

EMOTIONAL WELLNESS MATTERS

VOLUME XIII, NUMBER 4



“What disturbs people’s minds is not events, but their judgments on events.”

– Epictetus

In China, parents once bound the feet of their daughters in pursuit of beauty. In parts of Africa, both men and women elongate their earlobes and decorate their skin with minerals to look attractive. At one time in this society, we found plump, rotund people to be the epitome of beauty. Old movies show us that the Tarzans and Supermen of past decades would hardly pass muster in today’s gyms. Today we define beauty as a thin, youthful, and muscular look. We go under the knife and on extreme diets to achieve a socially acceptable appearance – not to mention tattoos and body piercing – all practices that are similar to the early Chinese custom of binding feet. Strong social standards dictate, especially through the media, how we should look – and if our own bodies deviate from these expectations, which is the case for almost all of us, we feel inferior and ashamed. We hide. We cover up. We don’t like an important part of our selves. We feel depressed. We feel anxious in front of other people. We feel powerless – and we are apologetic when we show the world who we are.

Body image refers to your personal relationship with your body. This includes all of the beliefs, attitudes, thoughts, feelings, and perceptions you have about your body. It does not refer to what your body actually looks like. Our body is one of many aspects of who we are, but for many of us it is the dominating source of our sense of self. If we compare ourselves to what we



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are *supposed* to look like, we come up short and this brings up negative feelings about who we are. We forget that our inner or essential self has many wonderful attributes. We do not have to harbor negative feelings about ourselves because our external appearance may not conform to current social norms. We may be a few pounds overweight, but that does not mean that people are going to reject us if we show our special inner qualities to other people – like our warmth, our caring, our social skills, and our intelligence. These latter qualities are what matter most in our relationships with others.

Many people would rather change their bodies than change their body image. They prefer to undergo plastic surgery, starvation diets, and extreme workouts rather than focus on learning to like their bodies. Your body image has little to do with your body's outward appearance. It is much more meaningful to learn to appreciate your uniqueness – you are unlike any other person in the world and this is a cause for celebration.

Body image problems generate other problems in our lives. People with negative body images, for example, have problems with *self-esteem*. Poor self-esteem means feeling personally inadequate, and this influences how to we relate to the world – our families, friends, and jobs. Body image problems are also linked to our *gender identity*, or how we feel about our masculinity or femininity. They are linked to *depression* and feelings of despair about our lives. They are correlated with *anxiety* in social situations so that we may limit our interactions with other people and fail to try new experiences. Body image issues can have a strong negative impact on healthy *sexual behavior*. And they provide the ground from which *eating disorders* develop.

Addressing Body Image Problems

Working on body image issues entails changing our definition of our body from negative to positive. In order to do this, we need to understand that societal standards are ever-changing and that few people can live up to them. It is not helpful to compare ourselves to social ideals that are unattainable – and besides, even if we could achieve them, that would be no guarantee of a happy life. Our inner qualities are much more important for achieving happiness. Furthermore, we tend to judge ourselves much more harshly than other people do. Most people are more concerned about their own self-presentation rather than how someone else looks.

Let's look at a few of the issues that should be addressed in order to acquire a more positive body image.

Take an Inventory of Your Body

Understand both the strengths and weaknesses in your body image. You are probably satisfied with some aspects of your body. The parts of your body that are problematic for you, unfortunately, stand out and may outweigh the more positive parts. Identify the features of your body that you like and those parts that you don't like (for example, your weight, your face, your physical strength, your hair, and different parts of your body). Next identify the degree of distress you experience in various social situations due to your physical appearance. Then it is helpful to examine the private thoughts you have about your physical appearance – some of these thoughts are probably positive (“I like the way clothes look on me”), while others are negative (“I don't feel as free as more attractive people seem to feel”). Before developing a more positive body image, it is helpful to know in detail what areas are the problem, what their impact is, and how you define them.

Where Did Your Body Image Issues Come From?

Research has shown that people who have had weight problems in the past still show dissatisfaction with their bodies once they have lost their excess weight. We remember our negative perceptions of our bodies from the past, and these perceptions become part of our body image. Childhood can be a challenging time because of the teasing that often occurs – and for most kids, the focus of teasing is on the face and head, as well as weight. Facial acne during the teens can have a lasting effect, well into adulthood, on our body image, self-confidence, and aspirations. Most teasing comes from siblings and from peers at school. Children and adolescents go through a period of their lives when it is important to establish credibility in the social world and to conform to social norms, a goal that can be defeated when they are teased about their looks. Our old body images have a long memory.

In order to change your body image, it is helpful to understand where the old wounds came from, how you felt at the time, and what influence the teasing had on your behavior. Working with a professional therapist can make this a particularly enlightening experience in which you can begin to repair the old damage and move into a new self-definition where you can see your body from a more integrated perspective.

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Work on the Anxiety Associated with Negative Body Image

Imagine being able to look calmly in the mirror and, without feeling any anxiety at all, focus on the parts of your body that have always caused you embarrassment. In fact, you would be able to examine your problematic body areas and feel happy and relaxed.

Working with a therapist, you would first learn how to achieve body relaxation through a variety of techniques, including *diaphragmatic breathing*, *progressive muscle relaxation*, *meditation*, and *guided visual imagery*. Other techniques include *self-hypnosis* and *biofeedback*. You would set aside some time each day to practice these techniques until you are able to achieve the skill to voluntarily bring your body to a state of complete relaxation.

Once that is achieved, you would then move into a technique called *systematic desensitization*. You would first identify several areas of your body and then rank them from “satisfied with” to “dissatisfied with.” Starting with the area that causes you little anxiety, you would put yourself into a relaxed state, imagine looking at that body area, put yourself back into the relaxed state, then open your eyes and look at that body area in a mirror for a few seconds. Repeat the process, but increase the time you look at your body with each exposure, and remember always to go back to the relaxed state until you feel completely calm before looking at your body again. Then do the same thing with the body area that causes you more anxiety than the first. Finally you’ll be able to do this with the body areas that cause you the most anxiety. It is important to work with a therapist as you learn this technique, although you will do your work with the mirror in private.

Question Your Assumptions

We all make assumptions about the world we live in, and these assumptions determine how we interpret reality. For example, we may assume that the only way people could ever like their looks is to change them. Or, we might assume that a person’s outward appearance is a reflection of their inner personality. We might assume that the first thing people look at when they meet you is your physical appearance. In addition, perhaps we assume that the only way to have a good life is to be physically attractive. All of these are faulty assumptions that are simply not true.

With the help of a therapist, try to identify your assumptions about your body. Examine the thoughts you have that logically follow from these

assumptions. Identify the feelings you have that are associated with your assumptions. By examining these faulty assumptions, we can begin to have more constructive and reality-oriented thoughts about our bodies. When we change our thoughts, our feelings will follow.

Become Aware of Your Cognitive Distortions

We make mistakes in how we think about our bodies, and it is helpful, in consultation with a therapist, to learn how we twist reality by using cognitive distortions. For example, we may use *polarized thinking* (“Either I’m beautiful or I’m ugly”) where there are no in-betweens. Or we may resort to *unrealistic comparisons*, like comparing your own looks with a model in a magazine (ignoring that the model’s photo was taken by a professional photographer and that the flaws have been airbrushed out of the photo). We often engage in *selective attention* by, for example, focusing on a flaw in our appearance and then magnifying it (“This wart on my chin makes me look like the biggest ogre on the planet”). We may engage in a cognitive distortion called *projection* (“If I think I’m ugly, then everyone I meet must think that way too”), where we attribute to others our own way of thinking.

Celebrating Your Body and Your Self

Once you have addressed the factors that contribute to a negative body image, you can put your energy into self-acceptance instead of hiding yourself from others. You can find joy in expressing who you are to others. You will be in a position to celebrate your own unique self and take pride in the fact that you are like no other person in the world.



Recommended Reading

The Body Image Workbook

by Thomas F. Cash.

New Harbinger Publications, 1997,

\$19.95. ISBN: 1-57224-062-8.

T H E B A C K P A G E

Do You Have Body Image Concerns?

The following questions are from Thomas F. Cash's *Body Image Workbook* –

- Are you happy with the body that you live in? Or would you rather be living elsewhere?
- Are there aspects of your physical appearance that you really despise?
- Do the same old negative thoughts about your looks keep popping into your head?
- Do you spend too much time worrying about what you look like?
- Do your feelings about your looks get in the way of enjoying your everyday life?
- Do these feelings impair your self-esteem?
- Do you avoid certain situations because you feel self-conscious about how you look?
- Do you rely to a great extent on clothes or cosmetics to cover up the “flaws” in your appearance?
- Are you often searching for the ultimate diet, the most effective body-shaping exercise, the right clothes, the most flattering cosmetics or hair-style?
- Do you spend a lot of time, effort, and money attempting to “repair” your looks or achieve physical perfection?
- Are you contemplating cosmetic surgery?

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