

Your Body Image: Learning to Love that Unique Person in the Mirror.

It's a rare individual indeed who looks in the mirror and thinks, "I like what I see just fine. I wouldn't change a thing." Even people who most of us think are perfect (movie stars, for example) are likely investing time and money in some kind of body "improvement" program. Meanwhile, the media continues to bombard us with images of surgically-enhanced, thin, beautiful models and actors who claim to represent everyday people. Is it any wonder that the *real* everyday people (you and I) sometimes suffer from a poor body image?

For the most part we can rise above those feelings, and not allow them to interfere with our day-to-day activities. But there are other times when we might let it get to us, maybe even affect our behavior. We might overdress at the beach, sitting on a blanket watching while others are splashing, laughing, showing a lot of skin, and generally having the great time we wish we were having. And there we sit, once again missing out on the fun.

If we let it take its course unchecked, a poor body image can negatively impact our entire quality of life. It can cause us to turn our backs on better job prospects and improved social opportunities. It can also lead to low self-esteem, depression, and eating disorders. So that's the bad news.

The good news is that we don't have to take it sitting down at the beach or anywhere else. It's all about controlling our thinking patterns. It takes effort on our part, and it won't happen overnight, but it's definitely worth the effort.

As we work to improve our thinking, it helps to understand how these negative feelings about our bodies come about in the first place.

Sometimes, sadly, a poor body image can be triggered by childhood trauma, including physical and sexual abuse, or infant neglect. And while these factors can make your self-esteem hurdles more difficult to clear, you can still make great forward progress by establishing positive thinking patterns. Remember, others have overcome these difficult challenges. You can too.

We've already mentioned the influence of the media. And you know where we are most likely to be exposed to that...television. Reducing time spent in front of the tube actually benefits you in two profound ways. The less TV you watch, the less you'll be exposed to these unrealistic body ideals. AND –as a bonus –you'll free up time for something more productive and worthwhile, like exercise.

Regular exercise and healthful food choices are two of the most naturally effective ways to help us feel better about our bodies. Why? Because they are directly connected to the condition our bodies are in. That makes sense, right? When a good diet and exercise program is part of our routine, we tend to see our image in the mirror as a work in progress, something that will improve with each day. And the beauty of looking at it this way is that it's *true*.

Very often we become most critical of ourselves when we are stressed, so set aside time to relax each day. Focus on positive aspects of your life. Recognize the things you can change for the better, and learn to not waste time on the things you can't control. You may also find it helpful to reach out. Working with a professional therapist may help you manage your thinking.

There's no better time than right now to start loving your body. Think of all it allows you to do--walk, work, hug, dance, hold hands, pet a dog, smile. We'll stop the list here, but you know it could go on for pages and pages. Remember, these are the things that *really* shape who you are. In fact, try this: stand in front of the mirror and say something positive about yourself once every day. You'll be amazed how much material you have to work with.

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