

Building positive body image in the information age

In a world bombarded with messages and images about 'perfect' bodies, how can we help women to love their bodies?

Body image is how you think and feel about your physical self. And it's not a new concept. Throughout time, humans have been compelled to judge themselves through comparison with others.

From childhood through to adolescence and adulthood, your body shape changes. So can your body image. This can be influenced by not only your health and personality, but external factors such as media, society and culture.

In the information age, every person every day receives on average 105,000 words of communication through media, internet and mobile phones apps. Add images and graphics to that, and each person is exposed to around 34Gb (gigabytes) of information a day – enough to overload a laptop within a week.

All this information can affect body image and behaviour, and often in a negative way. Having a poor body image can diminish your self-esteem and, in turn, your self-care.

In contrast, having a healthy body image means feeling comfortable about your body, which can help you to maintain good health.

An image-driven world

Jean Hailes ambassador and founder of the Wheel Women social and recreational women's cycling group, Tina McCarthy, says social media has enabled "the everyday person" to have a voice and influence, "whereas it was previously in the hands of big companies with big advertising budgets".

While that is often a good thing, other times it gives a platform to "the social media influencer, frequently unqualified in health, but happy to spruik wellness and beauty messages to highly impressionable followers," says Ms McCarthy.

"And the problem is that what's capturing people's imagination is not important in the scheme of things," she says.

Trends such as the objectification of women (eg, the 'pornification' of social media – where images are increasingly sexual), and celebration of skinny bodies are worrisome developments in the world of social media and can worsen a negative body image, says Ms McCarthy.

“But it’s difficult to tell women to just ‘get over it’, especially when there is so much pressure to look a certain way in this modern world,” she says.

Snippets of the real world

Ms McCarthy says Wheel Women aims to improve women’s body image by showing that women of all shapes, sizes and levels of fitness can ride a bike, and as much as what suits them.

“In between the ‘snippets of perfection’ on Instagram, we are showing ‘snippets of the real world’ – and this is a powerful message,” says Ms McCarthy.

“We are about providing a non-judgemental place for women to do what they can manage – whether that be one ride per month or one ride per week.”

Ms McCarthy is also an ambassador of ‘This Girl Can – Victoria’, a State government campaign that celebrates and supports Victorian women embracing physical activity in a way that suits the individual.

The message for both Wheel Women and This Girl Can – Victoria is “just go out and have a go; you don’t have to be perfect,” says Ms McCarthy.

“If you are loving what you are doing, you will do more of it, and your happiness and inner glow will radiate.”

The inner self-critical voice

Jean Hailes psychologist Gillian Needleman says that body image is the voice of negative criticism.

“Unfortunately, humans are hardwired to the primitive self-critical voice – it is an automatic thought,” Ms Needleman says.

As that voice won’t ever go away, we need to challenge our self-criticism and learn how to manage it.

“If we lose the strength of conviction and belief around the self-criticism, we can reduce its power,” she says.

First and foremost, you need to see your body as more than just your ‘casing’ or physical appearance, says Ms Needleman.

Your body is the result of many factors, such as genetics, environment, diet, exercise, type of work, if you have had children and how many. It is important to reaffirm that you are more than the sum of your physical parts.

“We are not one dimensional, yet negative body image forces us to view our body in this manner,” Ms Needleman says.

“Looking at your body and the role it plays for you as a functioning, complex entity is a great way to start to challenge the critical voice.

“The more you accept your body, the kinder you are to it – and this is beneficial for overall health and wellbeing as it will impact how you treat it.”

Modelling positive body image

The following mantras may be useful for minimising negative body image:

1. **Right here, right now**
 - Take me as I am
 - I am doing my best for now and I will continue to try to maintain my health
2. **Body appreciation**
 - My body is a complex entity that does many things
3. **Wellbeing rather than looks**
 - My health is the most important thing
 - I have so much more to offer the world than my looks.
4. **Self-love**
 - My body is my friend
 - I accept myself as I am.

Ms Needleman says another way to gently shift the mindset is to write three gratitude statements each day, noting down what you have appreciated about your body.

She says remembering that “no one is perfect” is also a simple but important way to remind yourself to be kind to yourself.

For more information about body image, visit <https://jeanhailes.org.au/health-a-z/mental-emotional-health/body-image>

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