

Body Image: How Do You Measure Up?

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How do you feel about your body? Are you satisfied with it? If your answer is “no,” there are many others who feel the same way. Body image is the term used to describe your complex relationship to your own body—your perception of it, your thoughts about it, and how you feel living in it. Your body image begins to develop at an early age and is influenced by a number of people and factors, including your parents and other caregivers, peers, the media, and life experiences.

Body image has been typically viewed as an issue that impacts women more than men. Recent research suggests that men are affected in greater numbers than previously believed. Many researchers point out that men are increasingly evaluated on their appearance and subjected to media images of the male ideal. While it has often been noted that American little girls are exposed to the unattainable physical proportions of Barbie, American little boys have their own unrealistic figure to contend with. Over the past 20 years, GI Joe has transformed from a fairly normal, average soldier’s body to a muscular extreme more akin to Arnold Schwarzenegger, unattainable for most men.

These arbitrary, changeable, and culturally based standards of attractiveness alone do not create problems with body image. Many other factors can contribute: low self-esteem, perfectionism, adherence to cultural beliefs about thinness and attractiveness, and participating in activities or communities that emphasize weight and appearance, such as body conscious sports like gymnastics or wrestling. When does body image become problematic? Negative body image is characterized by unpleasant feelings such as shame, anxiety, and self-consciousness about one’s body. There is a primary importance placed on physical characteristics, and often there are significant attempts to change one’s body through exercise, dieting, supplements, or cosmetic surgery. People with negative body image often have a distorted perception of their own size and shape. For both women and men, this may mean perceiving one’s body as larger and flabbier than it is in reality. Some people, usually men, may experience the opposite distortion; they perceive their bodies as smaller than they really are. While almost everyone experiences some of these symptoms at one time or another, when they are ongoing, intense, or when they interfere with your daily functioning (taking needed time away from doing academic work, for example), then they may be part of a body image disturbance and you may need to seek help from a professional in order to reduce the impact of negative body image on your life. Left untreated, negative body image can increase your risk of developing an eating disorder, depression, anxiety, social isolation, and other problems.

Even if you struggle with negative body image, positive body image can be achieved. Positive body image is characterized by a sense of confidence and comfort in one’s body. People with positive body image are accepting of their bodies and have an accurate perception of their shape, weight, and features. They do not over-emphasize physical appearance and weight, knowing that their true value as a person lies within the body. If you want to increase your positive body image, here are some suggestions:

- View yourself as a whole person without focusing on specific parts.
- Appreciate all that your body does for you; for example, your thighs allow you to dance.
- Remember that thinness and other physical characteristics do not equal happiness.
- Remember that beautiful bodies come in all shapes, sizes, and colors.
- Be critical of negative media images and messages that promote unrealistic standards of attractiveness.
- Check out websites that promote healthy body image; see the Counseling Center web page for a few

good links.

- Find and read books on positive body image; the Counseling Center and the Women's Center both contain these books in their libraries.

If you are or someone you know is struggling with negative body image or related problems, such as disordered eating or over-exercising, consider coming to the Counseling Center to talk with one of us. We are happy to provide you with consultation.