**What is Body Image? Why does it matter?**

The idea of Body Image includes not merely what we see in the mirror but also different dimensions of perception, affect, cognition and behavior. It is a complex multidimensional construct. Our mental representation of body shape, size and form is influenced by a variety of historical, cultural, social, individual and biological factors, which operate over varying time spans.”

Four important aspects come into play:

1) **Affective**: feelings we have towards our own body appearance. How you feel about your body? Including your height, shape, and weight.

2) **Cognitive**: thoughts and beliefs concerning body shape and size. What you believe about your own appearance (including your memories, assumptions, and generalizations).

3) **Perceptual**: accuracy of individual’s judgment of their shape and weight relative to their actual proportions.

4) **Behavioral**: how do we manifest our feelings, thoughts and perceptions? How you see yourself when you look in the mirror or when you picture yourself in your mind.

Although body image is a complex construct that encompasses different aspects of the body experience, in our contemporary Western society the major focus has been on the body’s appearance, in particular on body shape and weight. This is not surprising when current societal standards
FOR FEMALE BEAUTY INORDINATELY EMPHASIZES THE DESIRABILITY OF THINNESS, AN IDEAL ACCEPTED BY MOST WOMEN BUT IMPOSSIBLE FOR MOST TO ACHIEVE. ³

PEOPLE ARE HELD RESPONSIBLE FOR THEIR BODY SHAPE AND WEIGHT IN A WAY THAT THEY ARE NOT HELD RESPONSIBLE FOR THEIR HEIGHT, EYE COLOR, OR SIZE OF THEIR FEET. GIVEN THE INCREASINGLY LARGE DISCREPANCY BETWEEN CURRENT BEAUTY IDEALS AS PORTRAYED IN THE MEDIA AND THE BODY SIZE AND SHAPE OF REAL WOMEN AND MEN⁴, IT IS NOT SURPRISING THAT MANY PEOPLE EXPERIENCE THEIR BODIES IN A NEGATIVE MANNER.

**Normative Discontent**

WE ARE CONSISTENTLY DISSATISFIED WITH HOW WE LOOK, EVEN TO THE POINT THAT IS CAN BE CONSIDERED A “NORMATIVE DISCONTENT”⁵. WOMEN HAVE A GREATER BODY DISSATISFACTION (MEASURED AS THE DISCREPANCY BETWEEN CURRENT AND IDEAL RATINGS) THAN MEN, AND IT REMAINS REMARKABLY STABLE ACROSS MUCH OF THE ADULT LIFE SPAN.⁶

**RELEVANT STATS!!! Let’s bear in mind:**

- The average American woman is 5’4” tall and weighs 165 pounds. The average Miss America winner is 5’7” and weighs 121 pounds⁷

- The average BMI of Miss America winners has decreased from around 22 in the 1920s to 16.9 in the 2000s. The World Health Organization classifies a normal BMI as falling between 18.5 and 24.9.⁸

- In the United States, 20 million women suffer from a clinically significant eating disorder at some point in their life, including anorexia nervosa, bulimia nervosa, binge eating disorder, or an eating disorder not otherwise specified (EDNOS).⁹

- The average American woman is 5’4” and 140 pounds. The average fashion model is 5’11” and 115 pounds

- Fashion models are thinner than 98% of American women¹⁰

- About 70% of adolescent girls and young adult women would prefer to be thinner and are dissatisfied with their bodies¹¹
Although body image improves for women in late middle age, there continue to be about 60% who are dissatisfied with their body size and shape; these women continue to be at risk for eating disorders.\textsuperscript{12}

91\% of women in a recent survey on a college campus said they have attempted to control their weight through dieting.

45\% of women are on a diet at any given time.

13.8 million Cosmetic procedures in 2011\textsuperscript{13}. This represents a 5\% increase from 2010.

**Does it matter??**

**YES!!**

Researchers have consistently linked body dissatisfaction with

- Low self-esteem, shame and feelings of self-consciousness and anxiety
- Social anxiety and impairment.
- Sexual intimacy impairment
- Depression \textsuperscript{14}
- Eating Disorders.
- Increase surgical cosmetic procedures to enhance body image

This is serious!

- By age 6, girls especially start to express concerns about their own weight or shape. 40-60\% of elementary school girls (ages 6-12) are concerned about their weight or about becoming too fat \textsuperscript{15}
- About 70\% of adolescent girls would prefer to be thinner.\textsuperscript{16}
- Young adult women (18-30) years old seem to have a comparable level of body dissatisfaction to adolescents, about 70\% .\textsuperscript{17}
- Although body image improves for women in late middle age, there continue to be about 60\% who are dissatisfied with their body size and shape; these women continue to be at risk for eating disorders.\textsuperscript{18}

**THE EVOLVING FEMALE BODY. STAGES**

So let’s think about the specific challenges we have at each stage in our lives.
I. Childhood and Puberty

We know very little about the development of Body Image, particularly during the preschool and early elementary school years. Nevertheless, we have reasons to believe that the basis of Body Image is developed throughout childhood. It is not yet clear at what point body image becomes reasonably stable, but certain statistics are noteworthy:

Dieting and weight control strategies are considered to reflect how strongly an individual is dissatisfied with her or his own body size and shape. They are also associated with the onset of Eating disorders:

- Preschoolers (between ages 3 and 5), influenced by what they see on children’s television shows and their parents own beliefs about ideal child body types, prefer not to be heavier. Yet preschool age children are not typically worried about their own weight or shape; they are more concerned about their clothing, hair or jewelry.19
- 42% of 1st-3rd grade girls want to be thinner20
- In elementary school fewer than 25% of girls diet regularly. Yet those who do know what dieting involves and can talk about calorie restriction and food choices for weight loss fairly effectively21
- 81% of 10 year olds are afraid of being fat.22
- 46% of 9-11 year-olds are “sometimes” or “very often” on diets, and 82% of their families are “sometimes” or “very often” on diets23
- Even among clearly non-overweight girls, over 1/3 report dieting24
- Girls who diet frequently are 12 times as likely to binge as girls who don’t diet.25
- Elementary school American girls who regularly read magazines, 69% report that the pictures influence their concept of the ideal body shape. 47% say the pictures make them want to lose weight26

Some risk factors that have been found to influence Body Image negatively are: media influences and parental comments and sexual
Harassment is related to poorer body esteem, at least among girls, in elementary school.\textsuperscript{27}

First graders are capable of social comparison, and as they age they engage in this process in increasing frequency. Social comparison appears to be an influential factor in body image, body esteem and self-esteem.

Every biological milestone for women has the potential to increase fat deposition through the operation of sex hormones and thus might move women away from the thin and youthful ideal. As a girl moves towards adulthood she gradually attains the secondary sexual characteristics. As women seem to be most targeted for objectification during their years of reproductive potential, this means that puberty and adolescence are crucial times for the attainment of a healthy body image.

For several reasons puberty must be considered as a vital stage for the development of Body Image:

1) There are dramatic body changes associated with puberty, including a substantial weight gain.

2) Body dissatisfaction and eating disorders become more common starting in early adolescence, coincident with puberty. Girls\textsuperscript{1} body satisfaction dropped as they entered puberty such that early maturers experienced the decline before on-time or late maturers.

3) Puberty is associated with more adult-like behaviors such as dating and pressures related to an intensification of gender role expectations. Traditional gender roles associate femininity with investment in appearance and thinness and masculinity with strengthen and muscularity, characteristics that may increase the risk of body dissatisfaction.

4) Early puberty has been associated with a wide range of psychological and behavioral problems.\textsuperscript{28}

II. Adolescence and Young Age

Body image concerns are a normative and prominent feature of adolescent development. Integrating body image into one's identity and self-evaluation is a normative yet challenging developmental task that must be undertaken during adolescence. Body image becomes a risk factor
increased risk for several types of adjustment problems and disorders with adolescent onset (depression, drive for thinness, eating disorders, body dysmorphia, low self-esteem, and health-compromising behaviors).²⁹

Adolescents are constantly targeted and showered with multiple images that contain powerful and influential messages. These messages are deeply rooted in cultural beliefs and media representations about what constitutes an ideal body, how important it is to achieve that body, and what means are acceptable to obtain the ideal body. The body ideal is conveyed to adolescents and reinforced by the parents, friends, peers, and (potential) romantic partners. When the external pressures and ideal expectations for appearance are internalized and when psychological energy is expended in appearance comparisons and surveillance, then adolescents are more likely to experience body image dissatisfaction.³⁰

✓ 35-57% of adolescent girls engage in crash dieting, fasting, self-induced vomiting, diet pills, or laxatives. Overweight girls are more likely than normal weight girls to engage in such extreme dieting.³¹

✓ Over one-half of teenage girls and nearly one-third of teenage boys use unhealthy weight control behaviors such as skipping meals, fasting, smoking cigarettes, vomiting, and taking laxatives.³²

iii. Adulthood

There is good reason to expect body image to become poorer as we age, as every year is likely to take people further away from the thin (or muscular) and youthful body ideal. People typically put on weight through the life span, about 10 lb (4.6 kg) per decade of life until their 50’s, which is actually associated with lower mortality.³³ They also change shape, lose skin elasticity and develop wrinkles, and their hair goes grey or thins.³⁴

These normal age-related changes are likely to be particularly problematic for women. Women in our society gain status and value through appearance, whereas men may gain status from a broader range of qualities, such as intelligence, wealth, or power.³⁵ The greater importance of beauty in women’s lives renders them more concerned than men about the effects of aging on their appearance.
The “double standard of aging” implies that older women are judged much more harshly than older men.\(^{36}\)

Women’s desire to be thinner does not differ between age nor does concern about eating and weight, preoccupation with being, body esteem, satisfaction with appearance, or satisfaction with body parts. Women may shift their body comparisons to age-appropriate peers as they age, rather than to the thin and youthful ideals portrayed in the media. They may also have more realistic expectations about what is possible for them.\(^{37}\)

**iv. Post menopause**

The psychological and physiological changes associated with aging and menopause could be considered to parallel the changes associated with puberty and menarche. Therefore, they are likely to produce eating and weight-related concerns.

Weight typically becomes redistributed during menopause (usually around age of 50 years), resulting in a more rounded shape with larger breasts and waist and increased fat on the upper back. The very fact of menopause, whether it is greeted with sadness, anger, or relief, virtually requires an alteration in the way women think about their bodies.\(^{38}\)

Studies find menopausal women to be less positive about their appearance and fitness. Menopause is culturally equaled to aging.

Exercise, as in all stages in life seems to be a protective factor against negative body image: among women who did not exercise, age was associated with greater body dissatisfaction, whereas for those who exercised, increasing age was associated with greater body satisfaction. Exercise entails benefits to both the physical and emotional wellbeing of women.

**v. Old Age**

The importance of body appearance seems to decrease with increasing age. In simple terms, with age women’s bodies deteriorate, they remain equally dissatisfied, but it matters less to them. These two processes (increasing deviation from the beauty ideal, and decreasing importance) counterbalance one another to produce a stable level of body dissatisfaction.
At a certain age standards for body evaluation may change. The judgment of body image becomes centered in five specific body parts: eyes, hands, fingers, and legs, in addition to their body weight. This suggests a shift to focusing on functional aspects of their bodies. There seems to be a clear distinction between body function and body appearance for older adults and that they may value the former more than the latter.\textsuperscript{39}

Older people are more likely to endure medical problems or chronic illness, restrictions in social and personal activities, and changes in status and relationships with family and friends, in addition to physiological changes in joint mobility, weight, posture, skin, and hair quality. Changes in functional domains may also require various devices which will impact on appearance, e.g. glasses, hearing aids, walking canes.\textsuperscript{40}

As women age, they place less emphasis on the importance of the body’s appearance. Physical appearance is no longer such a central part of who they are. This allows a greater acceptance of the otherwise socially undesirable and largely uncontrollable age-related body changes which, in turn, means that older women are somewhat able to protect their self-concept and self-esteem from their increasing deviation from the thin and youthful ideal. In contrast, the importance of body shape, weight and appearance decreased as women aged, underscoring an important distinction between evaluation and importance of the body.

As women grow older and inevitably move further from the youthful and thin ideal, they adopt cognitive strategies such as lowering their expectations or reappraisal, which increase their acceptance of their aging bodies and more importantly, serve to maintain their self-concept and self-esteem.

\textbf{MOTHERHOOD}

Throughout every stage in life if a woman becomes a mother this will radically change her relationship with her body.

\textbf{PREGNANCY}

In pregnancy, a woman’s body undergoes rapid physical changes in many ways, but most notably in weight and shape. Women typically put on 25–35
LB across the pregnancy with marked changes in body shape, skin, and hair quality. Of course this varied greatly from woman to woman: pre pregnancy body weight, lifestyle and genetics greatly influence the way her body will react to the pregnancy.

Women show considerable variation in response to their changing bodies: the weight and shape changes of pregnancy can be distressing for some women but neutral or even liberating for others. Even though pregnancy seems to be the only time in a woman’s life were the social pressure to be thin, lessens it is still considered as “transgressing the idealized female body”.

Women tend to show that they are generally positive to body changes during pregnancy and are more accepting of their body size and make fewer attempts to control their weight than their non-pregnant peers. The acceptance of these body changes may be because these are viewed as “transient”, with the strong societal pressures on women to be slim relaxed to some degree in pregnancy. Overweight women, in particular, report feelings of liberation from restrictions placed on their lives and feel able when pregnant to participate in activities (e.g. swimming) that they would not otherwise.

Post partum period

There is also variation in the post-partum period, but here body image is generally more negative. Women typically retain weight after delivery, although here again there is considerable variability. Many women are dissatisfied with their weight and shape after having a baby and there is vulnerability to eating disorder pathologies.

Women (especially primiparous women) often refer disappointment when faced with the reality of their bodies: the expectations of a rapid and easy return to their pre pregnancy body that fail to become true often become a source of distress and discomfort.

Being a Mom

Our relationship with our body does not end with childbirth, so neither should our interest in how we view it! Lack of leisure and time for herself, have been found to be major stressors for mothers and this
directly influence their Body Image. Gaining a space of our own, time-out from assigned tasks and roles, and feeling as though one was doing something to improve one’s body⁴⁴ may become protective factors. Sleep, exercise routines, healthy diet, self-care and self soothe activities and social interactions and intimate relationships are factors that must be taken into account when attempting to maintain a healthy body esteem.

**Let’s pay attention!! Objectification Theory, Gender and Body Dissatisfaction**

According to Objectification Theory, sociocultural norms relevant to physical appearance influence the way we view our own bodies and the impact that such evaluations will have on our sense of self-worth, our self-esteem and even our social functioning.

We live in a Western world, and we can’t pretend that the constant badgering of these norms won’t get to us. We are constantly surrounded by messages conveying the current social standards of beauty: in the mass media, expressed by friends, family, work colleagues, and even strangers we encountered in our everyday life. Nevertheless, awareness is our strongest defense!

Keep in mind:

✔️ These messages are more pervasive and emphasize more strongly the importance of appearance for women than for men.

✔️ The emphasis on female appearance seems to be most pronounced during the period of reproductive potential (aged 15 to 40 years). These are vulnerable years, which means we have to make a greater effort to protect and support young women.

**Strategies to Promote a Healthy Body Image**

We all may have our days when we feel awkward or uncomfortable in our bodies, but the key to developing positive body image is to recognize and respect our natural shape and learn to overpower those negative thoughts and feelings with positive, affirming, and accepting ones.
1) **Body appreciation:** Daily positive reminders of our bodies' positive attributes and functionality are proven to promote overall positive body image. So remind yourself how wonderful your body is!

2) **Relate to your body in a non-aesthetic way**

3) **Exercise!!** Maintaining a constant, age appropriate exercise routine is a protective factor at every stage in our lives

4) **Knowledge in empowering:** Challenge yourselves and those around you to become involved in the active process of analyzing, identifying and transforming your environment. Don't let yourselves be passive receivers of negative messages. Become a critical viewer of social and media messages. Pay attention to images, slogans, or attitudes and decide for yourself.  

5) **Advocate for a healthier construct of beauty and educate the younger generations**

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American Society for Plastic Surgeons. www.plasticsurgery.org


