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Body Image: Living in Our Bodies

By Kali Munro, M.Ed., Psychotherapist

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I have yet to meet a woman who, at some point in her life, has not felt discomfort with the size or appearance of some aspect of her body. A woman does not have to be anorexic or bulimic to dislike her body or struggle with what she eats. The fact that there are vast numbers of women who are critical about their bodies and have an uneasy relationship with food is simply not captured by statistics, which invariably refer to the problems of anorexia and bulimia. The tendency to focus on eating disorders does not do justice to the pain and turmoil of the many additional women who struggle with what to eat, deny themselves food, or overeat.

Anorexia and bulimia are serious health problems and should not be minimized. But, there are thousands of women who do not fit these categories for whom eating is an emotionally laden issue and a health problem as well. Most women have had some form of dysfunctional relationship with food in their lifetime. Who hasn't gone on a diet, eaten too much for emotional reasons, or worried about how much they weigh? While on the surface this may not seem problematic, particularly when these issues are often the subject of everyday conversations with other women, it does reflect an insecurity about our bodies and a stressful relationship with food.

Having issues with our body and food can range from a woman worrying about her weight and what to eat once in awhile, to, on the other end of the continuum, worrying every moment of every day. The pain some women carry around about their bodies and food can be devastating, and is fuelled by seemingly innocent conversations about weight, dieting and the size of women's breasts, thighs, and stomachs.

Take Maria, for example. Every morning when she wakes up, she mentally goes over the 'flaws' of her body, wondering how she can slim her belly even further, how she can take the pounds off her bum, and what she can wear to slim her body. She mentally skims through the clothes she owns, wishing she had something that would make her body look better, to look less 'fat.' She wonders whether or not she should eat breakfast, exactly what she can put into her body, how many calories the meal would have and how much exercise she'd have to do to burn off those calories.

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Maria frequently compares herself to other women's bodies; women she meets and knows and women she sees in the media. In her mind, her body always fall short. She doesn't believe it when people tell her she looks good. In fact, when someone tells her that she looks like she has lost weight, she 'feels fat' and tries even harder to lose weight. But, she doesn't starve herself, or make herself throw up, although she thinks she should.

Heather, on the other hand, doesn't think regularly about what she eats, but does think she should lose some weight. She doesn't like her body and wishes she could be thinner. She has tried many diets but with no long term success. She wishes her body could be different, but has 'resigned' herself to being this size. She feels guilty and ashamed that she doesn't have more control, and believes that her body size means that she is 'lazy.' On bad days, both Heather and Maria buy lots of junk food and eat it, at

home, alone without paying attention to the fact that they are eating. Both women 'feel fat,' out of control, and ashamed of themselves afterwards and sometimes for the next day or more. The next day, Maria responds by clamping down hard with a diet, maybe skipping a meal, and while Heather may watch what she eats, she continues much the same. Both women feel ashamed of themselves and profoundly depressed, although not necessarily visibly.

These feelings of inadequacy and shame that both Maria and Heather have about their bodies and what they eat, and that so many women experience to one degree or another, is created and fuelled in a society that places more value on how women look than on what we think, feel or contribute. Women's physical attractiveness is such a big issue, particularly in the dominant white culture, that girls as young as seven years old are dieting.

Given society's obsession with appearances, particularly women's, it's no surprise then that many women believe that by changing their bodies, they can change their lives. But, this only makes matters worse. The more we focus on changing our body, the more we will feel like a failure, disappointed at our lack of success or control, and ashamed, anxious and insecure that our body doesn't look the way that we want it to. This inevitably takes us further and further away from our deeper self, leaving us feeling unsatisfied, lost, irritable, angry and depressed.

The challenge for all of us is to be ourselves, and to be in our bodies. When we live in our bodies, feel our feelings, and know our own perspective, we can't help but feel more connected and at peace with ourselves. When we judge our bodies we are taking an 'outsider' view, when what we really need is to learn how to live inside our bodies.

Finding a quiet place, taking a few deep breaths, and tuning in to how you feel is a good place to begin. Doing this for short periods of time each day, or as regularly as you can, increases your ability to do this more naturally. Everyone needs to find their own way of going inward. For some it is writing in a journal, meditating, yoga, dance, talking to other people, joining a support group, therapy, taking a bath, or getting a massage. Anything that assists you to focus inward and to connect with how you feel in your body, not how your body looks, is helpful.

Whichever route you take to connect more deeply with yourself is your choice. Try not to get discouraged if at first you don't feel any changes, it may take some time and there are other methods

to try. There are some excellent exercises in Marcia Hutchinson's book, *200 Ways To Love The Body You Have*, that you can try. Remember there are probably a number of reasons why food and body image are issues for you. The process of feeling better about yourself may feel like a slow and long one, but definitely well worth the journey.

Recommended Readings:

200 Ways To Love The Body You Have, by Marcia Hutchinson.

Transforming Body Image: Learning to Love the Body You Have, by Marcia Hutchinson

When Food is Love, by Geneen Roth. All of Geneen Roth's books are excellent!

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Improve Your Productivity With Healthy Living

By Wendy Betterini

Living a healthy lifestyle will not only make us feel better physically and mentally, but it can also greatly improve our productivity at home and work as well. Many people think they lack the time (or money) that it takes to lead a healthy lifestyle, but the fact is that it is far easier than one might think. Making small, simple changes that lead to a healthy lifestyle is as easy as taking a look at what we put in our bodies and how we treat ourselves on a day-to-day basis.

Eating properly is essential to providing our bodies with the proper fuel that is needed to get us through each day. Fueling our bodies with excess sugars and highly-processed foods increases the production of insulin in our systems, which eventually affects the sugar in our blood. This up and down in our blood sugar levels drain our energy and keep us from focusing on the tasks at hand.

Eating whole grains and complete proteins will level out the blood sugar and will also help decrease food cravings throughout the day. Our bodies are much better able to use the fuel supplied when the sources include lean proteins, whole grains, fruits, and vegetables. The result is sustained energy and proper nutrition. Highly-processed foods do not provide the vitamins and minerals our bodies need, and may actually harm us with additives such as Trans fats and preservatives.

Even if we practice proper eating habits, we may not always get the nutrition we need. If our diets are lacking nutrition due to a hectic lifestyle, supplementing with vitamins, minerals, and/or herbs can help. Deficiencies in many vitamins and minerals can cause problems with digestion, eyesight, and even sleeping patterns. Keeping the proper level of nutrients in our blood gives our bodies the added fuel when our diets fail to provide it. A good multi-vitamin will include most of what is needed, but choose a chewable brand for maximum absorption.

Another important factor in healthy living is staying hydrated. Providing hydration for our bodies is

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crucial to keeping our systems working optimally. Our bodies are composed mostly of water, and require about two liters of water per day, not only to maintain the proper water level, but to also flush out the impurities that are created through the body's daily processes. Proper hydration is necessary in sustaining our energy, and also aids in properly burning the fuel we have taken in by way of food.

To burn the extra fuel we taken in, we must exercise and burn calories. Without exercise, our bodies will only burn so many calories daily. Any excess fuel will turn into those ugly fat deposits so many of us wish we didn't have. It is now suggested that to lead a healthy lifestyle, one must incorporate a half hour of exercise each day. This can be fulfilled by simply taking a pleasurable one-mile walk during lunch or after work. Speed and distance aren't usually as important as keeping your body active on a daily basis. This alone should give you the pep and vitality needed to be more productive at home or work.

Finally, we should always listen to what our bodies are telling us when we are sick or feel "out of sorts." This is the body's way of telling us to recognize that we aren't leading as healthy a lifestyle as we should. If we make some of the simple changes mentioned above, we will go a long way putting our mind and bodies back in shape.

Wendy Betterini is a freelance writer and web designer in New England. She is the owner of

, which features work/life balance tips for entrepreneurs, home

business owners, telecommuters and freelancers. Visit today for more tips on balancing work and family under one roof.



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