Weighing you down: building a better body image

Have you ever told yourself, *just 10 pounds and I will finally be happy,* or, *all I have to do is lose weight and the rest of my life will fall into place?* Perhaps you've put off career goals, avoided an activity or refused to buy clothes that make you feel good just waiting to reach your target weight. Maybe you've thought, I will go *back-to-school…ask that person out…get a promotion…love myself… when I'm thinner.*



If this sounds all too familiar and your poor body image is holding you back from living life, you need to figure out how to start feeling good about yourself today—extra weight and all.

Stop waiting

If you've been using a little extra weight as a scapegoat for your lack of health and happiness, it's time to make a few changes to your lifestyle and give a boost to your outlook so you can be happy—regardless of what the scale says. Learn to love yourself and your life in the *here and now* by:

Treating yourself like a friend. People who have low self-esteem are constantly beating themselves up with negative chatter—things that most people would never say to a friend. Inner dialogue like, "I'll never be good enough," or, "I look disgusting," or "Who's going to take me seriously?," prove that the polite rules you follow in life don't necessarily carry over to the way you talk to yourself. When you speak positively, your brain will listen. Start paying attention and when your thoughts veer negative, put on the brakes and shift the focus to a more positive place.

Talking it up. Stand in front of the mirror and embrace your imperfections. Whether it's that bumpy belly, thinning hair or scar from an accident—these features of your body are part of your life experience and what make you unique. Find one thing you love, then two and then three. Appreciate your body for all the things it does for you—your arms that hug your children, your legs that take you for walks or your mouth that lets you smile and laugh. Now try writing down some of the things you like about yourself without mentioning your body or appearance. Put this list in your car or tape it to your bathroom mirror so it will be there when you need that extra boost.

Offering your time. Helping others will do wonders for your body image. Spending time with people who have real struggles like finding the next meal or living with deteriorating health can really put things into perspective. You don't need to lose weight to start appreciating life.

Wearing clothes that fit. Nothing will make you feel worse about your body than overly tight jeans that take your breath away. Find clothes that express your own personal style but fit and flatter you—just as you are today. So many people put off buying clothes that make them feel and look good until they reach their target weight, or wear clothing that's too small because they simply can't bear to buy a bigger size. Feeling uncomfortable in your clothes has a way of ruining your entire day and your way-too-tight-waistline can become a constant reminder of your perceived "failures."

Getting healthy. If you commit to a nutritious, balanced diet and make exercise a priority, you can't help but feel better about yourself. Exercise to be healthy, de-stress and have fun. Instead of obsessing over what the scale says, use the way you feel as your new gauge.

Sticking to positive people. If sitting around with your friends and family complaining about your extra weight has become your favourite pastime, it's time to find a new hobby. Who wants to associate with people that make you feel bad about yourself? Body bashing hurts you, hurts others and does nothing for your efforts to tune into positive self-talk. You will feel so much better when you know that the people in your life aren't judging you for the way you look or what you ate for lunch and offer the positive support you need.

Seeking help, if you need it. If you can't seem to shed the perception that your happiness is directly related to your weight, or are constantly preoccupied with your body, consider getting help. This can be as simple as

joining a weight loss or exercise group, a support program or by contacting support programs offered by your work for additional resources and help to break negative thought patterns.

Faking it, when all else fails. With images from advertisements and media constantly telling us that thin equals success and happiness, it's sometimes hard to not buy into the hype and feel that life would be so much better without that potbelly or "muffin top." If you're having a bad day, one sure-fire way to boost your lack of confidence is to fake it. Throw your shoulders back, hold your head up high and walk like you command attention and respect—even if you don't feel that way. You may surprise yourself and start believing it.

A few small lifestyle changes and a big shift in perspective can help kick start your desire to find happiness in the here and now. What you can accomplish when your mind and body work together instead of against one another may surprise you. Remember that being thinner won't make you happy, but learning to accept and appreciate your body for all it does for you can help you stay focused on what really matters—a healthy, positive life rich in love, laughter and valuable connections with great people.