

What is body image?

How does your body image affect your life? Psychologists Dr Peta Stapleton and Terri Sheldon consider the implications of a negative body image.

Body image is an interesting concept and one frequently heard in fitness, exercise and weight loss circles. Body image refers to how a person thinks or feels about their body shape and size. This perception may have no bearing on the person's actual appearance as experienced by others. With a positive body image, a woman has a real perception of her size and shape and feels comfortable and proud about her body. With a negative body image, a woman has a distorted perception of her shape and size, compares her body to others, and feels shame, awkwardness and anxiety about her body. A woman's dissatisfaction with her body affects how she thinks and feels.

Body image is influenced by several factors: early learning, such as the experiences you had and the words you heard about your body as a child; socio-cultural factors, such as the media's portrayal of current fashions and ideal body shape/size; your current situation and eating habits (which in turn, will always be influenced by things such as stress, relationships, or a lack of stimulation in a job).

In June 2005, the *Australian Society for the Study of Obesity* reported that more than seven million Australian adults – or 67 per cent of men and 52 per cent of women over 18 – were obese. Furthermore, 25 per cent of Australian children are overweight or obese – more than at any other time in our recorded history – and it has been predicted that this figure will increase to 50 per cent by the year 2020.

On the flipside, the issue of underweight Australians has also spent significant time in the spotlight more recently. When it comes to body image, the psychological issues caused by the perception of our physical selves are not really even based on weight.

The good news is that there are proven solutions and answers to poor body image. We encourage you to reflect on your experiences and try to unravel the development of your body image from childhood. Ask yourself the following questions in a quiet moment and pay attention to the answers.

- What was your family's rules and beliefs about eating?

- Did you have to eat everything on your plate whether you were hungry or not?
- Were you made to feel ungrateful if you didn't want to eat your food because of the 'starving millions'?
- Were you only allowed to eat at designated mealtimes?
- Were you allowed to choose what you ate?
- Were you forced to eat things you didn't like?
- Did you eat to make yourself feel better or block out negative feelings?
- Were you ever made to feel ashamed or embarrassed about how you looked?
- Was looking attractive and getting attention scary or dangerous for you?
- Are you still applying these rules to yourself and your current family? If so, how did you feel about them when you were younger and do you feel they are useful now?

Another aspect of how we live in our body, is our emotional intelligence. Our bodies hear everything we think and say about ourselves. If your body could write you a letter about how you speak

“ Photographers use 'tricks of the trade' to create phoney images of perfection ”

to yourself and others about it, how you treat it, etc., what would it say?

Take note of this and make a decision to change these unhelpful thoughts.

If you are overweight, focus on being healthy, not on losing weight. This will lead to a more positive result than focusing on losing something. When we 'lose' something, we often want to find it at a subconscious level, and weight loss is no different. Focus on what you do want. Take note of what your feelings or body sensations are when you overeat or undereat. This will help you understand your emotional eating patterns. Then make a list of helpful things you can do

“ The ideal weight of fashion models is not the health ideal ”

for each emotion rather than overeating or undereating. For example, if you are lonely, eating won't make you feel better, but calling a friend will.

Challenge what you read and see about the perfect body shape and size. This is not the average and does not take into account all the wonderful differences in the human population.

Finally, seek more assistance if you are ready to turn the corner. It is your life to live. So reaching a positive body image within yourself and treating yourself with respect will attract many others with the same. *

Psychologists Dr Stapleton and Terri Sheldon run the The Lakeside Rooms. Call (07) 5562 0466 or visit www.slimminds.com for more information.

Steps to success

1. If you are overweight, getting close to your goal weight can be emotional. You may unintentionally sabotage it because of emotional reasons. This might be due to you actually reaching a goal that has been out of your reach for some time (or forever). Remember, it is more comfortable for your mind to stay where you are.
2. If you are underweight, not reaching your self-imposed goal weight can also be emotional. This in turn affects your behaviour.
3. By not acknowledging that weight loss is indeed, a loss (albeit often a wanted one), it can be experienced as a loss of self, or of identity. This can occur when you are overweight or underweight.