

Self Worth - Body Image

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Body image is your attitude towards your body; how you see yourself, how you think and feel about the way you look, and how you think other people may perceive you. Your body image can be influenced by your own beliefs and attitudes as well as those of society, the media and peer groups.

What is a healthy body image?

A healthy body image occurs when a person is able to accept, appreciate and respect their body. A healthy body image is important because it is a protective factor that contributes to a person being more resilient to some mental health problems. Building Self Worth and healthy body image may require a balanced approach to nutrition and physical activity.

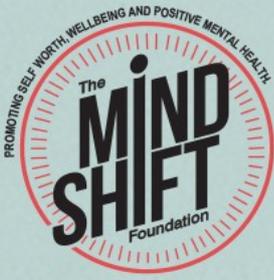
A healthy body image will improve:

- **Self esteem.** This dictates how a person feels about themselves. It can infiltrate every aspect of life and contributes to happiness and wellbeing.
- **Self-acceptance.** A person with self-acceptance is more likely to feel comfortable and happy with the way they look, and is less likely to feel pressured by unrealistic images in the media and societal pressures to look a certain way.
- **Healthy outlook and behaviours.** It is easier to lead a balanced lifestyle with healthy attitudes and practices relating to food and exercise when you are in tune with, and respond quickly to, the needs of your body.

What causes body dissatisfaction?

Body dissatisfaction can develop when a person has negative thoughts and feelings about his or her body. Body dissatisfaction is an internal feeling but can be influenced by several external factors. Family, friends, acquaintances, teachers and the media all have an impact on how a person sees and feels about themselves and their appearance. Individuals who receive negative feedback about their appearance are at an increased risk of body dissatisfaction.

One of the biggest external contributors to body dissatisfaction is the media. People of all ages and genders are bombarded with images through television, magazines, the internet and advertising. These images often promote unrealistic, unobtainable and highly stylised appearance ideals which have been conceived by salespeople and fabricated by stylists, art teams and digital manipulation. These unrealistic images of 'perfection' cannot be achieved in reality. People who don't feel they measure up to this false ideal can experience intense body dissatisfaction which can lead to severe damage of psychological and physical wellbeing.



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The following factors make some people more likely to develop a negative body image than others:

- **Age.** Body image is frequently shaped during late childhood and adolescence, but body dissatisfaction can affect people of all ages and is as prevalent in midlife as it is the young.
- **Gender.** Adolescent girls are more prone to body dissatisfaction than adolescent boys; however, the rate of body dissatisfaction in males is rapidly approaching that of females.
- **Low Self Worth and/or depression.** When we're really down on ourselves or suffering from a condition, we can become our own worst enemies and fixate on our appearance as a result.
- **Personality.** People with perfectionist tendencies, high achievers, 'black and white' thinkers, those who internalise beauty ideals, and those who often compare themselves to others have an increased risk of developing body dissatisfaction.
- **Teasing.** People who are teased about their appearance/weight, regardless of actual body type, have an increased risk of developing body dissatisfaction.
- **Friends and family.** Role models expressing body image concerns can increase the likelihood of an individual developing body dissatisfaction regardless of actual body type.

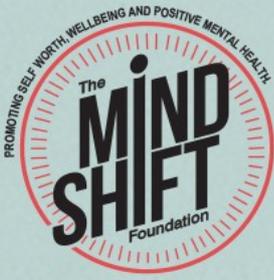
Why is body dissatisfaction a serious problem?

If you think that your Self Worth has been affected by negative body image pressure, it is important to take strong, positive steps to counter your understanding. Look for ways to promote realistic and healthy ways of viewing your body and yourself. Just as you shouldn't be judged by the colour of your skin or your religion, you shouldn't be judged by your body.

Occasional dissatisfaction with your body is not unusual. However, constantly feeling unhappy about your appearance can lead to low Self Worth and other more serious mental health issues in the long term.

According to The MindShift Foundation Clinical Psychologist Dr Lars Madsen, negative body image can, in severe cases, lead to elective surgery to change one's appearance. Reconstructive surgery after medical procedures (such as a mastectomy due to breast cancer), understandably helps a patient's recovery from the traumatic experience of what may be perceived as breast disfiguration. When it comes to purely cosmetic surgery, research tells us that post-surgery patients report their body image has either not changed or has diminished. While changing your actual appearance is counter-productive, improving your body image is always a constructive goal.

Having a negative body image can contribute to feelings of anxiety, anger, depression and shame, and will reduce your confidence in yourself. If your body image has a negative impact on your life, find ways to identify and change your thoughts and beliefs about your body.



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How can you improve your body image?

The best place to start countering negative thoughts on your image is with yourself. Overcoming body dissatisfaction, essentially, is about developing *body acceptance*.

This can involve doing the following:

- Focusing on your positive qualities, skills and talents to better appreciate your whole self.
- Say positive things to yourself every day.
- Avoid negative self-talk.
- Focus on appreciating and respecting what your body can do will help you to feel more positive about it.
- Setting positive, health-focussed goals rather than drastic weight loss goals is more beneficial for your overall wellbeing.
- Admiring others can improve your own body confidence but it is important to appreciate your own beauty. Avoid comparing yourself to others, accept yourself as a whole and remember that everyone is unique. Our differences are what make us special.
- Remember that many images you see in the media are unrealistic and represent a minority of the population.

It is also important to understand that there is no right or wrong when it comes to weight, shape, size and appearance. Challenging beauty ideals and learning to accept your body shape is a crucial step towards positive body image.

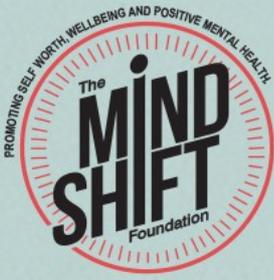
Where to get help

Always remember you are not alone. Your doctor or registered health professionals are there to help you.

Our online resource page also has a full list of organisations where you can get further information. <http://mindshift.org.au/suggested-links/>.

Things to remember

Developing body acceptance is an important part of reducing the impact that poor body image has on the way you think about yourself. Body acceptance means challenging the perception that you need to look a particular way and be a particular weight. It means challenging assumptions that you possess on how others look too.



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In Summary

Dr Lars Madsen confirms body image problems are a common cause of low self-esteem. At the heart of body image problems are unhelpful appearance related beliefs or ideas. These types of beliefs are often shaped through experiences with family and friends, exposure to appearance-related messages within the media and our wider culture. Once these beliefs are formed, if they are not questioned or challenged, you run the risk of developing a negative body image that can contribute to reducing your self-esteem.

Taking steps to counter your negative self image can include changing how you perceive physical appearances, letting go of your personal assumptions about your appearance, disconnecting from damaging forms of media and challenging reassurance-seeking behaviours. Setting safe goals such as leading a healthy lifestyle, achieving healthy body weight, talking to someone you trust or seeking professional help are great starting points.

Updates and Further information

For the latest updates and further information please visit www.mindshift.org.au.

Our Mission

It is our mission to ensure that every person has access to the resources available to build healthy self-esteem, to have a positive sense of self and to find meaning in life.

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