LOVE YOUR BODY, LOVE YOURSELF
Body Image

A NORMATIVE DISCONTENT

Put plainly, we can define body image by the way each one of us views our own physical appearance. This view includes psychological feelings as well as bodily experience. If you have poor body image you dislike your body, or perceive it as being unattractive to others. Conversely, if you have good body image you accept your body and view it as being attractive to others.

Almost everyone has some body feature they'd like to change. In fact, body image dissatisfaction is so common in our society that it's considered "normal." Body stereotypes, often seen in the media, are socialized and reinforced in our society. They're also learned from parents and peers. Children, especially girls, learn about cultural ideals of thinness at an early age and begin to incorporate these ideals into their normal attitudes and behaviors. This discontent can become a permanent fixture, leading to low self-esteem, dieting, and even eating disorders in pursuit of the "perfect body." Body image dissatisfaction is especially common among teens and young adults.

As a college student, having a healthy body image can become particularly challenging for you. College is a time when you establish relationships, as well as a sense of identity. Naturally, you also try to "fit in." As you enter college, you may encounter someone with body image concerns, or maybe you have concerns yourself. So, why is a positive body image so important? Psychologists and counselors agree that a negative body image is directly related to self-esteem. The more negative the perception of your body, the more negative you feel about yourself. Poor body image could also lead you to anxiety and depression. Being aware of the facts and related issues in this section will help you to guard against becoming a victim of negative body image.

BODY IMAGE DISSATISFACTION AND DISTURBANCE

Body image is often measured by asking people to rate their current and ideal body shape using a series of drawings of increasing size. The difference between these two values is the rate of body satisfaction. Overestimating the size of certain body sites (such as waist and hip size) when compared to objective measurements is usually a sign of dissatisfaction. However, body image may be seen as "distorted" or "disturbed" when one's self-evaluation of appearance is at such a level that it interferes with social and/or occupational functioning, or causes elevated levels of anxiety and depression in the individual.

- Body image dissatisfaction is more common in women than men, but men still express concern about their bodies.

- Women are more likely to judge themselves on appearance and thinness, while men are concerned about the size and strength of their bodies.

- 90% of women in America are unhappy with their bodies and think they need to lose weight; 75% of American males are unhappy with their body size or shape and think they need to trim fat and increase muscle.

- 70% of women and 33% of men rate their current figure as larger than ideal.

- Men are more likely to judge the female figure they find most attractive as heavier than women's ratings of the ideal body shape. Simply stated, men are far more likely to be attracted to larger women than women think men are.

- In one study, 3 out of 4 women stated they were overweight, although only 1 out of 4 actually were.

- A study found that women overestimate the size of their hips by 16% and their waists by 25%, yet the same women were able to correctly estimate the width of a box.

- In one study, over half of the females studied between 18 and 25 would prefer to be run over by a truck than to be fat, and two-thirds would choose to be mean or stupid rather than to be fat.

- A survey of college students found that they would prefer to marry an embezzler, drug user, shoplifter, or blind person than someone who is fat.

THE EFFECTS OF DIETING AND DISORDER EATING

A press for the "perfect figure" has led to a strong emphasis on dieting and weight control as a means to achieve these ideals. Today there is an intense focus on dieting, diet foods, and diet commercials. This focus on food and fat can lead to abnormal eating habits or even disordered eating. Many eating disorders are described as diets gone wrong.

- Americans spend $40-50 billion per year on diet products.

- In 1970, the average age a girl started dieting was 14; by 1990 the average age dropped to 8.

- 51% of 9 and 10-year old girls stated they felt better about themselves when they were adhering to a diet.

- 81% of 10-year old girls are afraid of being fat.

- 45% of women and 25% of men are on a diet on any given day; 80% of women in the U.S. are chronic dieters.

- 91% of women recently surveyed on a college campus had attempted to control their weight through dieting, 22% dieted "often" or "always."

- 98% of reducing diets fail to produce permanent weight loss; another study reported that 95% of all dieters will regain their lost weight within 1-5 years.

- Most eating disorders begin with a weight loss diet.

- 35% of "normal dieters" progress to pathological dieting; of those, 25% will progress to partial or full syndrome eating disorders.

- 7 million girls and women and 1 million boys and men suffer from eating disorders. Up to 22% will die as a result of the disorder.

MEDIA INFLUENCE

Celebrities in the media represent a body image standard that is impossible to achieve. Most teens watch an average of 22 hours of television a week, where they are exposed to these "perfect bodies." Many believe that they should try to achieve these ideals. In

addition, the images of men and women in magazine do not promote positive body image. They are intended to sell products. Advertising sends the message that you need to fix what is wrong with you.

- The average American woman is 5'4" tall and weighs 144 pounds; whereas the "ideal" woman portrayed in the media is 5'9" tall and weighs 100 pounds.

- If the doll Barbie were an actual woman, she would be 6'9" tall, have a 41" bust, and a 20" waist.

- Women and men on the covers of magazines represent only 0.03% of the population; they have trainers, and most ads are airbrushed or changed by a computer.

- In a 1997 Body Image Survey, both girls and boys reported that "very thin or muscular models" made them feel insecure about themselves.

- Following viewing images of female fashion models, 7 out of 10 women felt more depressed and angrier than prior to viewing the images.

BODY DYSMORPHIC DISORDER

The primary feature of Body Dysmorphic Disorder is a person's extreme criticism of some aspect of his/her appearance. The individual's rating of the body feature does not fit with that of an objective observer. From a clinical perspective, the individual is obsessively focused on a particular body part, and it interferes with the person's daily functioning.

- The most frequently reported sites for criticism are: hair, nose, skin, eyes, thighs, abdomen, breast size or shape, chest size, lips, chin, scars, height, and teeth.

- Prevalence studies have not been conducted; however, it is likely that the disorder affects 1-2% of the general population and 10-15% of psychiatric outpatients.

- Some researchers believe that the prevalence of Body Dysmorphic Disorder is on the rise.

- Although data on eating disorders suggest that 90% of the cases are females, studies suggest that Body Dysmorphic Disorder may be equally common in adult females and males.

TAKE ACTION

Learn to reject others' perspectives about body size. Think of your positive assets (i.e. intelligence, creativity) rather than your perceived flaws in appearance. Minimize exposure to television and fashion magazines that portray unrealistic body types. Challenge advertising and discourage size discrimination. Learn to accept people for who they are and what they contribute, rather than what they look like. These steps are helpful in developing a sense of self-acceptance, as well as promoting a healthy body image in others.

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