
The Beacon

Guiding You Through the Process of Change

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Body Image

It's not a female issue or a male issue. It's not a children's issue or an adult issue. Increasingly, some level of dissatisfaction with our own bodies is a universal concern in this country. Bookstore shelves are filled with diet books, surgical makeover shows on TV are multiplying, and magazines chronically feature photographs of "ideal" bodies and articles on how to attain them. Unfortunately, the female prototype is incredibly thin and the male prototype is, while thin, incredibly muscular. For the vast majority of people, these extreme body types are unattainable.

Different people respond to these idealized cultural standards in different ways. Eating disorders, such as anorexia, bulimia and binge eating, are only the most obviously-related results. Many people don't develop extreme problems with food or their bodies, but may have lifelong difficulties feeling comfortable in their own skin. Body image struggles can impact self-confidence, self-esteem, sociability, sexuality, and overall contentment with life.

Besides media images, there are many other factors that influence body image. Most significantly, parents have a huge role in shaping their children's perception of and relationship with their bodies. The first layer of influence is what parents directly communicate about their child's body shape, weight, general appearance, and eating/exercise habits. The second layer is what parents teach by example – comments and behaviors related to their own bodies and appearance. Other factors that affect body image include peers, teachers and coaches, gender, cultural background, and personality traits.

Here are some signs that you or your child may be struggling with body image issues:

- Preoccupation with appearance, body shape or weight that gets in the way of daily life
- Consistent sadness or anger about body image
- Frequent self-deprecating comments
- Frequent comparison to others regarding appearance, body shape or weight
- Concern about a body part that seems average to others
- Increasing shyness or self-consciousness
- Attempts to "hide" with clothing or posture
- Eating or exercise habits that seem extreme
- Secrecy related to eating or exercise habits

Counseling may be able to help people find comfort with their body and appearance, mitigate the effects of a negative body image, and enhance the development of a healthy inner core. Parents may also benefit from guidance in helping to promote a positive body image in their children. Beacon Behavioral Services will offer a body image workshop in the Fall. For more information, please call (860) 676-9350 x.27.

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Suggested Readings:

Cash, T. F. (1997). *The Body Image Workbook*. Oakland, CA: New Harbinger.

Freedman, R. (2002). *Bodylove: Learning to like our looks and ourselves*. Carlsbad, CA: Gurze Books.

Beacon Behavioral Services
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