

## **BODY SIZE DIVERSITY AND ACCEPTANCE**

### ***The Perfect Body***

Many elements of society promote the idea that having a Perfect Body is a guaranteed way to command others' admiration and approval. Society portrays this perfect body as the key--the secret to attracting a romantic partner, to landing a dream job, to having good health and to having popularity, success and self-confidence. In short, society seems to say that the perfect body is your passport to the good life.

And what *does* this perfect body look like? For women, the ideal is either a very thin supermodel/waif look, or an impossibly voluptuous figure. Men, on the other hand, may have to contend with ideals that demand muscularity or extreme thinness or both. You may be nodding your head at this point because you are aware of these ideals. If you are like most people, you have been criticized by others--or you may have criticized yourself--for being too fat or too thin or for simply not fitting the standard.

Research suggests that images of women are much more confining than what is allowed for men. Not surprisingly, women far out number men in terms of preoccupation with body shape, size, and weight. The most dominant standards emerge from white, middle class culture, and include many contradictory messages about what women are supposed to look like. For instance, these messages tell women to be thin, curvaceous, muscular and delicate--all at once! But did you ever stop and think about who sets these unquestioned standards?

### ***Society's Messages about Body Image***

Society's messages about body image are generally shaped by the media, the beauty industry and outdated notions of health and fitness. These messages define body shape and size as targets for regulation and control. Ironically, a majority of media photos that portray women with perfect bodies are enhanced by modern technology to achieve the effect, or portray women who may actually be seriously underweight. At best, such figures may be natural for only a small percentage of the population.

It is both unfair and unrealistic to expect everyone to look like these so-called perfect women, but the power of such images remains hard to resist. It may be difficult to give up the pursuit of this mythical perfect body size, even though that pursuit may end up being detrimental to one's emotional and physical health. Perhaps it would be easier if the ideals were not so tied to our sense of well-being. Perhaps it would be easier if media images did not carry so much aspirational appeal --provoking an atmosphere of envy, intended to motivate people to buy products and services in the hope of attaining those images (Cooke, 1996). Instead, we have multi-million dollar diet, drug, and cosmetic industries waving their products at women (and some men), implicitly saying, "Try me, give me your money, and I will promise you eternal happiness."

### ***The Body Police***

Very likely, you and people who may truly love you have acted as *Body Police* at some time. The *Body Police* enforce and reinforce society's messages about body standards (Cooke, 1996). They echo notions, for example, that a woman is not supposed to have hips, that a man is supposed to look like a fashion model or that nobody is supposed to have, of all things (shudder!), fat. They tell us, "You are not OK as you are; your body is not OK the way it is." When we accept that message, we say to ourselves, "I'll feel good about myself *only when* I look like *this*." We put certain conditions on ourselves that we've got to meet a particular standard before we can fully accept ourselves.

The *Body Police* also support *size oppression*. Size oppression occurs when a person is harassed or discriminated against simply for being, or not being, a certain size. For the most part, the desired size is one into which less than five percent of the people in this country fit. At this time of great progress against other forms of prejudice and discrimination, we remain steeped in size oppression, denigrating ourselves and each other because of our body sizes.

It is worth noting that while there is much pressure to be thin, size oppression does not spare those who are naturally thin either. Thin people often are oppressed by the voluptuous and muscular ideals and can be just as dissatisfied with their bodies and themselves as anyone else. And if not that, they are often the target of others' envy, jealousy and ill will--for no reason other than their body sizes! In that respect, the *Body Police* are equal opportunity oppressors!

### ***What's Normal?***

In her book, Cooke (1996) asks, What size should I be? For her answer, she does not refer to the usual insurance company height-weight charts. Instead, she points out that people's body shapes and sizes are results of many factors. These factors include people's genetics, the environments they grew up in, their stages in life, their nutritional intakes, their cultural norms and their life styles. Ultimately, Cooke's answer is . . . Me-size. As silly as that may sound, it's true. Believe it or not, body size diversity is normal.

As you seek to understand normality of body shape and size, question the media's and advertisers' images of perfection. Make your own decisions. Don't be fooled. We don't expect everyone to be the same height; how is it that we expect everyone to have the same body shape or size? When you think about normal, *think diversity*.

### **Crash Diets and Related Fads**

In contrast to what many self help books and tabloid formulas say, diets don't work. It's simply not effective to cut out this or that or to eat just salads or diet milkshakes to make your body fit some pair of jeans. (How about getting a pair of jeans that fit your body?) Crash diets rarely lead to permanent weight loss anyway. In fact, they often lead ultimately to weight gain. Diets can even create other serious health problems.

So what SHOULD you do? Flexibility is the key. Pay attention to your body's cues. Eat when you are hungry and stop when you feel satiated. Don't outlaw any food. Indulge the occasional craving. Take a long-term view of nutrition--balance can be achieved over a number of meals. Most importantly, enjoy food; remember it is fuel for your body; treat it as a friend. If you respond to your body's needs, your body will find its appropriate weight, size and shape. Health-- not some arbitrary dress size-- is the overall goal.

Avoid the crash mentality with regard to exercise, too. Setting an exercise goal of getting to look a certain way can be discouraging and frustrating. Instead, exercise for the goals of health, fitness, relaxation, and sheer good feeling. Everyday examples of reasonable exercise include walking about a half-hour a day, three days a week, and taking the stairs, if you can, instead of the elevator. Have fun being physical; if exercise feels like a form of self-punishment re-evaluate its place in your life.

Health and fitness are about enhancing your overall sense of energy, vigor and enjoyment of life, and about helping you weather the lows and enjoy the highs of life, whether physical or emotional. These things are possible at many body sizes, but not if you are starved or malnourished by the latest fad diet, or if you are in poor condition due to an inactive routine.

### **Remember . . .**

The next time you feel guilty over having eaten a donut or the next time you compare your body shape with that of someone you pass on the street, remember that body size diversity is normal. Remember that body size is not the determining measure of your's or anyone else's health or worth as a person. Remember that crash diets don't work and that exercise should be fun, not punishment. Remember to think critically and to not be conned by the media stereotypes of the perfect body. And above all, accept yourself and others for who they are, not for what their measurements might be.

### **What Can I do?**

In today's society, size oppression is so prevalent that it is sometimes difficult to imagine that things could be otherwise. However, you can take a proactive position in challenging prevailing standards. Here are a few ideas to get you started:

- Question standards before accepting them.
- Don't buy fashion magazines--at least don't *buy into* them!
- Imagine what fashion photographs look like before they are technologically enhanced.
- Ignore height-weight charts.
- Ignore or challenge the *Body Police*.
- Take time to become aware--without judgement--of the body size diversity around you.
- Get rid of your bathroom scales.
- Wear clothes that fit.

### **Resources:**

Cooke, Kaz. (1996). Real Gorgeous: The Truth about Body and Beauty. NY: Norton.  
Dixon, M. (1996). Love the Body You Were Born With: A Ten Step Workbook for Women. NY: The Berkeley Publishing Group.  
Freedman, R. (1988) Bodylove: Learning to Like Our Looks and Ourselves. NY: Perennial Library.  
Goodman, C. (1995). The Invisible Woman: Confronting Weight Prejudice in America. Carlsbad, CA.  
Higgs, L.C. (1993). One Size Fits All and Other Fables. Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers.  
Hirschman, J. Munter, C. (1995). When Women Stop Hating Their Bodies: Freeing Yourself From Food and Weight Obsession. NY: Ballantine Books. On the Internet at: <http://www.shulersnet.com/jellyroll/sizeacc.htm>

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