

## The university student's guide to

# BODY IMAGE

### A healthy body image: Why bother?

Health is more than avoiding disease. Good mental health, including how we feel about ourselves, is a very important component of overall health. How we feel about ourselves has an impact on our behaviours, such as what we eat, the physical activity we do, drug and alcohol use, and a wide variety of other health behaviours. More and more people are becoming dissatisfied with their appearance. Psychology Today published results of a large survey on body image that showed that over the last few decades, people's dissatisfaction with their body has grown. In 1972, 25% of women were dissatisfied. In 1996, that number rose to 56%. Similarly, for men, the number increased from 15% to 43% for the same time period. Studies reveal that people who have a poor body image are at higher risk for depression and low self-esteem. They are also more likely to have poor physical health due to severe dieting, crash diets, use of anabolic steroids and so on. Because they don't like the way they look, many people with a poor body image shy away from social situations, are reluctant to form personal relationships or they spend a great amount of time trying to achieve a better body. This can lead to social isolation. Research indicates that people with less social interactions are at greater risk for poorer health. Moving towards a better body image can move a person's health in a positive direction.

### What is body image?

Your body image is made up of 2 components:

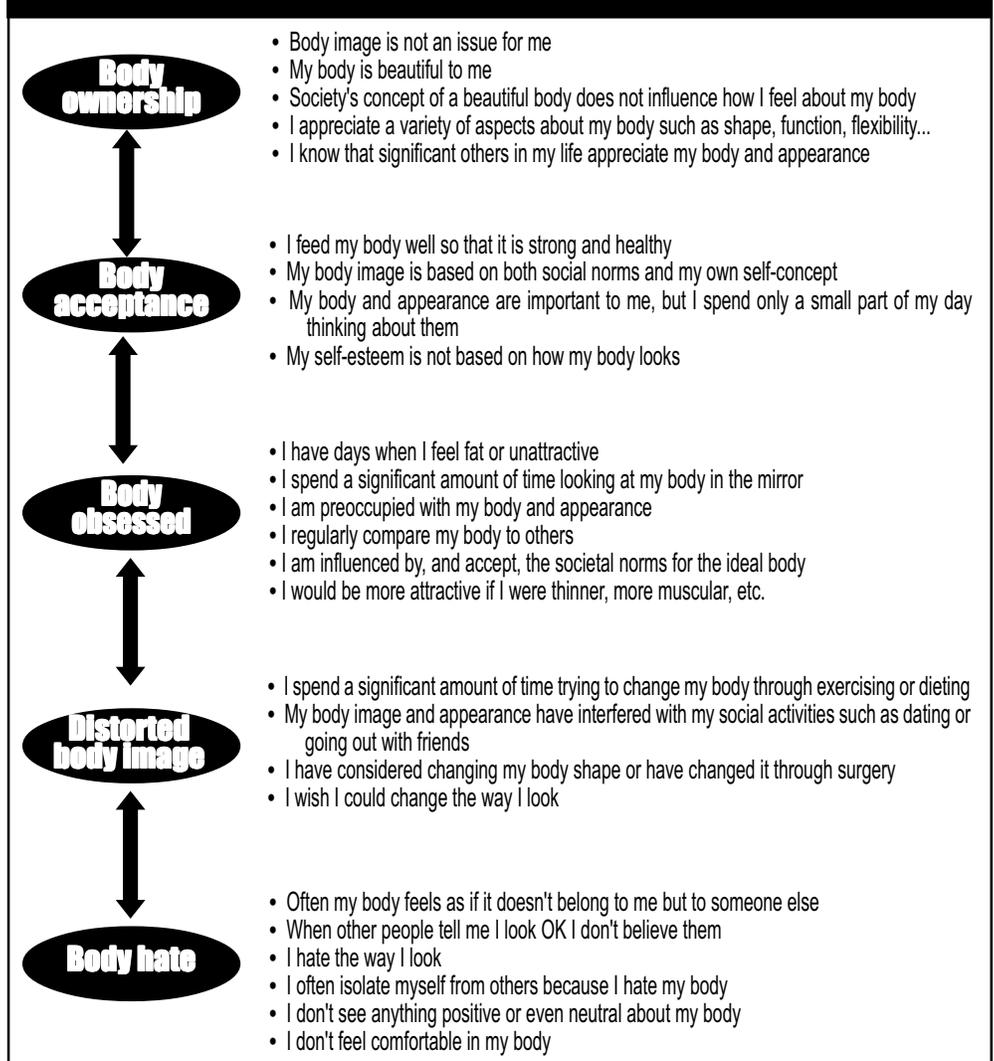
- 1) How you perceive your body, and
- 2) What you feel about that perception.

Although your perception of your body can vary from day to day, or even from morning to afternoon, people tend to have a relatively stable view of their body. The way you see your body is not necessarily similar to the way others view you. We have all heard someone who we think looks great mention how unattractive he or she is, or complain about body parts that he or she dislikes. We tend to be more critical of our own body than others are of us.

The emotions that we have about the way we perceive our body are a very important part of body image. A person may be overweight, yet feel great about what they see. On the other hand, a person may be perceived as attractive by others, yet he or she is very dissatisfied with what they see and has negative emotions about his or her body.

The combination of what you see and how you feel about it can range from positive to negative. If you have a positive body image, you are satisfied with what you see. Conversely, if you are dissatisfied with what you see, your body image is negative. Of course, the degree of satisfaction and dissatisfaction can vary, which creates a continuum of body image from body acceptance to body hate.

### WHERE ARE YOU ON THE BODY IMAGE CONTINUUM?



## Factors that contribute to body image

We do not have a concept of our body image at birth. Therefore, it develops over our lifetime. This image is influenced by the information we receive daily about what is considered attractive and what is considered unattractive. This information is deeply embedded in our culture. Each culture has its own ideals of beauty, which change over time and are transmitted to individuals through family, stories and legends, and through the various forms of media.

### Family

The earliest influence on our body image is our family. For the first few years of life we are constantly in the presence of our family, and what we hear and see in this context influences our beliefs, values and attitudes. The language that our parents use shapes our perceptions and it can affect us much more than we realize. When parents, relatives or even friends of the family praise a young boy for being “big”, “strong”, or “active” they are indirectly telling that child what characteristics are desirable for males. Similarly, when they praise a young girl for being “pretty”, “sweet” or “well behaved” they are telling her how girls are supposed to look and behave. We praise people to reinforce desirable qualities. Parents are often not aware of the tremendous impact their words have on their child’s development of sense of self.

### Children’s toys and fairy tales

The toys that children play with also help shape a sense of what is physically desirable and undesirable. Perhaps the most talked about example of this is the Barbie doll, which is one of the biggest selling toys in history. A typical young girl who owns a Barbie has an average of 7 Barbie dolls. When the doll was first released in the 1950’s, it was considered odd to have a doll with breasts, since dolls at the time typically represented babies or young girls. Barbie was different. She was marketed as the girl who had it all. Part of children’s play is to project themselves into the toys with which they are playing. Little girls playing with the doll become Barbie during play, and this can translate into wanting to be like Barbie when they grow up. This includes looking like Barbie. It may not be apparent by looking at the doll, but Barbie’s measurements do not represent the measurements of the typical woman. Those working in the field of body image often point out that if Barbie were life-sized her measurements would be virtually unachievable. To get an idea of what your measurements would be if you had Barbie’s proportions, do the calculations in the box to the right.

Certainly, Barbie is not the only children’s toy that influences body image. Action figures such as GI Joe, Superman, Batman and other army figures have a big chest, muscular arms and legs, and a flat stomach with the desirable “6-pack”. Animated characters often have bodies that set the standard for what children believe is desirable. The heroines in Disney classic films such as Beauty and the Beast, Cinderella, Snow White and The Little Mermaid are all thin and attractive with long legs and ample breasts. In many children’s stories, the hero or heroine is described as attractive while the evil character often has a deformity or is unattractive or overweight.

These toys and children’s stories, combined with family influences, firmly set in place a young person’s attitudes about physical appearance and what he or she believes to be desirable physical qualities.

### Friends

As children get older, the influence of family still remains but friends become very influential, especially in adolescence. Friends, who have also been influenced by their families and by toys can reinforce prevailing attitudes and values. In adolescence it becomes very important to belong to a group. It is during this time that a person’s image becomes much more important, to the point that some children and teens are excluded from social groups because of how they look or what they wear. After years of receiving the same messages, the prevailing beauty ideals are further reinforced.

### The media

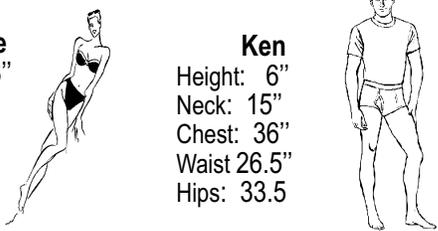
Before the advent of television and mass media, most people did not see what other people looked like around the world or even in the next village or town. Today we are bombarded with thousands of images from movies, television, magazines, newspapers, the internet and music videos.

The media has been criticized for using images of people that don’t represent reality. It seems that everywhere we look we see young, big-breasted, long-legged, broad shouldered women who are unbelievably thin. If we see a man in the media with his shirt off, chances are that he is lean, muscular, hairless, and young. Do the images of the people we see in the media reflect what we see every day? Not at all. In fact, only about 5% of women are capable of achieving the proportions of the typical woman’s body we see in advertisements. Our genetics determine

**ARE THEY FOR REAL?**

We put **Barbie** and **Ken** to the test. Here’s what we found they would look like lifesize:

<p><b>Barbie</b></p> <p>Height: 5’ 8”            Neck: 10”            Bust: 33”            Waist: 17”            Hips: 30”</p>	<p><b>Ken</b></p> <p>Height: 6”            Neck: 15”            Chest: 36”            Waist: 26.5”            Hips: 33.5</p>
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**HOW DOES BARBIE COMPARE WITH A REAL PERSON, LIKE YOU?**

Your current measurements are:  
 Hips \_\_\_\_\_ inches

**Note: Multiply your hip measurement by factors below to convert to Barbie measurements**

Your hips _____	X 1.00 =	Hips _____ inches
Your hips _____	X .58 =	Waist _____ inches
Your hips _____	X 1.10 =	Bust _____ inches
Your hips _____	X .39 =	Neck _____ inches
Your hips _____	X 2.27 =	Height _____ inches

how our body is shaped, how tall we can be, etc. Exercising regularly and eating a balanced healthy diet can help condition your body, but genetics will limit a person's ability to achieve certain proportions. If you are a guy with narrow shoulders, all the exercise in the world will not give you broad shoulders.

The average person is not well represented in the media, especially in advertising, movies and television. The goal of the different forms of media is to make money by selling you products or services. Clever strategies have been devised to separate us from our money. These strategies often take advantage of our need as humans to feel like we belong. For example, products are linked to "beautiful" people who seem to have it all including many friends and admirers. This makes us want to be beautiful as well so that we can have it all. Unfortunately, it is difficult or even impossible to be one of the "beautiful" people, since they are unattainable ideals. The media regularly enhances the images that we see by using good lighting, make-up, hair stylists and good photography. Some images are even computer enhanced to remove any imperfections or to enhance features such as eyes, legs and breasts. Of course, the ideal keeps changing as more and more people attempt to get "the look". It is interesting to note that for women, "normal" keeps getting thinner and thinner, whereas for men, "normal" means more muscular and cut.

### Tips for becoming a critical viewer of the media

Media messages about body shape and size will affect the way we feel about ourselves and our bodies **only if we let them**. One way to protect our self-esteem and body image from the media's often narrow definitions of beauty and acceptability is to become a critical viewer of the thousands of media messages that confront us each day. When we effectively recognise and analyse the media messages that influence us, we can realise that the media's definitions of beauty do not define our self-image or potential.

#### To be a critical viewer, remember:

- All media images and messages are constructions. They are NOT reflections of reality.
- Advertisements and other media messages have been carefully crafted with an intent to send a very specific message.
- Advertisements are created to do one thing: convince you to buy or support a specific product or service.
- To convince you to buy a specific product or service, advertisers will often construct an emotional experience that looks like reality. Remember, you are only seeing what the advertisers want you to see.
- Advertisers create their message based on what they think you will want to see and what they think will affect you and compel you to buy their product. Just because they think their approach will work with people like you doesn't mean it has to work with you as an individual.
- As individuals, we decide how to experience the media messages we encounter. We can choose to use a filter that helps us understand what the advertiser wants us to think or believe and then choose whether we want to think or believe that message. We can choose a filter that protects our self-esteem and body image.

#### To help promote healthier body image messages in the media, you can:

- Talk back to the TV when you see an ad or hear a message that promotes only a narrow range of body ideals and makes you feel bad about yourself or your body.
- Write a letter to an advertiser you think is sending positive, inspiring messages that recognize and celebrate the natural diversity of human body shapes and sizes. Compliment their courage to send positive, affirming messages.
- Tear out the pages of your magazines that contain advertisements or articles that glorify thinness or degrade people of larger sizes. Enjoy your magazine without negative media messages about your body.
- Talk to your friends about media messages and the way they make you feel.
- Make a list of companies who consistently send negative body image messages and make a conscious effort to avoid buying their products. Write them a letter explaining why you are using your "buying power" to protest their messages.

## BODY IMAGE QUIZ

Answer "yes" or "no" to the following questions:

- 1. I have struggled with my weight for years
- 2. I am very concerned about my weight
- 3. I am critical of my body
- 4. I tend to laugh off compliments about my appearance
- 5. I am very concerned about a body part or parts that I feel are either inadequate or too adequate
- 6. I am uncomfortable in social situations where I feel I'm being watched
- 7. I hate to wear a bathing suit in public
- 8. I am uncomfortable eating in public
- 9. I don't like my partner to see me naked
- 10. I don't like to see myself naked
- 11. I feel ashamed of my body
- 12. I seek refuge under the sheets during lovemaking
- 13. I compare myself mentally to visual images of "ideal" women or men
- 14. I often tell myself I'll take control again in the morning and once again attempt to diet
- 15. I want to lose a prescribed amount of weight before I go on vacation or attend a wedding or go back home
- 16. When my partner says he or she loves me just the way I am, I wonder what that's supposed to mean

**Scoring:** Add the number of "yes" and "no's" and look below to see how you scored

#### "Yes" on three or fewer:

Hooray for you! You accept yourself as you are. You probably feel pretty good about yourself.

#### "Yes" to four or eight:

You probably feel confident about your body some of the time, but very uneasy about it at other times. You might consider getting hold of some exercises or information that can help move your body image in a more positive direction.

#### "Yes" to nine or more:

You probably don't view your body in a positive way. This may be evident by feelings of sadness, degradation, and hostility toward the body you were born with. A negative body image is quite common; so common that some researchers have labelled it "normative discontent" in our culture. If your body image is interfering with your activities, mood, relationships or health then you should consider seeking the help of a health professional.

## Moving towards a positive body image

Our body image develops over a lifetime and becomes an integral part of us. Changing something that is so integral can be very difficult. If your body image is interfering with your life and you would like to work on changing it, here are a few strategies you can try:

- Be aware of the factors that contribute to your own body image. How does your family contribute? What about the toys you played with as a child or the fairy tales and other stories you listened to and liked? What cultural forces shape what is considered to be attractive?
- Concentrate on being healthy and having a healthy weight. To determine your healthy weight, see the section on Body Mass Index below.
- Do things that make you feel good about yourself. Buy clothes that feel good on you.
- Exercise for health and a sense of well-being and not just for physical appearance. Increased flexibility, endurance and energy levels are just a few of the benefits of exercising.
- Find balance. A healthy lifestyle is one that is balanced. This means getting adequate exercise, eating a healthy diet and getting adequate sleep. It means having fun and allowing yourself to have treats (a piece of chocolate cake every once in a while, etc.) Life is meant to be lived, and we should try to enjoy our time while we are here.

### INTERESTING INFO

25 years ago, the average female model weighed 8% less than the average American women. Today, the average model weighs 23% less than the average female.

For men, the average Playgirl centerfold has shed about 12 lbs. of fat while putting on over 12 kgs of muscle over the past 25 years

## What is your healthy weight?

Many people are confused about how much they should weigh. In the past, the Metropolitan Life Insurance tables established standard weights, but the weight ranges that were specified tended to be quite narrow. Today, health care professionals prefer to use the Body Mass Index (BMI) as a measure of healthy weight. This index is calculated using a person's height and weight.

The BMI scale can be used for both males and females over the age of 18. It is based on epidemiological information obtained from thousands of North Americans and Northern Europeans. Because of this, people with cultural roots outside of Europe or North America who tend to be smaller in size (such as the Japanese) may find their BMI to be below the "healthy range". Well muscled, lean men may find that their BMI is above the healthy range and into the "obese" range. However, this should not be a worry for these people. The BMI is just a general tool to help people identify if they are at risk for obesity related diseases. Furthermore, the BMI scale needs to be used in conjunction with other information, such as physical activity, dietary practices, level of life stress, drug and alcohol use, and body fat percentage to give a clearer picture of overall health.

So what does your BMI mean? A BMI between 20 and 25 is associated with the lowest risk of diseases that are linked to being overweight, such as heart disease, stroke and diabetes. A person in this range would not be advised to lose weight for health reasons. This does not mean that someone with a BMI within this "healthy range" is immune from getting heart disease or diabetes, but statistically, his or her risk is lower. A person with a BMI between 25 and 27 is considered slightly overweight and those with a family history of cardiovascular disease or diabetes, or those with an unhealthy lifestyle, would be advised to lose weight. A BMI of over 27 is associated with the highest risk of disease and a

person in this range is advised to lose weight for health reasons. A BMI of over 30 is considered clinically obese. A BMI of under 20 is associated with increased risk for diseases linked to inadequate nutrition. A person with a BMI in this range should consider consulting a dietician, nutritionist or a physician. Again, the BMI is just one factor to consider when examining healthy weight.

## HOW TO CALCULATE YOUR BODY MASS INDEX

The equation to calculate body mass index is:

$$\frac{\text{WEIGHT}}{(\text{HEIGHT})^2}$$

where weight is measured in kilograms and height is measured in metres.

**Example:** Paul is 183 cm tall and weighs 80 kilograms. Therefore his BMI is:

$$\frac{80}{(1.83)^2} = \frac{80}{3.35} = 23.9$$

## OTHER SUGGESTIONS FOR IMPROVING BODY IMAGE

**Be aware:** Be aware of how much time you spend talking about food and dieting or how often you get drawn into conversations about how you "should" look. Challenge cultural myths.

**Be open-minded:** Examine your belief that "beauty is thin" for women, or muscle is ideal for men. Think of those you consider attractive. Are they solid, graceful, exciting, kind? Beauty comes in many forms.

**Be supportive:** Be loyal and supportive to others you care about. Avoid put-downs about appearance and don't let anyone else put the ones you care about down.

**Be introspective:** Look for the inner qualities and strengths of others and appreciate your own. Say something positive about yourself everyday.

**Be positive:** Change your focus. Instead of adding up all that is wrong with you, pay attention to things you like about yourself.

**Be receptive:** Accept compliments from others by saying "Thank-you" rather than "Yes, but....."

**Be firm:** Stop comparing yourself to others. Comparisons are meaningless, painful and destructive to self-esteem.

**Be intentional:** Take care of your body and yourself by eating well and being active. If your body is tired, then rest!

**Be courageous:** Choose to do something you are putting off until you think you look good enough to do it.

adapted from: Marilyn Goodbrand, MSW, Wilfred Laurier University Counselling Services