How Body Image Affects Mental Health

What is body image? According to the National Eating Disorder Association, it is defined as our thoughts, perceptions, and attitudes about our physical appearance, which can be negative or positive. Positive body image generally includes feeling comfortable and confident in your body. It involves acknowledging that the way your body looks has little to do with your character or value as a person. Negative body image includes feeling shame, anxiety, or self-consciousness about your shape as well as a distorted perception of physical appearance. Comparison to others can cause your view of yourself to be distorted.

Women are more likely to have a negative body image than men. They are given messages throughout their lives that their bodies and looks are the most important thing about them. Through media and advertising, women see false beauty ideals. With social media's prevalence, people are constantly looking

at these images and making comparisons. These standards of beauty are usually not achievable or realistic, and some people may turn to expensive appearance-altering procedures in an attempt to mirror what they see. These comparisons, messages, and actions can cause poor body image, which can trigger disordered eating, suicidal thoughts, anxiety, shame, self-hatred, depression, and low self-esteem, all of which are harmful to mental health.

Developing a positive body image takes time and effort. Be patient with yourself as you try to not only have more love for your body, but to realize you are more than a body. You are a human being with talents and qualities that are much more important than what your body looks like.

Consider these tips to help develop a positive body image:

- Remind yourself that your body is a magnificent tool that performs many functions that allow you to experience life.
- Eat and exercise in a way that promotes health and strength, not to achieve a certain weight or body type.
- Practice self-compassion, or extending kindness and understanding to yourself, rather than judgement and criticism.
- Identify feelings of body shame and recognize where the feelings are coming from.
- Practice mindfulness and avoid allowing painful thoughts and feelings to define or overwhelm you.
- Unfollow people on social media who promote unrealistic body ideals or cause body shaming thoughts.
- Surround yourself with positive people who love you for who you are, not for what you look like.
- Kindly ask those you surround yourself with not to comment about your body or others' bodies.
- Wear clothes you feel comfortable in, that you don't have to constantly think/worry about.
- Focus on how it feels to move and live in your body, not

on how it looks.

For references and citations, click here.

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