Body Image

What Is Body Image?

Body image is what a person thinks and how they feel when they look in the mirror or when they picture themselves in their mind. This includes how the person feels about their appearance; what they think about their body itself, such as their height and weight; and how they feel within their own skin. Body image also includes how a person behaves as a result of their thoughts and feelings. A person may have a positive or negative body image. Body image is not always related to weight or size.

Why Is A Healthy Body Image Important?

Women with a positive body image are more likely to have good physical and mental health. Girls and women with negative thoughts and feelings about their bodies are more likely to develop certain mental health conditions, such as eating disorders and depression. Researchers think that dissatisfaction with their bodies may be part of the reason more women than men have depression.

A negative body image may also lead to low self-esteem, which can affect many areas of a person's life. The person may not want to be around other people or may obsess constantly about what they eat or how much they exercise.

Are Some People More Likely To Develop A Negative Body Image?

Yes. Girls are more likely than boys to have a negative body image. This may be because many women in the United States feel pressured to measure up to strict and unrealistic social and cultural beauty ideals, which can lead to a negative body image. However, a growing number of men, especially gay men, are reporting a negative body image, most likely because of the media's increased focus on men's weight and fitness.

White girls and young women are slightly more likely to have a negative body image than African-American or Hispanic girls and young women. However, cultural beauty ideals change over time, and it can be difficult to correctly measure a complicated idea like body image among women from different backgrounds. Children of parents who diet or who have a negative body image are also more likely to develop unhealthy thoughts about their own bodies.

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- The more a person practices thinking positive thoughts about themselves, and the fewer negative thoughts a person has about their body, the better they will feel about who they are and how they look.

What Causes A Negative Body Image?

Past events and circumstances can cause a person to have a negative body image, including:

- Being teased or bullied as a child for how they look
- Being told they are ugly, too fat, or too thin or having other aspects of their appearance criticized
- Seeing images or messages in the media (including social media) that make them feel bad about how they look
- Being underweight, overweight, or obese

In rare cases, people can have such a distorted view of their bodies that they have a mental health condition called body dysmorphic disorder (BDD). BDD is a serious illness in which a person is preoccupied with minor or imaginary physical flaws.

How Can A Person Have A Healthy Body Image?

Research shows that if a person is overweight or obese, their body image may improve if they participate in a weight loss program, even if they don't lose as much weight as they hoped. The weight loss program should include a focus on healthy eating and physical activity.

If a person is underweight and has a negative body image, they can work with a doctor or nurse to gain weight in a healthy way and treat any other health problems they have. If they are eating healthy and getting enough exercise, their weight may not affect their body image.

Body positivity values differences in body type and supports women and men in accepting their bodies as they are. The more a person practices thinking positive thoughts about themselves, and the fewer negative thoughts a person has about their body, the better they will feel about who they are and how they look. While very few people are 100% satisfied with every aspect of their body, it can help to focus on the things they do like. Also, most people realize as they get older that how they look is only one part of who they are. It is healthier for a person to accept how they look than to constantly work to change how they look.

How Can A Parent Help Their Kids To Have A Healthy Body Image?

A parent's body image plays a role in how children see themselves. Studies show that daughters are twice as likely to have ideas about dieting when their mothers diet. If a parent wants to lose weight to get healthy, they should pay attention to the language that they use with their kids. Rather than talking about "dieting," they can explain that they are eating healthy foods. Together as a family, they can cook healthy meals, order healthy meals at restaurants, and get more physical activity. Parents can teach their children about smart food choices and help them develop healthy eating and exercise habits.

A parent can help their children develop healthy body images by:

- Making sure their children understand that weight gain and growth are normal parts of development, especially during puberty

- Not making negative statements about food, weight, and body size and shape — theirs, their children's, or anyone else's

- Allowing their children to make decisions about food while making sure that plenty of healthy and nutritious meals and snacks are available

- Complimenting their children more on their efforts, talents, accomplishments, and personal values and less on their looks

- Limiting screen time. In addition to getting less exercise, kids who watch TV shows or movies or play online games often see unrealistic female bodies. Parents can talk with their kids about the media images they see.

- Encouraging their children's school to create policies against bullying

- Talking to their children often and showing them that they are always there to listen

A parent may be teaching their kids harmful habits if they:

- Often complain about their weight or body shape

- Often try new "miracle" diets

- Tell their kids they would be more attractive if they lost weight