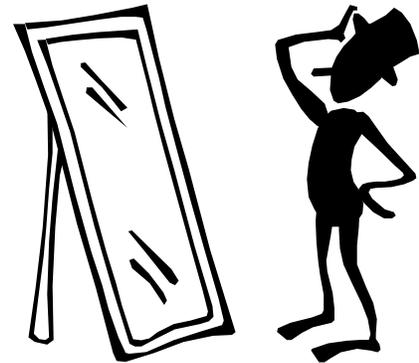


Body Image

When you look in the mirror, what do you see? Your perception of how your body looks forms your body image. Body image refers to the ways in which we perceive and experience our bodies visually, mentally, emotionally, and physically. Body Image is, therefore, formed by how we see ourselves, how we think and feel about our bodies, and how we experience our bodies' movements and sensations. Regardless of how closely your actual figure resembles your perception, your body image can affect your self-esteem, your eating and exercise behaviors, and your relationships with others. A healthy body image leads to body acceptance, which is feeling comfortable, confident and proud of your body. Developing and nurturing a healthy body image is crucial to happiness and wellness.



Read on to learn...

- What factors influence your body image.
- Whether or not it's possible to achieve the "ideal body."
- Is the "ideal body" really your key to health, success, beauty, & happiness?
- What can you do to improve your body image.



What factors influence body image?

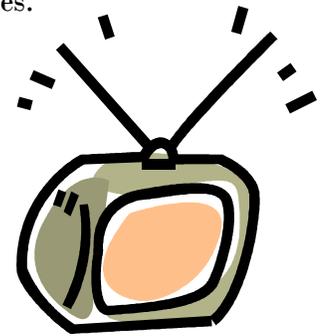
Size Prejudice

In American culture (and particularly in southern California), there is a lot of emphasis placed on body weight, size, and appearance. And, we are conditioned from a very young age to believe that self-worth is derived from these external characteristics. For example, being thin and/or muscular is associated with being “hard-working, successful, popular, beautiful, strong, and self-disciplined.” On the other hand, being “fat” is associated with being “lazy, ignorant, hated, ugly, weak, and lacking will-power.” These stereotypes are prevalent in our society; and they are reinforced by the media, our family and friends, and even well-respected health professionals. As a result, we often unfairly judge others and label them based on their weight and size alone. We feel great anxiety and pressure to achieve and/or maintain a very lean physique. And, we believe that if we can just be thinner or more muscular, we can be happier, more successful, and more accepted by society.

The Media

The media sets unrealistic standards for what body weight and appearance is considered “normal.” Girls are influenced at a very young age to believe that Barbie is how a woman is supposed to look (i.e. no fat anywhere on your body, but huge breasts). NOTE: If Barbie were life-size, she would stand 5’9” and weigh 110 lb. (only 76% of what is considered a healthy weight for her height). Her measurements would be 39-18-33, and she would not menstruate due to inadequate levels of fat on her body. Similarly, boys are given the impression that men naturally have muscles bulging all over their bodies.

Take a look at their plastic action-figures (like GI Joe Extreme) in toy stores. If GI Joe Extreme were life-size, he would have a 55-inch chest and a 27-inch bicep. In other words, his bicep would be almost as big as his waist and bigger than most competitive body builders’. These body ideals are reinforced every day on TV shows, movies, magazine covers, and even video games. At UCLA, where the crowd is young and the warm climate promotes use of revealing clothing, the exaltation and expectation of extreme leanness is even more exaggerated.



The media’s portrayal of what is “normal” keeps getting thinner and thinner for women and more muscular and ripped for men. Twenty-five years ago, the average female model weighed 8% less than the average American woman. Currently, the average female model weighs 23% below her average weight. Similar trends are seen with men. The average Playgirl centerfold man has shed about 12 lbs. of fat, while putting on approximately 27 lb. of muscle over the past 25 years.

With these media images and body ideals, it’s little wonder that women and men feel inadequate, ashamed, and dissatisfied with how they look. Only about 5% of women have the genetic make up to ever achieve the ultra-long and thin model body type so pervasive in

the media. Yet that is the only body type that women see and can compare themselves to. Similarly, all boys see is a body ideal that for most men is impossible to achieve without illegal anabolic steroids. There is a physiological limit to how much muscle a man can attain naturally, given his height, frame, and body fat percentage. Unfortunately, however, the action figure heroes on toy store shelves and male fitness models on magazine covers suggest otherwise.

Family, Friends, and Romantic Partners

Body image is also formed from the positive and the negative feedback from people whose opinions matter to us, such as family, friends, romantic partners, and coaches.

In college, you may feel great pressure to be thin or super muscular in order to be accepted by your peers and attractive to potential romantic partners. If you're living with a lot of other students in a sorority/fraternity house or residence hall, the pressure may be even more intense. In these group living situations, you may be surrounded by negative "body talk" ...in the bathroom, in the dining halls, in your dorm room...there's no escaping the comments ("Yuck! Look at my thighs...I'm so fat! I really need to go on a diet!"). All these comments can make you crazy! They can make you start worrying about your own weight and make you start feeling self-conscious about your own body, even though you never worried about it before!

A family member may have done the same thing while you were growing up by making constant comments about their own weight (or yours) and enforcing food restrictions. Early on, you may have gotten the message that you need to be thin in order to be accepted and loved by that family member.

If you're an athlete, you may feel tremendous pressure to lose weight or body fat so you can make a specific weight class (i.e. wrestling, crew, boxing), race faster (i.e. running, cycling), or look more attractive to the judges or audience (i.e. gymnastics, dance, cheerleading, figure skating). The pressure may come from you, your teammates, your coach, and/or your parents. In any case, the message is clear, "you need to have a certain body to perform well and be considered a good athlete." Unfortunately, these messages can be more harm than help. Prolonged nutrient inadequacies and impaired psychological functioning that are associated with disordered eating can adversely affect physical performance. There is no evidence that thinness equals better performance.

Health Professionals

Weight and height measurements are routinely done at health clinics; and you are often assigned a certain label ("underweight, healthy weight, overweight, or obese") based on these measurements. Your clinician may even encourage you to lose weight, to see a Dietitian, or to consider drugs or surgery based on these numbers, without asking about your eating and exercise habits or considering your level of fitness. The clinician, of course,



has good intentions. After all, clinicians are taught in their medical training that “overweight” and “obesity” are risk factors for many chronic diseases, such as diabetes and heart disease.

While weight measurements may actually reflect bad eating habits, a sedentary lifestyle, and poor health and fitness, they don’t always. In fact, there are many “overweight”, but fit, men and women who eat a balanced diet, exercise regularly, and enjoy excellent health (as indicated by their optimal blood pressure, blood cholesterol, and blood sugar levels). Similarly, there are many “healthy weight” men and women who don’t. If you have been a victim of this type of weight prejudice by the medical community, it’s understandable that your body image and self-esteem would suffer.

Is it possible to achieve the “ideal body?”

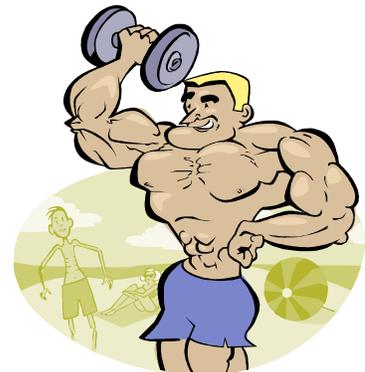
Our thin-obsessed culture has caused many people to believe that they would be better off if they were to trim off a few pounds of fat. A 1995 national health survey of college students found 46.4% were attempting weight loss at the time of the survey. The same survey found that only 20.5% of college students were overweight, yet 41.4% perceived themselves as overweight. In desperate attempts to achieve the “ideal” weight and shape, many students turn to disordered behaviors such as restrictive dieting, a variety of fat burning or muscle building products, exhaustive exercise, and/or cigarette smoking.

Keep in mind that your weight and body composition are determined by a number of factors. Some of these factors, such as your calorie intake and level of physical activity, can be manipulated. But other factors, such as your body type, bone structure, the way you store fat, and other genetic variables, cannot be manipulated. Most people simply lack the raw materials to build the “ideal” body, regardless of how strict they are with their eating and exercise regimens. Think twice before you make the choice to pursue weight loss. Do what is right for the health of your body without falling prey to the perils of trying to achieve someone else’s unrealistic numbers.



Consider this, only about 5% of American women have the ultra-long and thin body-type that is seen almost exclusively in the media. Women who attempt to achieve this body type (but lack the genetic material to do so) are setting themselves up for years and years of yo-yo dieting, weight fluctuations, disordered eating, and depression.

Similarly, the body ideal projected to boys and men in most muscle magazines and cartoon action figure heroes are impossible to achieve without illegal anabolic steroids. In most cases, if a man claims to have achieved this ideal with hard training and strict diet alone, he probably didn't. There is a physiological limit to how much muscle a man can attain naturally, given his height and body fat percentage. In other words, it's physiologically impossible to gain unlimited pounds of pure bulging muscle mass while maintaining an ultra lean, ripped body (with only 3-7% body fat)--even when following the “perfect” training and diet program. Once you reach your maximal muscle mass, any further gains will come from both muscle AND fat. So, men who have greater muscle mass/size tend to have higher body fat percentages as well (e.g. 10-15%).



Thus, it is important to be realistic when determining how you want to look to avoid sacrificing your health and happiness for an impossible goal.

Is the "ideal body" really your key to health, success, beauty, & happiness?

Health & Fitness

What does a number on the scale really tell you about how healthy or fit someone is? When you step on a scale, the weight that you see doesn't tell you anything about your body composition (i.e. how much is muscle, bone, or fat). Keep in mind that muscle is denser and weighs more than fat. So, if you are very physically active and have more muscle, you SHOULD weigh more.



In addition, weight (or even body composition) isn't the best indicator of health and fitness. Your eating habits, exercise patterns, and metabolic measures (like blood pressure, blood cholesterol, and blood glucose levels) are more important indicators of your health. And, your fitness level is better measured by your cardiovascular endurance, muscle strength, muscle endurance, and flexibility--not by your weight and body fat.

Compare these two female students. Which one is healthy and fit?

- Cathy is "obese" based on her height and weight (she stands 5'2" and weighs 180 lb, Body Mass Index = 33.). Despite her weight, she is training for a triathlon, exercises hard for 6 hours per week, and fuels her body with about 1800-2000 calories from wholesome nourishing foods. She is trying to lose weight, but realizes that restricting her calorie intake too low will impair her health and exercise performance.
- Michelle is underweight at 5'2" and 96 lb. (Body Mass Index = 17.6). She consumes fewer than 1000 calories a day, smokes and drinks diet sodas and coffee all day to suppress her appetite, and barely has the energy to walk to school, let alone work-out.

Compare these two male students. Which one is healthy and fit?

- Dion is 5'6" and 142 lb. He runs around the track and climbs the Drake stadium stairs for about 30-45 minutes 3 times per week, and he lifts weights for about an hour 2 times per week. He eats a high fiber diet (with plenty of fruits, veggies, and whole grains) and also makes sure to eat adequate protein from chicken, tuna, and low fat milk products. He just had a wellness exam at the Ashe Center and was told that his blood pressure and cholesterol levels were optimal.
- Eric is 5'6" and is extremely muscular at 170 lb. He is in the weight room 6 days a week for 2 hours each session. He never does cardio because he's afraid of losing mass and size. Eric eats a very high protein diet and starts his day by drinking 6 egg whites. He stays away from starch and sugar and supplements his diet with designer whey protein shakes, ECA stack*, and creatine monohydrate. At his last wellness exam, he was told his blood pressure was elevated (probably related to the stimulants in the ECA stack and lack of cardio exercise), his blood cholesterol was borderline high (possibly related to all the partially hydrogenated oils in the sports bars he eats, his high saturated fat diet and his

low fiber intake), and his blood creatinine levels were high (from all the protein in his diet).

* “*ECA*” stands for *ephedrine, caffeine and aspirin*. The *ECA stack* is a drug combination used as a stimulant by individuals trying to achieve weight loss.

Success

Describe a good friend or a good parent. What characteristics does he/she have? Now, describe a good doctor, lawyer, or teacher? What are they like? As you imagine these model people, what part (if any) does body weight or percent body fat play in determining their quality or effectiveness? Probably not much.

Beauty & Attractiveness

While body size and shape certainly contribute to physical attractiveness, they are not the only factors, and they certainly are not the most important ones! How you present yourself in social settings also plays a big role. Are you outgoing and upbeat, with a friendly smile and welcoming posture that attracts people to you? Do you dress to impress, have a unique style, stand tall, and carry yourself with pride and confidence? All of these characteristics also contribute to your physical attractiveness.

Imagine a pair of twins standing across the room. One is smiling and dancing and exuding a sense of confidence and openness. The other is standing with his/her arms crossed and has a disgusted, angry expression on his/her face. Which one would you think was more attractive?

Happiness

It's not uncommon for people to think that they would be so much happier if only they could lose weight or have a more muscular physique. After all, our society equates thinness and extreme leanness with happiness. Logically then, people turn to diets as the solution to all their life problems. Unfortunately, however, weight is not the problem, and dieting is not the answer. True happiness comes from within. It comes from nurturing your soul and spirit with healthy relationships, communication, boundary setting, and relaxation. While finding true happiness internally can often result in better self-care of the external body (i.e. healthier eating and physical activity patterns), focusing only on the self-care of the external body will do nothing to heal the inside pain.

What can you do to improve your body image?

De-emphasize weight. Don't get hung up on numbers. Weight doesn't tell you much.

- Is it muscle, bone, or fat? Muscle weighs is heavier (more dense) than fat.
- Weight isn't the best indicator of health or fitness. Your eating habits, exercise patterns, and other lifestyle choices are more important.
- Weight doesn't define who you are or what you are worth as a person.

There is no such thing as one "ideal body weight" based on your height. Each one of us has a healthy weight based on our body type, bone structure, muscle mass, genetics, what weight we feel our best at, and what weight our body tends to want to maintain at.

There is a physiological limit to how muscular you can get naturally.

- Many of the muscular male bodies you see in the media are the products of drugs. It is not possible to be that muscular and that lean without chemical assistance.
- Instead of thinking of it as a limit, think of it as your personal best.

Some Tips:

- Realize that you cannot change your body type. Learn to love and respect your body and to work with what you have.
- Invest time and money in yourself, rather than the diet and supplement industry. Spend your extra money on flattering clothes, fitness equipment, haircuts, massages, and other personal indulgences--not on diets.
- Stop weighing yourself. Focus on how your clothes fit and how you feel. If you keep trying to achieve an unrealistically low body weight for you, you're setting yourself up for failure, depression, disordered eating, and decreased quality of life.
- Stop comparing yourself to others.
- Listen to your body. Eat when you are hungry.
- Celebrate your body and the marvelous things it can do when you are fit and well nourished. So often, we take these things for granted.
- Decide how you wish to spend your energy -- pursuing the "perfect body" or enjoying family, friends, school and, most importantly, life.



- Move and enjoy your body. Go walking, swimming, biking, and dancing. Do yoga, aerobics, and weight training.... not because you have to, but because it makes you feel strong and energized.
- Surround yourself with people who have a healthy relationship with food, weight, and their bodies. It will make a difference in how you feel about yourself. Also, remember to set a good example for others by refraining from “fat talk” when you’re with friends and family.
- Stop your negative thoughts and statements about yourself. Focus on what you love about yourself. Compliment yourself. Talk to your body the way you would talk to a good friend.
- Reclaim your own inner strength. Focus on the unique qualities and personality traits that make you a special and successful person.
- Nurture your inner self. Enjoy things you find relaxing (e.g. music, bubble baths, fragrances, candles, massages, reading, writing, napping), be close to nature (e.g. garden, sunsets, beach, stars), and/or seek spiritual connection (e.g. prayer, meditation, inspirational reading, reflection). Feeling good on the inside is key to feeling good on the outside.
- 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 or a body builder, 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. Talk to people you trust, read books about body image, or write in a journal. These activities may help you to recognize emotionally destructive thoughts and put body image into perspective.
- Recognize that “fat-ism” is a form of discrimination similar to sexism, racism, and classism. Assumptions that body shape determines attractiveness, personality, and success are incorrect and unjust. Combat discrimination when possible. Challenge assumptions and generalizations that promote the belief that one “type” of person is better than another.

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