

Coping with College Series

In Pursuit of the Impossible Body Image

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Millions of college students are in pursuit of an impossible body image. Their self acceptance is based on having the perfect body, the ideal size, and the ideal weight, and will disappear once the extra pounds return. They also have trouble believing that other people can accept them without that ideal body. In the pursuit for the ideal body they devalue the body they have and negate their unique sense of self. The body images get in the way of their liking who they are. They do not feel a sense of integration and acceptance. You may know of friends, family members, or acquaintances who disowned their bodies. Even if they do not reject their bodies entirely, they may hate certain parts of their bodies. For instance, we often hear someone say "I hate my legs". " I hate my nose, etc".

Both men and women, but more so women, have gone to great lengths to transform themselves to meet society's expectations of the ideal body. The image of the culturally desirable body is projected in the media via TV, in the movies, in magazines, and on billboards. Women are expected to be thin, and men are expected to be muscular. The implication in the media is that to have the ideal body is to be attractive, powerful, witty, and self-controlled. The ideal body defines the individuals' self worth and identity.

Given that most people's bodies do not naturally fit the physical ideal, the pursuit can lead to years of dieting, eating disorders (e.g., anorexia nervosa, bulimia nervosa), self esteem issues, and an obsessive preoccupation with body image. Dieting is an health hazard. The never ending battle with weight gain, weight loss, and the lack of a stable weight, can be very stressful. We also lose control of our lives when we rely on external forces to validate our sense of worth, and define our identity.

How do we not accept the myth of the ideal body? To do that we need to seriously think about how we feel about our bodies, what we believe about our bodies, and why we feel and/or believe that way. It is important to attend to ones' thoughts and feelings, and note any association with your eating behaviors/habits. Do not use food to mask problems that you are avoiding, or problems that are too painful for you to face. Eat a well-balanced diet regularly without feeling guilty and have food become a normal part of life, rather than the focus of your life.

For additional information attend activities during Body Image Awareness Week, February 23rd-27th. Contact Student Counseling Services at 438-3655 for details about the week's activities or for more information about body image issues.