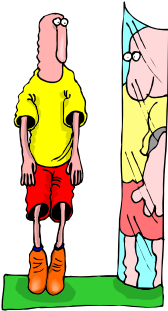


Body Image & Body Dissatisfaction

Body Image



Body image can be defined as a person's attitude towards and their perception of their body. Attitudes may include positive and negative beliefs, which are strongly influenced by our experiences (e.g. family, friends, media places, things around us).

Use the following questions to help you work how you feel about your body:

- How do I talk to myself about my body?
- What do I see when I look in the mirror?
- How do I treat my body?
- Would others agree with my attitude?
- How do I experience others talking about and treating my body?

Your physical perception of your body (the image you see in the mirror) is not a correct representation of how you look. Some people view themselves as overweight when they are underweight, or see particular body parts as being defective even though these defects are not visible to others.

Body Dissatisfaction

Unfortunately, it is not unusual for people to express dissatisfaction with their bodies. However, in some individuals, body dissatisfaction can lead to debilitating consequences, such as in individuals with eating disorders and body dysmorphic disorder.



Consequences may include:

- Emotional - anxiety, depression, anger or frequently "feeling fat"
- Cognitive - body dissatisfaction, strong negative beliefs, preoccupation with weight, shape or particular body parts
- Behavioural - severe dietary restriction, driven exercise, seeking surgery
- Body checking - weighing, mirror checking, comparing your body to others
- Body avoidance - wearing baggy clothes, avoiding situations where body is exposed (e.g. swimming)
- Undue importance being placed on appearance - it may have become the most important aspect of life

Body Acceptance

It is unrealistic to aim to be completely satisfied with our bodies, but we can learn to be more accepting. This is likely to take some time, but there are things

you can do right now to improve your body image:

- **Accept your genetics**—all bodies are genetically wired to be a particular size and shape, and your body will fight to maintain this. Forcing your body to change is likely to come at a tremendous cost.
- **Consider factors that have influenced your body image.** How did your attitudes & perceptions develop? Have they changed over time? What would help you to start creating a positive image now?



- **Consider what you do like about your body.** Scan your body for things you like rather than dislike. If this is difficult, start with a body part that you dislike the least. Practice paying attention to it.

- **Body function.** Consider each body part for its purpose or function. Legs allow us to walk, run, and dance. A womb may bear a child one day. A scar tells a story about your life. What parts of your body are you grateful for?

- **Identify activities that help you feel good in your body.** Go to the beach, play a musical instrument, practise yoga or relaxation, have a bath, walk the dog, visit a friend...



- **Reduce body checking and avoidance.** These behaviours reinforce negative body image. Read our handout on *Body Checking and Avoidance* for tips.
- **Expand your areas of interest.** When undue importance is placed on one aspect of life (e.g. appearance), other interests may be neglected. Think of a new activity to try, or an old interest to return to. Make a plan to try something new this week.
- **Evaluate your body image attitudes as if you were a scientist or lawyer.** Do you have *factual* evidence to support your beliefs? Do others agree with your attitude? Where is your Body Mass Index relative to the healthy weight range?
- **Identify "feeling fat".** People with poor body image often say "I feel fat". "This is one way of expressing feelings that are hard to label, interpret, or acknowledge. Try to identify and explore emotions that might be triggers for "feeling fat".
- **Keep at it.** Remind yourself that improving body image takes time and practise.
- **Consider the features that make other people attractive.** Is it always purely their appearance? Or is it also their personality, attitude and actions?