Battling Our Bodies? Understanding and Overcoming Negative Body Images

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How often do you look in the mirror and say "If I could just lose ten pounds, then I would be happy"? Unfortunately, the majority of American women and girls are dissatisfied with their bodies, and many take extreme measures in an attempt to change their bodies. For example, one study found that 63% of female participants identified weight as the key factor in determining how they felt about themselves -- more important than family, school, or career. Other research suggests that 86% of all women are dissatisfied with their bodies and want to lose weight. Women and adolescent girls regard size, much like weight, as a definitive element of their identity. Some girls assume there is something wrong with their bodies when they cannot fit consistently into some "standard" size; others will reject a pair of jeans simply because they won't wear a particular size.

Although a large majority of women are displeased with their bodies, many women and girls experience extreme body image difficulties that can be part of more complicated problems. These extreme body image disturbances include body dysmorphic disorder, eating disorders and severe depression.

Body Dysmorphic Disorder:
This is a disorder of "imagined ugliness." What individuals with this disorder see in the mirror is a grossly distorted view of what they actually look like. Often, these individuals will spend hours examining, attempting to conceal, or obsessing over their perceived flaws. Some people actually spend thousands of dollars on plastic surgery in an attempt to improve their bodies.

Anorexia Nervosa:
This disorder is characterized by an extreme fear of gaining weight and these individuals actually perceive their bodies as larger or "fat" even though they are grossly underweight.

Bulimia Nervosa:
Individuals with this disorder are also very dissatisfied with their bodies and have extreme concern with body weight and shape.

Depression:
In many instances, individuals with depression often have a distorted view of themselves and believe they are less attractive than they really are.

Since negative body image is a prevalent problem for many women and girls and can also be a component of many serious disorders, it is critical that women learn to change their body image towards a healthy and positive view of self.
Seven Ways to Overcome Negative Body Image

1. Fight "Fatism": Work on accepting people of all sizes and shapes. This will help you appreciate your own body. It may be useful to create a list of people who you admire that do not have "perfect" bodies, does their appearance affect how you feel about them? It is also important to remember that society's standards have changed significantly over the last 50 years. The women that were considered the "ideal beauties" in the 1940's and 1950's like Marilyn Monroe (size 14) and Mae West were full-bodied and truly beautiful women, but they would be considered "overweight" by today's standards.

2. Fight the Diet Downfall: Ninety percent of all women have dieted at some point in their life, and at any one point in time, 50% of women are dieting. Women are two times more likely to diet than men. To dieters' dismay, 98% of all dieters gain the weight back in five years. Studies also show that 20-25% of dieters progress to a partial or full-blown eating disorder. Women are foolish if they believe that dieting will make them feel better about themselves. Dieting only helps you lose your self-esteem and energy. Dieting also creates mood swings and feelings of hopelessness. If you feel pressure to lose weight, talk to a friend or loved one or seek professional help.

3. Accept Genetics: It is critical to remember that many aspects of your body cannot be changed. Genetics does play a role in your body and at least 25% to 70% of your body is determined by your genes. While there are many aspects of our bodies we cannot change, you can change or modify your beliefs and attitudes which influence the way you feel about yourself. Change starts with you, it is internal and it starts with self-respect and a positive attitude. It is important to focus on health and not size.

4. Understand that Emotions are Skin Deep: It is important to discover the emotions and feelings that underlie your negative body image. The statement "I feel fat" is never really about fat, even if you are overweight. Each time a woman looks at herself in the mirror and says "Gross, I'm fat and disgusting," she is really saying "There is something wrong with me or with what I'm feeling." When we do not know how to deal with our feelings we turn to our bodies and blame our bodies for our feelings. Every time you say "I'm fat" you are betraying your body, and you are betraying and ignoring your underlying feelings. Remember that "fat" is never a feeling, it's avoidance of feelings. Learn to discover your emotions and feelings and realize that focusing on your body is only distracting you from what is "really" bothering you.

5. Question Messages Portrayed in the Media: The media sends powerful messages to girls and women about the acceptability (or unacceptability) of their bodies. Young girls are thought to compare themselves to women portrayed as successful in the media, assessing how closely they match up to the "ideal" body form. Unfortunately, the majority of girls and women (96%) do not match up to the
models and actresses presented in the media. The average model is 5'10" and weighs 110 pounds, whereas the average women is 5'4" and weighs 142 pounds. This is the largest discrepancy that has ever existed between women and the cultural ideal. This discrepancy leads many women and girls to feel inadequate and negative about their bodies. It is important to realize that only 4% of women genetically have the "ideal" body currently presented in the media, the other 96% of women feel they must go to extreme measures to attempt to reach this unobtainable image. Many of the images presented in the media have been computer enhanced and airbrushed. The models' hips and waists have often been slimmed and their breasts enlarged through computer photo manipulation. Many of the women presented in the media suffer from an eating disorder or have adopted disordered eating behaviors to maintain such low body weights. It is important to start to question images in the media and question why women should feel compelled to "live up" to these unrealistic standards of beauty and thinness.

6. Recognize the Influence of Body Misperception: Women are prone to more negative feelings about their bodies than men. In general, women are more psychologically invested in their physical appearance. Your body image is central to how you feel about yourself. Research reveals that as much as 1/4 of your self-esteem is the result of how positive or negative your body image is. Unfortunately, many women with eating disorders have a larger percentage of their esteem invested in their bodies. Women with eating disorders often exhibit unequivocal body image misperception, in which they misperceive the size of part, or the entire body. Hence they are "blind" to their own figures. This distortion is real and it is not due to "fat," but to the eating disorder illness. It is important to recognize this misperception and attribute it to the eating disorder. When you feel fat, remind yourself that you misperceive your shape. Judge your size according the opinions of trusted others until you can trust your new and more accurate self-perceptions.

7. Befriend Your Body: It is important to combat negative body image because it can lead to depression, shyness, social anxiety and self-consciousness in intimate relationships. Negative body image can also lead to an eating disorder. It is time that women stop judging their bodies harshly and learn to appreciate their inner being, soul, and spirit. A women's body is a biological masterpiece; women can menstruate, ovulate and create life. Start to recognize you do not have to compare yourself to other women or women in the media. Begin to challenge images presented in the media and realize that your worth does not depend on how closely you fit these unrealistic images.
In Margo Maine's book "Body Wars," she teaches women to reclaim their bodies and offers ways to help women love their bodies. Here are examples of 10 ways you can love your body:

1. Affirm that your body is perfect just the way it is.

2. Think of your body as a tool. Create an inventory of all the things you can do with it.

3. Walk with your head high with pride and confidence in yourself as a person, not a size.

4. Create a list of people you admire who have contributed to your life, your community, or the world. Was their appearance important to their success and accomplishments?

5. Don't let your size keep you from doing things you enjoy.

6. Replace the time you spend criticizing your appearance with more positive, satisfying pursuits.

7. Let your inner beauty and individuality shine.

8. Think back to a time in your life when you liked and enjoyed your body. Get in touch with those feelings now.

9. Be your body's ally and advocate, not its enemy.

10. Beauty is not just skin-deep. It is a reflection of your whole self. Love and enjoy the person inside.

In conclusion, negative body image is a serious problem and has damaging affects on women's self-esteem and it can lead to depression, as well as an eating disorder. Changing our world starts with you, self-love and respect, and the end of prejudice starts with one person at a time. The external pursuit of changing your body can often damage spirituality by taking you away from the internal-self - the spirit, the soul, and the whole genuine self. If you or someone you care about suffers with negative body image, please seek professional help and stop the cycle of body hatred.

References and Suggested Readings:


Body Wars: Making Peace with Women's Bodies, Margo Maine, Ph.D., Gurze Books, Calsbad, 2000