



Self-Worth - Body Image and Health

Body Image

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. Negative body image can lead to low self-worth.

Characteristics of negative body image

A person with low self-worth may have some of these thoughts and feelings:

- A dislike of their appearance for any reason
- Obsessing over themselves in the mirror – or avoiding the mirror entirely
- Feelings of inadequacy
- Comparing their appearance to other people or envying them
- Thinking bad thoughts about ourselves
- Believing that how they look determines their overall value
- They don't want to go out or try new things
- They feel guilt, shame or disgust at the human need to eat
- They want to be someone else.

Health effects of unhealthy body image

Poor body image can turn dangerous when a person concludes that they need to take drastic action to change their appearance, often under the misguided idea that it will make them feel better about their bodies. This can lead to a range of conditions and behaviours.

Eating disorders

Weight is one of the biggest contributors to body dissatisfaction, which can lead to health problems with big consequences. An eating disorder is a recognised psychiatric condition in which someone becomes obsessed by eating and exercise habits, body weight or shape.

Anorexia nervosa

People who suffer from this serious condition often have an obsessive fear of gaining weight, which can manifest through limiting or depriving themselves of food. They may also perform high levels of exercise. They often follow restrictive diets and may resort to refusing meals to stick to



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their weight goals. Anorexia can develop in adolescence and while there is no one single cause, poor body image and low self-worth are noted as risk factors.

Bulimia nervosa

This serious condition can display as ongoing and recurrent binge-eating episodes. A person with bulimia is often regretful and ashamed of their binge-eating and may react with immediate compensating behaviours like purging, fasting, over-exercising or abusing drugs such as diuretics. Bulimia is harder to recognise than anorexia, as there are usually no obvious outwards signs. However, people with bulimia are often starving to death. The binge and purge cycles don't allow the body adequate nutrition and can ultimately cause a person to be even hungrier. Like anorexia, poor body image and low self-worth are high risk factors in the development of this condition.

Binge eating disorder (BED)

This is considered to be the most common eating disorder in Australia. It's not dissimilar to bulimia, in that it's characterised by regular episodes of binge eating, but unlike bulimia, people who suffer from BED won't engage in compensatory behaviours like purging or over-exercising. People suffering from this condition will often eat when they don't feel hungry. This can lead to the condition being dismissed as 'comfort eating', when it's actually indicative of something more serious. However, the condition is not the same as overeating. BED often induces guilt and shame, and can lead to depression. Low self-worth is considered a symptom of this condition.

Other specified feeding and eating disorders (OSFED)

Not all eating disorders are formally recognised by professionals. People who have been classified as suffering from OSFED often display symptoms of other conditions like anorexia or bulimia, for instance, but don't meet the full criteria for a diagnosis of those particular conditions. It doesn't mean their condition is any less dangerous, nor the symptoms any less severe. A diagnosis of OSFED can also be given to those who suffer from night eating syndrome, other purging disorders, or variations of anorexia or bulimia. A person's body image is generally very poor with a condition under the OSFED banner.

Body dysmorphic disorder (BDD)

A person with this condition suffers constant worry about the way how they look. They can believe that a minor or non-existent physical attribute is a major defect. The severity of the condition varies from those who are aware that their feelings aren't rational but can't stop feeling them, to those who believe their feelings without question. This condition is an obsessive condition that can interrupt school or work, and can make social situations very difficult. Someone with BDD can spend hours agitating over their appearance every day. They are unable to control their negative thoughts and



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often don't believe people who compliment them. Any body part may become a focus of scrutiny for someone with BDD. Needless to say, poor body image is a risk factor at the core of this condition.

Cosmetic surgery

While cosmetic surgery may carry the promise of a 'new you', there are significant health risks should the surgery go wrong. Infections and incorrect administering of anaesthesia by unqualified practitioners are some of the biggest problems facing those who take on surgery. Studies have found that self-worth doesn't necessarily increase or diminish after a successful surgery. Interestingly, those studies indicate that people are generally satisfied with the surgical nature of their procedure, but the intervention didn't have desired effect on their mental health. Cosmetic surgery is a personal decision. Getting educated and talking to a mental health professional is highly recommended. It's important to know what's really driving us towards altering our physical features.

Concealment

Some people might try to hide what they perceive to be large stomach by dressing in loose tops. People who suffer from acne might try to cover their skin in layers of makeup. Concealment is a behaviour which aims to protect supposed vulnerabilities, however it doesn't come without a cost. Some attempts at concealing a body are dangerous, especially in a hot country like Australia. Covering up from head to toe to hide body shape, supposed 'bad' skin, or a physical deformity or disability can potentially lead to heatstroke and exhaustion.

Heightened vigilance

The smallest imperfection can cause panic attacks in some people. From perceived flaws in body parts, such as noses or lips, to how we dress or do our make-up, heightened vigilance causes a sensitivity that can be exhausting. Obsessively fixating on a body part can affect decision-making and induce things like eating disorders, increase the desire for cosmetic adjustment or be a symptom of body dysmorphic disorder.

Depressive symptoms

Some people don't respond with anxiety or food-based behaviours when they don't like their body image but instead exhibit depressive symptoms. They are aware of what they look like, but rather than obsess on how they can fix themselves, they accept their poor self-image as fact and don't bother to nurture it. This attitude might seem to indicate self-acceptance, but if it's based on their acceptance of negative ideas about their appearance, then it's not healthy. This can lead to neglectful behaviours that minimise general self-care and only reinforce a lack of self-worth.



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Isolation

Some people with poor body image and low self-worth may seek isolation rather than socialise with others. This form of behaviour is one that can become habit-forming. Saying 'no' to social engagements on a regular basis may also have a knock-on effect of friends and acquaintances no longer asking us out to socialise, knowing that the answer will always be negative.

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 and avoid negative self-talk.
- Focus on appreciating and respecting what your body can do.
- Setting positive, health-focussed goals rather than drastic weight loss goals is more beneficial for your overall wellbeing.
- 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. 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

Being adversely affected by negative body image can lead to health concerns. Developing body acceptance is an important part of reducing the impact that poor body image has on a person's health. Aim for health-focussed goals and focus on respecting your body for what it can do.



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In Summary

Poor body image becomes dangerous when a person takes drastic steps to try to improve their self-image. Conditions such as anorexia and bulimia can cause serious health setbacks, and there are potentially serious repercussions if cosmetic surgery goes wrong. 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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