

BODY IMAGE AND SEXUALITY

What's the Connection?



What is body image?

Body image is how we feel about ourselves physically and how we think others see us. Some of us feel very good about our bodies, and some of us don't. Sometimes how we feel and what we actually look like are not the same. For example, someone who suffers from anorexia (starving oneself) may be very thin, but will look in the mirror and see someone much bigger than he or she actually is.

What is sexuality?

Sexuality is often thought of as sexual orientation – whether you are heterosexual, lesbian, gay, bisexual, etc., but it is so much more than that. Sexuality is an important and positive part of our lives that includes our sexual orientation, but also things like our sexual health, the way we act in relationships; how we feel about our bodies; how we interact with both males and females; and our understanding of who we are sexually. Our sexuality is influenced by our culture and by our ethical, spiritual, and moral values.

Body image and sexuality: What's the connection?

Body image is part of sexuality – how we feel about our bodies. Whether we know it or not, the way we see our bodies has a big influence on us every day, including the decisions we make. People who feel bad about their bodies sometimes make sexually unhealthy decisions. But the better you feel, the better the decisions you'll make.

So how do we make it better?

There are so many pressures from society to look a certain way that it's hard to resist them all. However, there are ways we can make our culture more accepting.

KNOW THE FACTS

We usually have hair and skin color similar to those of our biological parents, and we often develop their body types, too. It's good for us to realize that we get many of our body characteristics from our families. These characteristics make us unique, diverse, and beautiful in many ways.

THINK ABOUT IT: "THE PERFECT BODY?"

Most people have seen the media's idea of the perfect body for a man or a woman, but these are not realistic images. Magazines, for example, use a computer to cut away or shade the bodies in their photos. It's unfair to compare ourselves to something that doesn't even exist.

QUESTION BEAUTY IMAGES; CREATE BETTER ONES

It is important to question our images of beauty. Do our images of beauty include people from all cultures and people with different levels of physical ability? Do we see the beauty in people for who they are, rather than what they look like? It's up to us to accept stereotypes or reject them.

In a world with better body images...

Imagine a world that values more than one kind of body. Think of all the things that would change for the better. We might:

- Be less judgmental, so it would be easier for everyone to feel good about themselves.
- Embrace and accept people whose bodies have different capabilities.
- Value our bodies more and take better care of our health, including our sexual health.
- Be more comfortable with ourselves in romantic relationships and not focus on how our partners think we should look.

Understanding the connection between body image and sexuality is an important part of leading a healthy life. If you have been dealing with body image issues, you might want to speak to a parent or trusted family member, friend, teacher, or professional. You can also consult the resources listed here.

Resources

AMERICAN DIETETIC ASSOCIATION www.eatright.org
Information on healthy eating and nutrition.

EATING DISORDERS AWARENESS AND PREVENTION
www.edap.org 800-931-2237

For answers to your questions, information, and nationwide referrals.

THE SOMETHING FISHY WEBSITE ON EATING DISORDERS

www.something-fishy.org

Information and resources on body image and eating disorders for males and females.

FAT!SO?: A ZINE FOR PEOPLE WHO DO NOT APOLOGIZE FOR THEIR SIZE
www.fatso.com

Order by writing: PO Box 423464, San Francisco, CA 94142.

OVEREATERS ANONYMOUS www.oa.org 212-206-8621

Twelve-step support group for compulsive overeaters.

PLANNED PARENTHOOD OF NEW YORK CITY www.ppnyc.org

A website with information about sexual and reproductive health and relationships.

PLANNED PARENTHOOD'S "FACTS OF LIFE" LINE 212-965-7015

A 24-hour hotline offering pre-recorded messages in English and Spanish on more than 100 topics concerning sexuality and reproductive health.

TEENWIRE www.teenwire.com

Planned Parenthood's website especially for teens.

For more information, contact:

PLANNED PARENTHOOD OF NEW YORK CITY

Margaret Sanger Square, 26 Bleecker Street, New York, New York 10012-2413
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