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Body _____ image

Avoiding The Obvious

How do you react if you unexpectedly catch sight of yourself in a full-length mirror, glass door, or store window? Do you avoid posing for pictures if possible?

Many overweight people go to great lengths to avoid looking at their bodies, although they may be willing to view their face and hair. In fact many spend a great deal of time grooming their hair, putting on makeup, or shaping facial hair, but they avoid viewing their overall appearance. Some people avoid looking at themselves so successfully they are surprised when they see a photograph of themselves. Reactions range from "I'm not as fat as I feared." to "Who is that fat person standing with my family?"

How long has it been since you have looked at yourself in a full-length mirror? If you are unhappy with your body, it may be very difficult for you to even consider such an activity.

Avoiding feedback about your appearance may extend to other situations as well. Many heavy people avoid all forms of touch. They describe touching themselves as little as possible and purposefully thinking about something else while they shower to block acknowledging their girth. They shy away from letting others touch them too. "I was so afraid they would put their arms around me and feel my fat" is a common lament. Understandably, physical intimacy is greatly reduced if you cringe at the very thought of being touched.

Which Comes First?

As you became heavier did you notice changes in how you move, sit, or stand? Some obesity researchers question if being sedentary leads to obesity or if obesity causes people to be sedentary either because movement is uncomfortable or because they are self-conscious about their weight so they try to avoid the attention movement attracts. Whatever the origin, overweight

tools for success

- Recognize signs (such as avoiding mirrors, touch and movement) that you are in denial about your weight.
- Understand the factors that influence body image and how they change throughout the life cycle.
- Understand the hidden benefits of obesity and how they relate to your situation.
- Identify and practice the 4 steps for developing a new body image.
- Recognize feelings that signal you are at risk for weight regain.

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individuals tend to be less physically active. In fact, they often withdraw from many aspects of life as if they are trying to become invisible. Social withdrawal in turn sets the stage for further negative feelings about themselves and their bodies.

Paradoxically, researchers report that heavy people are more aware of weight gain than weight loss. This means they may carry the image and feelings of being fat even after they lose weight.

Why would someone ignore weight loss? Fear of failure. Dieters who have a history of losing and regaining weight may be afraid to believe weight loss is possible. Or they may be frustrated and embarrassed their 20-pound weight loss isn't noticeable. In contrast, being aware of weight gain helps them mentally prepare for criticism they anticipate receiving.

Evolution of Body Image

Your body image is built from many different influences, including how you feel about your overall appearance, how you feel about specific features (such as your height or nose), and how coordinated you feel (for example, clumsy or graceful). Cultural beauty standards, life experiences, and people's reactions to you also play a role.

Developmental Milestones

Think back over your personal history. What do you recall about the development of your body image? Can you pinpoint a time when your body image was positive? When it became negative? Or has it always been negative?

Your body image, like other feelings you have about yourself, is influenced by many factors. Since the size and shape of your body is not something you can completely disguise, your body image has been affected by others' reactions to you. Perhaps you were overweight as a child and endured teasing or criticism by peers or family members. If so, you may have begun to develop a negative body image at that time. Or maybe you were

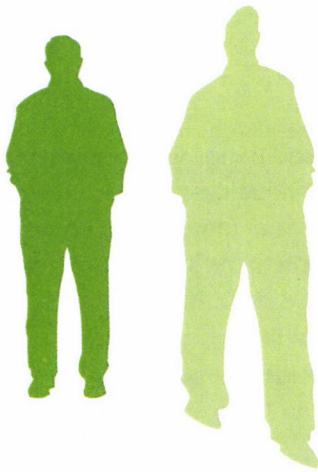
thin as a child but began to gain weight during puberty. If you felt uncomfortable with these physical changes or the attention they received, you may have begun to develop a poor body image.

Peer pressure during adolescence exerts a powerful influence on body image. The teen years are a period of increasing social complexity. Teens trying to deal with uncertainty and insecurity look for ways to control their environment. Observing their own physical appearance and that of others provides a ready yardstick to judge social acceptability. Teens may develop a negative body image because they feel they don't fit in, are different, or aren't accepted by their peers. It is easier to say, "They don't like me because I'm fat," or "not thin enough" than it is to say, "They just don't like me."

Some people sail through their childhood and adolescence with no real weight problems and a relatively healthy body image, but later they begin to overeat and gain weight in response to adult stressors. Death of a close family member, divorce, serious illness, financial pressures, career concerns, relationship problems, and parenting responsibilities can all contribute to overeating. The resulting weight gain leaves many people with a sense they have lost part of themselves.

Barbara had some difficulty with her weight as a young adult but was able to keep it within a 10-pound weight fluctuation. During her 30s, however, she retained excess weight following both of her pregnancies. The resulting change in her appearance caused her to feel badly about herself, and she quickly developed a negative body image.

Eating temporarily distracts us from our problems and reduces our stress level, but the long-term consequence, weight gain, ultimately causes more problems than it solves. Developing effective mechanisms for coping with the stresses encountered during adulthood can minimize weight gain, contribute to enhanced self-esteem, and improve body image.



Body Sense

As you learned while reading this module, overweight people frequently develop strategies for distancing themselves emotionally from their bodies. Some avoid looking in full-length mirrors; others touch themselves as little as possible. Some avoid movement because they don't want to call attention to themselves or because the discomfort of being active reminds them of their weight. The following activities are designed to help you regain and/or expand your sense of your body.

Activity 1 – Mirror Mirror

If you are in the habit of only looking at your face in the mirror, now is the time to find a full-length mirror in a private area and take a good look at your whole body—front, profile, and backside. Take time to acknowledge what you see. Remember, you can't change what you won't acknowledge. Knowing the truth about your appearance is the first step toward changing it. The eventual goal of this exercise is for you to learn to look objectively at your body, including when you're wearing minimal clothing.

Activity 2 – Touch

If you have avoided touching yourself to minimize receiving input about your size, get reacquainted with the feel of your skin. Begin by rubbing some hand lotion into your hands and wrists. What do you feel? How do you feel about what you are feeling?

Repeat this exercise for several days. Gradually begin to massage lotion into other parts of your body, noting how it feels and how you feel about it.

Activity 3 – Movement

Tired of being a wallflower or a coach potato? In the privacy of your own home, put on your favorite music and gently sway to the rhythm. Music has a way of calming our nerves and soothing our souls. Give it a chance to work for you. Note how you feel emotionally and physically as you sway and listen. This activity is worth repeating both for its calming effects and for the added exercise it provides until you are ready to undertake a fitness program.

Picture Perfect Collage

Creative arts projects can help you access thoughts and beliefs you hold but have difficulty putting into words. The following collage activities are designed to help you see how you think your life would be if you were of average weight, as well as what you think your life is like currently. After you complete the collages, share them with your weight management group or with your weight loss counselor. How accurately do you think you portrayed life pre- and post-weight loss? Did you depict good and bad aspects in both collages?

Collage 1 – Future

Using a 14-inch by 11-inch piece of construction paper or poster board, create a collage depicting what you believe your life would be like if you lost weight. You may use personal photos, photos from ads and catalogs, clip art, craft items, words, etc.

Collage 2 – Present

On a second piece of paper or on the other side of the collage you have already made, create a new collage portraying your current life.



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Cultural Beauty Standards

Standards of beauty vary among cultures and within a given culture over time. These standards reflect a combination of religious, economic, and political influences. Because a woman's status has generally been more strongly tied to her appearance than has a man's, ideas about the ideal female form have undergone more changes. Looking at changing female ideals just since the '60s drives this point home.

During the social upheaval of the 1960s and 1970s, women's rights were a dominant social issue. Body-hiding unisex clothing styles such as loose T-shirts and jeans became popular. Greater sexual freedom created a competing fashion trend — sexy mini skirts and hot pants. Many women felt added pressure to have a trim, sexy body to fit the latest fashions. Not surprisingly, quick weight loss diets increased in popularity.

As more women entered the work force in the 1980s and early 1990s, a masculinized build became desirable. Mimicking men's fashions, clothing manufacturers produced somber-colored suits with padded shoulders and narrow skirts. By 2000, women were a fixture in corporate America. Hints of femininity returned. Dresses and soft colors became acceptable again. The idealized female form today is described as "boys with large breasts." It combines masculine muscle tone and narrow hips with a bit of female curves. Many health experts believe the desire to achieve this unnatural shape has helped create a strong demand for breast implants and liposuction.

Historically men gained status and desirability through displays of power. Athletic, leadership, and business skills were prized above physique. However, today men report feeling "pressure to be fit," which many sociologists attribute to the increasing independence and fitness of women. Looking well toned has replaced looking well fed as a symbol of male prosperity and desirability.

Cultural beauty standards are impossible for all but a few people to attain. This does not stop people

from trying or yearning to match the ideal, however, resulting in widespread discontentment. In fact, disappointment with one's physique is so common among women that psychologists have termed it Normative Discontent.

Possible History of Abuse

People who have experienced sexual abuse or assault often report very negative feelings about their bodies, combined with strong feelings of guilt, shame, anger, and fear. Their actual weight may have little impact on their body image, but they unknowingly connect their appearance to the abuse or assault. Some individuals admit gaining weight to make themselves less attractive, effectively saying, "Stay away from me," without uttering a word. Their negative body image and excess weight typically persist until they resolve their feelings about the trauma they experienced.

Now that you are familiar with the major factors shaping body image, you may be asking, "If having a negative body image is so painful, why do people stay fat?"

The Hidden Benefits of Obesity

Some people find obesity provides benefits that outweigh the negatives of being fat in a thin-loving society. Potential benefits include the following:

Excuse for Unmet Goals — Many overweight people blame their unmet goals on their weight instead of their lack of professional or social skills. They may say, "Management is prejudiced against fat people or I'd have gotten the job," or "I can't get a date because of my weight." Losing weight can be stressful because it removes the excuse.

Power — Overweight men in particular report they like the sense of power they have as a "big guy."

Increased Professional Credibility — Some women feel being heavy signals they are serious about their work.

Decreased Threat to Friends and Peers — People often mistrust someone they feel is too attractive. Being overweight is a way of saying, "I'm not a threat, I'm just like you."

Test of a Mate's Commitment — Being overweight can be a way of saying, "Do you love me for me? Prove it! Love me even though I am fat."

Reduced Risk of Infidelity — Some people say being heavy helps them stay faithful by reducing their chances to cheat.

Staying off the Radar Screen — When you are heavy, you and others expect less of you. You become comfortably invisible.

Protection — Obesity can be a barrier between yourself and others who may do you physical harm.

Developing A New Image of You

Acknowledging your current body image, understanding its roots, coming to terms with your true appearance, and gradually adjusting to a new thinner you are important steps toward managing your weight long term.

Until you recognize why you feel the way you do about your body and the hidden benefits you derive from being overweight you may feel uncomfortable at a lower weight and be at risk of letting the pounds pile on again. Regaining your lost weight may be disappointing to your conscious mind, but at some unconscious level it will serve to move you back into your comfort zone.

Signs You May Be at Risk for Regain

Once you've lost weight, it's important to watch for signs that may prompt weight regain, including:

- Resentment and anger at people who seem to notice you for the first time even though you've met before. "I'm the same person I was when I was fat."
- Anxiety when you receive attention (sexual or otherwise) for your new appearance.
- Pressure to meet expectations—yours and those of others.
- Inability to see you've lost weight.

If you experience any of these feelings, it is important you notify the group facilitator or other OPTIFAST® Program staff of your struggle. Also, it is critical you remain at the lower weight long enough to allow yourself to work out the conflicting emotions of pleasure and fear inspired by your weight loss.

The goal is to learn to be more comfortable IN your body not just WITH your body. To do this you will need to set your own standards of an acceptable body image and work to reinforce them. The enclosed worksheets are designed to help you achieve just that.

key goals

Using the tips in this module, develop 2 – 3 goals to work towards.

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