The Power of Perception

How much time do you spend each day looking in the mirror? How do you feel about the person you see looking back at you? For many people, this experience is a valuable motivational tool, driving them to either keep up with their exercise and diet or to start making healthier choices. For other people, however, dissatisfaction with their own body can take a very different and dangerous course. Poor body image is a serious problem among both boys and girls, and it often leads to the development of depression, eating disorders, and even suicidal thoughts. Body image is a complex issue, and the more we think correctly about it, the more likely we are to keep ourselves happy and healthy.

Negative Body Image Influences

Adolescents and young adults are particularly susceptible to poor body image, but as our culture changes, we find older adults drawn into the the same pressures. People today have many conflicting influences in their lives concerning body image. On one hand, commercial marketing encourages them to watch television, eat convenient, processed food, and follow other unhealthy patterns. On the other hand, our culture, especially social media, presents certain body types as ideal, implying that anything different is less beautiful, less desirable, and undeserving of success. These unrealistic ideas are reinforced at school and in the workplace, where pressures to match these ideals are very strong.

It is easy to get confused by these mixed messages, and tragically some people respond by falling into despair about the way they look instead of adopting strong, balanced approaches to health.

*Pressure to meet **unrealistic expectations** about what the body should look like is high.*

LEARN MORE

Make smart decisions about your health and visit a physician or health specialist for advice and questions.

National Eating Disorders Association

www.nationaleatingdisorders.org

National Association of Anorexia Nervosa and Associated Disorders, Inc.

www.anad.org

HEALTHY DIRECTIONS

BUILDING A BETTER BODY IMAGE

HEALTHY DIRECTIONS

Immediate Causes

While cultural influences are strong, not all people who face them develop body image problems. Researchers have identified several specific factors that seem to play an important role in forming unhealthy self-views:

Depression

Depression can very easily latch onto body image as a focus of negative thoughts. People who struggle with depression need strong guidance and support in their lives if they are to retain a healthy, confident view of themselves. In turn, this strengthened self-image helps a person to overcome depression in other areas of life as well.

Abuse

People who have suffered tragic abuse as children or teens frequently become insecure about the way they look, particularly in adolescent years. Parents and mental health professionals must be aware of this risk and give abused children extra attention as their minds and bodies change.

Stress

Some people are more sensitive to stress than others. All of us are occasionally tempted to respond incorrectly to the stress in our lives, and that can take the form of focusing on body image to an unhealthy extent.

Disorders

Poor body image often manifests itself as one of several prominent disorders:

Body Dysmorphic Disorder

This label simply refers to a state of mind in which a person's view of his or her own body does not correspond to reality. As a result of these misconceptions, a person sees parts of his body as being unattractive and he takes extreme measures to "fix" the problem, such as malnourishment, plastic surgery, and social withdrawal. This mentality leads to dangerous eating behaviors and other physical risks.

Eating Disorders

In response to their incorrect view of themselves as fat, some young people adopt dramatic measures to try to starve themselves into shape. These efforts actually injure the body by depriving it of nutrients and following destructive cycles of binge eating, purging, further harm to self-image. Unfortunately, people with these disorders are often very careful to hide them from those close to them. Parents and friends should be alert to the warning signs of eating disorders and take action to get victims the help they need to overcome them.

Solutions

Young people who live in a safe environment and receive plenty of positive reinforcement of their worth and beauty are far less likely to see themselves as physically deficient. At home and at school, supportive friends, responsible adult authorities, and other positive influences are the greatest deterrents to unhealthy self-images.

At all times of growth, but especially during the confusing adolescent years, children and teens must have the freedom to communicate openly with adults

Positive influences from family and friends can be **the greatest deterrent** *to an unhealthy body image.* **Don't be afraid** *to speak up if you or a loved one is hurting.*

they trust. Instead of becoming ashamed and afraid of the way their bodies are changing, young people need to be able to talk about those changes and hear that they are normal, parts of becoming an adult.

What about cases in which a young person truly is out of shape and needs to lose weight for health reasons? A balanced approach to becoming healthier is essential. There is a fine line between getting serious about weight loss and becoming obsessed with it to the point where no amount of change can convince the brain that it has reached its goal.

Many young people with body image problems respond well to therapy, either in a group or on an individual basis. Correcting misguided thinking is an essential first step, but a supportive environment is also important for making that correction last.

Everyone Has a Part to Play

Each individual is responsible for his or her self-image. It is very important that each of us make the decision to ignore peer pressure, discard unrealistic views of what is beautiful, and focus on healthy, responsible attitudes about our own bodies. If we need to become more healthy, we should do so by improving our diet and exercise. Most importantly, we need to understand that who we really are is not the same as what we look like on the outside. Our personalities are far more important than our exteriors. People who realize this are able to balance attention to appearance with a true sense of self-worth.

That being said, each of us has a responsibility to help those around us develop that same sense of self-worth. Parents and adult authorities should make it a point to encourage self-esteem and confidence, and should

avoid lifting up certain body types as examples of perfection. Young people should never make others feel bad about the way they look, either through bullying or exclusion from groups. What may seem to be innocent fun may actually do serious harm to those who are already self-conscious about their bodies.

There is **no gender discrimination** *when it comes to poor body image. Males and females can* **both** *be victims to an unhealthy mentality.*