

## body image

Body image is the personal relationship you have with your body. It includes your perceptions, beliefs, thoughts, and feelings about your physical appearance. It also includes how you feel in your body.

Body image can be further broken down into four categories:

1. Body image **satisfaction** refers to how satisfied you are with your body and appearance.
2. Body image **investment** refers to the importance you place on physical appearance in defining yourself and in determining your self-worth.
3. Body image **behaviour** refers to appearance related behaviors such as grooming, checking, concealing aspects of your appearance, and avoiding places, activities or people.
4. Body image **perception** refers to how accurately you estimate your own body size and/or shape.

## characteristics of negative vs. positive body image

### negative body image

- A distorted perception of your size and shape—you perceive your body or parts of your body inaccurately.
- You believe that only others are attractive.
- You believe that your body size or shape is a sign of personal failure.
- You equate your weight or shape as a sign of your lack of worth.
- You feel ashamed, anxious and self-conscious about your body.
- You feel uncomfortable and awkward in your body.
- You spend an unreasonable amount of time worrying about your appearance, your weight, food, or calories.
- You avoid certain activities or places because of the way you look.
- You avoid certain people because of the way you or they look.

### positive body image

- An accurate perception of your size and shape—you see your body as it really is.
- You celebrate and appreciate your natural body shape.
- You understand that a person's physical appearance says very little about their character and value as a person.
- You accept your body and you understand that all bodies are different.
- You refuse to spend an unreasonable amount of time worrying about your appearance, weight, food or calories.
- You feel comfortable and confident in your body.
- Your appearance doesn't determine your actions or behaviors.
- You are comfortable around people of all shapes and sizes.

Body image dissatisfaction is very common—90% of women and 50% of men are dissatisfied with the way they look. People with negative body image have a greater likelihood of developing an eating disorder and are more likely to suffer from feelings of depression, isolation, low self-esteem and obsessions with weight loss.

## how does body image develop?

Body image forms gradually, and begins to develop in childhood. It is affected by both past and current experiences. Some of the most common determinants of body image include cultural factors, interpersonal experiences and physical changes.

### 1 cultural socialization

- Societal beliefs and media messages can have a big impact on your body image.
- Much of our society ascribes to a particular “beauty ideal” that is very unrealistic. This “beauty ideal” is reinforced by images and messages in the media that we are confronted with on a daily basis.
- In our society, preschool children have already started learning societal beliefs about physical characteristics. They know that superheroes like Superman have big, bulging muscles and that Barbie is thin and happy.
- The fashion, cosmetics and diet industries work hard to make us believe that our bodies are unacceptable and need constant improvement. This is done so that we will think we need their products. Advertisements reduce us to body parts—lips, legs, breasts, abs—all of which are airbrushed and digitally altered, creating impossible standards

### 2 interpersonal experiences

- Family members or friends may pass on messages about your body either through direct comments (e.g., telling you to lose

- weight) or through modeling (e.g., having a parent who constantly complains about his or her appearance teaches you that looks are something to worry about).
- Being teased or criticized about your appearance can have a lasting effect on how you feel about your appearance.
- Being frequently complimented on appearance can also create problems if it leads to beliefs that your appearance is the only thing people value about you, or it creates pressure to look a certain way.

### 3 physical changes

- Our bodies change dramatically during puberty, which can bring about intense preoccupation with these changes and with our physical appearance in general.
- The relative timing of physical maturation can also be important in body image development (e.g., maturing early or late may contribute to feelings of insecurity or self-consciousness).
- Physical changes that contribute to feelings of insecurity (e.g., weight gain or developing acne) can have a lasting effect on your body image. Studies show that people who had acne or who were overweight, did not necessarily experience an improvement in their body image when their skin improved or they lost weight.

## ways to improve your body image

1. **Appreciate all your body can do** (e.g., run, dance, breathe, get you places, embrace those you care about, laugh, dream...). Create a list of all the things your body lets you do and add to it.
2. **Remind yourself that your body is an instrument**, not just an ornament.
3. **Don't let your weight or shape keep you from activities you enjoy.**
4. **Remember that every body is different.** Even if everyone ate the same things and did the same amount of exercise, we would not all look the same. This is because our genetics influence our bone structure, body size, shape and weight.
5. **Keep a top 10 list of things you like about yourself** that are not related to how much you weigh or what you look like. Read the list often and add to it.

## 6. Become a critical viewer of media messages:

- a. Remember advertisements are created with the intent to send a specific message: you need the product being advertised. By sending the message that you are not okay as you are and that you need changing, advertisers are effectively creating a need for their product.
- b. Notice how advertisements are strategically placed (e.g., health and fitness magazines promote weight loss and fashion magazines promote products).
- c. Remind yourself that the majority of the media images have been altered by make-up, lighting, airbrushing and Photoshop.
- d. Pay attention to how media images and messages make you feel about yourself.
- e. Advertisers create their message based on what they think will affect you and compel you to buy their product. You can choose to filter these messages, reminding yourself of what advertisers want you to think or believe (e.g., you need to lose weight, you will be more loveable if you buy their products, you are not good enough as you are) and deciding whether you want to buy-in to these messages.
- f. Ask yourself whether the messages you see and hear in the media and in society fit with your personal values (e.g., do you think people are more worthwhile the thinner they are?). Do you want to support these messages?
- g. Advertisers also create advertisements based on what they think you will want to see. This gives you the power—by letting advertisers know that you do not want to see unrealistic standards of beauty and that you will not buy products or services supporting this message, you are showing advertisers that their methods of advertising are not working, and may actually be working against them. You can protest these messages in several ways (e.g., writing a letter to the advertisers, stop reading magazines and buying products that advocate these messages).

7. **Remind yourself that true beauty is not skin-deep.** Think of the most important people in your life and ask yourself why you value them so much. Do you love your friends and family members because of the size of their waist or their clear complexion?
8. **Create a list of people you admire** and who have contributed to your life, your community or the world. Consider whether their appearance was important to their success and accomplishments.
9. **Look at yourself as a whole person.** When you look in the mirror choose not to focus on specific body parts, but on your reflection as a whole.
10. **When you look in the mirror focus on what you like about your appearance.**
11. **Practice looking in the mirror and accepting the way you look** (not evaluating your appearance or characteristics of your appearance as positive or negative).
12. **Surround yourself with positive people.** It is easier to feel good about yourself and your body when you are around others who are supportive and care about you for who you are, not what you look like. You may also choose not to hang out with people who make disparaging comments about your appearance or their own.
13. **Wear clothes that are comfortable,** that express your personal style and that make you feel good about your body. Work with your body—not against it.
14. **Do something nice for yourself**—something that lets your body know you appreciate it (e.g., take a bubble bath, take time for a nap, find a peaceful place to relax).
15. **Think about how much time you spend worrying about food, calories and your appearance.** Try using this time to do something productive (e.g., homework, helping others, spending time with family or friends).
16. **Be assertive with others who comment on your body.** Let these people know that comments about your physical appearance, either positive or negative, are not appreciated. They are evaluative comments and you have the right to say that you do not want to have your appearance evaluated.
17. **Be aware of the negative messages you tell**

**yourself about your body and appearance.**

18. **Shut down or challenge the thoughts** that tell you your body is not right or that you are a bad person.
19. **Use affirmations** such as “I accept myself the way I am” or “I am a worthwhile person.”
20. **Challenge your negative body talk.** Look for evidence for the accuracy of your self-talk.
21. **Surround yourself** with men and women of all shapes and sizes.
22. **Practice noticing** what you appreciate about people (of all shapes and sizes).
23. **Throw away clothes** that no longer fit you or that you use as a measuring tool to check your body size.
24. **Stop weighing yourself.**
25. **Find exercise that you enjoy** and exercise for non-weight related reasons.
26. **Don't rely on weight as a cure-all.** Losing weight will not magically make all of your problems or insecurities go away.
27. **Support your body, don't be its enemy.** Eat when you are hungry. Rest when you are tired. Exercise because it makes your body strong and makes you feel good.
28. **Stop checking behaviors** such as: weighing yourself frequently to see if you've gained or lost weight, going to the bathroom to check how you look, repeatedly asking others for reassurance about your appearance.
29. **Develop a “varied identity.”** Do not solely define yourself as the “ugly one,” “the blonde one,” “the muscular one,” “the fat one.” You are more than the way you look.

**30. Identify and challenge negative body talk.**

Examples of negative body talk include:

- a. *“Either I am the perfect weight or I am fat.”*
  - i. Challenge the idea that things are black and white. Consider the fact that there are shades of grey and that gaining ten pounds makes you ten pounds heavier, not fat. Stop using harsh (e.g., fat) labels to describe yourself or your body. Ask yourself if there is a less harsh way to describe your weight gain.

- b. *“If I didn't look so ugly, I would have got the job.”*
  - i. Ask yourself if you know that this is the reason. Are you 100% certain? Are there other possible explanations? What evidence do you have that this is the reason you did not get the job?
- c. *“They think I am a lazy slob because I am over weight.”*
  - i. Ask yourself if you know this is true. How do you know? Is there evidence that they see you this way?

**31. Challenge the following FALSE appearance assumptions:** (taken from The Body Image Workbook by Thomas Cash, 2008)

- a. *“Physically attractive people have it all.”*
  - i. Beauty can backfire. People may be jealous of someone's appearance, impacting how they interact with that person. They may also make assumptions about a person, based solely on his or her appearance (e.g., she is beautiful so she must be stupid; he is attractive so he must be egotistical).
  - ii. Being attractive does not safeguard against feelings of inadequacy, a lack of self-worth, depression or loneliness.
  - iii. Our initial reactions to someone's appearance don't always last. Consider the fact that your reaction to someone's personality can impact how you see that person (e.g., as more or less attractive).
- b. *“My worth as a person depends on how I look.”*
  - i. Think about the other aspects of yourself that represent who you are. What qualities do you possess that you like? What attributes do your friends like about you?
  - ii. Think about what you value in others. Do you only like them because of the way they look?
  - iii. How much emphasis do you think should be placed on one's body/appearance? Are there other aspects of life you think are more important?
- c. *“I should always do whatever I can to look my best.”*
  - i. Think about what would realistically happen if you didn't look your best at every

- occasion. Would people like you less?
- ii. Do you require others to look their best all the time? Would you be harshly judgmental of them if they didn't look their best? If you don't expect this of others, why do you demand it from yourself?
  - iii. Who can look their best all the time? It unreasonable to expect yourself to look your best all the time.
  - iv. You can always think of ways you can look better. Expecting yourself to look your best creates unreasonable expectations and sets you up for failure.
- d. *"The first thing that people will notice about me is what's wrong with my appearance."*
- i. Just because others are aware of an "imperfection" in your appearance, doesn't mean they will think less of you or mistreat you.
  - ii. Your personality is more influential in how others think of you than whatever might be "wrong" with your looks.
  - iii. We are usually more concerned with our own appearance than with the appearance of others.
- e. *"If people knew how I really look, they would probably like me less."*
- i. Characteristics such as friendliness, warmth, honesty, integrity, intelligence, and a sense of humor are highly valued human traits, no matter what you look like.
  - ii. Have you ever stopped liking someone upon discovering an imperfection in his or her appearance? Have you ever thought "I didn't realize Joe has acne—I should probably end our friendship"?
  - iii. It is likely that you are the one who is uncomfortable with your appearance, not others.
- f. *"By managing my physical appearance, I can control my social and emotional life."*
- i. Good grooming can enhance your looks and make you feel attractive; however, feeling attractive will not solve all of your problems.
  - ii. You cannot build a happy life using only your appearance.
  - iii. Appearance management is only helpful if it improves your body image. If no matter what you do you still feel ugly, you need to change your body image, not your appearance.
  - iv. Depending on clothing for "damage control" only reinforces your belief that your body isn't good enough. Using clothing or makeup to cover aspects of your appearance that you dislike isn't helping your body image.
- g. *"My appearance is responsible for much of what has happened in my life."*
- i. Attractiveness is not a prerequisite for success. Consider Mother Teresa or Bill Gates—would they win a beauty contest?
  - ii. Ask yourself if you have loved or admired people for reasons that have nothing to do with their appearance?
- h. *"If I could look just as I wish, my life would be much happier."*
- i. Research shows that physically attractive people are not necessarily happier.
  - ii. Similarly, good-looking people do not necessarily have a positive body image.
  - iii. Wishing you looked differently magnifies your discontentment with your body.
- i. *"My culture's messages make it impossible for me to be satisfied with my appearance."*
- i. The media in our culture does portray powerful and unhelpful messages about physical appearance and what is considered "attractive;" however, you can choose not to buy into these messages (refer to #6 above).
  - ii. Remember that beauty is subjective and not everyone buys into the ideals presented in the media.
- j. *"The only way I could ever accept my looks would be to change my looks."*
- i. Research shows that you can change your body image without changing your appearance.
  - ii. Have you ever gone on a diet and lost weight, bought new clothes, got a new hairstyle or had cosmetic surgery and still not felt good about your looks? This suggests that it is your body image that needs fixing—not your body.

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