

BODY IMAGE & EATING DISORDERS

Body image is defined as one's thoughts, perceptions, and attitudes about their physical appearance. How do you see yourself and feel about your body (e.g., height, shape, and weight) when you look in the mirror?

Positive body image is a clear, true perception of your shape; seeing the various parts of your body as they really are. Body positivity (or body satisfaction) involves feeling comfortable and confident in your body, accepting your natural body shape and size, and recognizing that physical appearance says very little about one's character and value as a person.

A negative body image, on the other hand, involves a distorted perception for one's shape. Negative body image (or body dissatisfaction) involves feelings of shame, anxiety, and self-consciousness. People who experience high levels of body dissatisfaction feel their bodies are flawed in comparison to others, and these folks are more likely to suffer from feelings of depression, isolation, low self-esteem, and eating disorders. While there is no single cause of eating disorders, research indicates that body dissatisfaction is the best-known contributor to the development of anorexia nervosa and bulimia nervosa (Stice, 2002). **Learn more risk factors for eating disorders >**

Body image concerns often begin at a young age and endure throughout life. By age 6, girls especially start to express concerns about their own weight or shape, and 40-60% of elementary school girls (ages 6-12) are concerned about their weight or about becoming too fat. (Smolak, 2011). Furthermore, over one-half of teenage girls and nearly one-third of teenage boys use unhealthy weight control behaviors such as skipping meals, fasting, smoking cigarettes, vomiting, and taking laxatives (Neumark-Sztainer, 2005). It is important to note that the age of onset differs depending on the individual, and these body image concerns may start younger, or never come up at all.

As with eating disorders, body image concerns can affect us all. While all ages, genders, and cultures are equally at risk for body image issues, there are traditionally different triggers and appearance-related pressures depending on one's gender. In our Western culture, girls often feel pressure to succumb to the societal appearance-ideal (sometimes referred to as the thin-, beauty-, or cultural-ideal), whereas boys are often faced with social pressures to be lean and muscular.

The body positive movement is making great strides to promote size diversity, body acceptance, and a healthier body image for all ages, genders, races, abilities, etc. It is

important that we continue to embrace body diversity by recognizing all bodies as good bodies. While we all may have our days when we feel awkward or uncomfortable in our bodies, the key to developing positive body image is to recognize and respect our natural shape and learn to overpower those negative thoughts and feelings with positive, affirming, and accepting ones.

Accept yourself. Accept your body.