

Coping with College Series

Body Image

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Of all the characteristics that contribute to our self-identity, the way we view our body is often one of the most significant. Body image is the way we perceive our body and how we feel about and in it. Having a healthy body image can become particularly challenging for people in college. Primarily because college students are often seeking to establish a sense of identity, maintain or establish relationships, and in general "fit in".

The development of one's body image is affected by the following:

- direct and indirect feedback from others
- actual occurrences to the body (i.e., surgery, accidents, illnesses, physical and sexual abuse)
- general self-esteem.

Many people try to change their body. This is highlighted by the fact that approximately 80% of women in the U.S. are chronic dieters. Further, if you've spent much time at the ISU rec. center, you probably have overheard students talking about trying to quickly lose weight for upcoming events, such as Spring Break trips.

Some people begin to feel like failures if they cannot achieve an acceptable body size. This perspective can lead to difficulties with self-esteem, relationships, and can lead to unhealthy attempts (e.g., eating disorders) to try to lose weight.

Body image disturbance is essentially a socio-culturally generated problem. Our society exerts tremendous influence over how we feel about our bodies. For example, we could consider a Miss America Pageant contestant as a "model" of American body image values. In the 1950's, Miss America contestants were about 5'6" tall and weighed between 120-130 pounds. Currently, an average Miss America winner is about 5'10" and weighs around 110-115 pounds. It's ironic that as our model, or ideal, body size is getting smaller, the average American person is getting larger. This is confirmed by recent reports suggesting that nearly two-thirds of the U.S. population is overweight.

We receive an overwhelming number of messages about body image from television, magazines, billboards, and other media. Take a moment and remember some of the bodies you may have recently seen on television, or recall the last magazine ad that contained an image of a body. What characteristics do you remember about the people that had "attractive" bodies? How about the "unattractive" bodies? Undoubtedly there are many social rewards for having a particular body type. However, many of us are unable to attain the size or type of body that we often come to believe we should have.

What can we do? Ideally, people would learn to reject others' perspectives about body size, thereby developing a sense of self-acceptance. We can learn that there are healthy thoughts, attitudes, and behaviors that allow us to nurture, protect, and love our body, rather than to starve, reject, or hate our body. Our body is but one part of who we are. It's most healthy to define our self-identity by all of our characteristics. Being satisfied with our body is important, but no more

important than other characteristics that make up who we are, such as our ambition, intelligence, sense of humor, kindness, etc.

If you're interested in learning more about body image and related issues, the upcoming Body Image Awareness Week may help. During a week in February, there will be a variety of programs on campus designed to address body image, eating disorders, and self-acceptance. For more information contact the SCS at 438-3655.