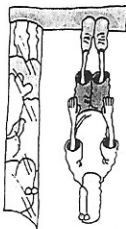


Body image & body dissatisfaction

Body Image

What is this thing called body image? It is usually defined as a person's beliefs, thoughts, perceptions, feelings & actions about their body & appearance. Some things that body image might include or be related to are:

- Body satisfaction or dissatisfaction
- Weight and shape concerns
- Body distortion
- Preferred body shape / size
- The importance placed on one's weight & shape



People with eating disorders often have very negative views of their bodies & physical appearance. This can have a significant impact on their quality of life. It can also serve to keep their eating disorder going.

Managing Body Image Concerns & Body Dissatisfaction

It is difficult for people to change their actual body shape & appearance. People may lose weight in the short-term, but will be vulnerable to a range of consequences when their weight is below the healthy point for them - increased preoccupation with food, binge eating & reduced metabolism are just some examples. There are also aspects of appearance that are almost impossible to change. Frame size & height are genetically determined & (outside of surgery) unable to be altered. All of this can be very frustrating for people who dislike their appearance.



Fortunately, although actual appearance is hard to alter, body image can be changed. If you think back to the definition above, it is how an individual feels about their body that is important. Perhaps you can think of two friends who have similar overall appearances, yet one is satisfied with how they look & one is not. The difference is not in their bodies - it is in how they view them & how much importance they place on their appearance & weight.

Tackling negative body image takes time, but there are things you do right now to start to make a difference:

- **Consider the factors that have influenced your body image.** How did your body perceptions & thoughts develop? Have they changed over time? What would help you to start creating a positive image now?

- **Consider what you do like about your body.** Try scrutinising yourself for things you like rather than for flaws. You may also like to consider the things your body does (walk, swim, dance...) that you enjoy or are grateful for.
- **Identify activities that help you feel good in your body.** Things like spending time with friends, watching waves at the beach, playing a musical instrument, engaging in relaxation or yoga, having a bath/shower, walking the dog, watching a comedy...
- **Stop body comparisons!** Do you compare your body to others? Most people report feeling worse about themselves after doing this. Have a go at stopping altogether, or at least cutting down.
- **Stop body checking!** Do you check your body frequently or search for physical flaws? What impact does this have on how you view & feel about your body? Our handout on *Body Checking and Avoidance* talks more about this topic if it is applicable to you.
- **Expand your areas of interest.** One consequence of being very concerned about weight & appearance is that other interests or hobbies may be neglected. Try to think of some new things to try, or some old interests to return to. Are there skills you'd like to learn? Groups you'd like to join?
- **Ask for help.** If possible, let people know what you're trying to do. Comments about weight or shape are unlikely to be helpful for you right now.
- **Evaluate your body-related thoughts as if you were a scientist or lawyer.** When you say, "I look fat & ugly", do you have *factual* evidence to support this? Would others describe you the same way? Have you received any positive comments about your looks? Where is your Body Mass Index relative to the healthy weight range?
- **Separate 'real' emotions from 'feeling fat.'** If you often say (or think) "I feel fat", consider what you mean by this. Remember that "fat" is not an emotion! Often individuals with an eating disorder will say "I feel fat" when they experience emotions like anxiety, guilt, or loneliness. Label feelings using emotion words & shift the focus away from weight.
- **Keep at it.** You didn't develop a negative body image overnight & it won't disappear overnight either. Try not to give up too soon.
- Refer to the CCI website for more handouts & resources relevant to eating disorders.

