A Healthy "Weight & See" Attitude

What Is Body Image?

When you look in the mirror, what do you see? Your perception of how your body looks forms your body image. Regardless of how closely your figure resembles your perception, your body image can affect your self-esteem, behavior, and relationships with others.

Why Are So Many People Unhappy with Their Bodies?

In modern American society, thinness is a determinant of physical attractiveness. The current fashion ideal is significantly thinner than the actual physique of most Americans. Most women feel they should lose weight even if they are not considered overweight by medical standards. Men, to a lesser degree, share this body dissatisfaction, which is based more on fashion norms than health recommendations.

Lean bodies are also associated with valued characteristics including success, energy, self-discipline, and wealth. Excess fat on the other hand, may be interpreted as a sign of laziness, ignorance, or lack of self-control. These generalizations promote discrimination against people who are considered "unnecessarily" overweight. The prejudice also sparks anxiety and self-contempt in people who are normal or underweight but believe they should be thinner.

Body Image and the Media

The media promotes the widespread belief that attractive people are lean people. Celebrities, such as fashion models, actors, actresses, and television journalists, are generally thinner than the average American. These media personalities project an image of confidence, beauty, and success which may seem to be inextricably linked to the thinness of their bodies.

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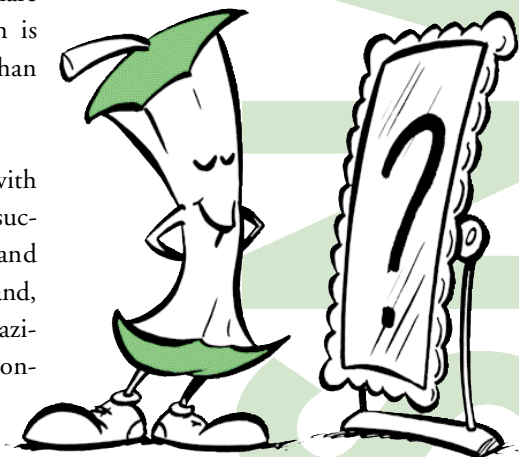
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Can I Attain an "Ideal" Shape?

Your body shape is determined by a number of factors. Some, such as calorie intake and energy expenditure, can be manipulated. Others, such as your frame size, the way you store fat, and other genetic variables, are beyond your control. Many people simply lack the raw materials to build the current "ideal" body. Thus, it is important to be realistic when determining how you want to look and how much you want to change your lifestyle in order to attain your desired appearance.

How Can I Improve My Body Image?

- Examine the degree to which your self-esteem depends upon your appearance. Although it may seem natural to wish you looked like a fashion model, basing your happiness on this desire may lead to failure. Unrealistic goals can prevent you from exploring ways to enhance your life.

- Broaden your perspective. Talking to people you trust, reading books about body image, or writing about your fears and perceptions in a journal, may enable you to recognize irrational thought patterns and put body image into perspective.

- Be active. Regular physical activity enhances muscle tone and improves self-esteem.

- Recognize that "fat-ism" is a form of discrimination similar to sexism and racism. Assumptions that body shape determines personality and success are incorrect and unjust. Combat discrimination when possible. Question assumptions and generalizations which promote the belief that one "type" of person is better than another.

For more information on body image, please visit **www.snac.ucla.edu.**

CREATING A POSITIVE BODY IMAGE

When you look in the mirror, what do you see? Your perception of how your body looks is your body image. Regardless of how closely your body resembles your perception, your body image can affect your self-esteem, behavior, and relationships.

Factors That Influence Your Ideal Body Image

- **The media** promotes the widespread belief that attractive people are lean people. Celebrities, such as fashion models, actors, actresses, and television journalists, are generally much thinner than the average American. These media personalities project an image of confidence, beauty, and success, which may seem to be inextricably linked to the thinness of their bodies.

- **Medical studies** associating obesity with chronic disease and decreased life expectancy lend credibility to the "thin movement." Medical findings do not, however, indicate that excess body weight is necessarily linked to poor health and well being. Lifestyle factors, such as nutrition, physical activity level, stress, as well as genetics and socioeconomic status, may be more important in determining one's health and longevity than weight alone.

- **Family values** can have a tremendous impact on what you consider important for yourself. If your brothers, sisters, or parents associate body shape with desirable characteristics such as success and beauty, your perception of how you look may influence your self-esteem. Consider the way your family communicates about weight, attractiveness, and success, and how your own body image reflects these values.

- **Friends** who share interests with you, such as music or sports, are less likely to promote body dissatisfaction than friends who focus on dieting and weight. It is important to define what is important to you and to foster relationships with people who will enrich your enjoyment of life as well as your self-esteem.

- **Self-perception** tremendously impacts your confidence. Healthy eating, regular physical activity, and the tendency to "take care of yourself" (such as getting adequate sleep, managing your time, and finding time for pleasure) promote both a positive body image and strong self-esteem.

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Food for Thought

If you (or someone you know) worry about your weight or body shape, consider the following questions to gain perspective on yourself and your "ideal" body image.

- How much of a person's attractiveness is determined by the shape of his or her body? How much is based on other qualities such as eyes, smile, personality, posture, and approachability?
- Do you choose your friends based on physical attractiveness?
- Do you think people will dislike you if you don't have an "ideal" figure?
- To what extent do you want to base your self-esteem on societal values?
- What qualities do you need to demonstrate based on your personal and career goals? Are they the qualities of a great research scientist, teacher, doctor, engineer, mother, or fashion model?
- To what extent does your self-perception affect how attractive you try to be?
- What potentially interesting or rewarding experiences do you miss because you are ashamed to reveal an "imperfect" body?
- Do you see yourself as others see you?
- Because many media personalities depend upon appearance for their livelihood, they may rely on constant dieting, extensive exercise, or surgical procedures to maintain their shape. Would you want to do this?
- Do you approve of discrimination based on race, religion, gender, sexual orientation, or class? Does your reaction to a person's weight reflect your views on other forms of discrimination based on differences and appearance?

Books for Further Reading*

- *The Adonis Complex: The Secret Crisis of Male Body Obsession* by Harrison Pope, Katharine Phillips and Reberto Olivardia (Free Press, 2000)
- *When Women Stop Hating Their Bodies: Freeing Yourself From the Food and Weight Obsession* by Jane Hirschman and Carol Munter (New York: Fawcett, 1995)
- *Transforming Body Image: Learning to Love the Body You Have* by Maria G. Hutchinson (Freedom, CA: Crossing Press, 1985)
- *The Invisible Woman: Confronting Weight Prejudice in America* by W. Charisse Goodman (Carlsbad, CA: Gurze Books, 1995)
- *Body Love: Learning to Like Our Looks and Ourselves* by Rita Freedman (New York: Harper and Row, 1989)
- *Nothing to Lose: A Guide to Sane Living in Large Body* by Cheri Erdman (San Francisco, CA: Harper Publishing, 1995)
- *Style is Not a Size: Looking and Feeling Great in the Body You Have* by Hara Estroff Marana (New York: Bantam Books, 1991)
- *Fat! So? Because You Don't Have to Apologize for Your Size* by Marilyn Wann (Berkeley, CA: Ten Speed Press, 1998)

* Many of these books are available through the Gurze Books Catalog, P.O. Box 2238, Carlsbad, CA 92018; telephone: (800.756.7533); website: www.gurze.com