

Video: <http://www.nedc.com.au/eating-disorders-explained>

Body Image & Eating Disorders

Body Image

Body image is the perception that a person has of their physical self and the thoughts and feelings that result from that perception. These feelings can be positive, negative or both and are influenced by individual and environmental factors.

The Four Aspects of Body Image

1. How you see your body is your perceptual body image. This is not always a correct representation of how you actually look. For example, a person may perceive themselves as overweight when they are actually underweight.
2. The way you feel about your body is your affective body image. This relates to the amount of satisfaction or dissatisfaction you feel about your shape, weight and individual body parts.
3. The way you think about your body is your cognitive body image. This can lead to preoccupation with body shape and weight. For example, some people believe they will feel better about themselves if they are thinner or more muscular.
4. Behaviours in which you engage as a result of your body image encompass your behavioural body image. When a person is dissatisfied with the way they look, they may isolate themselves because they feel bad about their appearance or employ destructive behaviours (e.g. excessive exercising, disordered eating) as a means to change appearance.

Why is positive body image important?

Positive body image occurs when a person is able to accept, appreciate and respect their body. Positive body image is important because it is one of the protective factors, which can make a person more resilient to eating disorders. In fact, the most effective eating disorder prevention programs use a health promotion approach, focusing on building self-esteem and positive body image, and a balanced approach to nutrition and physical activity. A positive body image will improve:

- Self esteem, which dictates how a person feels about themselves and can infiltrate every aspect of life, and contribute to happiness and wellbeing.
- Self-acceptance, making a person more likely to feel comfortable and happy with the way they look and less likely to feel impacted by unrealistic images in the media and societal pressures to look a certain way.
- Healthy outlook and behaviours, as it is easier to lead a balanced lifestyle with healthier attitudes and practices relating to food and exercise when you are in tune with, and respond to the needs of your body.

What Causes Body Dissatisfaction?

The following factors make some people more likely to develop a negative body image than others:

- **Age:** body image is frequently shaped during late childhood and adolescence but body dissatisfaction can affect people of all ages and is as prevalent in midlife as young adulthood in women
- **Gender:** adolescent girls are more prone to body dissatisfaction than adolescent boys; however the rate of body dissatisfaction in males is rapidly approaching that of females
- **Low self-esteem and/or depression**
- **Personality traits:** people with perfectionist tendencies, high achievers, 'black and white' thinkers, those who internalise beauty ideals, and those who often compare themselves to others, are at higher risk of developing body dissatisfaction
- **Teasing:** people who are teased about appearance/weight, regardless of actual body type, have an increased risk of developing body dissatisfaction
- **Friends and friend who diet and express body image concerns:** role models expressing body image concerns and modelling weight loss behaviours, can increase the likelihood of an individual developing body dissatisfaction regardless of body type
- **Body size:** in our weight conscious society, larger body size increases risk of body dissatisfaction

Helpful Tips on Improving Body Image

- Focusing on your positive qualities, skills and talents can help you accept and appreciate your whole self
- Say positive things to your self every day
- Avoid negative or berating self-talk
- Focusing on appreciating and respecting what your body can do will help you to feel more positively about it
- Setting positive, health focused goals rather than weight loss related ones is more beneficial for your overall wellbeing
- Admiring others' beauty can improve your own body confidence but it is important to appreciate your own beauty, avoid comparing yourself to others, accept yourself as a whole and remember that everyone is unique and difference are what make us special
- Remember, many media images are unrealistic and represent a minority of the population

Getting Help

If you feel dissatisfied with your body or are developing unhealthy eating or exercise habits seek professional help. Some counsellors and psychologists have specialist knowledge in body image. Professional support can help guide you to change negative beliefs and behaviours.

Eating Disorders

What are Eating Disorders?

Eating disorders are serious mental illnesses; they are not a lifestyle choice or a diet gone 'too far'.

Eating disorders are associated with significant physical complications and increased mortality. The mortality rate for people with eating disorders is the highest of all psychiatric illnesses, and over 12 times higher than that for people without eating disorders.

Eating disorders occur in both men and women, young and old, rich and poor, and from all cultural backgrounds. About one in 20 Australians has an eating disorder and the rate in Australian population is increasing.

There are four eating disorders that are recognised by the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM), which are Anorexia Nervosa, Bulimia Nervosa, Binge Eating Disorder and Other Specified Feeding and Eating Disorders (OSFED).

Eating disorders defy classification solely as mental illnesses as they are not only involve considerable psychological impairment and distress, but they are also associated with major wide-ranging and serious medical complications, which can affect every major organ in the body.

Many people who have eating disorders also present with depression, anxiety disorders, personality disorders or substance abuse problems.

Physical Warning Signs

- Rapid weight loss or frequent weight changes
- Loss of disturbance of menstruation in girls and women and decreased libido in men fainting or dizziness
- Feeling tired and not sleeping well
- Lethargy and low energy
- Signs of damage due to vomiting including swelling around the cheeks or jaw, calluses on knuckles, damage to teeth and bad breath
- Feeling cold most of the time, even in warm weather

Psychological Warning Signs

Psychological warning signs can be difficult to detect in anyone suffering from an eating disorder. They usually only come to light through changes in behaviour or through discussion and conversation. Some include:

- Preoccupation with eating, food, body shape and weight
- Feeling anxious and or irritable around meal times
- Feeling 'out of control' around food
- 'Black and white' thinking (e.g. rigid thoughts about food being 'good' or 'bad')
- Distorted body image
- Using food as a source of comfort (e.g. eating as a way to deal with boredom, stress or depression)
- Using food as self-punishment (e.g. refusing to eat due to depression, stress or other emotional reasons)

Behavioural Warning Signs

Behavioural symptoms are commonly present in those with eating disorders. While you may recognise some of these symptoms in someone you care about, these signs can still be concealed and may be difficult to detect. Some include:

- Dieting behaviour (e.g. fasting, counting calories/kilojoules, avoiding food groups such as fats and carbohydrates)
- Eating in private and avoiding meals with other people
- Evidence of binge eating (e.g. disappearance and/or hoarding of food)
- Frequent trips to the bathroom during or shortly after meals
- Vomiting or using laxatives, enemas, appetite suppressants or diuretics
- Changes in clothing style (e.g. wearing baggy clothes)
- Compulsive or excessive exercising (e.g. exercising in bad weather, continuing to exercise when sick or injured, and experiencing distress if not possible)
- Changes in food preferences (e.g. claiming to dislike foods previously enjoyed, sudden preoccupation with 'healthy eating', or replacing meals with fluids)
- Obsessive rituals around food preparation and eating (e.g. eating very slowly, cutting food into very small pieces, insisting that meals are served at exactly the same time every day)
- Extreme sensitivity to comments about body shape, weight, eating and exercise habits
- Secretive behaviour around food (e.g. saying they have eaten when they haven't, hiding uneaten food in their rooms)

If you have recognised one or more of the above signs or symptoms in someone you care about, you should seek help immediately. You may wish to consult your local GP or you can contact the Butterfly Foundation Support Line on 1800 ED HOPE.

Onset and Duration

While adolescence represents a peak period of onset, eating disorders can occur in people of all ages.

Regardless of the age of a person at the time their eating disorder begins, there can often be a considerable period of time between onset and the time of first treatment. Furthermore, the person may see a number of health professionals before receiving a correct diagnosis. This delay is likely to negatively influence the duration of the eating disorder and the outcomes of treatment.

Evidence shows that early diagnosis and intervention can greatly reduce the duration and severity of an eating disorder. It is therefore vital to seek professional help at the earliest possible time.

Eating Disorders and Other Mental Health Issues

A person with an eating disorder will often be diagnosed with another mental health problem. Dual diagnosis or co-morbidity refers to the presence of one or more diseases or disorders in one individual.

There is a high level of co-morbidity of psychiatric illnesses with eating disorders. Eating disorders are most commonly accompanied by depression and anxiety disorders; however, substance abuse and personality disorders are prevalent in people with eating disorders.

Recovery is Possible

Eating disorders are serious potentially life threatening mental and physical illnesses, however with appropriate treatment and a high level of personal commitment, recovery from an eating disorder is achievable.

Evidence shows that the sooner you start treatment for an eating disorder, the shorter the recovery process will be. Seeking help at the first warning sign is much more effective than waiting until the illness is in full swing. If you suspect that you or someone you know has an eating disorder it is important to seek help immediately.