Loving Your

Imperfect Body

Bodies smell. They leak. They wrinkle, get blemishes, creak, and ache. They have hair sprouting from weird places, even when hair won't grow where it's wanted. Bodies come in all shapes and sizes, all colors, and with all kinds of flaws and differences in ability. And of course, as the children's book says, everybody poops.

In short, all bodies are flawed and imperfect. At the same time, our bodies house our thoughts, dreams and emotions, and allow us to see, hear, feel, and experience the world. While there may be a world beyond our physical self, right now, as a living, breathing human, your body is the only home you've got. It's important to love your home, even if it's got a few flaws (which they all do).

Our body image influences our self-esteem and self-confidence, affects our physical and mental health, and changes how we move through the world. If you struggle to love your body, read on to learn more about body image and how it can be improved.

What Is Body Image?

The term "body image" refers to how we feel about our bodies, how we physically inhabit our bodies, and how we see ourselves – both in our mind's eye and when we look in a mirror. Body image is different than appearance, and in many cases, our own body image is quite different than how an objective observer would describe us.

A Positive Body Image

People with a positive body image have a realistic sense of their own appearance. They know that their appearance does not define their worth as a person, and they are happy and content in their own skin.

Having a positive body image does not mean that a person thinks that their body is perfect or without flaws; rather, it means that they understand that everybody has flaws, and is nonetheless deserving of love and respect.

A Negative Body Image

In contrast, people with a negative body image can't accept their physical flaws. A negative body image can lead to feelings of shame, or a need to hide. It can keep someone from engaging in social activities and can be a barrier to intimacy in relationships.

A negative body image can also lead to people spending excessive time and money "hiding" their flaws with makeup, accessories, or clothing, or seeking out cosmetic procedures but finding little relief from their appearance-related anxieties.

People with a negative body image can become obsessed with perceived flaws that are not noticeable or only minor to an outside observer. In extreme cases, a negative body

image can lead to body dysmorphia, in which someone sees their body as radically different than it actually is. For example, a body builder with body dysmorphia may see a frail, scrawny wimp in the mirror, even though they are, objectively, built like a tank.

A negative body image can lead to poor self-esteem and low-self-confidence, and people with a negative self-image are more likely to suffer from poor mental health, including depression and anxiety.

While a negative body image isn't the only cause of eating disorders, it is a contributor. Even in those who do not have full-fledged eating disorders, a negative body image can lead to disordered eating behaviors, including fasting, restricting food groups, dieting, binging, and excessive exercise, all of which can take a toll on health and wellbeing.

Worrying about Our Appearance

Unfortunately, today's society makes it easy to feel bad about one's body. Even as North Americans are getting larger, our image of the ideal body is getting thinner – and harder to obtain. For example, fashion models used to be 8% smaller than the average woman, and now they are 30% smaller – and several inches taller.

For men, the physical ideal has also shifted. Just look at the leading men in any Marvel movie, with their elaborately sculped muscles, as compared to the biggest stars of the 1950s. Certainly, celebrities such as James Dean and Marlon Brando were fit and handsome, but they didn't spend hours in the gym or eat highly specific diets under the watchful eye of trainers and nutritionists as today's impossibly lean and muscular stars do.

Studies show that both men and women are worried about their appearance. Estimates suggest that around 70% of women aged 18-30 don't like their body, and around 50% try to control their weight with unhealthy behaviors. Among men, 43% don't like their body and body dissatisfaction is growing among men.

A positive body image is important for a happy, healthy, well-adjusted life. A negative body image harms physical and mental health and can hold us back from achieving our dreams. Read on for more about how our body image is formed in childhood and adolescence.

Body Image in Childhood and the Teen Years

As infants, our first job is to figure out how our body works. At first, we can't even lift our heads, but soon we are crawling, walking, and then running around, getting into mischief. Soon after we start learning to move our bodies, we start absorbing messages about which bodies are good, and which are bad. Studies show that children as young as three may start to worry about their weight.

While humans have always valued beauty – a walk through any art gallery will teach you that – today's concern about body weight is newly intense and is affecting children at younger and younger ages. In 1970, the average age that girls began dieting was 14, but by 1990, that age had dropped to 8. By age 10, more than 80% of girls have been on a diet.

As well as worrying about their own weight, young children also start to judge others based on weight. Elementary school students who are obese are 65% more likely to bullied by their peers, and those who are overweight are 13% more likely to be bullied.

While children are worried about their appearance at earlier ages than ever before, puberty is still the worst time for liking one's body. The average person's body image hits an all-time low between the ages of 12 and 15, and self-esteem drops along with it. Studies show that by the teen years, many girls will give up many activities such as going to the beach, playing sports, or even speaking in public, because of concerns about their appearance.

Along with the decrease in body image during adolescence comes an increased risk of eating disorders. Most eating disorders begin during the teen years. Even among teens who do not have a full-fledged eating disorder, unhealthy eating patterns are common. Half of teen girls and a third of teen boys fast, binge, or use smoking, laxatives or excessive exercise to control their weight.

Evidence shows that media, including movies, television, magazines, and social media, is a big contributor to teen's body dissatisfaction. Studies show that the more time young women spent on social media, the more likely they are to have a poor body image.

When teens read articles about dieting and weight loss, girls are six times more likely to engage in unhealthy eating, while boys are four times more likely. Over 90% of teenage girls feel that the media pressures them to be thin. While 65% think that fashion models are too thin, 46% strive to look like the images they see in fashion magazines.

Gender and Body Image

Body image issues affect people of all genders. While many people assume that women are more affected by messages about their weight and appearance than boys, this is changing. In the early 1990s, 15% of teenage boys were unhappy about their bodies. This has increased to around 45% today. A recent study of college-age men found that over 90% of them had at least one part of their body that they didn't like.

In today's society, boys are caught between wanting to be thinner and wanting to be more muscular. For that reason, body image issues can show up differently in men than women. Many boys turn to the gym to gain muscle and fall into patterns of disordered eating and excess exercise. To make matters worse, men are less likely to seek help for body image issues, even when their health is seriously impacted. Boys and men make

up one third of those with eating disorders, and men and women suffer from body dysmorphia in equal numbers, but males are much less likely to seek help.

For any one of any gender, a negative body image can lead to a lack of self-esteem and self-confidence, and an increased risk of depression, anxiety, and eating disorders. If you aren't happy with your body, it's important to know that help is available. If body image issues are seriously affecting your life, talk to your doctor or call the National Eating Disorders hotline at (800) 931-2237.

For more ways to improve your body image, read on.

Steps to Overcoming a Negative Body Image

If you struggle with a negative body image, improving it will also help improve your physical and mental health and wellbeing, increase your self-esteem and self-confidence, and make it easier to developing meaningful connections to the people around you. If you are ready to start improving your body image, there are some tools below that may be helpful.

Recognize That Body Image Fluctuates

As you start on your journey towards a better body image, begin by recognizing that body image naturally changes and fluctuates from day to day, and month to month. It may take some time to quieten your negative thoughts about your body, and there won't be one moment when you are finished developing a positive body image. Doubt and anxiety can always creep back in.

It's important to accept that loving your body is a journey. Understanding this will make it easier to get back on track any time your journey is derailed.

Practice Self-Compassion

It's hard to maintain a positive body image in the face of a society that emphasizes physical appearance at every turn through books, media, and interactions among friends and family. Fortunately, studies of women show that cultivating self-compassion can help them maintain a positive body image in the face of negative social pressures. Self-compassion is simply the art of treating oneself with kindness.

To build your self-compassion, try reading Self-Compassion by Dr. Kristen Neff, the psychologist who first established self-compassion as a field of study. The book is filled with exercises to help you develop your own sense of self-compassion.

Cognitive Behavioral Therapy

Cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) is a type of therapy focused on helping patients learn effective strategies for combating negative thoughts and behavior patterns. CBT is

one of the most common therapies used to improve body image. In CBT, you will learn to recognize and change the thoughts, emotions, and behaviors that contribute to your negative body image.

If you are interested in trying CBT, the Association for Behavioral and Cognitive Therapies has an <u>online directory of certified therapists</u>.

While working with a therapist is the fastest way to learn to control negative thought patterns, there are also steps you can take at home. If you find yourself ruminating about your body, try the following:

- Work through the <u>Body Image Workbook</u> by Thomas Cash. This book offers a variety of research-proven exercises that will help address your own negative body image.

- Banish negative body talk. Too often, we criticize our own and others' bodies. Resolve to stop this negativity. Every time you start to say or think something negative about anyone's body – your own or someone else's – stop yourself, and come up with something positive instead. It may take practice, but if you are consistent, you will learn to skip straight to the positive thoughts and leave the negative thoughts behind.

- Make the mirror your friend. Many of us have a bad relationship with our mirror. We'll either avoid it entirely, or we'll use it to stare at our flaws or make faces at ourselves. Instead, resolve to treat the person in the mirror with love and kindness. When you see your reflection, look yourself in the eye. Smile. Wave. Say something kind, positive, or seductive. Write yourself positive notes and stick them in the mirror frame. Whatever you do, don't allow yourself to frown at your reflection or criticize your appearance.

- Practice mindfulness meditation. As little as ten minutes of mindfulness meditation each day has been shown to help calm negative thought patterns and boost mood. Meditation can also help you learn to be more present in your body and learn to listen to its needs.

  All you need to get started is a quiet place to sit and a few minutes to concentrate. There are many free or low-cost meditation apps available for your smartphone, or try following along with a beginner mediation video on YouTube. Just find someone with a voice you like and follow their instructions.

Boost Your Media Literacy

Every day, we are bombarded with ads for weight-loss products; articles describing elaborate diet, workout and beauty regimens; and social media posts filled with beautiful people with perfect skin and hair. All too often, all three – the ads, the articles, and the social posts – are carefully optimized to sell you something.

In the case of social media, often what's being sold is the idea that person in the picture is beautiful and carefree, regardless of the reality. When you compare your everyday self in the mirror with the perfect photo an influencer just posted, it can be hard to feel good about your body. However, learning about the various ways in which photos can be edited, filtered, and manipulated can help you understand the difference between truth and reality in images, and it can help you feel better about yourself.

To learn more about media literacy and the link to body image, visit About Face, which offers online media literacy training aimed at teens (but useful for adults as well). The Canadian non-profit Media Smarts also offers extensive resources about media literacy, with lessons focusing on food advertising, media and body image, gender stereotypes in the media, and more. In addition, the National Eating Disorders Association also offers a media literacy toolkit.

Carefully Curate Your Media

Even if you know how media images try to manipulate you, it's still important to be selective about what information you take in. Support movies, TV shows, magazines and websites that showcase a diversity of ages, genders, body types, and abilities. On social media, unfollow influencers who make you feel bad about yourself, and seek out voices who talk about issues that are important to you.

Embrace Healthy Movement

The human body is designed to move, and getting regular exercise is one of the healthiest things you can do for your health, fitness, and mental well-being. If you aren't a regular exerciser, find an activity you enjoy doing and start doing it.

If you are motivated to exercise by setting goals, make sure you set positive goals relating to your skills, fitness and enjoyment, rather than goals around losing weight or inches. Good goals include mastering a new skill, running a new distance, or increasing how much you can lift. Setting healthy, positive goals and watching your body get stronger and more skilled can transform your relationship with your body image.

Fitness with a mind-body component such as yoga or tai chi may be particularly helpful in helping you learn to connect with and appreciate your body. Skills-based exercise, such as Olympic weightlifting, dance, ice skating, rocking climbing, or a new-to-you team sport can also help boost your body image.

When you focus on mastering new skills and observe your slow but steady improvement as you keep practicing your chosen sport, you'll gain a new appreciation for your body and what it can do.

Learn about Nutrition

Go to any newsstand (or any website) and you'll see dozens of headlines about every kind of diet under the sun, intermixed with recipes for cookies, cakes, pies and BBQs. It's overwhelming and confusing. For instance, did you know that Keto, Atkins, Paleo, and low-carb diets are all basically the same thing? If mass media is your only guide, it's hard for the average person to make sense of what to eat. When your diet isn't optimal, you won't be as healthy as you could be, and your body image can take a hit.

If you are looking for reputable, science-based nutrition information, don't bother with fashion and fitness magazines. The diet information inside may not be accurate and may even be harmful. In fact, studies show that simply reading the average fashion magazine lowers your body image. Instead, visit <u>My Plate</u>, the USDA's nutrition website. It contains simple advice on eating well.

If you still need help, consider visiting with a registered dietitian (RD). RDs will help you understand the basics of healthy eating and can teach you how to fuel your body with nutritious, delicious food that helps you be healthy and vibrant.

Live for Today, Not Tomorrow

In today's media-saturated environment, it's all too easy to fall prey to body image issues. Over half of all people don't like some aspect of their body. This has serious consequences. A negative body image increases your risk of mental health problems, and it can also hold you back from achieving your dreams and reaching your goals. Many people who don't like their bodies put off things they'd like to do until they achieve the "perfect body".

The thing is, the perfect body doesn't exist. Happiness, however, does. If you've been guilty of putting off travelling, going to the beach, or any other activity until you reach a certain body goal, it's time to stop waiting to be perfect and start living, today. After all, the best way to be happy with your body is to be happy in your body.