**Self Esteem in Teens**

Does any of this sound familiar? "I'm too tall." "I'm too short." "I'm too skinny." "If only I were shorter/taller/had curly hair/straight hair/a smaller nose/longer legs, I'd be happy."

Are you putting yourself down? If so, you're not alone. As a teen, you're going through lots of changes in your body. And, as your body changes, so does your image of yourself. It's not always easy to like every part of your looks, but when you get stuck on the negatives it can really bring down your self-esteem.

**Why Are Self-Esteem and Body Image Important?**

**Self-esteem is all about how much you feel you are worth — and how much you feel other people value you.**Self-esteem is important because feeling good about yourself can affect your mental health and how you behave.

People with high self-esteem know themselves well. They're realistic and find friends that like and appreciate them for who they are. People with high self-esteem usually feel more in control of their lives and know their own strengths and weaknesses.

**Body image is how you view your physical self — including whether you feel you are attractive and whether others like your looks.** For many people, especially people in their early teens, body image can be closely linked to self-esteem.

**What Influences a Person's Self-Esteem?**

**Puberty and Development**

Some people struggle with their self-esteem and body image when they begin puberty because it's a time when the body goes through many changes. These changes, combined with wanting to feel accepted by our friends, means it can be tempting to compare ourselves with others. The trouble with that is, not everyone grows or develops at the same time or in the same way.

**Media Images and Other Outside Influences**

Our tweens and early teens are a time when we become more aware of celebrities and media images — as well as how other kids look and how we fit in. We might start to compare ourselves with other people or media images ("ideals" that are frequently airbrushed). All of this can affect how we feel about ourselves and our bodies even as we grow into our teens.

**Families and School**

Family life can sometimes influence our body image. Some parents or coaches might be too focused on looking a certain way or "making weight" for a sports team. Family members might struggle with their own body image or criticize their kids' looks ("why do you wear your hair so long?" or "how come you can't wear pants that fit you?"). This can all influence a person's self-esteem, especially if they're sensitive to others peoples' comments.

People also may experience negative comments and hurtful teasing about the way they look from classmates and peers. Although these often come from ignorance, sometimes they can affect body image and self-esteem.

**Healthy Self-Esteem**

If you have a positive body image, you probably like and accept yourself the way you are, even if you don't fit some media "ideal." This healthy attitude allows you to explore other aspects of growing up, such as developing good friendships, becoming more independent from your parents, and challenging yourself physically and mentally. Developing these parts of yourself can help boost your self-esteem.



**A positive, optimistic attitude can help people develop strong self-esteem.** For example, if you make a mistake, you might want to say, "Hey, I'm human" instead of "Wow, I'm such a loser" or not blame others when things don't go as expected.

Knowing what makes you happy and how to meet your goals can help you feel capable, strong, and in control of your life. A positive attitude and a healthy lifestyle (such as exercising and eating right) are a great combination for building good self-esteem.

**Tips for Improving Body Image**

Some people think they need to change how they look to feel good about themselves. But all you need to do is change the way you see your body and how you think about yourself. Here are some tips on doing that:

**Recognize that your body is your own, no matter what shape or size it comes in.** Try to focus on how strong and healthy your body is and the things it can do, not what's wrong with it or what you feel you want to change about it. If you're worried about your weight or size, check with your doctor to verify that things are OK. But it's no one's business but your own what your body is like — ultimately, you have to be happy with yourself.

**Identify which aspects of your appearance you can realistically change and which you can't.** Humans, by definition, are imperfect. It's what makes each of us unique and original! Everyone (even the most perfect-seeming celeb) has things that they can't change and need to accept — like their height, for example, or their shoe size. Remind yourself that "real people aren't perfect and perfect people aren't real (they're usually airbrushed!)".

**If there are things about yourself that you want to change and can, do this by making goals for yourself.** For example, if you want to get fit, make a plan to exercise every day and eat healthy. Then keep track of your progress until you reach your goal. Meeting a challenge you set for yourself is a great way to boost self-esteem!

**When you hear negative comments coming from within, tell yourself to stop.** Appreciate that each person is more than just how he or she looks on any given day. We're complex and constantly changing. Try to focus on what's unique and interesting about yourself.

**Try building your self-esteem by giving yourself three compliments every day.** While you're at it, every evening list three things in your day that really gave you pleasure. It can be anything from the way the sun felt on your face, the sound of your favorite band, or the way someone laughed at your jokes. By focusing on the good things you do and the positive aspects of your life, you can change how you feel about yourself.

Some people with physical disabilities or differences may feel they are not seen for their true selves because of their bodies and what they can and can't do. Other people may have such serious body image issues that they need a bit more help. Working with a counselor or therapist can help some people gain perspective and learn to focus on their individual strengths as well as develop healthier thinking.

**Where Can I Go if I Need Help?**

Sometimes low self-esteem and body image problems are too much to handle alone. A few teens may become depressed, and lose interest in activities or friends. Some go on to develop eating or body image disorders, and can become depressed or use alcohol or drugs to escape feelings of low worth.

If you're feeling this way, it can help to talk to a parent, coach, religious leader, guidance counselor, therapist, or friend. A trusted adult — someone who supports you and doesn't bring you down — can help you put your body image in perspective and give you positive feedback about your body, your skills, and your abilities.

If you can't turn to anyone you know, call a teen crisis hotline (an online search can give you the information for national and local hotlines). The most important thing is to get help if you feel like your body image and self-esteem are affecting your life.

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