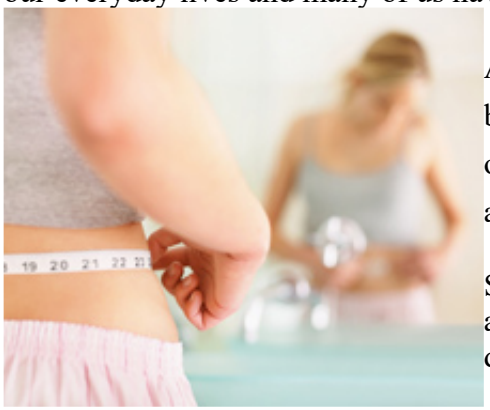
Body image basics

Media portrayals of male and female beauty are everywhere from billboards and TV commercials to magazine advertisements and your local mall. It's nearly impossible to remain oblivious to their presence in our everyday lives and many of us have become more aware of their impact too.



Acknowledging that the media can influence your ideas about your own body is an important step in building a better relationship with your own body, but even more important is knowing how you can work on appreciating your unique features and beauty.

Start treating your body with the love and respect it deserves by paying attention to some of the obstacles to building a better body image and discovering how to clear a path for positive living.

Outside Influences on Inner Beauty

It's nearly impossible to make it through the grocery store line without being overwhelmed by paparazzi and fashion magazines. The media and our culture are obsessed with the thin and beautiful and it appears everywhere. When you're faced with unrealistic standards for beauty, keep the following tips in mind to avoid falling into the trap of negative thinking:

Be alert. Don't passively take in content that suggests superficial ideas of beauty. Recognize bad messages when you see them and challenge cultural myths. Catch yourself talking and focusing too much about dieting and how you should look.

Be skeptical. Question the idea that beauty equals thin. Who do you consider beautiful? Look at the non-superficial characteristics in them that you value. Are they funny? Kind? Smart? Don't limit the definition of beauty. It comes in many different forms.

Be fair to others. Don't get caught up in the comparison trap—it's a game that no one wins. It is not going to help you improve yourself in the ways that matter.

Be fair to yourself. Think about the inner qualities and strengths you appreciate in your friends and family members. Now look to yourself. You also possess valuable qualities and strengths that you should be cherishing.

Words That Wound

They say it takes 10 positive comments to undo one negative one. But what do you do when the source of criticism is yourself? You need to be the gatekeeper of your own thoughts: challenge negative statements and replace them with positive ones.

Challenge yourself—when you are thinking negative thoughts about your body— ask yourself how it benefits you to focus on your flaws.

Remind yourself of why it's unrealistic to believe that thinner people are "happier" or "better" when you have the urge to compare yourself to others.

Surround yourself with people that make you feel comfortable and good about yourself.

Compliment yourself. When a negative comment comes into your mind, analyze why it's there, reject it and replace it with five positive thoughts. Repeat this list whenever you feel negatively about your body.

Love yourself. If you've been focusing on flaws, it's time to take another look. Shift your attention to the things you like about yourself and add those up instead. Be proactive. If you spend too much time critiquing your flaws in front of the mirror, get rid of it or limit your time in front of it.

Meals and Emotions

There are an overwhelming amount of options for people who are trying to lose weight, but there is no magic bullet for weight loss. It's easy to focus on the end result and wish for a faster route, but the reality is, nothing can compare to a healthy lifestyle. But this can be challenging to maintain, especially when there is an emotional connection between food and eating.

Remember to:

View food as fuel for your body and not a source of comfort or as your "enemy."

Don't diet. If you need help to get on track, see a registered dietitian to learn more about developing a healthy lifestyle.

Examine your relationship with food and your moods to break the food and emotion connection. If you are struggling with an eating disorder or need help, contact your physician or a professional.

Moving Towards a Better Body

It's no secret. Exercise is a great way to get healthier and to feel better about your body. When you exercise your body also releases endorphins that boost your mood and fight depression. To build up your body image as well as your body when exercising, keep these three rules in mind.

Do exercise for your overall health, not just for your physical appearance.

Don't use exercise as a form of punishment for calories consumed.

Do participate in the activities that you enjoy, even if they draw attention to your weight.

Small Bodies, Big Influences

Building a healthy body image begins when you're young, so to help the children in your life stay positive in their thinking and lifestyle, keep these tips in mind.

- Weight gain is a natural part of growing up, especially during puberty, so let children know that this is normal.
- Stay positive in your comments about food, weight, and body shape.
- Provide children with plenty of healthy food options, while allowing them to choose for themselves.
- Praise children on their accomplishments and personality traits.
- Discuss the media's representation of weight with children and watch television with them so you know what they are taking in.
- Challenge their school to take on policies against size and sexual discrimination, harassment and teasing.
- Support the removal of public weigh-ins and fat measurements.
- Let children know you are always available to talk about issues that are important to them.

Building a better body image is an important step to feeling good about yourself physically and emotionally. But to accomplish this, you need to first recognize that our celebrity-obsessed culture's ideas and representations of beauty are impossible and superficial. Instead of aspiring to an ideal that is both unattainable and unhealthy, set new goals: realistic ones that will ensure your body—and your feelings about your body—are both in good health. Awareness, a realistic attitude and good health habits can all help embrace the skin you're in and make your peace with your inner critic.