



Milwaukee School of Engineering Counseling Services Newsletter

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Body Image: Can I Be Happy With The Way I Look?

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Body Image – What is it?

Body Image is easily misunderstood. It involves our perception, imagination, emotions, and physical sensations of and about our bodies. It's not static, but ever-changing; sensitive to changes in mood, environment, and physical experience. It is not based on fact. *It is psychological in nature*, and much more influenced by self-esteem than by actual physical attractiveness as judged by others. It is not inborn, but learned. This learning occurs in the family and among peers, but these only reinforce what is learned and expected culturally.

Why does it matter?

For women, having an acceptable body image can easily become an obsession. In fact, research indicates that for the majority of American women, body image already is. Eighty percent of women are dissatisfied with their appearance. Thirty-four percent of women would be willing to try a diet even if it posed a health risk and ninety-three percent of them have tried repeatedly to lose weight. Approximately ten percent of females in the U.S. have been diagnosed with an eating disorder. These disorders will kill about 50,000 of those women.

“But I’m a guy, why do I need to know about body image?”

Aside from offering support (i.e. not judging women based solely on appearance and valuing women for other things besides adherence to the narrow cultural definition of “beauty”) for your moms, sisters, wives and girlfriends, there's lots of reasons men should be thinking about how they view *their own* bodies as well. Helen Fawkner, a PhD psychology student at the University of Melbourne, has been researching body image issues, including those relevant to males. Her research confirms that in recent years there has been an increase in the number of men seeking treatment for body image dissatisfaction.

“It used to be that men were defined by their jobs; in a sense that has changed and it has been argued that their body is one of the few remaining ways in which they can differentiate themselves from women”, says Ms Fawkner. Now men feel the need to display strength, and indeed masculinity, through physical appearance. This means invoking the stereotypical “ideal” man- muscular, athletic, without body hair, trim to the point of being devoid of fat, flawless skin, and packaged neatly in a classic “V” shaped frame. Of course, just like the stereotypical female image of beauty, this “ideal” is really an impossibility for most men.

Making Cash by Making You Feel Bad

So where do we get our ideas of what men and women “ought” to look like? The short answer is our culture, but the more accurate answer is by those around us, movies, television, and of course, the beauty, diet, and fashion industries. Although both men and women have always received images from advertisers about how they “should” look, recently men have become more aware of what women have known for years- advertisers will sell more products if they can make people feel bad enough about how they look. Traditionally this meant relying outdated notions about health and fitness, but the evolution of the oft cited “metrosexual,” or the urban heterosexual man who highly values appearance, coupled with male makeover shows like “Queer Eye for the Straight Guy,” are beginning to foster a consumer environment where men are almost as focused on body image as are women. Of course, both men and women are now besieged by photos that have been digitally "enhanced" to hide blemishes, slim bulges and exaggerate curves. As a result, even models with "ideal" bodies are not attractive enough for advertisers. No wonder normal folks feel inadequate!

“So what can I do to create a more positive body image?”

Here are some guidelines for working towards a positive body image

From Rita Freeman, Ph.D.

1. Listen to your body. Eat when you are hungry.
2. Be realistic about the size you are likely to be (based on your genetic & environmental history).
3. Exercise regularly in an enjoyable way, regardless of size.
4. Expect normal weekly and monthly changes in weight and shape.
5. Work towards self acceptance and self forgiveness – be gentle with yourself.
6. Ask for support and encouragement from friends and family when life is stressful.
7. Decide how you wish to spend your energy -- pursuing the "perfect body image" or enjoying family, friends, school and, most importantly, life.

Other tips:

- Question standards before accepting them!
- Take a little time to become aware- *without judging*- of the body size diversity around you everyday.
- Visit the Counseling Center at K-230 or call to schedule an appointment: 414-277-7590

Sources/Resources Online

GENERAL:

<http://www.bodypositive.com/>

http://www.edreferral.com/body_image.htm

FOR WOMEN:

<http://www.4woman.gov/BodyImage/bodyimage.cfm>

<http://www.caringonline.com/eatdis/topics/bodyimage.htm>

FOR MEN:

http://www.psychology.org.au/publications/inpsych/12.2_65.asp

<http://www.kornet.org/katfed/male2.html>

MSOE Counseling Services is located on the Second Floor of the Kern Center (K-230). To Schedule an appointment with a Counselor, call (414) 277-7590. For more information, visit Counseling Services at: www.msoe.edu/st_life/couns