



Healthy Steps to Freedom

“Dying to Be Thin, How Far Will You Go?”

Body Image and Cultural Standards of Beauty

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Body Image throughout the 20th Century: “Modest to Full Figure to Thin!”

American standards of beauty have changed significantly over the past century. Viewing false role models, women have been allured into striving for impossible ideals.

- **1900-1920** Larger bodies were associated with affluence and thin bodies were associated with poor, working class women
- **1940** Full figures were fashionable (idols like Marilyn Monroe wore a size 14)
- **1960** Thinner bodies were popular, like that of “Twiggy”
- **1980** Fit and sporty bodies were more desirable (*Jane Fonda’s Workout*)
- **2000** Ultra-thin bodies became the trend, leading to an increased incidence of eating disorders and death among young models striving for impossible ideals

Media and Body Image: “There Are No Innocent Images!”

Media (TV, magazines, billboards, Internet and radio) plays a significant role in dictating these beauty ideals. Commercials and advertisements may seem innocent, but the underlying messages are designed with intent and purpose. Hidden among the words and pictures are messages telling viewers how they should look, foods they should eat, clothes they should wear, how they should cut their hair, etc.

- The average person sees more than 1,724 images PER DAY!¹
- Women exposed to magazine images of ultra-thin fashion models subsequently exhibited feelings of depression, unhappiness, guilt, shame and body dissatisfaction.²

Changing Body Images throughout the World: “Striving for American Ideals!”

American standards of beauty have begun to spread globally. With the introduction of westernized TV throughout the rest of the world, traditional cultures and values have been compromised and, in some cases, abandoned.

- Historically, **Chinese** worshipped a woman’s round belly as a sign of fertility and sexual desire. Today half the women in China are normal or below normal weight and are trying to lose 10 pounds.
- In 1988, **Fiji** women laughed at the Western women’s quest for thinness. In 1995, TV arrived and women began emulating American TV stars.

- For centuries, men in **Mongolia** were attracted to short, plump and strong women who could carry their share of the work. Now, dieting in Mongolia is very popular and fitness centers, which didn't exist 10 years ago, have begun to appear.
- It has always been more attractive for **Jamaican** women to be 10 pounds overweight, than 10 pounds underweight. Today, women in Jamaica are taking dangerous animal hormone pills in a misguided attempt to change their body shape.
- In **South Africa**, women traditionally wore large beaded waist and leg hoops simulating rolls of body fat, which were considered marks of beauty. In a recent study of black female university students in a rural area, 45% had some form of disordered eating, attempting to look more like the westernized ideal.³

The Disparity Between Impossible Ideals and Ourselves: “Size What?”

Viewing models, pop stars and TV stars in the media, creates a huge gap between what women see when they look in the mirror and what they strive to achieve.

- The **average supermodel** is estimated to be **5' 9" tall**, weigh **110 pounds**⁴ and wear a **size 2**, yet only **1 in 40,000** women meets the size and shape requirement to become a fashion model.⁵
- The “**ideal girl**” (as described by Caucasian teenage girls) is **5' 7" tall**, weighs **110 pounds** and **wears a size 5**,⁶ whereas the average U.S. woman is **5' 4" tall**, weighs **163 pounds**⁷ and wears a **size 14**.⁸
- Pictures of models in magazines are **airbrushed**, retouched and edited.
- In their own quest for thinness, **TV stars, models, pop stars and music artists** promoting these ideals have developed a wealth of diseases and conditions including diet pill abuse, substance abuse, eating disorders and even death.

At War with Our Own Bodies: “Is it Vanity? Or Building Self-Esteem?”

In an effort to build self-esteem, women often utilize desperate measures that lead only to vanity and self-destruction.

- **Vanity** – An increasing number of women are dieting compulsively, using illegal substances and opting for dangerous and unhealthy procedures (such as plastic surgery, BOTOX[®] injections, implants and liposuction) leading to obsessive behaviors, eating disorders, illness, drug addiction and even death.
- **Self-Esteem** – Poor body image and low self-esteem seem to be at the root of many of these impossible ideals and ensuing health disorders.
 - People with negative body image are more likely to suffer from feelings of depression, isolation, low self-esteem and obsessions with weight loss.⁹
 - Though feeling awkward or uncomfortable in our bodies is not uncommon, “the key to developing positive body image is to recognize and respect our natural shape and learn to overpower those negative thoughts and feelings with positive, affirming and accepting ones.”⁹ For example, try viewing images that are more affirming such as those from popular modeling agencies that use only models size 12 and above.¹⁰

Practice: “Tackling my Issues! Developing a Personal Plan!”

- Learn to Make Healthy Choices (active living and smarter eating):

- After reading the following statement, discuss your reaction.

Choices I make every day are influenced by my self-image. I sometimes avoid participating in activities that I like (such as swimming or dancing) or enjoying a meal simply because I am self-conscious about the way my body looks.⁹

- Learn to Be Content (having a healthy perception of one’s own body)

- What defines my self-esteem? I feel good about myself when...

- Who defines my self-esteem? (mother, friends, media, etc.)_____

- Limit Time Spent Viewing Magazines, TV, etc.

- How much time have I spent viewing popular media (i.e., looking at magazines, watching TV, browsing the web)

Today? _____

In the past week? _____

What things could I have done with this time that would have been more positive for my self-esteem?

- **Avoid Comparing Your Body...with your friends' bodies or the people you see in advertisements or on your favorite TV shows.**

- Looking back over the past week,

Who were the people I spent time comparing my body to? _____

For what or whom did I make decisions about what to wear (i.e., who did I try to “please” when I picked out what clothes to wear?). My boyfriend? Mother? Co-worker? Friends? _____

How did that make me feel? _____

- Recognize that “Our uniqueness to God is a source of our self-esteem”¹¹

- If you notice yourself comparing your body to others, you should remember that every **BODY** is naturally different, meaning we all have special qualities that make us unique as individuals. What are five things that make me unique?

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____

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