

Improve Your Body Image

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Body image does not refer to one's physical appearance: it refers to the beliefs, perceptions, thoughts, feelings, and actions that pertain to that appearance. In the Western world, a negative body image is so commonplace among women that it is called "normative discontent": it has become normal to be unhappy. This is demonstrated in study after study: in 1996 *Psychology Today* found that 56% of women were dissatisfied with overall appearance; in 2009 *Glamour* found that 40% of women are unhappy with their bodies. These results hold regardless of body size and have a profound effect on self-esteem.



Studies confirm that as much as one-fourth of your self-esteem is related to the quality of your body image. If you don't like your body, it's difficult to like yourself.

Contrary to common belief, weight loss is not the best way to improve body image: a psychological problem can rarely be addressed with a behavioral solution. Research shows that losing weight does not guarantee improved body image. By contrast, improved body image is possible without weight loss. Appearance does not mandate how one feels - therefore, one should separate the goals of weight loss and body acceptance and address each on its own terms.

There are some things you can do to improve your body image regardless of your current shape or weight. Please note: if body image problems are significantly affecting behavior, or are accompanied by an eating disorder, you should consult a mental health professional.

Don't put off

Many people put off pursuing their goals or put aspects of their lives on hold until they have reached their ideal weight. "I'll go on a date", "I'll buy a bikini", "I'll pursue the new job", and so on, "when I lose that 20 pounds." This is a mistake - while you wait to get started, you run the risk of life passing you by.

You need to realize that the circumstances may never be perfect to start your weight loss, and that you may never be fully achieve your goal weight. You will be far happier if you think about what things you would do if you got to your goal weight, and then - even though it takes courage to put yourself out there - start doing them. Avoiding things like going to the beach or wearing a swimsuit can actually worsen your body image because you miss out on the activity and feel sorry for yourself. Start now to do the things you would do if you had an ideal body (date, buy new clothes, go to the beach).

View the media critically and avoid unrealistic comparisons

Comparing oneself to media images and of perfection makes you feel worse about your body. Research shows that even a brief 20 minute intensive exposure to images of typical fashion models provokes an immediate drop in self-esteem. Remember that models and stars spend excessive time and money on their looks because it is their job, and media images of them are further digitally enhanced towards an unrealistic ideal.. Stop comparing yourself to them. You don't have to adopt these ideals and pressure yourself to achieve them. If you hold more moderate, realistic ideals and stop measuring with unreasonable yardsticks, this self-acceptance will improve your body image.

Stop Negative Body Talk

Focusing on the negative aspects of your body and joking with friends about your "stomach rolls" or "fat thighs" does impair body image and keep you focused on your flaws. At one Lulu Lemon Athletica store in the US, salesclerks were coached to discourage customers from talking negatively about their bodies. A later survey of the salesclerks showed that they reported improved body image as the result of being exposed to less negative talk. Make a pact with a friend, your spouse, etc. to stop negative body talk. Make a pledge to yourself to end complaints about your body.

Focus on the Positive

Everyone has positive and negative features of their appearance. Focusing attention primarily on the negative features keeps you feeling worse about yourself. With a little effort, however, you can learn to focus more attention on the positive aspects of your body and appearance and improve body image. First, remember that others don't judge you as harshly as you judge yourself. Do you really focus on your best friend's thighs? When you catch yourself thinking negatively about your body, try to make a correction by saying something positive about that body part, such as "I'm so glad my legs got me through the long walk today." Keep a running list of things you like about yourself - things

that aren't related to how much you weigh or what you look like. It can also include positive things your body is able to do, positive features of your appearance, and compliments you receive. When you receive a compliment, practice accepting it rather than objecting.

Maintain a Healthy Lifestyle

Regular physical activity in sensible moderation (for health, not weight loss) can benefit your emotional life and your body image. Healthy nutritious eating makes you feel good that you are taking care of your body. Do something nice for your body, like a bubble bath or a massage, that lets you know that you appreciate it.

Groom to enhance your appearance and feel better in the body you have

Hiding in loose baggy clothes can make you feel (and look) worse. Wear clothes that are correctly-sized for your body shape, are comfortable, and make you feel good about your body. Work with your body, not against it. Learn to use mood-altering tools of adornment to enjoy your appearance more: new clothing styles, fabrics and colors; cosmetics; hair care; jewelry; and fragrances.

Reference: The Body Image Workbook by Thomas F. Cash, Ph.D.

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