

Life Lines

Improving Your Quality of Life — One Step at a Time



Body image and loving how you look

For some of us, our body image is directly tied to our self-esteem, so it's important to have a positive body image. But how can we feel good about ourselves and love how we look?

Are you happy with how you look? Have you ever looked in the mirror, or seen a photo of yourself and immediately focused on the negatives? Better yet, do you constantly want to look 'better' or more appealing? When we evaluate ourselves, we are forming our own body image, or how we feel about our body's aesthetics.

Body image is the mental picture you have of your body as well as your feelings about it. This picture may have little to do with how you actually look or how other people see you. A person's body image is a product of his or her personal experiences, personality, and various social and cultural forces. Specifically, a person's sense of his or her own physical appearance, usually in relation to others or in relation to some cultural "ideal," can shape his or her body image.

A person can have a negative or positive body image. A number of factors influence whether someone feels good or bad about how they look — the media and advertising can play a prominent role. Sometimes when we do not look like people we see in print or television, we form unreal expectations of ourselves. Our body image is then affected, and so is our confidence and overall happiness. It's important to accept how we look individually, and important to stay away from comparing ourselves to others. It's crucial to know what a positive body image is, and some characteristics of a person with positive body image are described below.

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO HAVE A POSITIVE BODY IMAGE?

- Understanding that physical appearance says little about your character and value as a person.** What you look like does not define who you are, and your physical appearance should not define you to others, nor define your self-worth.
- Feeling comfortable and confident in your body.** Loving yourself and truly appreciating your body will help you feel generally more comfortable. This comfort increases confidence and encourages a more positive outlook on life. This will help in social situations and general day-to-day interactions.
- Speaking positively about yourself and your body.** You like how you look, so tell people about it! Try to stay away from saying things like 'I look fat' or 'I wish I had the body to wear that'.

One common misconception about body image is that only women are concerned with it. The truth is that men, women, and even children are affected by how they look, or how they feel about how they look. And contrary to popular belief, improving on someone's body image doesn't always mean losing weight. Current research indicates many men wish to become more muscular, often desiring an additional 15 to 26 pounds of additional muscle mass.

Building a positive body image is important for building confidence, reducing stress and feeling good about yourself. It positively impacts your mental health and your behaviour in social settings. The Dietitians of Canada have outlined ten steps for improving body image. Five of these steps are listed below. To see the rest of the steps, please visit <http://www.dietitians.ca/Your-Health/Nutrition-A-Z.aspx> and look for "Body Image".

FIVE STEPS TO IMPROVING BODY IMAGE

- ✔ **Forget dieting.** Dieting can bring temporary weight loss, but the weight is often gained back quickly. The cycle of losing and gaining can be harmful to your health and can lead to frustration, anger and an even poorer body image.
- ✔ **Focus on your health, not your weight.** A healthy lifestyle and healthy weight go hand-in-hand. Aim to be healthier with each passing day.
- ✔ **Experience the pleasure of eating well.** Celebrate the pleasure of healthy eating. By eating a balanced diet of delicious nourishing foods you will be able to enjoy your favourite indulgences occasionally with no worries. Your weight will result from what you do most of the time, not what you do once in a while.
- ✔ **Enjoy being active.** How about a noon-time walk, a family hike or a swim with friends? Physical activity lets you enjoy the outdoors and helps you deal with stress while making you feel more energetic. All this helps you feel good about yourself.
- ✔ **Accept yourself.** Feeling good about yourself starts with accepting who you are and how you look. Healthy bodies come in all shapes and sizes. Focus on all your good qualities instead of perceived negative qualities. Feel what it's like to love your body unconditionally.

We all have 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 negative thoughts and feelings, replacing them with positive, affirming, and accepting ones. Doing so will improve our lives in multiple areas and improve our general wellness.

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