

THE GOOD AND THE BAD

Body Image



What is body image? Have you ever thought about how you see yourself when you look in the mirror? How do you picture yourself in your mind? What do you believe about your own appearance? Body image is affected by all these things. It has to do with how we feel about our bodies, including our height, shape, and weight. It has to do with how we sense and control our bodies. We all experience body image differently, but most of us feel a combination of positive and negative body images to different degrees at different times. We may all have days when we feel awkward or uncomfortable in our bodies.

The key to developing a positive body image is recognizing and respecting our natural shapes and learning to overpower negative thoughts and feelings with positive, affirming, and accepting ones. What's important is making sure that a negative body image doesn't become our focus, or prevent us from positively experiencing life.

When you experience a positive body image, you appreciate your own unique appearance (color, shape, size, etc.) and all of the other characteristics that make you exceptional as a person.

Signs of a positive body image may include:

- A clear, true perception of your body, which allows you to see yourself as you really are without judgment.
- An appreciation of your natural body shape that does not dictate how you feel about yourself or others.



- An appreciation of all that your body does for you and the ability to recognize that this is more important than the way you look.
- The ability to be comfortable and confident in your body, to be proud and accepting of it.
- The ability to love yourself unconditionally, and not judge yourself by how well you stick to a diet or exercise plan.

If you experience negative body image, you may feel disappointment or dissatisfaction with your appearance and often become obsessed with ways to change.

Signs of negative body image may include:

- A distorted perception of your body – you see yourself as bigger, smaller, or in some other negative way different from what you really are.
- The need to compare yourself to other people, believing that only they are attractive.
- Spending more time worrying about the shape of your body than what it can do or how it feels.
- Feeling ashamed, self-conscious, and anxious about your body.
- Feeling uncomfortable and awkward in your body.
- The belief that your body size or shape is a sign of failure.

People with negative body image are more likely to suffer from feelings of depression, isolation, low self-esteem, and obsessions with weight loss. They are also at a heightened risk for using destructive alternatives to fix their perceived problem. This can lead to over-exercising, smoking, substance abuse, or eating disorders.

At its most extreme, a negative body image may result in Body Dysmorphic Disorder (BDD). BDD is self-criticism of some (or many) aspects of your appearance. People experiencing BDD see themselves in ways that do not fit with that of an objective observer. People suffering from BDD believe that they are so completely unattractive (or ugly or even disfigured) that they may be unable to interact with others or function normally for fear of ridicule and humiliation at their appearance.



SPECIAL CONSIDERATIONS IN BODY IMAGE

Body Image and People with Physical Disabilities

Watching TV or movies, or reading popular magazines, you might develop the impression that only the most fit, attractive people lead healthy, active lives, and can be found sexually desirable, or experience success in life. For many of us, this impression becomes a standard by which we judge ourselves and our own ability to be desirable, or successful in life. But, if we as a culture take our cues about what is right or normal from these outside influences and if the most desirable bodies must be, at a minimum, healthy and fit: then where is the space for someone who can never fit that ideal? What message is sent about someone who is missing a limb, is unable to see, or must use a wheelchair? If we as a society have learned that we should strive to reach certain standards of physical perfection, then if we don't, it perpetuates a belief that we must work harder to correct our flaws. We feel that we should be more disciplined - eat less, exercise more, and change ourselves to fit the mold: then what is the lesson for people who can never reach that goal no matter how much they might try?

Even for those of us who experience positive body image, and who have stopped trying to wish our bodies be taller, shorter, thinner, stronger, lighter, darker, or just "different", there is still a range of "normal" or "acceptable" that we know includes us. If we decide to reject mainstream representations of beauty, we have that option. We can look to other cultures, other sources of information. For those living with disabilities finding an alternative model of beauty that includes them is much harder.

People with disabilities find themselves confronted by two conflicting, divergent ideas about their bodies and how those bodies "should" be. On the one hand, people with disabilities are often ignored – seen only as the disability, or not seen at all. People without disabilities may treat people with disabilities as different, "other", a deviation from the norm. Because people with disabilities are so often invisible, people without disabilities may not even consider acknowledge them as peers or equals, much less think about them as people with bodies who do or do not fit the standards of ideal beauty.

At the same time, the standards for physical perfection and the ideal body that affect people without disabilities also affect people living with disabilities. We are all exposed to the same media with the same narrowly constructed ideals. For people living with disabilities, though, instead of feeling that the standard is just a little out of reach, and that trying just a little harder will get them there: people with physical disabilities may be left feeling that they don't fit in the same world with people who don't live with disabilities.



There are ways that people with disabilities can control the effects of negative impressions they receive from messages about body image:

- ***Avoid unrealistic comparisons.*** Just as a person in a wheelchair may not become a dancer or run an 8-minute mile, they may be a brilliant musician: as an ultra-marathoner may be tone deaf or may never write beautiful poetry.
- ***Redefine your ideas about what a body can and should do.*** Rather than feeling a disability makes you weak, think about the inner strength required of you to deal with the challenges of everyday life. Appreciate the things you can do well and the ways your methods of coping with your disability are assets to you.
- ***Don't over-generalize.*** Your disabilities may change the way you perform your activities, but they do not limit you completely. You can still do many things successfully. Just because someone is a terrible cook or sings off-key does not mean they have failed as a person.

QUEERNESS AND BODY IMAGE

Queer Women and Body Image

Queer and heterosexual women experience many of the same body image concerns. They are exposed to much of the same mass media and to the same mainstream images of ideal beauty. In some ways, though, queer women confronting ideas about body image and what they expect of themselves may face more difficulties, as they are exposed to the divergent, as well as, conflicting ideals of beauty espoused by both mainstream and queer communities. Women in the queer community often reject what is considered "traditional femininity" and traditional standards of beauty, while embracing alternative ideals. This can become a problem if these women, instead of finding inclusive new ways to view themselves, feel forced to adhere to a different but equally stringent standard in order to fit in with their community. These pressures can be especially difficult for women who experience a fluid sexuality (bi- or pan-sexuality, intersex, etc.) and are not easily defined by any prescribed gender roles- as defined by the straight or queer community.

In such a case, a bisexual or lesbian woman may feel she has not been freed from pressures to fit in, but has instead exchanged one set of pressures for another. This pressure might be to reject "mainstream" images of beauty, despite a personal preference for and comfort with those images. While the queer community may embrace alternatives when it comes to ideas about self-representation – different hair,



makeup, and clothing styles, as well as body types – this community may also exert pressure on its members to conform to these alternative types – to reject all concerns about body size, to feel that wanting to lose weight is wrong- potentially at the expense of an individuals' health and well-being (physical and mental). Queer women may feel they must ignore their own comfort in order to fit into culture and community.

It is important that people who have decided to learn to love themselves, to accept themselves, and to experience positive body image, not judge or shame people who make a deliberate decision to change the way they eat, exercise, or represent themselves. Trading one extreme for another is not healthy; a transition from negative to positive body image or from unhealthy to healthy is. A person may say "I want to get in shape because I feel better that way" or "I want to lose weight so that I can be a better dancer/runner/yogi (ni)" or "I prefer not to eat red meat because I don't like the way it makes me feel". There are many reasons someone may choose to embrace a healthier lifestyle, to avoid certain foods, etc., and that person should not be made to feel they have made a bad decision. Adapting a healthier lifestyle is a legitimate choice, and should be treated as one, unless the behavior is becoming destructive, or controlling the way a person lives in a negative or risky way.

Queer Men and Body Image

Eating disorders and problems with body image historically have been associated almost exclusively with women. Traditionally, discussions have focused on ways that media and culture place strict standards on women and demand they meet unrealistic and unattainable expectations. More recently, the discussions have expanded to include the ways that men are affected by these same influences from media and cultural depictions of what we are "supposed" to look like. Men are receiving the same messages women do, in almost the same frequency, and those messages are beginning to have many of the same effects on men. Unfortunately, queer men seem to be more affected by, and suffer more frequently from negative effects of poor body image and eating disorders, than do straight men. These negative effects can include poor self-esteem, depression, eating disorders, compulsive exercising, and steroid abuse.

While queer women may fight with conflicting ideals about body image and femininity, queer men may find they are struggling to achieve a hyper-exaggerated sense of male beauty. Queer men are expected (by members of both mainstream and gay cultures) to be fit, muscular, clean, well-dressed, and into trends and fashion. Some queer men report fearing that being too fat, too thin, too unattractive, or too old will prevent them from finding partners who will care about them or from achieving lasting, loving relationships. Others describe feeling that working out and being physically fit will help them regain control of their own bodies, which are all too often taken over by



discussions of what gay men are, and what they should or should not look like. A need to look strong and fit may also be rooted in a need to combat stereotypes that gay men are weak, and not masculine enough. A fit and toned body can make a person look and feel powerful, a feeling many sexual minorities are often denied by mainstream culture.

Negative stereotypes about gay men and masculinity may do more than cause eating disorders and negative body image. They may also prevent men from seeking help for these problems. Gay men may hesitate to seek help, because they associate eating disorders with women, and may see an eating disorder as a "women's disease". This might make it more difficult for a population often accused of being insufficiently masculine to become associated with the disorder. There is action we can take to combat the negative effects that stereotypes and unrealistic expectations place on gay men. Always question the motives of those sources of information. Will they profit from making you feel bad about yourself, or from pressuring you to change? Lifestyles, goals, and presentations of our bodies are different for everyone. It is up to each of us to decide what works for us, and what is comfortable. It is also up to us to respect the individual choices made by those around us.

WAYS TO COMBAT NEGATIVE BODY IMAGE IN YOURSELF...

- *Every morning when you wake up, thank your body for resting and rejuvenating itself so you can enjoy the day.*
- *Spend more time feeling good about yourself and enjoying life, and less time worrying about how you think you look.*
- *Don't let your weight or shape keep you from activities you enjoy.* Don't wait until you are thinner to do things you want to do.
- *Your body is the instrument of your life, so use it.* Your body needs exercise and real food for fuel. Find a method of exercise that you enjoy and do it regularly. Take walks, dance, garden, golf... get moving for your heart, not to decrease the size of your bottom. You may lose weight or you may not, but your body will be stronger, your stress will be lower and you'll feel better. Become aware of what your body can do each day, and worry less about how you look doing it.
- *Give your body what it needs.* Eat when you are hungry. Rest when you are tired. Surround yourself with people who value your inner strength and beauty.



- ***Stop weighing yourself.*** Take a break from the pressure of numbers. Is the scale telling you that you aren't working hard enough, or that you are failing? Get rid of it. Let your body, your energy levels, and your own sense of accomplishment be your guides.
- ***Take note of your blessings, not your blemishes.***
- ***Choose to find beauty in the world and in yourself.***

AND IN SOCIETY...

- ***Think of the people you admire.*** Ask yourself if their looks are the reason and if you would still admire them if they looked differently. Think about what qualities you would like others to admire in you.
- ***Stop talking about your weight, especially in front of teenagers.*** Young people only learn to love and accept their bodies if they have role models who love and accept themselves. For example, when young women hear older women obsess aloud about weight (whether it's about being too fat or too thin); it encourages them to do the same.
- ***Question the motives of the fashion, cosmetics, and weight loss industries.*** For these industries, the main objective is to make money, not to help you become the best person you can be. It's in their best interest for you to want to be something you're not. The less you like yourself, the more you depend on them for "help" in changing. For them, this means profit.
- ***Adjust your budget so your spending reflects your values, instead of the pressure to be perfect.*** Your dollars are in demand and companies will respond to your spending. Be a critical consumer, and ask yourself: How much do you give to the fashion and cosmetics industries, or to diet plans? More importantly, what do you get back?
- ***If the people around you are exhibiting attitudes you don't share, let them know.*** You can tell your family and friends that you don't like the negative messages they may be sending you, and you're trying to create a positive atmosphere emphasized by the quality of a person's spirit instead of the size of their jeans.

Everybody is different. Even if 1,000 people had the same diet and exercise regimen for a year, they would not all look the same at the end of the year. Individuals' genetics



influence differences in their bone structure, body size, shape, and weight. These differences help to make each of us unique and beautiful, and we should celebrate that. Avoid comparing your body with your friends' bodies or the people you see in advertisements or on your favorite TV shows. Consider these facts: your skin replaces itself once a month, your stomach lining every five days, your liver every six weeks, and your skeleton – every three months. Your body is extraordinary – always respect and appreciate it.

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Appendix

Eating & Body Image Self-Assessment

Answer in your own sheet of paper.

Weight

- T F 1. I am unhappy with my current weight.
- T F 2. I want to significantly change my weight.
- T F 3. My weight has not been stable.

Physical Health

- T F 4. I get tired easily.
- T F 5. (For women only) My periods have not been regular.
- T F 6. I have stomach pain and/or digestive problems.
- T F 7. I have headaches and body aches.
- T F 8. I take supplements for weight management and do feel that there are undesirable side effects such as increased moodiness or hostility.



Physical Appearance

- T F 9. I am dissatisfied with my body size and shape.
- T F 10. I have no confidence in how I look.
- T F 11. I wish I could change some parts of my body.
- T F 12. I don't see myself as physically attractive as others.

Eating Behaviors

- T F 13. I try very hard to control my eating.
- T F 14. I skip meals
- T F 15. I am constantly on a "diet" to lose weight or gain weight.
- T F 16. I eat to make myself feel better.
- T F 17. I am willing to try any method that will help change my weight.
- T F 18. Sometimes I eat more than I should and cannot control my eating.

Physical Activities

- T F 19. When I exercise, all I can think about is either losing weight or bulking up.
- T F 20. I have to work out a lot in order to feel in control of my weight.
- T F 21. I avoid social gatherings when I don't feel good about my body and myself.

Emotional Well-Being

- T F 22. I find myself feeling depressed easily
- T F 23. I am very tense when it comes to food and eating.
- T F 24. I am anxious about how people perceive and judge me.
- T F 25. My self-esteem is based mostly on my weight and appearance.
- T F 26. Being dissatisfied with my weight, I am moody and easily irritated.

Academic Concerns



- T F 27. I am preoccupied with thoughts of food and weight and thus find it very hard to concentrate on school/work.
- T F 28. I get tired easily and do not have the energy needed for school/work.
- T F 29. I worry about getting less than perfect grades.

The questionnaire above is designed to increase your awareness about eating disorders and/or body image concerns, and is not intended to be used for diagnostic purposes. After reviewing your responses, you may want more information on eating disorders or body image concerns, or a chance to talk with a qualified professional. This questionnaire was prepared by the Eating Disorders and Body Image Concerns Task Force, George Mason University, 3/03.

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