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What Is a Negative Body Image?

What do you see when you look in the mirror? The reflection of a happy, healthy young person? Or someone you automatically cut down as too fat, too short, or too ugly? Have you ever thought your whole life would be better if you were thinner and more attractive? These feelings are examples of negative body image.

People with a negative body image believe that if they don't look right, other things, such as their personality, intelligence, social skills, or capabilities, also aren't right.

In today's society, body image is more than just the mental picture you have of what your body looks like. For many, body image is also a reflection of how they feel about themselves and their lives. People with a negative body image believe that if they don't look right, other things, such as their personality, intelligence, social skills, or capabilities, also aren't right. They think that if they fix their bodies, all their other problems will disappear. This can result in unhealthy weight management practices and an unhealthy relationship with food. People excessively diet and exercise out of fear of gaining weight.

Your body image is influenced by many different things. It is influenced by family, friends, and a culture that is obsessed with weight, body shape, dieting, and food. All people have negative thoughts and feelings about their body at some point in their life. But when it becomes more than a passing concern, when people base their happiness and self-worth on what they eat, how often they exercise, and how much they weigh, they are suffering from a negative body image. This outlook causes people to believe that all their experiences in life are affected by their appearance and body weight.

Even worse, when this preoccupation with food and weight turns into an obsession, it can result in a full-blown eating disorder. According to the National Eating Disorders Association (NEDA), more than eleven million people in the United States are suffering from an eating disorder such as bulimia nervosa or anorexia nervosa, and another twenty-five million are battling binge eating disorder.

The problems surrounding body image can be especially difficult for teens. Adolescence is a time when you may feel confused about the changes happening to your body. These changes are a natural part of growing up, but they can make you feel out of control and unhappy with your appearance. As a result, you may turn to unhealthy eating habits, which can lead to a serious eating disorder. This can seriously damage your physical and emotional health.

Nobody is born with a negative body image. It is something that you learn, something that develops over time. As you grow older, your experiences are shaped by the different messages you get from society. And those messages often connect personal success and happiness with being thin and beautiful. If people feel they don't measure up to those ideals of success, then they tend to disregard any other real accomplishments. Having a negative body image can seriously distort the way you look at yourself and your life.

Having a negative body image can be very dangerous if it's not addressed. The good news is, because a negative body image is something you learn, it also can be unlearned.

Do you know how to recognize a negative body image, what the causes and consequences are, and how to overcome a negative body image? If you work on learning to love and respect your body right now, you'll have the time, energy, and willpower to focus on the most important part of your being—who you are inside.

The Ideal

People throughout the world have very specific ideas of what makes someone beautiful. This idea is often referred to as the ideal because it represents what is thought of as perfect. But in many cases, the ideal is impossible and unhealthy for most people to achieve. In the United States, this ideal is constantly promoted through messages and images from the media (advertising, fashion magazines and e-zines [magazines on the Internet], television, movies, and videos). When people don't see themselves in these images, they believe there is something wrong with them. If they constantly judge themselves against this ideal, they will always feel that they're not good enough.

The beauty ideal is always changing. In the 1950s and 1960s, Marilyn Monroe was America's most celebrated sex symbol. But by today's standards, she would be considered overweight and out of shape. Today, the ideal is an impossibly thin, waiflike model who looks nothing like the majority of Americans. But since we are bombarded by these images, people think it's the norm, or standard, for everybody. Ultimately, no matter what the current trend is, the beauty ideal has nothing to do with reality. In reality, people come in a variety of shapes and sizes, which are determined mainly by their genetic makeup.

Nonetheless, advertisers in the beauty and fashion industries make it seem that if you don't strive for the beauty ideal, you won't be successful or happy in life. Advertising relies on and targets this feeling of inadequacy to sell products that will supposedly improve your appearance. Advertisers want you to believe the beauty ideal is a goal we can achieve so that we will spend money on products such as fat-free foods, diet drinks, weight-loss pills, skin products, makeup, exercise videos and equipment, and fashion magazines.

Who Has a Negative Body Image?

Anyone can suffer from a negative body image, but it tends to affect females more than males. This is because in our society, girls feel more pressure to look good and reach a beauty ideal. At a young age, females are taught to believe that physical appearance is more important than anything else. They believe their physical appearance defines their identity.

In fact, one study conducted the American Association of University Women found that middle-school girls reported that their looks were the most important factor in feeling good about themselves. A study led by Phebe Cramer, Ph.D., and Tiffany Steinwert, Ph.D., which appeared in a 1998 issue of *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology* found that attitudes toward thinness and ideal body size are formed as early as three years of age. By elementary school age, the study found, girls fear looking fat more than losing their parents, getting cancer, or experiencing nuclear war.

Generally, boys are not as vulnerable as girls to negative body image. This is because boys are taught by society and their families to define themselves more by abilities than appearance. Boys are encouraged more than girls to express themselves and be aggressive to achieve what they want. But boys, too, can be affected by a negative body image. When they don't measure

up to an ideal body that is very lean and muscular, they—like girls—may hurt their bodies by overeating or not eating at all. In a study of 10,000 teens that was reported in *Pediatrics* in 2005, less than half of the males and about a third of the females indicated that they were happy with their bodies.

Experts agree there is a clear connection between negative body image and eating disorders. And because females are more vulnerable to negative body image, they are also more likely than males to suffer from an eating disorder. Ninety to 95 percent of those who suffer from eating disorders are women. But the number of males who have eating disorders is increasing. No one is immune to these problems. And, according to research conducted at the School of Public Health, University of Minneapolis, and published in August 2006, teens who have negative feelings about their bodies are more apt to binge eat, smoke, eat unbalanced meals, and exercise less than those who possess positive body images.

Do I Have a Negative Body Image?

It's important to recognize the signs of a negative body image. Once you recognize the problem, you can work on accepting your body. The sooner you address the problem, the more likely you are to overcome it.

- Are you afraid of getting fat?
- Do you think about food a lot?
- Do you constantly compare your body with those of others?
- Do you say negative things about your body to other people?
- Do you say mean things about your body to yourself (in your head)?
- Do you get mad at yourself or your body after looking at magazines or watching television?
- Do you avoid social activities because you think others will find you unattractive?
- Do you avoid eating around other people?
- Do you wish you could change the way you look?

If you answered yes to most of these questions, a negative body image is affecting your life and you should consider getting help. Without help, you may be putting yourself at risk for an eating disorder.