

Body Image and Exercise Motivation **By Julie Victor**

As we examine humankind today, a strange paradox becomes evident. While man has enjoyed tremendous progress in many areas of life, from improved technology to greater standard-of-living to modern healthcare, millions of people still wake up and say, “yuck” when they look in their mirrors each day.

Whether it is healthy or unhealthy, whether an individual thinks of it often or rarely, everyone has a body image. The National Eating Disorders Association defines body image as, “a perception of how we see our physical self in our mind’s eye.” It is always subject to change, depending on mood or physical experiences. It involves the way we experience our physical selves, the way we sense and control our bodies.

An unhealthy body image is any body image that is a distorted perception of one’s body shape. The more common misperception is that an individual sees him/herself as too big, but the opposite can occur, as well. Whatever the type of distorted view, the individual is convinced that only others are attractive – never him or herself. The individual feels ashamed, self-conscious, awkward, and ashamed of his /her body.

In order to lose weight, an individual needs to consume fewer calories than he/she expends on a daily basis. Over time, this will reduce body fat. Once lost, the individual needs simply to balance (approximately) caloric consumption and expenditure in order to maintain the new body weight. While this may appear to be simple, it is a major challenge for many. The key seems to be motivation. Some lack it entirely, while others allow their motivation to morph into obsession. What causes a person to go beyond the pursuit of health and actually destroy health?

Unhealthy body image is a distortion of what our body actually looks and feels like. Often, while the individual with an unhealthy body image may be in good physical condition, he or she is unable to recognize this. The result is often reduced self-esteem, manifest in thoughts such as, “I’m not capable of healthy changes” or worse, “I’m not worthy of changing my body”. This vicious cycle often causes problems in other areas of life, as well. Worse still, this type of thought pattern can lead to such depression that the individual gives up trying to change permanently.

A recent study found that 75% of women and 54% of men say they often think about their physical appearance and would prefer that their bodies be different. Beyond exercise, such individuals employ plastic surgery, all sorts of cosmetics, and various spa-type treatments, all in the pursuit of a fitter, younger appearance.

This heavy emphasis (some might say overemphasis) on physical appearance can come at great cost to the individual, and not merely financial cost. This type of person may avoid deeper psychological/spiritual issues that truly lie at the root of the self-esteem/psychological issues that are manifest in poor/distorted body image. The individual is trying to hammer a nail with a screwdriver, so to speak, with the result being that neither the psychological nor the physical issues are resolved satisfactorily.

Healthy, realistic body image plays an important role in the quest for total health and wellness. However, unrealistic body image doesn't change itself. Negative thought patterns must change, and positive thought patterns must take root. While this takes time and effort, and backsliding will likely occur, the hard work is worth it! The following actions are a great starting point:

- Write a list of body parts you are happy with and look at the list often.
- Work at acceptance with regard to your body type; appreciate what your body can do, rather than focus on what you believe it can't do.
- Learn to ignore fashion industry/media portrayals of ideal body type. Many of these images are computer modified, and very few people possess the genetic shape of these models.
- Eat a sensible, balanced diet. Exercise regularly and safely. If you are unsure what those two sentences mean, consult a registered dietician and qualified personal trainer.
- Inform others about your exercise and health goals.
- Try to remember that appearance is *part* of the person, not the whole person.
- Work to assess realistically what you see in the mirror. Nearly all of us have some areas of our bodies that we like more than others; if you can be honest with yourself about these, you've begun to develop a mindset that will allow you to be more realistic about the parts you don't like as much.

Only with sustained, determined effort will ingrained thought patterns change. None of us can maintain consistently high motivation indefinitely. Therefore, it's important to enjoy the benefits of the journey toward physical and mental well-being, and not merely the destination. Improved self-esteem, better enjoyment of food and exercise, greater comfort with oneself are all benefits that accrue gradually. These benefits may not be realized if the "perfect body" or "perfect" *anything* is the focal point.

Genetics must also be considered. So much frustration can be avoided simply by accepting one's body type, and making the best of it, instead of trying to force the body to be something it is not. If the individual adopts an unrealistic attitude toward his/her genetics, discontent is the inevitable result. Body type, also known as somatotype, is purely genetic and is the overriding factor that determines how the body will respond to exercise. The basic body types are as follows:

- Endomorph – softer, rounder physique, with high percentage of body fat
- Mesomorph – heavily muscled physique, with athletic build
- Ectomorph – slender, lean physique, with little body fat or muscular development

It is critical to recognize and accept your body type. If an individual ignores his/her body type, he/she will likely try to affect bodily change that is unrealistic or even impossible. Whatever your body type is, never let it become a reason to avoid exercise. Match your expectations to your genetics, and you will likely enjoy both the exercise and the benefits of exercise more.

There are nearly as many reasons to exercise as there are exercisers. One's body image, healthy or unhealthy, is often a critical motivating factor with regard to diet and exercise. Therefore, it is vital to establish and maintain a healthy view of one's body. It is also important to establish motivational factors and goals that are positive (such as the desire to remain healthy and active), rather than negative (such as trying not to look like some particular body type). Please do not equate the body with the person; appearance is only part of the individual. Make an effort to have the "attitude of gratitude" toward the genetics your parents passed down to you, and enjoy the rewards of a strong, healthy mind and body. Here's to your success.