

Body Image

Body image is how you see yourself, from what you see when you look at yourself and how you feel about your body, to how you sense your body's movement and how you experience the way your body functions.

Take a moment and picture a new baby.

What thoughts or words does that conjure to your mind? Perhaps: perfect, pudgy, soft, wonderful, precious?

Now think about your body, what thoughts come to mind now?

When we are born, our fat is celebrated as a sign of thriving, of robust health. As we grow into children, adolescents, and teens however, the polar opposite is drilled into us. We are shown impossible, ever-changing ideals and told that if we are not struggling to change our bodies, that we are wrong, or don't fit in. It's no wonder that by the age of six, half of girls are worried about being too fat. By eleven, two thirds of them. By the time they're teens, almost all of them (92% to be exact) will have engaged in some sort of "weight control behaviour".

Why Thinness?

Prior to the Industrial Revolution (1840), bodies that were soft, plump, and round were the ideals for beauty. At this point, it became fashionable for a man to afford a wife who was too weak to work, and the new feminine ideals became "delicate" and "fragile". It was a status symbol for a man to have a housewife, a woman who not only didn't, but couldn't, work. This fragility is the exact opposite of what female bodies are evolutionarily designed to be: robust, strong, and healthful. Not that all female bodies are made to give birth, but those that do need to have the ability to undergo a massive amount of stress, trauma, and change. Women (of all expressions of the word) are strong as f**k. But, circling back to women as a status symbol (or possession), strong just doesn't mesh well with being obedient, quiet, and whatever other BS "ideals" men have tried to force on women. So, while their wives were stuck at home, the men in the marketing offices changed the cultural narrative. As Naomi Wolf put it, "A culture fixated on female thinness is not an obsession about female beauty, but an obsession about female obedience."

The Bikini Industrial Complex (BIC)

The BIC is the team of marketers whose entire job is to convince you two things: 1) you are fundamentally flawed and 2) you can be "fixed" if you buy their product. *This is just not true, and it's incredibly dangerous.* How dangerous? These companies have lobbied the governments to make sure that their products are everywhere, from high school health class to medical textbooks. Take BMI, it was invented by a panel of nine individuals, seven of whom were employed by weight loss clinics, and used only white men as measurement. It's bananas. Weight may be indicative of certain underlying conditions, but it does not have any bearing on health by itself. Fat isn't a disease, it's a tissue.

Health at Every Size (HAES)

The HAES approach was developed by healthcare workers who state that the real health concern isn't weight, it's the stigma associated with weight. People with eating disorders, disorders borne of bad body image, have the highest mortality rate of any mental illness. People in bigger bodies are also less likely to seek medical care because of the discrimination they face. HAES recognizes that bodies come in all shapes and sizes, that every body is deserving of respect, that eating should be geared towards well-being, and that people should exercise in whatever manner feels good in their bodies.

Changing Your Story

What if right now, at this very moment, your body was doing exactly what it needed to? What if you were born a perfect, unique individual and that never changed as you grew?

The truth is that all bodies are made up of the same parts arranged in different ways, no two are the same, nor should they be.

From a scientific perspective, it's in our best interest to be as different as possible to ensure that the human race continues (evolution, baby).

From a practical perspective, it's literally impossible to change your genes with diet and exercise. Your body was made to be a certain way and it protects that natural state at all costs.

Here are some practical ways you can improve your body image:

- **Body acceptance**: Rather than trying to jump from criticizing your body to loving your body, try just seeing it for what it is: a neutral body. It is not good or bad, it just is. Body positivity can feel false in the face of the BIC, because good money has been paid to convince you that your body is anything but positive without [insert product here]. So just accept that the body you have is yours, and it's the only body you get.
- **Body awareness**: I can't say this strongly enough: listen to your body. Your body runs on ancient rules, it doesn't recognize the media, diets, or even the English language. It is an incredibly complex machine with one purpose: to stay alive. If you are hungry, eat. If you are tired, sleep. If you're stressed, move and/or breathe deeply. Your body isn't trying to fool you, everything it does has a purpose.
- **Focus on utility**: Once you have accepted that this is your body, shift the focus from what it looks like to what it can do. In your body, you have survived 100% of your worst days. Every single thing that you have accomplished is because of your body. It has protected you from countless harmful germs, often without you even realizing it. It gives you the ability to hold your family and friends, to do things that bring you joy, to move through the world in your own unique way, to walk the path you have chosen.
- **Make a list**: Sit down and write out a list of things you like about your body, and yourself in general. It may feel uncomfortable at first, that's okay. Our brains are wired to prioritize negative thoughts, so we have to be intentional about focusing on the positive ones. Writing these positive traits down makes us more likely to remember them, it also provides something tangible to look at later when we need a reminder.
- **Take belly breaths**: Our bellies aren't meant to be flat. They need to expand to breathe. We need to breathe to live, ignore anything that makes you feel like you can't.