



Improving Body Image

Body image is the way we think and feel about our body, and in turn how we treat it. Weirdly, having good body image has very little to do with what we look like. However, how we look impacts how we are treated by others and society at large, which can influence the way we think and feel about our body.

When looking at body image research often looks at 2 different things.

- Body satisfaction = how we feel about the way our body looks.
- Body appreciation = how we feel about what our body can do.

If you focus more on body satisfaction over body appreciation, then body image is likely to be lower overall. This is why the way we look doesn't automatically determine our body image. Even stereotypically 'beautiful' people can have poor body image!

You were not born disliking your body. Watch young children, they may be fascinated or curious, but very rarely do they actively hate their body.

Diet Culture is the swamp we all swim in that has an impact on all of us whether we want it to or not. Diet Culture is a system of beliefs which equate thinness with health, beauty, success and happiness. It perpetuates the idea that one type of body is better than another. Over time the body ideal will change (e.g. 'heroin chic' v's 'strong not skinny'). However, idea that one type of body is best, and this is the type of body we should all aim for is constant.

A few things to think about, reflect on and do to help understand and start to change your body image.

The idea is to take each of these at your own pace and discover and understand without judgement or expectation. If anything feels too hard, stop. There is no pressure to do this all at once.

1. When did you learn that your body wasn't ok? Was there a particular moment? When did you come to know that whatever you feel is wrong with your body was "bad"? Do you still believe that now? Who gains, by you feeling that way?
2. Being thin or "fit" is no better than being fat. This is a belief not a fact and beliefs can change! You are so much more than your body. Think of someone you love. Is the first thing that you think of their abs or their legs or bulging arm muscles? Or maybe how kind or generous they are. When that person dies, is the thing you will be cherishing their washboard abs? Doubt it!
3. Curate your social media and social gatherings you find yourself in. The saying says, "comparison is the thief of joy". If something makes you feel bad about yourself or your



body, probably don't follow it or engage with it. Try and find people who are comfortable living exactly as they are in their current body. So, you can see what is possible. If we don't see it sometimes it can be hard to imagine it.

4. Get rid of the scale or seriously dial back how frequently you use them. Also get rid of any 'goal' clothes. One thing I can guarantee is your body will change over time. Hanging on to things because 'one day I'll get back into them' is almost guaranteed to lead to negative comparison. These things may start as motivating but often quickly become a stick to beat ourselves with when we don't reach those goals within the time we want.
5. Look for patterns in your negative thoughts about your body. If you aren't aware of something it is hard to do anything about it! Highlight the story you tell yourself about your body, where and when you feel it in your body. Try and do this free of judgement or shame but note down if you do feel these things. Investigate with kindness why these patterns might exist.
6. The longest relationship you are ever going to have it with yourself, so why are you talking to yourself like that! Negative self talk will keep you stuck where you are. Interrupt and challenge how you talk to yourself about your body, food and movement. Try aiming for facts first. Alternatively have a list of affirmations or things your body does for you e.g. allows me to hug my family, allows me to have these experiences etc and remind yourself of those things when your headspace becomes negative.
7. Look at the sorts of things that trigger your negative body image. Is it your body changing, is it certain traumas or experiences you have had? Knowing your triggers can help manage the issue.
8. If your body was different, what do you think you would lose or gain? Is this true or just your assumptions or worries? Getting clear on what you are afraid of can help to ease the fears.
9. Set Boundaries around body talk with those around you. You don't have to engage, you don't have to listen, you don't have to accept people commenting on your body. This can be as little as "I don't want to talk about my body" to a little more sarcastic "I am way more interesting than the size of my bum!" Do it in a way that works for you!
10. Write out all the things you like about your body/ask trusted people what they love about your body and do things you love to help highlight these things. We sometimes overfocus on the bad and forget to acknowledge the good.
11. Scaling how we feel can be helpful e.g. on a scale of 1-10 how much distress am I feeling from this right now? Naming and numbering can help us conceptualise when change



occurs. So, if going to the gym in tight fitting clothes used to be an 8 but now it is a 6 you can see a change. Seeing progress helps us to stay motivated.

12. Find coping skills that work for you when body image is bad and is taking over. Grounding, mindfulness, dancing, changing environment, sensory or fidget toys. Build your tool box with as many weird and wonderful things as you can.
13. Find people you can talk to about your body image. A therapist, a friend, a parent, a support group. Sharing things out loud helps us to process and unpack our experiences. It also stops us lying to ourselves and can help to hold us accountable.
14. If you were to live your best life free of any body image hang ups, what would this look like? How can you move closer to that now? What are the barriers to moving closer to this? How can you remove them?
15. What makes someone worthy in my eyes? What values or character do they have that you value? What is it about someone that means you respect them? How do the answers to these questions contradict how I value myself and belief in my own worthiness? Why am I to be treated differently from how I would treat everyone else?

Remember this isn't going to change overnight. Healing takes time. Some of the above may be really confronting and hard to do, but that doesn't mean you shouldn't try. You will get stuck and need to find a way to sit in the crappy feelings that remain. These stuck points are breathing spaces for you to see how far you have come. Along the path, acknowledge the steps you have taken as well as the path yet to be laid.

My hope for you is that you stop waiting for your body to be 'perfect' so you can live! You only get this chance to be part of the memories or in the pictures. Don't waste them waiting to be the 'right fit'. Body image like many other aspects of life will ebb and flow, allow space for that fluctuation whilst also working on improving the status quo. Give yourself the permission to live just as you are.

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