

BETTER BODY-ESTEEM



When you look in the mirror:

what do you see?

how do you feel?

what do you think?

In the *Gage Canadian Dictionary*, self-esteem is defined as “thinking well of oneself; self-respect.” For the purposes of this article, body-esteem will be defined as a **respect** for and **appreciation** of your body. How you think, feel or view yourself determines your satisfaction with your body as a whole, and its individual parts.

Healthy body-esteem results in feeling “comfortable” with your body. Your focus is on what your body can do for you, and less so on how it looks. Body-centred activities, such as bathing, swimming, and even clothes shopping, are enjoyed rather than avoided. It is natural to compare your body to other people’s bodies, but with healthy body-esteem you will recognize your own unique beauty and strengths.

On the other hand, if you have unhealthy body-esteem you will tend to have a distorted perception of your body size. Did you know that 90% of women tend to overestimate their actual body weight? You might also find yourself obsessing over ways to change your size through dieting and exercise, and/or have “skinny clothes” in your closet. You might find that your insecurity about your weight will hold you back from participating in body-centred activities and from recognizing personal accomplishments.

Unhealthy body-esteem can affect both men and women. Although women have traditionally been found to experience societal pressure to conform to a ‘thin-ideal;’ it is now being recognized that men also experience pressure to conform to a ‘muscular ideal.’

In reality, people’s natural body weights are as diverse and (permanently) unchangeable as height and eye, hair, and skin colour.

Comparison to these societal ideals tends to cause emotional stress and lowers your self-esteem. It can result in feeling worthless or simply not good enough. Perhaps you believe that if you’re not in control of your weight then you’re not in control of your life. However, you might find that your critical thoughts about your weight and appearance actually interfere with *living* your life.

Do you want to improve your body-esteem? Write out a list of things you have given up or avoid doing because you’re not happy with your weight or appearance. Then take time to write out a list of advantages to developing a healthier attitude toward your body. If you’re convinced that you’re ready to change how you think, feel, and view your body, then take your life back! Do one of the activities that you’ve avoided (e.g., buy a new swimsuit).

SUGGESTIONS FOR BETTER BODY-ESTEEM

- Stop paying attention to “numbers”; ignore (or better yet accept) the numbers on the scale and the size of clothing you wear. Pay attention to how you feel in your body and in your clothes.
- Clean your closet. Donate or throw away any clothes that don’t fit. If your budget allows, treat yourself to new clothes if needed.
- When you look in the mirror make an effort to notice what you like about your body, and challenge the critical voice that tells you what you need to change.
- Remember that the mirror is a reflection of your body as an ‘object’ it is not a reflection of your true self. The mirror cannot capture who you are as a person: your hopes, aspirations, accomplishments, or even how you relate to others.
- Challenge “ideal” body assumptions. If fashion or exercise magazines trigger critical body thoughts then throw them out. Buy a magazine that celebrates size diversity, or buy a magazine on your favourite sport, hobby, or interest.
- Acknowledge and celebrate your achievements, big and small. Remember that your success is not measured by your weight or body size.
- Focus on actively living in your body rather than being trapped within self-consciousness. Even with body limitations (e.g., due to age or injury) consider the idea of channelling your energies on what your body still can do versus what it can no longer (or never could) do.
- Get involved! Engage in a body-centred activity every day. Take a bubble bath. Join a dance class or sports team. Learn how to play a musical instrument. Research has found that yoga, for example, tends to help people feel better about themselves; it has helped people who suffer from eating disorders, depression, and anxiety. In yoga, the focus is on the mind-body connection and fostering strength, flexibility, and balance.

Extreme dieting, excessive exercise, food/weight preoccupation, and unhealthy body-esteem can be signs of disordered eating. Talking to a professional counsellor can help if you’re struggling to accept and respect your body, and/or if you’re concerned about your eating habits.

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