

How Body Image Affects Mental Health

11/15/2021

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By Susannah Woodbury, Intern and Emma Parkhurst, Professional Practice Extension Assistant Professor



Introduction

What is body image? According to the National Eating Disorder Association (NEDA), it can be defined as our thoughts, perceptions, and attitudes about one's physical appearance. This can be negative or positive. Positive body image generally includes feeling comfortable and confident in your body. It involves acknowledging that the way your body looks has little to do with your character or value as a person. Negative body image includes feeling shame, anxiety, or self-consciousness about one's shape as well as a distorted perception of physical appearance. Comparison to others can cause the view of oneself to be distorted.¹

Women are more likely to have negative body image than men.² They are given messages throughout their lives that their bodies and looks are the most important thing about them. Through media and advertising, women see false beauty ideals. With social media and "face filters" being increasingly prevalent, people are constantly looking at these images. These standards of beauty are usually not achievable or realistic, and some may turn to expensive appearance-altering procedures (i.e. plastic surgery, injections or "fillers") in an attempt to mirror what is shown in the media. This causes poor body image, which can trigger disordered eating, suicidal thoughts, anxiety,

shame, eating disorders, self-hatred, depression, and low self-esteem.⁵ All of these are very harmful to a person's mental health.

Developing a positive body image takes time and effort. Be patient with yourself as you try to not only have more love for your body, but to realize you are more than a body. You are a human being with talents and qualities that are much more important than what your body looks like.³

Tips on Developing a Positive Body Image^{1,3}:

- Unfollow people on social media that promote unrealistic body ideals, or that cause body shaming thoughts.
- Surround yourself with positive people that love you for who you are, not what you look like.
- Kindly ask those you surround yourself with to not comment about your body or other's bodies.
- Wear clothes that you feel comfortable in, that you don't have to constantly worry about.
- Eat and exercise in a way that promotes health and strength, not for achieving a certain weight or body type.
- Focus on how it FEELS to move and live in your body, not on how it looks.
- Remind yourself that your body is a magnificent tool that performs many functions that allow you to experience your life.
- Identify feelings of body shame and recognize where they are coming from.
- Practice mindfulness and avoid allowing painful thoughts and feelings define or overwhelm you.
- Practice self-compassion, or extending kindness and understanding to yourself, rather than harsh judgement and criticism.

References

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