

How Negative Body Image Can Cause and Influence Eating Disorders

What is body image?

Body image is how people perceive their physical appearance. It involves how one sees or pictures themselves, the beliefs they hold about their physical appearance, and how they feel others perceive them. Those who have a poor body image perceive their body as being unattractive or even repulsive to others, while those with a good body image accept their body as it is and are not concerned with how others perceive them.

Studies show that negative body image is an issue for both women and men, although body image issues are more common among women. While women tend to perceive an unrealistic thinness as the ideal body image, men tend to perceive an unrealistic muscle mass and higher weight as the ideal.

People with negative body image have a greater likelihood of developing an eating disorder and are more likely to suffer from feelings of depression, isolation, low self-esteem, and obsessions with weight loss.

Body image and eating disorders – who is at risk?

According to the National Association of Anorexia Nervosa and Associated Disorders (NAAD), eating disorders – including anorexia nervosa, bulimia nervosa and binge eating disorder – affect up to 5 million Americans every year. While eating disorders typically affect females, males make up as much as 25 percent of the total population of people with eating disorders.

Studies have shown that body dissatisfaction is strongly related to the development of eating disorders; other factors such as being excessively preoccupied with one's outward physical appearance or minimizing one's feelings and emotions, may also put an individual at risk. Additional factors include unhealthy dieting and untreated mental health issues.

Research also suggests that there may be a genetic and biological predisposition to Anorexia, Bulimia and Compulsive Overeating, but it is important to remember that for each individual, there is likely a wide variety of reasons for developing an eating disorder. Further factors identified by researchers for developing an eating disorder include:

- societal and family pressures
- psychological problems
- physical and emotional separation from family
- requirements for high academic performance
- beginning or ending a significant relationship
- childhood abuse

Can eating disorders be cured?

If you currently have or think you may be developing an eating disorder, it is important to seek the assistance of a trained professional. Eating Disorders are serious and complex illnesses, but with early diagnosis and intervention, you can recover from an eating disorder and live a full and healthy life.

There may be the desire to self treat, but self treatment is not a substitute for medical and mental health intervention and may result, according to the Eating Disorder Foundation, in repeated failures that add to the frustration and despair.

It is important to recognize that eating disorders have little or nothing to do with food or weight. More often, food is used as a way to keep from experiencing unwanted or difficult emotions and feelings.

Developing a healthy body image

Though body image is the perception of how we think and feel about our physical appearance, it is influenced greatly by societal messages. We live in a society that is obsessed with looks and weight, but that does not mean that one must passively accept the negative messages we receive about our bodies. The following, adapted from the Boston Women's Health Book Collective, suggests ways to build a better body image:

1. Find your "set point," a weight where your body feels comfortable and will fight to remain. Accept weight variations throughout the life cycle.
2. Most of us judge each of our body parts individually – my thighs are too fat, my breasts too droopy. Strive to experience your body as a whole, rather than as separate parts that need improvement.
3. Instead of trying to conform to the rigid beauty ideal promoted in the media, experiment with finding a style or look that expresses something about yourself and feels good to you.
4. When you exercise, pay attention to the rhythms and sensations you experience as you move. While exercise is often promoted as a way to lose weight and achieve an idealized body shape, it also helps us feel good in our bodies, which in turn can help us accept and celebrate how we look.
5. Reject the imposed ideals that womanhood must be suppressed. If you have a curvy body, embrace your curves as symbols of power and pride.
6. Notice how much time you spend worrying about your looks instead of being aware of what is going on inside of you or around you. Try practicing mindfulness, a technique used in meditation and yoga.
7. If you have an image of perfection in your head to which you are constantly comparing yourself, get rid of it. Where is it written that our bodies should be free of lines or marks or scars? Such bodies do not exist in real life.

Seek assistance

The Johns Hopkins Student Assistance Program (JHSAP) is committed to assisting students in managing the challenges they face during their academic careers. JHSAP provides support to students in dealing with personal, academic, and relationship problems.

If you are concerned that you have a negative body image or that you may be exhibiting unhealthy eating habits, you may benefit from more individualized services. Contact the Johns Hopkins Student Assistance Program (JHSAP) at 443-287-7000 or visit our website for more information: www.jhsap.org.