

Body Image

What is body image?

Body image is the perception that a person has of their physical self, but more importantly the thoughts and feelings the person experiences as a result of that perception.

It is important to understand that these feelings can be positive, negative or a combination of both and are influenced by individual and environmental factors.

The four aspects of body image:

1. The way you see yourself (Perceptual)

The way you see your body is not always a correct representation of what you actually look like. For example, a person may perceive themselves to be fat when in reality they are underweight. How a person sees themselves is their perceptual body image.

2. The way you feel about the way you look (Affective)

There are things a person may like or dislike about the way they look. Your feelings about your body, especially the amount of satisfaction or dissatisfaction you experience in relation to your appearance, weight, shape and body parts is your affective body image.

3. The thoughts and beliefs you feel about your body (Cognitive)

Some people believe that they will feel better about themselves if they are thinner. Others believe they will look better if they develop more muscle. The way you think about your body is your cognitive body image.

4. The things you do in relation to the way you look (Behavioural)

When a person is dissatisfied with the way they look, they may employ destructive behaviours such as excessive exercising or disordered eating as a means to change appearance. Some people may isolate themselves because they feel bad about the way they look. Behaviours in which you engage as a result of your body image encompasses your behavioural body image.



Why is positive body image important?

People with positive body image will generally have a higher level of physical and psychological health, and better personal development. A positive body image will effect:

- **Self esteem levels**

Self esteem dictates how a person feels about themselves and this can infiltrate every aspect of that person's life. The higher your self esteem, the easier you will find it to stay on top of daily life, the more sociable you will be, leading to higher levels of happiness and wellbeing.

- **Self-acceptance**

The more positive a person's body image, the more likely that person is to feel comfortable and happy with the way they look. A person with positive body image is less likely to feel impacted by unrealistic images in the media and societal pressures to look a certain way.

- **Healthy outlook and behaviours**

When you are in tune with, and respond to the needs of your body, your physical and psychological wellbeing improves. A positive body image will lead to a balanced lifestyle with healthier attitudes and practices with food and exercise.

What causes body dissatisfaction?

When a person has negative thoughts and feelings about his or her own body, body dissatisfaction can develop.

Environmental influences play a large role in how people perceive and feel about their body. A person's family, friends, acquaintances, teachers and the media all have an impact on how that person sees and feels about themselves and their appearance. In particular, when an individual is in an appearance oriented environment or receives negative feedback about their appearance, for example, by being teased, they are at an increased risk of body dissatisfaction.

People of all ages are bombarded with images through media such as TV, magazines, internet and advertising. These images are often unrealistic, unobtainable and highly stylised, promoting beauty and appearance ideals for males and females in our society. They send strong messages which reaffirm that in our culture thin is beautiful for females and lean/muscular is the ideal body shape for males and that when these body shapes are achieved that happiness, success and love will result.

The ideal demonstrated in these images has been fabricated by stylists, art teams and digital manipulation and cannot be created or achieved in real life. If a person feels that they don't measure up in comparison to these images, feelings of body dissatisfaction can intensify and have a damaging impact on that person's psychological and physical wellbeing.



Some people are more likely to develop a negative body image than others. This can be as result of the following factors:

- **Age** - body image problems can affect people from childhood across the lifespan and are as prevalent in midlife as young adulthood in women. However, beliefs about body image are frequently shaped during late childhood and adolescence so this is a particularly crucial time
- **Gender** - adolescent girls are more prone to body image dissatisfaction than adolescent boys; however the rates of body dissatisfaction in males is rapidly approaching that of females
- **People who experience low self esteem and/or have depression**
- **Personality traits** - people with perfectionist tendencies (e.g. people who feel a need for everything in their lives to be perfect), high achievers and people who cognitively are more 'black and white' in their thinking, those who internalise and value beauty ideals, and people who tend to compare themselves to others, are at higher risk of developing body dissatisfaction
- **Appearance teasing** - people who are teased for their appearance, especially weight, regardless of actual appearance or weight, are at a greater risk of developing body dissatisfaction than those who are not
- **Having friends and family who diet for weight loss and express high body image concerns** - when a person is in an environment in which central people express body image concerns and model weight loss behaviours, they are more likely to develop body dissatisfaction themselves regardless of actual appearance or weight
- **Larger body size** - In our weight conscious society, larger body size increases risk of body dissatisfaction
- **Sexual orientation in males** - research shows that homosexual men are more vulnerable to eating disorders than heterosexual men

In western society, dissatisfaction with the body has become a cultural norm.

How can you improve your body image?

People with negative body image can become fixated on trying to change their actual body shape. This can lead to people engaging in unhealthy practices with food and exercise with the hope that the change in body shape will alleviate negative feelings. These practices do not usually achieve the desired outcome (physically or emotionally) and can result in more intense negative feelings of disappointment, shame and guilt, as well as place a person at greater risk of developing an eating disorder.

It is important to remember that you cannot change some aspects of your appearance. Your height, muscle composition and bone structure are determined by your genes; this is the way you are born. A person can change some things but is important to understand and believe that there is no right or wrong when it comes to body shape or appearance. This can be hard to accept if a person has negative body image;



however, challenging beauty ideals and learning to accept your body shape is a crucial step towards feeling positively about your weight, shape, size and appearance.

While changing your actual appearance may be difficult and complicated, changing your body image is an achievable goal. We have the power to change the way we see, feel and think about our bodies. Here are some tips to get started:

- **Focus on your positive qualities, skills and talents** - this can help you learn to accept and appreciate your whole self. A person is much more than just a physical being
- **Say positive things to yourself every day** - when you say something often enough you start to believe it
- **Avoid self talk that is berating or negative**
- **Focus on what your body can do and has done** - the body is amazing; appreciating and respecting all the things it can do will help you to feel more positively about it
- **Set positive, health related focused goals rather than weight loss related ones** - engaging in practices with food and exercise that promote health over weight loss/management is more positive for your overall wellbeing. Remember many people who are normal or underweight are unfit and many physically fit people (think about rugby players) are higher than average in body weight
- **Avoid making body comparisons to others** - everyone is unique and differences are what makes a person special. Admiring the beauty in others can be positive for your own body confidence but it is important that you appreciate the beauty and accept yourself as a whole in order to feel more comfortable in your skin
- **Make a conscious decision about what to read and look at** - remember that the majority of images presented in the media are unrealistic and represent a minority of the population. Many of the images in magazines have been digitally altered and do not represent what real people look like.

Getting help

If you feel dissatisfied with your body or if you feel like you are developing unhealthy eating or exercise habits, professional help is a good idea. There are counsellors and psychologists who have specialised knowledge in the areas of 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

The NEDC constantly reviews research evidence on eating disorders. Recent research can be found at www.nedc.com.au/research-resources Each of the publications of the NEDC also draw on an extensive review of evidence and expert opinion. NEDC publications and their bibliographies can be found at www.nedc.com.au/nedc-publications In addition to NEDC publications, this fact sheet has drawn on other sources of information which can be found at www.nedc.com.au/fact-sheet-bibliography

