

Body Image Perception: Learning To Love The Body You Have Now

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The human body is an utterly amazing creation. Even a basic consideration of its functions boggles the mind. Neurons connect to the nervous system, the nervous system connects our muscles and hair-trigger messaging occurs at lightening speed. Every component is composed of microscopic cells, tiny self-regenerating entities numbering in the trillions. Yet, somehow it all comes together, each intricate system functioning in a harmonious symphony conducted masterfully by the brain.

This exquisite miracle of biology makes it possible for us to move around in the world and to experience it with all of our senses. It is the foundation of our very being. Shouldn't it be easy to sit back and simply appreciate our bodies for all they are and all they do for us?

Not so according to recent studies. When participants were asked to what degree they love their bodies, results consistently show that the majority of women harbor a negative body image perception.

Body image perception is often measured by assessing the difference between how a person thinks she appears and her ideal image of how she thinks she should look. For much of the female population, what they see and what they want to see is vastly different.

A 2011 research study of British women, conducted by the University of West England, found that 30 percent of women would give up a year of their lives if they could achieve their ideal body weight and shape. Those findings are reminiscent of another study last year in the U.S., which found that about half of women polled would prefer forgo sex for the summer rather than gain 10 pounds. Similarly, a 1997 *Psychology Today* survey found that 56 percent of women were unhappy with their body image and would go to great lengths to change their appearance. Female body image perception does not appear to have improved over the past decade.

Why is it so hard for women to love their bodies?

As an increasing amount of documents testify, women are sexualized from a very young age. Abercrombie & Fitch's clothing line is a prime example of this. The clothing giant recently made headlines when it released a two-piece bikini for 7-year-old girls with push-up cups in the top.

The female body is also routinely portrayed as a product and a commodity through advertising. Images of women are routinely used to sell seemingly unrelated products such as automobiles, men's cologne and destination vacations.

Furthering the idea that the organic female body is not beautiful in and of itself, we are constantly surrounded by airbrushed images of female "perfection" in the form of roadside billboards, magazines at the checkout stands, television programs and internet ads. Everywhere we look, we are bombarded by suggestions that we are not beautiful, that we do not measure up and that we need to be more beautiful in order to live happy lives, have successful careers -- and most importantly -- attract a suitable mate (lest we die a lonely, frumpy, old, cat lady).

A 2007 report by the American Psychological Association found that this culture-wide sexualization of women contributes to an epidemic of negative body image perception. The constant stream of unhealthy messages about beauty, happiness and success affect women deeply -- even on a subconscious level.

It IS possible to love your body as is.

As pervasive and insidious as it is, you can fly in the face of societal programming. Improving one's own body image perception is a process that occurs over time and requires shifting the way in which you define beauty and your own self-worth.

Key to making the shift to a positive body image perception is becoming acutely aware of the hidden messages about beauty that surround you. Recognizing the impact of these images and observing thought processes that lead you towards beliefs that undermine your self-love is an excellent place to start. Here's how:

- 1.) Notice when women are being portrayed sexually to sell a product and notice airbrushed images that do not accurately portray the female form. Recognize the beliefs that you conjure up from these images about your own beauty.
- 2.) Question what you are looking at and the hidden intentions behind what you see. Oftentimes media images are intended to manipulate you into believing that you are not good enough so that you will then purchase a product.
- 3.) Form your own opinion about what it is to be beautiful. Include all of your amazing female qualities in your definition. Connect with the exquisiteness of your body and appreciate the joy, pleasure and life that it brings to you each day.

People can -- and do -- change their beliefs throughout the course of their lives. The most powerful and healthy belief systems are the ones that influence love of and care for your body. When your body image perception improves and you begin taking better care of yourself, your confidence improves along with your health.

In direct opposition to what today's media and advertising purport, finding happiness and fulfillment is an inside-out job. Choose today to start being a critic of what you see in the media. Enjoy the positive effect this has on your entire life.