry is abrogating responsibility for the pressure that it puts on young models to be super-thin"

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*"In my personal experience a problem with body image was only one small part of the feelings that lead to anorexia, that it came after the eating disorder arose as a means of justification for what I was doing. So yes I agree in that sense that images of very slim models can have a detrimental effect to people vulnerable to eating disorders"*

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"I think fashion has a huge influence on people especially the younger people. I know when I look at models it doesn't help me, I don't know if this is because I have an eating disorder or not but it makes me think I'm huge"

BRITISH FASHION COUNCIL

The British Fashion Council's Model Health Inquiry report "Fashioning a Healthy Future" had a scope that was very precisely defined – the health of catwalk models employed to work at London Fashion Week shows. It acknowledged that the facts of the modelling profession are not as glamorous as they appear. "It is peopled by young and potentially vulnerable workers...for many their careers are short and they endure working conditions that are damaging to their health".

On eating disorders the report stated the issue starkly. "Our investigations uncovered a deep lack of knowledge about eating disorders in the fashion industry, including among models themselves".

Within the scope of the inquiry, there was much we could support and this report contains a call to action that would see the main recommendations as they relate to eating disorders implemented fully and as soon as possible.

Our concern was that the scope of the British Fashion Council's inquiry did not extend to considering the impact that this very influential industry has on a wider population – some of whom are particularly vulnerable to its more harmful aspects.

We understood the reasons for this constraint to the inquiry's remit, but nevertheless feel the omission is a weakness in the inquiry's impact and opportunity to act as an agent of change.

We know that the substance of most people's concern with the industry is the effect that it is having on a generation of young people. That concern is widely expressed from parents, teachers, politicians, social commentators and aspects of the media as well as those people who have already been directly affected by eating disorders – the most extreme example of a toxic effect.

"I have colleagues who worked on fashion magazines. My career has been as a design consultant and I have also been an art director on other types of magazines. I understand that eating disorders emerge from a mix of complex issues, but I strongly believe the fashion industry and the media in general needs to do so much more to help. In fact, I think it's time they became more accountable for the negative environment they create, especially for teenage children"

THE MEDIA'S ROLE

The media has perpetuated its own unhealthy obsession with weight and shape in some of the coverage it has given the issue. The hysteria that surrounded the so-called 'size zero' debate did little to enlighten opinion, or challenge entrenched misconceptions. It deflected attention from the substantive issue of an unhealthily thin aesthetic by allowing the fashion industry to retort that there were no size zero models – only size 6 and size 8's. This had the unhelpful effect of making fashion look disingenuous even when it was being truthful. That most stories were lavishly illustrated with pictures of either models or celebrities looking emaciated only reinforced the stereotypical view that thin equals eating disorder.

Our stance was to represent the concerns of people affected by eating disorders and to steer a path through the conflicting interest groups. We steered clear of joining the more florid media opportunities. Getting a headline or two that screamed "charity blames fashion for anorexia deaths" would have been very easy, but wouldn't have solved anything.

"I also think celebrities have a huge part to play. More so than models, they are aspired to by others, they choose to lose weight to fit into an outfit which was created by a designer and the result is pressure given by the media who choose to glorify the models"

BANNING BY BMI

More controversially, we didn't join those calling for a ban on models with a Body Mass Index (BMI) of less than 18. Our position is that BMI is a crude measure, unreliable before full adult height is reached, culturally biased, and by itself cannot be used to make a diagnosis of an eating disorder.

We know it is possible to be slender and healthy. It is also possible to be severely affected by an eating disorder and not be underweight. Most people with bulimia nervosa would be above a BMI of 18, and yet bulimia is the most common eating disorder making up about 40% of clinical cases. It is also as severe and as dangerous as anorexia nervosa, and easier to hide when everyone thinks eating disorder equals thin.

A slender physique is only healthy if it comes naturally. The danger is that too many models are young people, not yet fully physically mature who are required to maintain a degree of thinness that is not their natural size. They are forced to adopt this potentially lethal practice just in order to fit the prevailing aesthetic of beauty as tall and thin and young.

Banning on the basis of BMI felt too much like blaming the models for their bodies without doing anything to challenge the aesthetic. Such a ban would have done nothing to protect the health and wellbeing of models with bulimia who were not underweight.

BEAT'S PUBLIC MEETING

We invited a panel of opinion formers to lead the discussion at our public meeting. TV Presenter and fashion journalist Caryn Franklin chaired the inquiry

Dr Adrienne Key

Dr Key is a Consultant Psychiatrist specialising in treating eating disorders and body image disturbance. She is a member of the panel for Model Health Inquiry.

Tarryn Meaker

Ms Meaker is a Size 12 model – which is considered a 'plus size'. As a top teenage fashion model, she had personal experience of pressures on models to be thin, and developed an eating disorder as a result.

Susan Ringwood

Ms Ringwood is **beat's** Chief Executive. She acted as an independent advisor to the Model Health Inquiry, and has worked with the Association of Model Agents on implementing the inquiries' recommendations.

Elise Slater

Ms Slater is a designer who works in the London fashion industry, on the women's-wear trends forecasting side. She is involved with the AnyBody campaigning group.

Rosanna Carr-Taylor

Miss Carr- Taylor is a model, and a Miss England 2007 finalist. She has not been personally affected by the pressure to become thin, but has seen at first hand the effect this can have on others.

Caryn Franklin

Caryn spoke about her personal connection with the fashion industry, and her commitment to beating eating disorders too. She has been a patron and supporter of beat's work for many years and understands the issues well.

She spoke about the cyclical nature of fashion – as trends, styles and the underlying aesthetic change. She said the debate about size has been round before, and then went away when the creative remit changed – She felt this time it had surfaced when thinness was more extreme and was glad the fashion industry through the model health enquiry seemed to be taking some action.

She explained her view of fashion as a complex industry – so many people have a part to play and all need to be harnessed together. She knows how hard it can be to concede what could be a competitive advantage.

She spoke about her friend and colleague Jeff Banks, who produced a collection of size 12 clothes some years ago in a challenge to the thin aesthetic. The collection was not featured in any fashion magazine because the clothes were too big for the models, and fashion editors wouldn't include them.

Caryn would wish to see a union or professional association for models – to protect their interests and safeguard their working lives. She wants to see the momentum kept going.

She deplored the fact that feminism is not a word used in fashion or popular culture these days – thin was seen as a short cut to 'edgy.' And this was a mindset that designers were rooted in.

Adrienne Key

Dr Key spoke about her role as a member of the British Fashion Council's panel of inquiry into model's health. She was the only person on the panel not directly involved in the fashion industry, and the only person with professional experience of eating disorders too.

She spoke about her alarm at the level of ignorance she found in the industry – an ignorance that the panel was courageous enough to acknowledge in their published report.

There was a real fear of being blamed for causing eating disorders, and a fear of the financial consequences and career failure if individuals were seen to be breaking ranks on this issue. This fear was addressed, and the resulting report does contain some strong recommendations that everyone could agree on about education for models, a healthier environment and improved working practices.

She spoke about the need to keep the pressure on, and encourage the actions needed to implement the report. The panel will continue to meet for the next two years and she is committed to working with them to achieve the challenging goals they have set.

She recommends banning models under the age of 16 from British Fashion Week cat walks and that all models undergo a health check.

Tarryn Meaker

Tarryn spoke about being a top model as a teenager and the pressures she experienced to achieve success in that world. She spoke about being embarrassed by being thin and yet still expected to lose weight.

Those pressures caused her to develop an eating disorder which affected her life for several years. Now healthy, she works as a 'plus size' model. She is 5' 10" and a size 12 – which in itself speaks directly to the issue when the average adult woman in the UK is a size 16.

She spoke about the attitudes and behaviours she experienced – where weight and shape were judged so harshly and where young models came to feel it was their fault if they didn't fit the tiny clothes. She knew from personal experience the drive to get thin and stay thin just to get work. This was a goal that in her case couldn't be achieved in a healthy way. She soon became used to being part of an environment where food was an enemy, and where her fellow models used extreme and harmful methods of controlling their appetite and weight.

She feels strongly that in an international industry, that is so successful and powerful – blaming models isn't the answer. She wants to see a healthier aesthetic promoted, and more people able to speak out about the changes they all know need to happen – soon.

Susan Ringwood

Susan said she has always been interested in clothes, she had read the magazines and enjoyed shopping but she had to learn about fashion when this issue became so prominent in relation to eating disorders over recent months. She found the fashion world was a strange, closed environment, a world where behaviours and attitudes that would perhaps not be tolerated elsewhere went unnoticed or un-remarked.

She stressed that **beat** has always stated publicly that fashion by itself doesn't cause eating disorders – it's more complex than that – but it is a powerful influence and one that some vulnerable young people can find toxic. **beat** had conducted a survey with 100 young people – all of whom had personal experience of an eating disorder. They were clear that it wasn't fashion or the media that made them ill, but they also felt very strongly that it made it so much more difficult for them to recover.

Susan said that **beat** calls on the industry to establish an ethical supply chain – like that of organic or fair traded goods – where all aspects of the fashion industry commit to practices and standards that promote a healthy ideal.

Elise Slater

Elise spoke about her work as a designer and the women's wear she is involved with. Forecasting trends, driving them and responding to them is an important part of achieving success in the fashion industry. It's a dynamic and creative industry.

The unfortunate aspect she has seen is that the trend is to be thinner and thinner still. There is very little diversity, and all the aspirational features of fashion – its glamour, the cult of the celebrity are all focused on thinness.

She stated how strongly she feels that eating disorders should not have to be seen as a normal rite of passage for young people – yet this is the danger that is presented everywhere we look.

Fashion holds and promotes a key message for young people about what is aspirational and Elise feels strongly that children in particular need to be encouraged not to respond. The more unhealthy or even dangerous aspects of those messages – messages that bombard us from every direction.

Elise said that for any change to take a real effect, it has to come from the grass roots – which is why she feels that designers have such an important responsibility. They can challenge the aesthetic, and they should.

Rosanna Carr Taylor

Rosanna made a passionate plea for models to be seen and treated as people, not inanimate objects. She feels that the trend to portray models as mannequins – blank, artificial and unreal all contributes to the unhealthy aesthetic.

She said she felt fortunate that she was in her late teens, as opposed to her early teens, when put under pressure to lose weight and never actually forced to do so – but she knows that it happens routinely to so many others and that the impact is devastating.

She wanted to challenge the aesthetic of unhealthily thin images of people portrayed as though they were normal in the media as well as on catwalks. She commented on the “new standard of normal” that has emerged which, for most people, is unachievable and feels this should be challenged with more variety on the catwalk and in the media.

For the future, she spoke about her hopes for a vibrant, creative industry that can celebrate diversity and show women’s bodies as beautiful in ways that are not just about one type of ultra thin shape.

She also feels strongly that children should learn in school how to protect themselves against the harmful aspects of the media’s obsession with size.

Points raised from the floor

Retailers should show responsibility too – the high street is where most people get their clothes – not from couture. Girls and professional women want to wear something flattering and fashionable – and we come in all shapes and sizes.

Like politics – people get the fashion they deserve – fashion follows the aesthetic, it doesn’t create it. We are blaming the fashion industry when we are all to blame – it’s a whole society issue.

There should be a standard sizing – no two shops sell clothes cut to the same pattern, and so you never know what is going to fit you.

Designers could get more involved – they don't usually choose the model themselves – the show's producer does that. Stella McCartney did choose her own models at this year's fashion shows and it made a real difference to the look – it showed her commitment too.

The 'celebrities' have a responsibility too – they are more likely to be the awful size zero than models are, because celebrities aren't tall like models. It's the popular women's magazines that exist on a diet of celebrities parading in clothes that couldn't be worn by the average woman.

Media have a role to play – they help to perpetuate some of the unhealthy stereotypes – they always include a picture of a very thin person to illustrate an article and then say how dreadful it is. That doesn't help.

We have all embraced ethical sourcing for food and fair traded goods – we could easily do the same for clothes. It would be about celebrating something positive rather than blaming people.

The supermarkets have been taking a big stance about environmental issues, organics etc. There is a growing consumer interest in this, and supermarkets sell clothes too – they could take a lead.

Summary of submitted evidence

Most people were encouraged that this issue is finally being taken seriously – and particularly that the view of an eating disorder as a trivial fashion accessory is being challenged.

There was support for the Model Health Inquiry, but some strong doubts expressed about whether there is enough commitment across the industry to make the recommendations work.

Many people made a point in support of the view that while fashion isn't the only cause of an eating disorder – its influence can be harmful.

"I feel compelled to respond to this question as someone who has struggled with both anorexia and bulimia for over 10 years, and as a graduate from a textile design course. I do agree that the use of overly skinny models is now out of order. Their use in campaigns where thinness isn't necessary such as for perfume or makeup is irresponsible".

There were divided views about the role that legislation could play. Some people stressed the difficult practicalities of enforcing any legalities. A small majority felt strongly that, as with drink/driving and smoking – only legislation could curb the health risks that fashion industry raises.

OUR CALL TO ACTION

Five steps that everyone can take – no matter where or how they are involved in the fashion industry:-

1. Raise awareness – get informed about eating disorders and understand the risks. Change working practices to help reduce the risks involved.
2. Demonstrate diversity – in shape and size as well as ethnicity and age. Challenge the narrow aesthetic.
3. Take an ethical stance – make a commitment to supply chain integrity. Translate lessons from fair trade to make fashion healthy.
4. Build resilience – in the young people employed in the industry and those influenced by it. Help people understand the pressures and how to reduce them.
5. Celebrate creativity – fashion is aspirational. The creativity that drives it should be life affirming – not potentially deadly.

OUR COMMITMENT TO ACTION

beat is committed to working with the fashion industry to help bring about the changes we know are both necessary and possible.

We will offer support, information and will work in collaboration with industry sectors to implement the Model Health Inquiry recommendations.

We will challenge unhelpful media coverage and celebrate best practice whenever we can.

Eating disorders can be deadly, but they can also be beaten. We can all play a part.

Has fashion got its house in order?

A **beat** Ambassador Sarah Wilkinson summed it up in her analysis:-

"The fashion industry may not have got its house in order yet, but it is slowly shifting the furniture".



Beat is the national charity supporting people affected by eating disorders.

beat is changing the way people think about eating disorders.

Over 1.1million people in the UK are directly affected by eating disorders, that means lives lost, bright futures destroyed.

Eating disorders are a serious mental illness—not a fad, a diet gone wrong or a fashion accessory.

That's why eating disorders must be beaten.

And they can - with the right treatment and the right support. **beat** is the organisation that campaigns; that challenges the stigma that people with eating disorders face; that gives people the help and support they need.

We have a vision: eating disorders will be beaten.

And we make our vision real.

beat supports

People need to know that they can get help beating their eating disorders. We run national helplines, a UK-wide self-help network, a comprehensive website. We are the first port of call, a first step towards recovery and hope.

Eating disorders will be beaten when more people affected by eating disorders access the help and information they need.

beat campaigns.

People need to have confidence in the healthcare system so that they get the help and treatment they need. Beating an eating disorder can be a battle, but the fight shouldn't be with the system.

We campaign to improve services. We engage with Government and policy makers and make sure that the views of people with eating disorders are listened to and taken into account.

Eating disorders will be beaten when the most effective treatment is available to all.

beat speaks

Nobody should have to hide their eating disorder because of the shame and stigma that they feel. Eating disorders are not about magazine headlines, they are about real damage and real distress.

That's why we challenge journalists and writers to present the truth about eating disorders.

Eating disorders will be beaten when they are no longer sensationalised or trivialised in the media.

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