

Body Image

By Thia Haselton, MFT

If you're a woman with a poor body image, a trip to the local supermarket can be a painful exercise, particularly when it ends at the checkout register, where tabloid front pages and glossy magazine covers promote the "perfect bodies" that few of us have. Whether it's Shape magazine suggesting how you can tighten those abs or Vanity Fair displaying a glamorously thin celebrity, we are bombarded with images of buffed, slender women.

Alongside these photos of "perfect bodies" are damning pictures of other stars with cellulite, or of celebrities like Oprah before her latest diet-exercise challenge. Whew! How can you possibly accept your body type after being subjected to a barrage of these images?

To make matters worse, the message promoting "perfect bodies" doesn't end at the supermarket. Turn on the TV and you'll see a seemingly endless line-up of commercials touting the latest weight loss miracle. Or you can watch programs featuring people losing massive amounts of weight in very short periods of time and being penalized if they don't. If you channel hop, you're bound to see a show with a parade of models.

Am I skinny enough?

Did you know today's models weigh 23% less than the average woman? Many are anorexic or bulimic. Certainly, many of them are not eating what they should to maintain their health in the years to come. Maybe, like some of us, they remember a mother asking if she looked fat in a particular dress or if her bottom looked too big in a pair of pants. Maybe they vowed never to have to ask that question of their daughters.

Girls compare each other all the time. In my private practice I hear women say they think their friends are more slender, that they need to lose weight. Some of my patients have tried starving themselves, others have gone on the latest trendy diet. Some have forced themselves to vomit after meals, or exercised excessively. But no matter how slender they got, they were never thin enough. Over time this obsession and the struggle against their bodies takes a toll on their entire lives.

These are some of the indicators of suffering from a "bad body image":

- Waking up every morning disgusted with your body
- Promising to "eat right" in the morning, only to blame yourself later when you eat something "bad"
- Not shopping for clothes because you don't like to see yourself in the mirror or you can't accept your size
- Dieting successfully at first, then putting on more pounds than you lost later
- Thinking you'll be happy, if only you could lose weight
- Rationalizing that someone dumped you because of your weight

If you are someone with a "bad body image," you may have noticed that it pervades every aspect of your life: your relationships; the way you eat; what you wear; and how you think of yourself on a daily or even hourly basis. Life becomes a struggle because the focus is on body appearance versus experiencing life and living "from the inside out."

Body image impacts both genders

People with body image struggles often feel as though they live in their heads. They consider their bodies objects to judge and manipulate. If you are struggling with body image, you're not alone. Many women and increasing numbers of men do so as well. Be assured, there is help to be found. Working with a therapist who specializes in body image issues can help you discard old beliefs and outmoded ways of thinking so you can begin to accept and

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enjoy yourself. Your life can become more about living and less about trying to control your food intake and body image. Imagine a life where you really live in your body and appreciate how it feels.

About the Author

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