

**Body Love**  
**By Women's Services and Resources**  
**Brigham Young University**

*“In our society you have to be pretty first, then you can think about having character, being smart, and achieving things. If you aren't pretty, nothing else matters.”*

*“For as long as anyone's been counting—at least three decades—women have been at war with their bodies. Dissatisfied with their appearance and wanting to loose weight, they have often gone to extremes to do so...”*

According to a recent magazine survey of 5000 women, only one in 50 women is truly happy with her body. We live in a world today that places exaggerated emphasis on image and appearance. As a result, it seems that almost every woman hates her body -- or at least something about it. In fact, the female world is experiencing an epidemic of body fixation and hatred unprecedented in history. This self-loathing is consuming us -- our time and our energy.

Developing a healthy body image is important because our body image is at the very core of our identity. Body image plays a major role in our self-concept. Studies confirm that as much as one-fourth to one-third of our self-esteem is related to how positive or negative our body image is. Plus, our feelings about our bodies are woven into practically every aspect of our behavior. Therefore, how can we develop a healthy body image and be a good role model for the young women around us?

What is Body Image?

It is the picture of our own body which we form in our mind and thus relates to all other images and attitudes we hold about ourselves. Body image involves our perception, imagination, emotions, and physical sensations of and about our bodies—how we see or picture ourselves, how we feel others perceive us, what we believe about our physical appearance, and how we feel about our body.

Things That Affect Body Image:

- 1) Media/Culture
- 2) Messages from parents and peers (both praise and criticism)
  - Praise: inflates the values of physical attractiveness or gives excessive meaning to certain features. Soon the child learns that love is contingent on looks.
  - Criticism: A daughter who is constantly told that she is overweight will see herself has much heavier than she really is.
- 3) Personality characteristics (e.g. poor self-esteem)
- 4) Sexual abuse or trauma to the body

Studies indicate that the more people focus on their bodies, the more critical they become. In most instances, the experience of looking at our bodies in the mirror tends to

provoke negative feelings, not only toward our body but toward the self inside. Other studies show that intensified self-awareness also leads to increased conformity. The more you focus on your body, the more aware you become of its flaws and the more you want to try to be like every one else.

### Developing a Healthy Body Image

Here are some guidelines that can help you work toward a positive body image:

- Listen to your body. Eat when you are hungry.
- Be realistic about the size you are likely to be based on your genetic and environmental history.
- Exercise regularly in an enjoyable way, regardless of size.
- Expect normal weekly and monthly changes in weight and shape
- Work towards self acceptance and self forgiveness- be gentle with yourself.
- Ask for support and encouragement from friends and family when life is stressful.
- Decide how you wish to spend your energy -- pursuing the "perfect body image" or enjoying family, friends, school and, most importantly, life.

### **Changing Your Body Image (Taken from: The Body Image Trap)**

1. Think about your positive attributes, the things about yourself you do not want to change. Write them down and label them List A.
2. Think about what you'd like to change about yourself. Write these attributes down and label them List B.
3. For each item in List B, ask yourself the following questions:
  - a. Is it possible to change this?
  - b. Is it a reasonable goal to change this?
  - c. How long would it take?
  - d. How much would it cost?
    - i. In time
    - ii. In money
    - iii. In social discomfort
  - e. Is it worth it?
4. For each item in List B, ask yourself these questions:
  - a. Why do I want to change this?
  - b. What pressure do I feel to change this?
  - c. What benefit do I expect if I change this?
  - d. Do I have any other options?
  - e. Will changing the items in List B affect the items in List A?
5. What is your ideal body image? Is it a set of measurements (112 pounds, blond hair, dark eyelashes) or a set of adjectives (a reliable, useful, resilient body that is unique and comfortable)?

Is your ideal body image a reasonable one? (if you ideally would like to be 5'10" and you are 5'2", your ideal is not reasonable. Similarly, if your ideal size is size 4 and you are size 14, that is not a reasonable body image for you.)

Is your ideal body image possible?

6. What difference do you think achieving your ideal body image will make in your life-
  - a. At home
  - b. With your family of origin (mother, father, brothers, and sisters)
  - c. At work
  - d. Socially
  
7. What difference will achieving your ideal body image make in how you feel about yourself? Will you-
  - a. Like yourself better
  - b. Be more confident
  - c. Be more talented
  - d. Be more capable
  - e. Be more loving
  - f. Be more accepting
  - g. Be more honest and straightforward
  - h. Be more real

Cinderella dreams aside, what will you be able to do then that you cannot do now? Why can't you do what you want now? Is it your body that is preventing you from getting what you want, or is it your attitude to your body?

A "perfect" size and shape does not create talent, competence, and love in spite of the advertisers' promises. Your self-esteem is dependent on your attitude, on your acceptance of yourself as you are, not on your size. Consider what size and shape you naturally are and work on accepting that as good, normal, and beautiful.

### **Helping Your Daughter Change Her Attitude Toward Her Body (The Body Image Trap)**

If you have struggled with body image issues, you must seriously consider the messages you send your daughter, consciously and unconsciously. If you grab your stomach as you go past a mirror and grimace, your daughter will not believe that her less-than-perfect body is acceptable either.

Start by examining your own attitudes about your body. Talk to your daughter about your problems and your attitudes. Discuss her attitudes only if she offers them.

Explain to your daughter –

1. How your body image has crippled your self-esteem
2. How you have responded to media pressure to conform
3. How you are beginning to understand how that attitude enslaves you
4. How far you have to go to change your attitude
5. What role models inspire you- who in your life or in public life seems to accept herself and is admirable
6. How you started with a wonderful body that worked well and was attractive and how social pressures made you begin to believe that you were not good enough
7. How much time and money that attitude cost you: work out how much, over the years, this attitude cost you
8. How much it costs in friendships and relationships
9. How you are only now coming to realize what you have done to yourself
10. What plans you are making to change your attitude and increase your acceptance of your body
11. How you are trying to remove all “put downs” and derogatory remarks about your body from your conversation
12. That you need her help not to discuss diets, and not put down yourself or other people for their size or weight

Do not criticize her or suggest that she must do the same. She has to come to accept her body in her own time. You can show her what the problem is like for you and what you are trying to do about it, but you cannot make her decisions about her body for her. You can refuse to support any derogatory remarks about her body and object to any activity that contributes to making her feel as though her body is inadequate. Your daughter is far more likely to do as you do than to do as you say.

On the other hand, if you have an accepting attitude to your body but your daughter is ready to trade hers in, you might try talking to her about it.

1. Ask her how she feels about her body.
2. Ask her what her goals are. Are they possible, reasonable, healthy?
3. Discuss the set theory of weight; that she is more likely to achieve a stable weight with three regular, modest meals a day than yo-yo dieting.
4. Discuss the economic drive behind the social need to be thin.
5. Ask her how much time and money she is willing to spend on changing herself.
6. Ask her what she expects to achieve with change.
7. Point out that not accepting herself results in low self-esteem. Is that what she expects?
8. Ask her how you can help.
9. Do not offer solutions.
10. Do not offer to take charge.
11. Do not tell her she has to change.
12. Do not criticize the way she is.
13. Above all, listen to her.

(Adapted from BodyLove: Learning to Like Our Looks and Ourselves, Rita Freeman, Ph.D.)

## Things for Women to Remember

All of us have to decide essentially what the body is for beyond just building it. Are we building it for a purpose? Are we building it just to be beautiful? Is being beautiful the purpose – or is being in control the purpose? It seems to me the real issue we face in the world as we grow older is how to be generative, how to use our bodies and our real selves for something that is more – that has true value in the world.

Most of us aren't designed to have these flat-stomached, narrow-hipped figures. Whether we're planning on having kids one day or not, that's what our bodies are designed to do — create new life – which is beautiful. These hips and breasts and stomachs have a purpose, and to ignore that is to ignore the incredible abilities and strengths that we possess.

It's time to change this body bashing mentality. Maybe this year instead of bashing ourselves in the dressing room while we try to find a new outfit or bathing suit, we could just close our mouths and reject the impulse to criticize. Maybe we could stop listening to a society that expects impossible things from us. Maybe we could learn to value our hearts and minds more than our bodies.

Maybe one day we'll all let something other than a number or ideal image define who we really are.

## Quotes

“Women spend time, energy and money making themselves into something that will please others. Why? Because we think that no one will love us or appreciate us as we are- bare-faced, long-necked, plump, short, our personality hanging out to be seen by anyone. As we are, we are not good enough...The messages are all around us, all day, everywhere. We are constantly told we are imperfect. If we want to be accepted, we must change, shape, reduce, remove- make ourselves different. To do that we must buy products. And, since perfection is impossible, we must continue to buy. In our constant pursuit of the perfect body, we devalue the one we have and negate the unique and intriguing person we are” (The Body Image Trap, p. 39).

“[The media] promises that if a woman is thin enough, fit enough, stylish enough, she will be admired, accepted, and sexually appreciated. It lies. Once a woman depends on assurances outside herself for her vision of herself, she loses control of her life” (The Body Image Trap, p. 38).

“I plead with you young women to please be more accepting of yourselves, including your body shape and style, with less longing to look like someone else. We are all different. Some are tall, and some are short. Some are round, and some are thin. And almost everyone at some time or other wants to be something they are not! But as one adviser to teenage girls said: ‘You can't live your life worrying that the world is staring at you. When you let other people's opinions make you self-conscious you give away your

power...The key to feeling [confident] is to always listen to your inner self- [the real you]. And in the kingdom of God, the real you is ‘more precious than rubies.’” (Elder Holland, October 2005).

“I mention adult women because, sisters, you are our greatest examples and resource for these young women. And if you are obsessing over being a size 2, you won’t be very surprised when your daughter or the Mia Maid in your class does the same and makes herself physically ill trying to accomplish it” (Elder Holland, October 2005).

### Resources

#### Web pages

[www.gurze.com](http://www.gurze.com)

<http://www.4girls.gov/>

[http://www.edreferral.com/body\\_image.htm](http://www.edreferral.com/body_image.htm)

<http://www.bodypositive.com/>

<http://www.nationaleatingdisorders.org>

#### Books

Outsmarting the Mother-Daughter Food Trap

By Debra Waterhouse, M.P.H., R.D.

The Body Image Workbook: An 8-Step Program for Learning to Like Your Looks

By Tomas Cash

Mom, I Feel Fat! Becoming Your Daughter’s Ally in Developing a Healthy Body Image

By Sharon Hersh

The Body Myth: Adult Women and the Pressure to be Perfect

By Margo Maine, Ph.D. and Joe Kelly

Do I Look Fat in This?

By Jessica Weiner

Full Mouse, Empty Mouse

By Dina Zeckhausen

Shapesville

By Andy Mills and Becky Osborn

Girl Zone Body Talk: The Straight Facts on Fitness, Nutrition, & Feeling Great about Yourself

By Ann Douglas & Julie Douglas

Real Kids Come in all Sizes

By Kathy Kater

Healthy Body Image, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition: Teaching Kids to Eat and Love their Bodies Too!

By Kathy J. Kater

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