NEDC Fact Sheet - Body Image

National Eating Disorders Collaboration

What is Body Image?

Body image is the perception that a person has of their physical self and the thoughts and feelings that result from that perception.

The four aspects of body image:

1. How you see your body is your **perceptual body image**. This is not always a correct representation of how you actually look.
2. The way you feel about your body is your **affective body image**. This relates to the amount of satisfaction or dissatisfaction you feel about your shape, weight and individual body parts.
3. The way you think about your body is your **cognitive body image**. This can lead to preoccupation with body shape and weight.
4. Behaviours in which you engage as a result of your body image encompass your **behavioural body image**. When a person is dissatisfied with the way they look, they may isolate themselves because they feel bad about their appearance or employ destructive behaviours as a means to change appearance.

Why is positive body image important?

Positive body image occurs when a person is able to accept, appreciate and respect their body. Positive body image is important because it is one of the protective factors which can make a person more resilient to eating disorders. In fact, the most effective eating disorder prevention programs use a health promotion approach, focusing on building self-esteem and positive body image, and a balanced approach to nutrition and physical activity.

A positive body image will improve:

- **Self esteem**, which dictates how a person feels about themselves and can infiltrate every aspect of life, and contribute to happiness and wellbeing.
- **Self-acceptance**, making a person more likely to feel comfortable and happy with the way they look and less likely to feel impacted by unrealistic images in the media and societal pressures to look a certain way.
- **Healthy outlook and behaviours**, as it is easier to lead a balanced lifestyle with healthier attitudes and practices relating to food and exercise when you are in tune with, and respond to the needs of your body.

What causes body dissatisfaction?

When a person has negative thoughts and feelings about his or her own body, body dissatisfaction can develop. Body dissatisfaction is an internal process but can be influenced by several external factors. For example, family, friends, acquaintances, teachers and the media all have an impact on how a person sees and feels about themselves and their appearance. Individuals in appearance oriented environments or those who receive negative feedback about their appearance are at an increased risk of body dissatisfaction.

One of the most common external contributors to body dissatisfaction is the media. People of all ages are bombarded with images through TV, magazines, internet and advertising. These images often promote unrealistic, unobtainable and highly stylised appearance ideals which have been fabricated by stylists, art teams and digital manipulation and cannot be achieved in real life. Those who feel they don't measure up in comparison to these images, can experience intense body dissatisfaction which is damaging to their psychological and physical wellbeing.

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The following factors make some people more likely to develop a negative body image than others:

- **Age** – body image is frequently shaped during late childhood and adolescence but body dissatisfaction can affect people of all ages and is as prevalent in midlife as young adulthood in women
- **Gender** - adolescent girls are more prone to body dissatisfaction than adolescent boys; however the rate of body dissatisfaction in males is rapidly approaching that of females
- **Low self-esteem and/or depression**
- **Teasing** - people who are teased about appearance/weight, regardless of actual body type, have an increased risk of developing body dissatisfaction

- **Personality traits** - people with perfectionist tendencies, high achievers, 'black and white' thinkers, those who internalise beauty ideals, and those who often compare themselves to others, are at higher risk of developing body dissatisfaction
- **Friends and family who diet and express body image concerns** - role models expressing body image concerns and modelling weight loss behaviours, can increase the likelihood of an individual developing body dissatisfaction regardless of actual body type
- **Body size** - In our weight conscious society, larger body size increases risk of body dissatisfaction

How can you improve your body image?

While some aspects of your appearance can be changed, others, like your height, muscle composition and bone structure are genetically fixed. It is important to understand that there is no right or wrong when it comes to weight, shape, size and appearance. Challenging beauty ideals and learning to accept your body shape is a crucial step towards positive body image.

While changing your actual appearance can be counterproductive, improving your body image is a constructive goal. We have the power to change the way we see, feel and think about our bodies. Here are some helpful tips:

- Focusing on your positive qualities, skills and talents can help you accept and appreciate your whole self
- Say positive things to yourself every day
- Avoid negative or berating self-talk
- Focusing on appreciating and respecting what your body can do will help you to feel more positively about it
- Setting positive, health focused goals rather than weight loss related ones is more beneficial for your overall wellbeing
- Admiring others' beauty can improve your own body confidence but it is important to appreciate your own beauty, avoid comparing yourself to others, accept yourself as a whole and remember that everyone is unique and differences are what make us special
- Remember, many media images are unrealistic and represent a minority of the population

Programs that effectively increase positive body image focus on reducing risk factors and increasing protective factors.

Why is body dissatisfaction a serious problem?

Body dissatisfaction is the top ranked issue of concern for young people (Mission Australia, 2011). Body image issues have increased worldwide over the last 30 years and do not only concern young people but affect people of all ages. This pervasive problem is concerning because overvaluing body image in defining ones self-worth is one of the risk factors which makes some people less resilient to eating disorders than others. People experiencing body dissatisfaction can become fixated on trying to change their body shape, which can lead to unhealthy practices with food and exercise. These practices don't usually achieve the desired outcome (physically or emotionally) and can result in intense feelings of disappointment, shame and guilt and, ultimately, increase the risk of developing an eating disorder.

Getting help

If you feel dissatisfied with your body or are developing unhealthy eating or exercise habits seek professional help. Some counsellors and psychologists have specialised knowledge in body image. Professional support can help guide you to change negative beliefs and behaviours.

To find help in your local area go to **www.nedc.com.au/helplines.**

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Australian Government

Department of Health and Ageing