

Walgreens

By Michelle Konstantinovsky



Make friends with your reflection, no matter what your age

“Body image” is one of those terms that seems to be everywhere at times.

Doctors may ask if yours is in good shape, magazines dole out tips on how to improve it, and most bare-midriffed pop singers tend to negatively impact the one you’ve got.

But while we seem to be talking about it nonstop, do any of us really know what body image means? And is it something you can shape at any age, or are you destined to live with the one you developed during those formative (read: excruciatingly painful) teen years?

It's tough to track down one definitive explanation for what body image actually is, but a simple, even intuitive, definition is suggested by the National Eating Disorders Association: Body image can be thought of as how you see yourself when you look in a mirror or when you picture yourself—your body—in your mind. Note that according to this definition, a physical mirror is not needed for a positive or negative body image—the mirror in your mind's eye can be enough to love or hate your body. Body image is very closely tied to self-esteem—a sense of personal worth that is built on one's overall identity, which includes, but is not solely driven by, body image. You may hear both terms (body image and self-esteem) used in discussions relating to eating disorders and body dysmorphic disorders, medical conditions that are often closely tied to body image. An eating disorder is broadly defined as any of a group of conditions in which you are so preoccupied with food and your weight that is difficult or impossible to focus on other things. Body dysmorphic disorder (BDD) is a potentially debilitating condition in which a person is constantly thinking about a perceived flaw in his or her appearance.

In reality, this flaw may be minor—a mole on one's chin, perhaps—but in the mind of a person with BDD, that mole genuinely appears to take over the entire face. Note that a person with BDD may, to the rest of the world, look completely normal and attractive, but in the BDD sufferer's eyes, she is anything but normal; her body image is skewed.

And although the idea of a negative body image reaches its extreme in these medical situations, you don't have to have one of these diagnoses to potentially need a boost to your body image. In our fast-paced, social media-obsessed world, there is a seemingly endless, inescapable barrage of appearance-focused media images that can influence one's sense of self. It's no wonder that a person's body image can become so vulnerable.

The good news is that—believe it or not—you *can* control how you feel about your body at any age. That means that despite the constant messages bombarding you from all directions (“Thin is in!,” “Curves are hot!,” “Tone your [insert arbitrary body part here]!”), you’re not sentenced to a lifetime of self-loathing in front of the mirror. Here are some ways you can create—and keep—a positive self-image at any age.

Start Strong

When should parents start thinking about planting the seeds for body-confidence in their kids? The earlier the better, according to Jennifer Berger, executive director of San Francisco-based nonprofit About-Face, an organization that teaches women and girls how to think critically about media messages that affect their body image and how to resist their negative impact. Make sure to broach the topic in way that is appropriate for the child's age, Berger advises. For instance, at age two it can be, “Let’s talk about how great your body is and all the great things it does.”

While it may seem strange to impart messages of self-acceptance on the toddler set, it's not long after the preschool years that kids begin sizing up one another's bodies and bolstered confidence really does play a crucial role in fending off future insecurity. “Around age 4 or 5 is when kids start talking about who's fat and who's thin and that comes directly from the adults around them and their own values about fatness and thinness,” Berger says. “A huge piece of that is for adults not to encourage that kind of behavior and to understand why kids are coming up with that stuff.”

Margarita Tartakovsky, M.S., associate editor at Psych Central and author of body image blog, Weightless, agrees that parents need to examine their own relationships with their bodies in order to encourage positive attitudes in their children. “It’s one thing to tell your little girl or boy, ‘You’re so beautiful’ or ‘You’re so strong,’ but then they hear you bashing yourself and talking about how you want to lose weight or how you can’t have ice cream with them because Mommy’s too big or Daddy’s trying to work on his six-pack,” she says. “I think it’s really important to look inward, think about your own relationship to your body and to food and how you communicate that relationship to your children.”

Be a Smart Media Consumer

Beyond building a body-positive dialogue at home, people of all ages can learn to adopt a more critical view of the media. With today's media saturation through traditional and ever-expanding social channels, it can be hard to get away from the latest fashionable body-image fads, like the “thigh gap,” which has some women

(mostly teens) obsessing over a noticeable space between their upper thighs. In her role at About-Face, Berger trains volunteers to educate students about the potentially manipulative media messages regarding body image and self-esteem. “We give them the tools to really deconstruct what they’re seeing and understand what about the media they’re consuming is positive for them and what is harmful,” she says. “And they start to break down for themselves how to deal with the emotions that the media brings up.”

Many of those emotions can be rooted in feelings of inadequacy, due to the media’s often-impossible beauty standards. Tartakovsky believes there is hope, however, and that refocusing your attention on more positive media outlets is not only possible, but beneficial. “It depends on what type of media it is,” Tartakovsky says. “For example, there are tons of really great, empowering blogs that influence us in positive ways.” Sites like BeautyRedefined.net and TheBodyPositive.org fight hard to foster unconditional self-love in the face of pervasive media-endorsed negativity and offer alternatives for web surfers of all ages.

Be Grateful

One surefire way to combat negative self-talk at any age is to express gratitude for what your body is capable of, not just what it looks like. “We end up being so focused on ‘How does my body look?’ that we forget how amazing our bodies are and it’s really important to remember that and be grateful for it,” Tartakovsky says. She believes anyone can benefit from making a nightly list of what their body allowed them to accomplish that day. “Maybe it helped you hug your grandkids or write a really sweet letter to your partner or take a walk that really eased your stress. There are so many little things and so many big things that our bodies help us do. Once you realize that, maybe you can start to look at your body in a more positive way.”

Berger believes vocalizing that gratitude and appreciation can be especially effective. “There is so much value in saying positive things to one’s self in the mirror,” she says. “Encouraging and practicing positive self-talk and actually saying it out loud is super powerful.” Powerful and empowering when you take these tools and make friends with your reflection, no matter what your age.

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Reviewed by Shira Goldenholz, MD, MPH on March 17, 2014

Sources

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