

Body Image

What is body image?

Body image is a combination of the thoughts and feelings that you have about your body. Body image may range between positive and negative experiences, and one person may feel at different times positive or negative or a combination of both. Body image is influenced by internal (e.g., personality) and external (e.g., social environment) factors.

What is positive body image or body acceptance?

When a person is able to accept, appreciate and respect their body, they may be described as having a positive body image. This is not the same as body satisfaction, as you can be dissatisfied with aspects of your body, yet still be able to accept it for all its limitations. Positive body image is important because it is one of the protective factors which can make a person less susceptible to developing an eating disorder (1).

A positive body image is associated with:

- **Higher self-esteem**, which dictates how a person feels about themselves, can impact on every aspect of life and contribute to happiness and wellbeing.
- **Self-acceptance**, making a person more likely to feel comfortable and happy with the way they look and less likely to feel impacted by unrealistic images in the media and societal pressures to look a certain way.
- **Having a healthy outlook and behaviours**, as it is easier to lead a balanced lifestyle with healthier attitudes and practices relating to food and exercise when you are in tune with, and respond to, the needs of your body.

What are the four aspects of body image?

1. The way you see your body is your **perceptual body image**. This is not always a correct representation of how you actually look.
2. The way you feel about your body is your **affective body image**. Feelings may include happiness or disgust, but are often summarised as the amount of satisfaction or dissatisfaction you feel about your shape, weight and individual body parts.
3. The way you think about your body is your **cognitive body image**. This can lead to preoccupation with body shape and weight.
4. The behaviours you engage in as a result of your body image are your **behavioural body image**. When a person is dissatisfied with the way they look, they may isolate themselves or employ unhealthy behaviours as a means to change appearance.

What is body dissatisfaction?

Body dissatisfaction occurs when a person has persistent negative thoughts and feelings about their body. Body dissatisfaction is an internal emotional and cognitive process but is influenced by external factors such as pressures to meet a certain appearance ideal. Body dissatisfaction can drive people to engage in unhealthy weight-control behaviours, particularly disordered eating. This places them at heightened risk for developing an eating disorder.

What are the signs of body dissatisfaction?

If you suspect that you or someone in your life may be experiencing body dissatisfaction, these are some of the things you may notice:

- **Repetitive dieting behaviour** (e.g., fasting, counting calories/kilojoules, skipping meals, avoidance of certain food groups)
- **Compulsive or excessive exercise patterns** (e.g., failure to take regular rest/recovery days, experiencing distress if exercise is not possible)
- **Valuing appearance as essential to self-worth** (e.g., the belief that others judge you based only on how you look, and that you cannot be successful, valued or loved if you are not 'attractive', 'fit', 'built' or 'beautiful')
- **Checking behaviours** (e.g., checking appearance in reflection, measuring body parts, pinching skin)
- **Spending a lot of time** on appearance, hair, make-up or clothing
- **Thinking or talking** a lot about thinness, muscles or physique
- **Consistent negative talk** about themselves and/or people with higher weight
- **Self-surveillance** (e.g., monitoring own appearance and attractiveness)
- **Self-objectification** (e.g., when people see themselves as objects to be viewed and evaluated based upon appearance)
- **Aspirational social comparison** (e.g., comparing themselves, generally negatively, to others they wish to emulate)
- **Body avoidance** (e.g., avoiding situations where body image may cause anxiety such as swimming, socialising).

Why is body dissatisfaction a serious problem?

Body image is ranked in the top three concerns for young people in Australia (2). Body dissatisfaction and overvaluing body image in defining one's self-worth are risk factors making some people more susceptible to developing an eating disorder than others. People experiencing body dissatisfaction can become fixated on trying to change their body shape, which can lead to unhealthy practices such as with food, exercise or supplements. Over time, these practices do not achieve desired results and often create a trap leading to intense feelings of disappointment, shame, guilt and, ultimately, increase the risk of developing an eating disorder.



Who is at risk of body dissatisfaction?

Any person, at any stage of their life, may experience body dissatisfaction. The following factors make some people more likely to develop negative body image than others:

- **Age:** Body image is frequently shaped during late childhood and adolescence, but body dissatisfaction can occur in people of all ages.
- **Gender:** Women are more likely to experience body dissatisfaction than men, however people of all genders may experience negative body image (3).
- **Gender dysphoria:** People with gender dysphoria are more likely to experience body dissatisfaction than people without gender dysphoria (4). This body dissatisfaction can extend beyond sex characteristics only (5).
- **Friends and family who diet and express body image concerns:** Role models expressing body image concerns and modelling weight-loss behaviours can increase the likelihood of a person developing body dissatisfaction regardless of actual body type.
- **Body size:** People with higher weight are at an increased risk of body dissatisfaction due to societal focus on weight.
- **Low self-esteem and/or depression:** People who experience low self-esteem or depression are at an increased risk of body dissatisfaction.
- **Teasing and bullying:** People who are bullied about appearance and/or weight, regardless of actual body type, have an increased risk of developing body dissatisfaction (6).
- **Personality traits:** People with perfectionist tendencies, high achievers, rigid 'black and white' thinkers, those who internalise beauty ideals, and those who often compare themselves to others, are at higher risk of developing body dissatisfaction (7).

Body image and the media

Longstanding research has documented the impact of viewing traditional appearance-focused media on the development of body image concerns (8, 9, 10).

In recent years, one of the common external contributors to body dissatisfaction is social media. Social media portrays images that are filtered and edited and tends to show the 'highlights' of a person and their life. These images promote an unrealistic appearance ideal that cannot be achieved in real life.

Research shows that social media use is associated with increased body dissatisfaction and disordered eating (11). Body dissatisfaction may occur when a person is viewing and comparing themselves to social media images and reading the appearance-related comments on social media, and feeling that they cannot live up to the ideal images presented.

Careful consideration of how you use social media and the people you engage with is important in building and maintaining a positive relationship with your body.



How can you improve your body image?

There is no right or wrong when it comes to weight, shape, size and appearance. Challenging beauty ideals and learning to accept your body shape is a crucial step towards positive body image. We have the power to change the way we see, feel and think about our bodies.

Here are some helpful tips to improve body image:

- Focus on your **positive qualities, skills and talents**, which can help you accept and appreciate your whole self
- **Say positive things** to yourself every day
- **Avoid negative self-talk**
- Focus on **appreciating and respecting** what your body can do, which will help you to feel more positively about it
- Set **positive, health-focused goals** rather than weight-related ones, which are more beneficial for your overall wellbeing
- **Avoid comparing yourself to others**, accept yourself as a whole and remember that everyone is unique
- **Unfollow or unfriend people on social media** who trigger negative body image thoughts and feelings

Getting help

If you feel that you or someone in your life may be experiencing body image or eating concerns, seek professional help. Professional support can help guide you to change negative beliefs and behaviours, and build a positive relationship with your body.

To find help in your local area go to [NEDC Support and Services](#).



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