

BODY IMAGE PART 1: NEGATIVE VS. POSITIVE



If you've ever gone through your clothes closet and felt that nothing looks good enough on you, or glanced in the mirror only to cringe or turn the other way, you've experienced how body image can affect your state of mind. Body image refers to the perceptions, thoughts and reactions we have to our body size and appearance. A negative body image is linked to shyness, low self-esteem, depression, and eating problems. Often, how we feel about our bodies has less to do with actual body size than it does with body perception—and it's this perception that can influence our ability to lose weight.

Why do so many people, especially women, have a negative body image? Much of it has to do with their life experiences, along with society's often unrealistic standards of beauty. For example, hurtful words from family or peers about how you look or act, a mother who is highly critical of her own body, and a culture that values ideals of thinness that most people cannot attain, can all have a profound effect on how you feel about your body. The good news is that you can learn to have a positive body image, even if you haven't reached your goal weight.

To improve your body image, first identify the parts of your appearance you dislike. Then answer these questions: What situations or events trigger negative thoughts about your size, shape or appearance? For example, is it a party, summer vacation, comments other people make about weight, stepping on the scale or wearing certain clothes? What do you tell yourself in these situations? For example, "I hate the way I look," or "Nobody will talk to me looking like this," or "I'm destined to be fat." How do these thoughts affect your behavior? For example, do you decline invitations to parties, wear baggy clothes to cover up or weigh yourself several times a day? It helps to keep a diary so you can pinpoint the situations and negative beliefs that cause your body image distress.

Positive Thinking

A negative body image often results from illogical thinking. Below are some ways to replace errors in thinking with more positive thoughts about body image:

Do you compare yourself to the ultra thin models in movies and magazines?

Realize that airbrushing, styling, and coloring can make the "ideal" image even more of an illusion. Instead, accept that people come in all shapes and sizes. Also, consider the special qualities you possess, like unique skills, traits or physical characteristics, and how these qualities distinguish you from the real people around you.

When looking in the mirror, do you magnify the flaws and minimize your positive features?

Instead of being self-critical, stop and think about the aspects of your appearance that you find acceptable or satisfying.

Do you blame your appearance for your problems or put restrictions on yourself because of your size?

If, for example, you're not meeting people as easily as you'd like, perhaps it's something other than your appearance that's causing the problem. Or, maybe your appearance is really not an issue to others as it is to you. When you think you can't do something or go somewhere because of your size, give it a try anyway. Soon your discomfort will be replaced by a sense of accomplishment for doing something that you wanted.

Does a bad mood day become a reason to feel bad about your body?

Instead of taking it out on your body, ask yourself what's actually bothering you and deal with the real issue at hand.

By recognizing the thinking errors that lead to a negative body image, you can formulate a plan to correct your thinking and turn these feelings into positive body image experiences. Continue to keep a diary to identify and refute negative feelings about your body and to see how much you've improved over time.

