



Article by Dr. Mary Ann Iyer, MD, MA

Becoming Comfortable with Your Body Appearance

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If you don't like what you see when you look in the mirror, you are in the majority of the population. A survey done in 1996 found that "56 percent of women and 43 percent of men disliked their overall appearance with an even larger percentage dissatisfied with individual attributes such as weight and mid torso", and 73 percent of the respondents to a survey conducted amongst women attending the University of Wisconsin-Madison "often have negative thoughts about their body".

Because what we think and feel influences everything else about us - from our behavior and interactions to the choices we make every day - if we carry a negative mind set about ourselves, it can really mess up our lives. A recent poll done by People magazine found that 93 percent of women have tried to lose weight, and up to 20 percent of college women in the United States are bulimic.

So what is a body-mind to do?

For starters, recognize that image is just that – an image. If we realize that the mind stuff we carry may or may not reflect reality – and, most importantly, that the interpretation we give it is uniquely our own, we can start to get a handle on how malleable this really is.

Next, consider what about your body is changeable, and what isn't. I'm a strong proponent of lists – and this would be a good one.

Itemize those aspects of your body appearance that are changeable. Then create a workable plan of action – with specific activities and a timeline – and get to work! If you are not your own best disciplinarian, enlist the help of someone you can trust to keep you on task and on track.

And reward yourself for every victory you make!

Finally, recognize those aspects of yourself that are uniquely you that are not changeable. Whether by genetic predisposition or just plain luck, we each have a conglomerate of attributes, some of which are prized, and some despised. Be advised that much of our interpretation of these categories is culturally determined, and hammered home daily by media messages designed to keep us feeling dissatisfied.

Practice the following:

- Own what is true without apology.
- Develop gratitude for the miracle of life that is present in you just as you are.
- Move with pride and awareness. This body is the body you have to function with. Don't disown it!

- Confront your own inner critic. Get downright blatant. If you wouldn't say something to somebody else – don't say it to yourself!
- Ignore media messages that paint impossible pictures. They harm us all.
- Remember that many body changes (such as aging, pregnancy, the need for rest) are not illnesses – and are part of the normalcy of a full life. As Olshansky & Carnes have said, aging is simply “living past our warranties.”
- If you are feeling stuck with negative self-talk or images, and unable to move beyond them, consider getting help from a therapist who does cognitive reframing and/or imagery.
- Above all else, love exactly what you find when you gaze at yourself. You are the most precious gift you've ever received.

It may be, as you practice these ideas, you will find that some of what you originally had on the “to change” list will gravitate over to your acceptance. Celebrate that as a true victory, too!

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