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, 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 people whose bodies have different capabilities. Accept people who are different from the way society expects them to be. 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.

FATSO?: A ZINE FOR PEOPLE WHO DO NOT APOLOGIZE FOR THEIR SIZE  www.fatso.com
Order by writing: PO Box 43246, 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.pppync.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
Tel: 212-274-7200 Fax: 212-274-7300
www.pppync.org

ABOUT PLANNED PARENTHOOD OF NEW YORK CITY: At Planned Parenthood of New York City, we have more than 90 years of experience providing quality reproductive health care in a safe, supportive environment. We offer services to women, men, and teens throughout New York City, regardless of age, income, or immigration status. When you talk to us, it’s always confidential. To make an appointment at any one of our three health centers in Manhattan, Brooklyn, and the Bronx, call 212-965-7000 or 800-230-PLAN.