

Time for a Body Image Makeover? A 10-Step guide

A 10-step makeover for your body image can benefit your health

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It's well known that the parties, dinners, and special events associated with holidays and special occasions present many opportunities for health-conscious people to succumb to temptation. Even the best of intentions can fall by the wayside when your inhibitions are lowered as you slip into a party mood. Even a run to the supermarket can lead you to problems. Store owners know exactly how to place their products so that the most appealing of goodies sit at the ends of the aisles or are offered as free samples.

People who work hard to maintain their ideal weight may find that they start to doubt and question themselves when they occasionally give way to temptation. In a society that both values thinness and pushes high-carb, high-fat, and high sodium foods, it's no wonder that so many people have difficulty not only with their weight but with how they feel about their bodily shape and size.

Your body image is a function of how you feel about your appearance and how well you feel your body performs. You also have feelings about your body's health. Some of the cues that influence your body image come from "inside" and others are affected by social factors. For instance, if you feel that you are strong, able, and effective, you will have a better body image than if you feel that your body isn't cooperating with your desires to perform in a certain way. Similarly, a chronic illness can cause you to resent a body that you feel is preventing you from achieving your goals. The third aspect of body image, your feelings about your appearance, is in large part determined not by how you feel but by how *society* defines ideals of physical beauty. Most people who experience body image disturbances are sensitive to these social definitions. They feel that there is a mismatch between how they look and how they "should" look.

There are some interesting ways in which social factors affect body image as shown in a study reported in the New York Times, which will be published next spring in the Journal of Consumer Research. Researchers Debra Trampe and her colleagues in the Netherlands found that undergraduate women (who are particularly susceptible to body image concerns) reacted with negative evaluations of their bodies when exposed to advertising images of beauty-related products. They actually had a more negative

evaluation of their own bodies when viewing just the beauty products compared to viewing ads that did not show the products. The researchers were surprised because there were no Julia Roberts or other stunning celebrities that would cause the participants to feel deficient in some way. Just showing a beauty product is enough to make women aware of and sensitive to their own shortcomings.

It's not only college women who can suffer body image disturbances. Men and women of all ages can be subject to negative body images. Everyone needs to learn how to resist these potential body image depressants.

Is your body image in need of a makeover? Here are ten ways that you can remake a negative body image and start to build a positive one:

1. Don't hold yourself up to unrealistic ideals. If you feel that you have to have perfect weight, build, or skin tone, you'll never be satisfied with who you really are. Learn to feel comfortable in your body with all of its quirks and peculiarities.

2. Don't beat up on yourself if you gain a few pounds. You might find that your weight goes up a bit after a few days of travel, vacation, or holiday entertaining. You'll lose it as soon as you go back to your normal exercise routines.

3. Act on your resolutions now instead of waiting. Don't replace actions today with promises for the future. If you fit your workout routines and days of healthy eating in between days of unhealthy eating, you'll be better off than putting it off for a later time.

4. Maintain your workout schedule. Holidays, business travel, celebrations, and even bad weather can interfere with your normal routines. Figure out ways to keep exercising even when the timing isn't optimal.

5. Make sure you build walking into your routines. If you live in the city, walk a few extra blocks instead of driving or riding public transportation. If you drive everywhere, park a few extra spaces away from the door so that you're forced to walk a bit longer. If possible, rather than take elevators, take the stairs.

6. Balance your carbs, fats, and sodium intake. Holidays, birthdays, and other special events are rife with unhealthy temptations. If you must eat cake, also eat nibbles of cheese, nuts, veggies, and fruit. In general, try to limit your portion sizes of carbs (although chocolate now and then may even be healthy!)

7. Allow yourself to feel pride in what your body can do. When you find that you can lift more weight, run longer, and fit into the clothes you want to, take a moment and appreciate your accomplishments. This reinforcement will keep you going and motivate you to keep up your healthy habits.

8. Take advantage of tips in reputable health sources. There actually is decent advice provided in many popular publications and websites about how to reach or maintain your desired weight and how to maximize your health. However, avoid the websites that try to sell you something or make unrealistic promises.

9. Assess your actual body mass index (BMI). Use this BMI calculator available on the CDC website. Once you determine your BMI, you'll know whether you fall within a risk group for over- or underweight. If your weight is normal, then keep on keeping on with what is working for you now. If not, don't despair-go to step 1 and start to improve your body image by improving your health.

10. If you have serious body image issues, seek help. For some people, preoccupation with body image can reach proportions that suggest the existence of an eating disorder. If you are one of those people who is constantly worried about your size, or are focused on some aspect of the body that you're dissatisfied with, or if you are engaging in bingeing and purging, find a licensed professional.

You can pull these out at any time of year, not just during times of holidays and celebrations. Once you start working on your body image, you'll be surprised at how quickly you can start to feel healthier and as a result, more attractive, effective, and fulfilled.