

A NEW HARBINGER SELF-HELP WORKBOOK

# The Body Image Workbook

SECOND EDITION



An  
Eight-Step  
Program for  
Learning to  
Like Your  
Looks



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## STEP I

# Discovering Your Personal Body Image

Your journey toward body image change and acceptance begins with self-understanding. As conveyed by the adage "Know thyself," you must first seek specific knowledge about your own personal body image. However, because we often obtain insight about ourselves by trying to understand others, let's first consider the experiences of three people—Emily, Andrew, and Katlin—who are all having body image problems.

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### THREE PEOPLE WITH A NEGATIVE BODY IMAGE

Emily is a nineteen-year-old college student—bright, energetic, and sociable—whom most people would describe as nice-looking. Her weight and height are average and she has pretty blue eyes and a contagious smile. But this is not how Emily sees herself. She complains, "My big butt and fat thighs totally mess up my looks." She's preoccupied with her weight. She admits liking the color and style of her strawberry blonde hair, and she describes her upper body shape as "okay, I guess." But she has no particular feelings about most other areas of her body.

Whenever Emily goes to the gym or meets someone new (especially guys) on campus, at work, or at a social event, she's hit by a wave of self-consciousness and feels as if her body is under a microscope. Another upsetting situation occurs whenever she weighs herself and sees that she's a few pounds heavier than she'd like to be. She gets especially bothered about her body whenever she wears any snug clothing—for example, a bathing suit at the pool, or spandex workout shorts at the gym. In these situations, a familiar pattern of thoughts runs through Emily's mind: "I'm the fattest person here. I look like a blimp. I wish I could disappear. I hate feeling this way." She rarely has pleasant thoughts about her looks,

unless a girlfriend compliments an outfit she's wearing. But even compliments readily lead to self-critical thoughts, such as "The outfit would look a lot better if my butt didn't stick out so much."

Because of Emily's discomfort about her looks, she sometimes avoids going to parties, especially if she knows there will be new people to meet at the event. She also avoids going to the beach or pool. When attending aerobics class, Emily sneaks into the back of the room after the class has begun. To lose weight, she's always trying out a new fad diet. Her former boyfriend thought she looked fine, but her "insane obsession with her looks" made no sense to him, and he became exasperated with her.

Andrew is a forty-year-old divorced stockbroker. He's slender, has a nicely trimmed beard, and is quite the dresser. He deplores his receding hairline and thinning hair. He's also dissatisfied with his muscularity, believing that his lack of bulging muscles makes him "look like a loser." He feels "cheated in the looks department." Once his thoughts zoom in on his appearance, as they often do, Andrew becomes irritable and despondent for the rest of the day. He's convinced that no woman will ever find him attractive enough to date. But, sometimes, if someone does seem interested in him, he wonders what's wrong with her.

Several situations predictably provoke Andrew's body image distress. When he's hanging out with guys he thinks are good-looking or who have lots of hair or well-defined muscles, Andrew compares his looks with theirs and he becomes filled with bitterness. Before going to work, he scrutinizes himself in the mirror, inspects his balding head, and examines his flexed muscles from every angle. Andrew's thoughts about his appearance are angry and self-disparaging. "I look like a damned wimp. It's totally unfair." He thinks, "I look worse every day. The more hair I lose, the dumber I look."

So how does Andrew cope? To escape feeling too "skinny," he avoids hanging out with well-built men as much as he can. From time to time he lifts weights at home (the gym is too intimidating), but he is impatient for noticeable changes so he quickly gives up working out. He wears baseball caps, even indoors, to hide his hair loss. He's tried plenty of hair-growth regimens, but they didn't work for him. Rather than asking a woman for a date and risking rejection, he goes to movies and parties alone, if at all.

Katlin is thirty-one-years-old and has been married to Patrick for ten years. They have two children and Katlin also teaches high school English. About three years ago, Katlin was involved in a near-fatal automobile accident that left her face severely lacerated and burned. Despite the improvements that she obtained from plastic surgery, her face remains visibly scarred, mostly on her chin, right cheek, and forehead. These physical changes have scarred her body image as well.

She is preoccupied with how she looks to others and what she believes they must be thinking about her. She is extremely aware of strangers' stares and is seldom willing to be in public places with her kids, fearing that they will be uncomfortable being seen with her. Sometimes when she's teaching, if she notices students whispering or giggling, she wonders if they are making fun of her looks. Before leaving the house, she always applies a thick coat of cosmetic concealer. In social situations, she tries to stand to the left of people so they cannot see the right side of her face. Patrick worries about her difficulties with "looking different" and about the fact that even though she is physically capable of smiling, she almost never smiles anymore. She fantasizes that another cosmetic surgery will make her look "normal" again. Sometimes, Katlin looks at photos of herself taken before the accident and cries. "I'll never be me again," she sobs.

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## SELF-DISCOVERY WITH THE BODY IMAGE SELF-TESTS

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Each person's body image is as unique as a fingerprint. Emily, Andrew, and Katlin all have negative body images, but if you look more closely you'll see the experience is unique to each person. They dislike different physical features, are distressed by different triggering events, have different thoughts and emotions, and handle their problems differently. What these three people do have in common is that, like you, they are tired of struggling with their negative body images.

Now it's time to discover more about your own unique body image—both your strengths and your vulnerabilities. On the following pages, you'll find a series of self-tests that probe your personal body image experiences in detail. When you complete them, each scientifically developed test will provide you with a fine-tuned, informative summary of certain crucial facets of your body image (Cash 2008).

After you've taken all six tests, I'll show you exactly how to score them. Don't worry; you don't have to be a math genius to do this. Then, once you've computed your scores, I'll guide you in their interpretation.

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## THE BODY IMAGE EVALUATION TEST

On this first self-test, you will discover your *evaluative body image*. This refers to how you feel about your appearance in general as well as about particular physical characteristics or features. Put a check mark in the column that expresses how dissatisfied or satisfied you are with each characteristic listed.

Physical Characteristics	Very Dissatisfied	Mostly Dissatisfied	Mostly Satisfied	Very Satisfied
1. Overall appearance				
2. Face (facial features, complexion)				
3. Hair (color, thickness, texture)				
4. Lower torso (buttocks, hips, thighs, legs)				
5. Midtorso (waist, stomach)				
6. Upper torso (chest or breasts, shoulders, arms)				
7. Muscle tone				
8. Weight				
9. Height				
10. Any other physical characteristic that you dislike? _____				

## THE BODY IMAGE THOUGHTS TEST

In the course of day-to-day life, thoughts about your appearance may run through your mind. This self-test lists some of these thoughts. Simply read each thought and decide how often, if at all, it has occurred to you in your daily life during the past month. For each thought, place a checkmark in the column that indicates how often the thought has occurred. In making this decision, don't take any listed thought too literally. Your own thoughts might be similar in content, but consist of different words. For example, you may not have the identical thought "I am unattractive," but you may have equivalent thoughts like "I'm ugly," or "I look awful."

Body Image Thoughts	Rarely or Never	Once Every Several Days	Daily or Almost Daily
1. Why can't I ever look good?			
2. My life is lousy because of how I look.			
3. My looks make me a nobody.			
4. They (other people) look better than I do.			
5. It's just not fair that I look the way I do.			
6. With my looks, nobody is ever going to love me.			
7. I wish I were better-looking.			
8. I wish I looked like someone else.			
9. They (other people) won't like me because of how I look.			
10. Something about my looks has to change.			

<b>Body Image Thoughts</b>	<b>Rarely or Never</b>	<b>Once Every Several Days</b>	<b>Daily or Almost Daily</b>
11. How I look is ruining everything for me.			
12. They (other people) are noticing what's wrong with my looks.			
13. They (other people) are thinking I'm unattractive.			
14. My clothes don't look good on me.			
15. I wish they (other people) wouldn't look at me.			
16. I can't stand my appearance anymore.			
17. They (other people) are judging me because of what I look like.			
18. There's nothing I can do to look good.			
19. I can't do that (something you're invited to or expected to do) because of my looks.			
20. I've got to look just right to do that (something you're invited to or expected to do).			

## THE BODY IMAGE DISTRESS TEST

Negative body image emotions, such as anxiety, disgust, despondency, anger, frustration, envy, shame, or self-consciousness, crop up in different situations for different people. In the next self-test, you are asked to think about occasions when you've been in each of twenty situations. Place a check mark in the column to indicate how often you've had negative emotions about your appearance in each situation. Of course, there may be some listed situations that you haven't encountered or some that you avoided. If so, simply indicate how often you probably would have had distressing emotions if you had been in those situations.

Body Image Situations	Rarely or Never	Once Every Several Days	Daily or Almost Daily
1. At social gatherings where I know few people			
2. When I look at myself in the mirror			
3. When people see me before I've "fixed up"			
4. When I am with attractive people of my own sex			
5. When I am with attractive people of the opposite sex			
6. When someone looks at parts of my appearance that I dislike			
7. When I look at my nude body in the mirror			
8. When I am trying on new clothes at the store			
9. After I have eaten a full meal			
10. When I see attractive people on television or in magazines			

<b>Body Image Situations</b>	<b>Rarely or Never</b>	<b>Once Every Several Days</b>	<b>Daily or Almost Daily</b>
11. When I get on the scale to weigh myself			
12. When anticipating or having sexual relations			
13. When I'm already in a bad mood about something else			
14. When the topic of conversation pertains to physical appearance			
15. When someone comments unfavorably on my appearance			
16. When I see myself in a photograph or videotape			
17. When I think about what I wish I looked like			
18. When I think about how I may look in the future			
19. When I am with a certain person			
20. During certain recreational activities			

## THE APPEARANCE IMPORTANCE TEST

People have various beliefs and experiences about the meaning and importance of their physical appearance. Some of these beliefs are reflected in the statements in this next self-test. Read each statement and decide whether it is personally mostly true or mostly false for you. Record your answers with a check mark in the appropriate column beside each statement.

Experiences and Beliefs About Your Appearance	Mostly True	Mostly False
1. When I see good-looking people, I wonder about how my own looks measure up.		
2. When something makes me feel good or bad about my looks, I tend to dwell on it.		
3. If I like how I look on a given day, it's easy to feel happy about other things.		
4. When I meet people for the first time, I wonder what they think about how I look.		
5. In my everyday life, lots of things happen that make me think about what I look like.		
6. If I dislike how I look on a given day, it's hard to feel happy about other things.		
7. I fantasize about what it would be like to be better-looking than I am.		
8. By controlling my appearance, I can control many of the social and emotional events in my life.		
9. My appearance is responsible for much of what's happened to me in my life.		
10. I often compare my appearance to that of other people I see.		

Experiences and Beliefs About Your Appearance	Mostly True	Mostly False
11. If somebody had a negative reaction to what I look like, it would bother me.		
12. My physical appearance has a big influence on my life.		

## THE BODY IMAGE COPING TEST

In the course of everyday life, there are situations and events that can negatively affect our body image. These situations and events are called *body image threats or challenges*, because they threaten or challenge our ability to feel okay about how we look. Listed below are some of the ways that people may try to cope with body image threats or challenges. For each item, think about how much it characterizes how you usually cope or probably would cope with an event or situation that poses a threat or a challenge to your feelings about your body image. Indicate with a check mark whether each coping reaction is or is not characteristic of you. It doesn't matter how helpful or unhelpful your ways of coping are. Don't answer based on how you wish you reacted. Just be truthful.

Coping Reactions	Mostly Is Like Me	Mostly Is Not Like Me
1. I spend extra time trying to fix what I don't like about my looks.		
2. I think about how I could cover up what's troublesome about my looks.		
3. I do many things to try to look more attractive.		
4. I spend a lot of time in front of the mirror.		
5. I think about what I should do to change my looks.		
6. I fantasize about looking different.		
7. I seek reassurance about my looks from other people.		
8. I compare my appearance to that of physically attractive people.		
9. I make a lot of special efforts to look my best.		
10. I make a special effort to hide or cover up what's troublesome about my looks.		

Coping Reactions	Mostly Is Like Me	Mostly Is Not Like Me
11. I try to tune out my thoughts and feelings.		
12. I eat something to help me deal with the situation.		
13. I avoid looking at myself in the mirror.		
14. I tell myself that I am helpless to do anything about the situation.		
15. I withdraw and interact less with others.		
16. I make no attempt to cope or deal with the situation.		
17. I try to ignore the situation and my feelings.		
18. I react by overeating.		
19. I consciously do something that might make me feel good about myself as a person.		
20. I remind myself of my good qualities.		
21. I tell myself that I'm just being irrational about my looks.		
22. I tell myself that the situation will pass.		
23. I try to figure out why I am challenged or threatened by the situation.		

Coping Reactions	Mostly Is Like Me	Mostly Is Not Like Me
24. I tell myself that I am probably just overreacting to the situation.		
25. I remind myself that I will feel better after a while.		
26. I tell myself that there are more important things than what I look like.		
27. I tell myself that I probably look better than I think I do.		
28. I react by being especially patient with myself.		
29. I tell myself that the situation is not that important.		

## THE BODY IMAGE QUALITY OF LIFE TEST

People differ in how their body image experiences affect other aspects of their lives. Body image may have positive effects, negative effects, or no effect at all. The various ways that your own body image might influence your life are listed below. For each item, place a check mark in a column to indicate how your feelings about your appearance affect that aspect of your life. Before answering each item, think carefully about the answer that is most accurate about how your body image usually affects you.

Aspects of Your Life	Mostly a Negative Effect	No Effect	Mostly a Positive Effect
1. My basic feelings about myself—feelings of personal adequacy and self-worth			
2. My feelings about my adequacy as a man or woman—feelings of masculinity or femininity			
3. My interactions with people of my own sex			
4. My interactions with people of the opposite sex			
5. My experiences when I meet new people			
6. My experiences at work or at school			
7. My relationships with friends			
8. My relationships with family members			
9. My day-to-day emotions			
10. My satisfaction with my life in general			

Aspects of Your Life	Mostly a Negative Effect	No Effect	Mostly a Positive Effect
11. My feelings of acceptability as a sexual partner			
12. My enjoyment of my sex life			
13. My ability to control what and how much I eat			
14. My ability to control my weight			
15. My activities for physical exercise			
16. My willingness to do things that might call attention to my appearance			
17. My daily grooming activities (i.e., getting dressed and physically ready for the day)			
18. How confident I feel in my everyday life			
19. How happy I feel in my everyday life			

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## SCORING YOUR BODY IMAGE SELF-TESTS

After taking the tests, most people say that it was an eye-opening experience. They become more self-aware and have a somewhat greater realization of how their body image influences their emotions and their lives. Of course, putting these experiences under a microscope may be a bit bothersome. So, if you want to take a breather before scoring your tests, feel free to do so. Your discomfort will pass and you'll be ready to pick up where you left off.

Let's score your self-tests one at a time. Follow my instructions below for each test. Enter each score you obtain in the Body Image Profile below.

### The Body Image Evaluation Test

Here you have indicated the areas or aspects of your appearance that you like or dislike. Count the number of characteristics with which you are Very Dissatisfied (in column 1) and multiply it times 2. Count the number you rated Mostly Dissatisfied (i.e., your check mark is in column 2). Add these two sums to obtain your Body Image Evaluation score. Enter this score (from 0 to 20) in your Body Image Profile below.

### The Body Image Thoughts Test

On this test you revealed how often, over the past month, you've had various negative thoughts about your looks. To compute your score, first count the number of check marks you placed in the middle column (Once Every Several Days). Next count the thoughts occurring Daily or Almost Daily (check marks in the last column) and multiply this second number times 2. Add the two sums and enter your Body Image Thoughts score (0 to 40) in your Body Image Profile below.

### The Body Image Distress Test

This test focuses on situations and events that lead to body image discomfort or distress. First, add up the check marks you put in the middle column (Sometimes). Next, add up the check marks in the last column (Often) and multiply that number by 2. The sum of these two values is your Body Image Distress score (ranging from 0 to 40) to enter on your Body Image Profile.

### The Appearance Importance Test

This test is easy to score. Count how many statements that you marked as Mostly True for you and enter this Appearance Importance score (from 0 to 12) in your Body Image Profile.

## The Body Image Coping Test

This test has three scores that reflect different coping strategies that people use to handle body image threats and challenges. The first coping strategy is called Appearance Fixing and its score is the number of check marks you entered in the first column (Mostly Is Like Me) for items 1 through 10. The second score is for coping by Experiential Avoidance—and that is the number of Mostly Is Like Me check marks for items 11 through 18. Finally, count the Mostly Is Like Me check marks for items 19 through 29 to get your score for coping by Positive Rational Acceptance. Enter each score in your Body Image Profile.

The possible range of scores is 0 to 10 for Appearance Fixing, 0 to 8 for Experiential Avoidance, and 0 to 11 for Positive Rational Acceptance.

## The Body Image Quality of Life Test

Your final test enables you to understand how your body image affects you and your life. You need to calculate two scores. The first one is the Negative Impact score, which is the number of times (from 0 to 19) you checked Mostly a Negative Effect, in the first column. The second score, Positive Impact, is the number of check marks (from 0 to 19) in the last, Mostly a Positive Effect, column. Enter these two different scores in your Body Image Profile.

## SELF-DISCOVERY HELPSHEET: YOUR BODY IMAGE PROFILE

Body Image Test Scores	Body Image Zones		
	Acceptance Zone	Risky Zone	Problem Zone
<b>Body Image Evaluation</b> ____ + ____ = ____	0    1	2    3    4    5	6-10   11-15   16-20
<b>Body Image Thoughts</b> ____ + ____ = ____	0-1    2-3    4-5	6-8 9-11 12-14 15-17	18-22 3-29 30-40
<b>Body Image Distress</b> ____ + ____ = ____	0-1    2-3    4-5	6-8 9-11 12-14 15-17	18-22 23-29 30-40
<b>Appearance Importance</b> ____	0    1    2	3    4    5    6	7-8 9-10 11-12
<b>Body Image Coping</b> Appearance Fixing ____ Experiential Avoidance ____ Positive Rational Acceptance ____	0    1    2 0    1 11 10 9 8 7	3    4    5    6 2    3    4    5 6    5    4    3	7    8    9    10 6    7    8 2    1    0
<b>Body Image Quality of Life</b> Negative Impact ____ Positive Impact ____	0    1 19    18	2-3    4-5    6-7 16-17 14-15 12-13	8-11 12-15 16-19 8-11 4-7 0-3

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## INTERPRETATION OF YOUR BODY IMAGE TESTS

You have taken the comprehensive self-tests of body image and, in the process, have already begun to realize some key things about your own body image. Now let's take your self-discovery to the next level and learn what your test scores really mean. I will guide you in interpreting your test results so that you can determine exactly what you need to change.

### Three Body Image Zones

On the right side of the Body Image Profile under Body Image Zones, for each score please circle the value or range that represents your score. This will place each test score on a continuum that will help you understand the meaning of the score in terms of three Body Image Zones—the Acceptance Zone, the Risky Zone, and the Problem Zone.

Scores in the *Acceptance Zone* reflect a positive, healthy aspect of your body image. There's not much that needs improvement on this facet. Individuals with the best body image will have lots of scores in this zone. The main purpose of this workbook is to help you have more scores in the Acceptance Zone.

Scores in the *Risky Zone* signal a warning and identify directions for change that this workbook will make possible. Those facets of your body image in this zone cause hassles or difficulties for you sometimes and in some situations. The closer a score is to the Acceptance Zone the better; and the closer it is to the Problem Zone, the more body image difficulties you have. Risky Zone scores pinpoint aspects of your body image with definite room for improvement that you will want to work on.

Scores in or near the *Problem Zone* wave red flags. These aspects of your body image are especially troublesome for you and make important contributions to a negative body image. Problem Zone scores highlight key areas to target in your efforts to change and become more accepting of your physical appearance.

Now let's examine each of your test results in detail to understand what your scores can tell you about your body image. You should realize, however, that scores are only numbers and cannot be perfectly precise for specific people. These test results are tools for self-discovery, not pronouncements of absolute truth. I will offer interpretations as food for thought. Ultimately, the most important insights must come from you. So, take the time you may need to really ponder what I suggest. Does it fit? When discussing your test results, I will ask you as much as I tell you.

### Body Image Evaluation: Where Does It Hurt?

People with Risky Zone and Problem Zone scores on this test are dissatisfied with many of their physical characteristics (Cash 2000b). Because you are probably reading this book to overcome a negative body image, don't be surprised if you score in one of these zones. There are at least two possible reasons for such scores. First, you may have several distinct sources for your displeasure. Being overly critical of your looks, you find a number of different physical attributes that you cannot accept as they are. When you look at your body, you look for trouble and are unwilling to find anything that is really

okay. Your body is a moving target for your discontent. Second, there's the spillover factor. Not liking your weight, for example, may spill over to any body area (e.g., lower torso, midtorso, muscle tone) that you think betrays your weight. You actually have only one complaint, but it affects your evaluation of several features.

Some people may have a low dissatisfaction score on Body Image Evaluation that is more of a problem than the low score actually implies. Often this occurs because you are content with most of your physical characteristics except for one or two, but feel that the areas of discontent ruin your overall appearance. Did you answer that you were dissatisfied with your overall appearance on item 1? If so, are you blaming your entire body for one or two disappointing features? That can create lots of troublesome problems.

Whatever your score and whatever imperfections you focus on, eliminating any dissatisfaction is worth the effort. This workbook will help you accept your physical appearance—imperfections and all.

## How Thought-Provoking Is Your Body Image?

When you took the Body Image Thoughts Test, you began to read your own mind. The test samples negative thoughts that people may have about their looks (Cash, Lewis, and Keeton 1987). Scores in the Problem Zone mean that you tend to think the worst about your looks and you think it often. You've probably convinced yourself that these mental self-criticisms are really true. As you mull over aspects of your appearance, you focus on your "flaws." You ruminate over what other people think about your looks and probably assume they judge you as disapprovingly as you do yourself. Once caught up in the stream of these thoughts, it's hard for you to ignore them. If you score in the Risky Zone, you may be milder in your self-critical thoughts, or you may put down your body in a more focused fashion, picking on some single feature. Either way, you are needling yourself—needlessly.

Let's consider the other side of the coin. How often do you have positive, self-affirming thoughts about your physical appearance? How open is your mind to pleasant, approving thoughts about your body? If you have a negative reply to these questions, why is that? Why would you close your mind to self-acceptance? Maybe you're oblivious to your physical assets, so you don't believe there's anything good to think about. Or maybe you push aside any complimentary thoughts with a "Yes but ..." followed by some self-criticism. For example, "I look pretty nice with this hairstyle, but I'm still fat."

Another reason for a deficit of self-affirming thoughts could be that you've come to believe that only vain, egotistical people think favorably of their looks. If so, then any mental compliment about your appearance may lead to a brief guilt trip, so you dismiss the positive thought with "I shouldn't be thinking that." Later in this workbook, you'll learn to give yourself permission to acknowledge and enjoy your best features—without the guilt. How would it feel if you didn't have self-critical body image thoughts running through your mind? How would it feel to have frequent self-accepting body image thoughts?

## Where Are Your Body Image Land Mines?

Now let's learn more about the situations and events that trigger your troubles. Your Body Image Distress score reflects how many situations trigger you to becoming bothered or upset about your looks

(Cash 1994b; 2002b). You might feel anxiety, disgust, despondency, anger, frustration, envy, shame, or self-consciousness. If you have a score in the Problem Zone, daily life is probably like crossing a minefield, with the potential for negative emotions and experiences to erupt almost everywhere.

Scores that are in the Risky Zone indicate that you have some times and places that intensify your body image displeasure. Even if your distress is triggered by limited circumstances, you don't need the grief and can learn to eliminate it. In this workbook, you'll focus on your most provocative situations—the ones in which you're conditioned to react emotionally—and you will learn to handle these situations differently. You will learn that the situation itself doesn't cause your distress. Rather, the real culprit that upsets you is how you think about and behave in the situation.

### Importance of Your Appearance: How Much Do You Bank on Your Looks?

The Appearance Importance Test taps a very important aspect of your body image (Cash and Labarge 1996; Cash, Melnyk, and Hrabosky 2004). It provides you with a measurable index to determine how much you are invested in your physical appearance for defining your identity and determining your self-worth. The more you invest, the more vulnerable you are to body image troubles and problems in your life. If you score in the Risky Zone, you believe that your appearance is moderately influential on how you think about yourself or how you believe other people think and feel about you. Scores in the Problem Zone reveal that you place excessive emphasis on your physical appearance in terms of how you think about yourself in your everyday life.

The scientific truth is that the more invested people are in their appearance, the more it preoccupies them—in their thoughts, emotions, and behaviors. If you are devoting lots of your hopes, energies, and efforts to being physically attractive or looking different than you do, especially because you believe that this is essential to your self-worth, you actually will feel little self-worth. Do yourself a favor and reread this paragraph and really think about it. Can you see how it applies to you?

Several steps in this workbook will focus on helping you to gradually deemphasize your looks and put them in a proper, happier perspective. Your looks are not everything, and you are certainly much more than your looks.

### How Do You Cope with Feeling “Ugly”?

There are three basic ways that people try to handle or cope with threats or challenges to their body image (Cash, Santos, and Williams 2005). The Body Image Coping Test provides your scores for each approach—Appearance Fixing, Experiential Avoidance, and Positive Rational Acceptance. Let's try to understand each coping strategy and what your scores mean.

Appearance Fixing is a common coping strategy that involves mental and behavioral attempts to change something about your looks. When troubled by some offending physical characteristic, you may reflexively try to do something to your appearance to feel more comfortable. You might fuss and fret over the characteristic and try to cover it up to make it look better. For example, if something happens that makes you feel fat, you might put on loose-fitting clothing, start planning your next diet, or begin working out to your exercise video.

Another Appearance Fixing tactic is called *compensation*. You try to improve something specific about your looks, such as by getting a new hairstyle or buying new cosmetics or an outfit, so that you make yourself “look better in order to feel better.” One additional strategy involves seeking reassurance about your looks from other people. When you ask a friend, “Do you think I look fat in this sweater?” you hope to hear “No, of course not” and have your concern fixed. You can also “fix by fantasy”—imagining how you will look after weight loss or cosmetic surgery. Later, in Step 6 of the workbook, you’ll see how coping by Appearance Fixing can become a problematic pattern called Appearance-Preoccupied Rituals. You will learn how to overcome this problem.

Dealing with body image discomfort by Experiential Avoidance entails efforts to shut out or evade negative body image emotions. So you may say to yourself, “Don’t think about this” or “I can’t think about this.” Perhaps you avoid by distracting yourself from your upsetting experience—you may watch television or eat to take your mind off of it. Often, some people cope with anticipated body image discomfort by completely avoiding the situation that they expect will elicit it. If you expect to feel self-conscious at the beach party or aerobics class, you just refuse to go. Avoidance may provide you with temporary relief, but it perpetuates your body image difficulties. In Step 3, you will begin to learn how to accept your feelings instead of avoiding them. In Step 6, you will also learn to stop playing out your Evasive Actions.

Unlike the first two strategies for managing negative body image emotions, Positive Rational Acceptance is a healthy approach. As you will see in Step 3, discomfort is neither dangerous nor revealing of some awful inner truth about you. It is merely a feeling. You can learn how to be aware of and accept that feeling, rather than trying to deny it, avoid it, transform it, or allow it to dictate what you do. In Steps 3, 4, and 5 of the workbook, you will learn from your feelings and develop a more honest, self-affirming perspective on your body image experiences.

## How Does Your Body Image Influence Your Life?

As discussed in the introduction, being dissatisfied with something about your physical appearance may be no problem at all or it may be a very big problem. The difference is determined by the impact or consequences of your body image in your everyday life (Cash and Fleming 2002b; Cash, Jakatdar, and Williams 2004). Does your body image influence your feelings about yourself, your social interactions, your eating and exercise behaviors, your sexuality, and so on? It is essential for you to understand how your body image experiences affect the quality of your life. This is measured by your two Body Image Quality of Life scores. A high Negative Impact score means that your body image produces numerous disruptive; interfering effects on your life. A low Positive Impact score indicates that your view of your looks seldom gives rise to experiences of pleasure, contentment, joy, or pride. The ultimate goal of the program found in this workbook is to enhance the quality of your life by helping you improve your body image acceptance.

## TRANSLATING YOUR SELF-DISCOVERIES INTO GOALS FOR CHANGE

At this point, having taken and interpreted all the self-tests, your body image should be coming into sharper focus. You should now see patterns, both your strengths and your vulnerabilities, that were not apparent to you before. You may be tempted to chastise yourself—"I can't believe my body image is so bad. I'm such a total mess!"—but I urge you to take a different, more self-accepting viewpoint. Your self-discoveries give you insights into exactly what you need to change. And this insightful knowledge is power. You could not change without it.

### What Do You Need?

Let's translate your self-discoveries into specific directions for improvement. Take a look at the Needs for Change Helpsheet that follows this section. Identify and write down two or three important needs for change based on your results from each body image self-test. The Helpsheet is organized into specific topics so that you can easily translate your self-discoveries into individualized goals for change. If you go back and look at your answers to specific items on each test, you will see some of these directions for change. You may also have ideas about what you need to change that are not based on your test results.

Don't second-guess something that you need to work on by deciding that you cannot change it. Suspend judgment about what you can or cannot accomplish. Just write down the changes that you suspect or know would make your body image (and life) better. Each section of the Helpsheet has room for three needs for change. If you want to list more, use the margins or your own notebook.

Do you remember Emily, whom you met at the beginning of this chapter? Here are a few examples from her Needs for Change Helpsheet:

- "I need to stop loathing my lower body."
- "I need fewer self-critical thoughts about my weight."
- "I need to allow myself to have positive thoughts about what I like about my looks."
- "I need to become more comfortable with my looks at social events (e.g., at the pool)."
- "I need to be able to look in the mirror and not get upset."
- "I need to spend less time trying to decide what to wear before going out."
- "I need to quit comparing myself to every good-looking woman I see (especially in those in the beauty mags)."
- "I need to eat healthy instead of doing dumb diets."
- "I need to quit jockeying for the back row in aerobics class."

Here are excerpts from Andrew's needs list:

- "I need to stop being so angry at myself for my hair loss."
- "I need to quit hiding under my baseball cap, though it scares me to think about that."
- "I need to accept the fact that I'm not a muscle man and the reality is that I never will be."
- "I need to spend less time criticizing myself when I'm looking in the mirror."
- "I need to give myself credit for the fact that I work out regularly and that I'm in good shape."
- "I need to stop thinking that women consider me boring because of my looks."
- "I need to appreciate that I have nice skin, an attractive beard, and I really dress well."
- "I need to be friendlier to muscular guys. It's not their fault they're built differently than I am."
- "I need to socialize more and stop using my looks as an excuse for staying home."
- "I need to recognize that all single women aren't going to reject me for my looks and that the ones who do aren't women I ultimately want to be with anyway."

What are some of the things Katlin says she needs to change? Here they are:

- "As hard as it is to do, I need to accept that I look different now. I need to work on that."
- "I need to stop looking at my old photos, because that always upsets me."
- "I need to quit trying to make my scars invisible, because they aren't and never will be."
- "I really, really need to get more comfortable with other people looking at me."
- "I need to smile more, because everybody is more attractive when they smile."
- "I need to figure out what to say to people who seem bothered by my scars."
- "I need to quit thinking that my husband and kids are ashamed of me, because I know that I'm a terrific wife and mom and that they really love me."
- "I need to realize that my appearance doesn't have to prevent my having fun, unless I let that happen."

## Helpsheet for Change: My Needs for Change

Physical characteristics I need to accept more:

I need to \_\_\_\_\_

I need to \_\_\_\_\_

I need to \_\_\_\_\_

Negative body image thoughts that I most need to reduce or eliminate:

I need to \_\_\_\_\_

I need to \_\_\_\_\_

I need to \_\_\_\_\_

Situations I really need to feel more comfortable with:

I need to \_\_\_\_\_

I need to \_\_\_\_\_

I need to \_\_\_\_\_

Beliefs and behaviors I need to change to be less invested in my appearance for my self-worth:

I need to \_\_\_\_\_

I need to \_\_\_\_\_

I need to \_\_\_\_\_

Ways that I cope with my body image difficulties that I need to change:

I need to \_\_\_\_\_

I need to \_\_\_\_\_

I need to \_\_\_\_\_

The consequences (effects) of my body image difficulties I especially want (need) to change:

I need to \_\_\_\_\_

I need to \_\_\_\_\_

I need to \_\_\_\_\_

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## FINAL WORDS OF ENCOURAGEMENT

Each of the following chapters of *The Body Image Workbook* is chock-full of opportunities to discover additional assets and liabilities affecting your body image. And always, after you learn what's wrong, you'll then learn how to make it better.

This detailed discovery of what's risky or problematic with your body image can leave you feeling as though you're at the bottom of a mountain that you'll never be able to climb. I understand. This is a natural human feeling. A journey is often hardest at its start. Realize that the climb isn't as steep or as treacherous as it may seem at the moment. Others have taken the same path you are about to take, and they have succeeded. You've pinpointed your difficulties and used them to identify positive directions, and you can accomplish your goals one step at a time. I commend you for completing this first important step. Onward!

## STEP 2

# Understanding the Origins of Your Body Image Story

Melissa will turn thirty on her next birthday. She's struggled with her body image for as long as she can recall. When she looks at her baby pictures, all she can say is "Well, at least I was cute for a few months." What she remembers from her preschool years is a family get-together where her aunt announced loudly to everybody that Melissa looked just like Miss Piggy. Melissa can still hear all the laughter, especially her mom's and dad's. She ran to her room and cried inconsolably. Her big brother started calling her Miss Piggy, and continued doing so for years.

During elementary and middle school, Melissa had lots of friends and enjoyed sleepovers and after-school soccer games. She liked feeling athletic and being one of the best on the team. When she was ten, her coach told her she'd be a better player if she lost some weight. She decided she would, so she started discarding the lunch her mom packed for her each day. Although she never told her mother about this, Melissa figured she would understand, because her mom was always complaining about her own weight and was always on one diet or another. Melissa also recalls that her parents never told her she was pretty.

Melissa's puberty arrived at the age of twelve. This came along with a very unwelcome growth spurt. Some of the boys at school teased her about having "big boobies," and she began to feel very self-conscious about the changes her body was going through. She hated her fuller hips and dreaded having her period each month. She started wearing baggy clothing to conceal her body shape whenever possible. She quit her sports activities and focused on her straight-A academic subjects.

In high school, Melissa continued to worry about how she looked. Occasional outbreaks of acne on her face and back worsened her body image concerns. She regularly dated a guy who told her that she was beautiful. She liked that he said this but suspected it was just a ploy for having sex with her. When she did have sex with him, she insisted on having the lights off. When they broke up, she noticed that his new girlfriend was thinner than she was. She went on a diet again.

College brought Melissa continued academic success, some good female friends, and several short-term romantic relationships. She dieted often and went to the gym regularly for aerobic exercise. She also fell in love with Craig, her future husband. She describes this as the best time of her life. In her words, "I had lots of fun, discovered my love for computer science, met Craig, and lost fifteen pounds."

Landing a great job and getting married after graduation, Melissa was excited about her new life. Still, she often felt self-conscious about her body. She frequently compared herself to other women and concluded that she was either fat or unattractive. Little things about her looks bugged her, even though she knew "rationally" that she looked okay and "this shouldn't matter so much." Craig's compliments and assurances didn't help. Every morning, she weighed herself nervously. She spent lots of money shopping for new, flattering outfits. To prepare for work or a social event, she labored for more than an hour with her hair, makeup, and clothes.

Now, Melissa is tired of struggling with her body image and hates how it affects her and her life. She is beginning to see how the story of her body image unfolded from her childhood to the present. She wants to change and accept herself as she is.

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## THE DEVELOPMENT OF A NEGATIVE BODY IMAGE: VOICES FROM THE PAST

As you can see from Melissa's story, people don't just wake up one day with the conviction that they cannot stand their looks. Usually, they've felt this way for quite some time. Body image forms gradually, beginning in childhood. Life experiences lead some people to relate to their bodies in positive and satisfying ways, while other people travel a less enjoyable path. The factors that influence body image development can be divided into two basic categories:

1. The historical influences from your past are the forces that shaped how you came to view your appearance in the ways that you do.
2. The current influences are the events and experiences in everyday life that determine how you think, feel, and react to your looks.

You must explore each of these two influences in greater detail so that you can really understand your personal body image development. In Step 2, we focus on the historical causes. Step 3 will deal with the forces responsible for your day-to-day body image experiences.

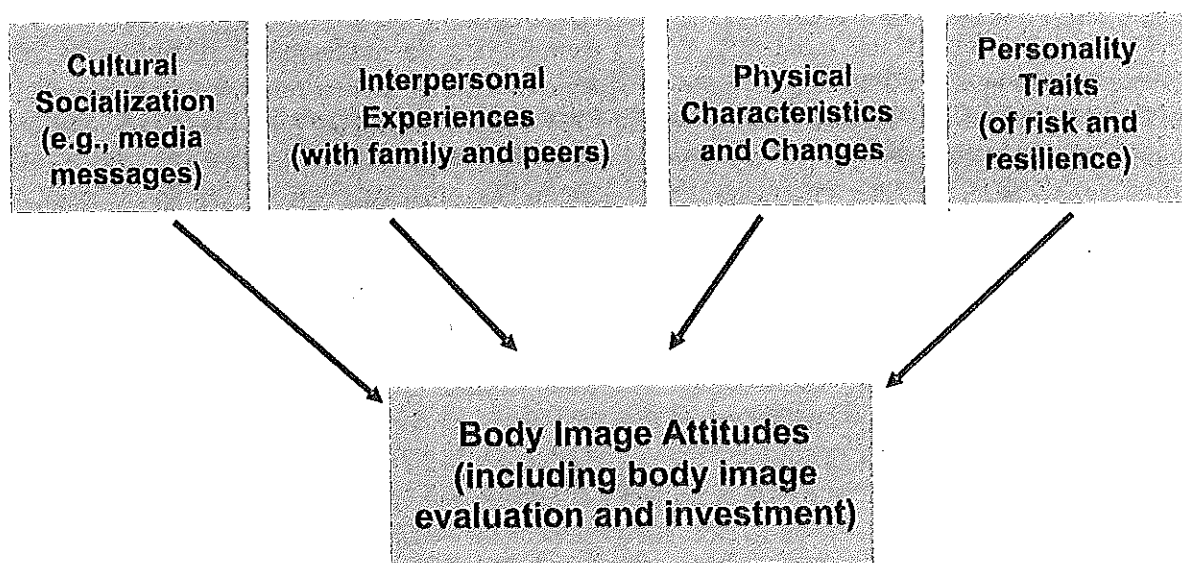
Your basic sense of identity is rooted in your experience of being embodied. The body is the boundary between you and everything that is not you. By the age of two years, most children have self-awareness and can recognize their physical self as a reflection in the mirror. More and more, their bodily being comes to represent who they are in their own eyes. Then they begin to reflect upon how other people view their appearance.

Take a close look at figure 2.1. It identifies four categories of historical factors that govern body image development: cultural forces, interpersonal experiences, physical characteristics and changes, and individual personality traits. These factors shape all of our body image attitudes—the perceptions, beliefs, thoughts, and feelings we come to have about our physical appearance. These attitudes include

not only how satisfied or dissatisfied we are with our looks, they also involve how invested we are in our physical appearance for defining who we are and who we want to be. Some events and experiences have a negative influence and others a positive influence on our unfolding body image attitudes.

To understand body image development (including your own), let's consider some of the interesting ideas and research evidence offered by psychological scientists who have studied body image (Cash and Pruzinsky 2002; Grogan 2007; Thompson 2004; Wertheim, Paxton, and Blaney 2004).

**Figure 2.1**  
**Body Image Development: Historical Influences**



## CULTURAL REFLECTIONS

By the time children attend preschool they have already started learning how society views various physical characteristics. Little kids know that lovely Cinderella wins the handsome prince; her ugly and mean stepsisters lose out. They know that Barbie and Ken have the good life, with bodies to match. They know that male superheroes and action figures have bulging muscles. Body image takes shape as children absorb concepts of what society values as attractive—how they should look. Kids also form images of what is not attractive—how they should not look. In animated cartoons and feature films for kids, the “losers” and “bad guys” are often depicted as ugly or fat. Most importantly, children begin to judge their own bodily appearance—how well does it live up to the “shoulds”? The answer can affect their sense of self-worth.

From the word go, society dictates social values and the meanings of physical appearance. Let's take a closer look at the biased lessons our culture teaches us.

## My Fair Lady

The adulation of thinness hasn't occurred in some cultures to the extent that it has in Western society. For example, in societies where food is scarce and Western media are absent, a heavier body is still viewed as evidence of successful survival. In earlier times, a full-figured physique was the epitome of feminine beauty. The rounded hips and thighs of prehistoric goddesses symbolized feminine fertility. In much of the art of the fifteenth to eighteenth centuries, full-figured women were the standard of beauty. In the ancient Orient, a fat wife was such a symbol of honor for her husband that some men force-fed their wives to enhance their own social standing.

In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, however, a thinner and less curvaceous body type has increasingly been promoted as the standard of feminine attractiveness. In the last thirty years, fashion models, film stars, and beauty pageant contestants have all become thinner, even as the majority of the female population has become heavier. As rates of anorexia nervosa and bulimia nervosa have steadily increased, emaciated "waif" models appear on magazine covers and fashion runways, in television ads, and in music videos. The message broadcast is that "thin is in and feminine." Each year *People* magazine publishes its "Most Beautiful People" list. Esthetic accolades have been given to such obviously slender bodies as those of Jessica Alba, Halle Berry, Penelope Cruz, Angelina Jolie, Alicia Keys, Nicole Kidman, Julia Roberts, and Eva Longoria—to name just a few. And as reflected by the prevalence of breast augmentation surgery—there were over 329,000 surgeries in the United States in 2006 (American Society of Plastic Surgeons 2007)—large, shapely breasts have become more important to the cultural ideal (just as they were in the middle of the twentieth century).

For the sake of beauty, women in our society are told to shave or wax their legs, armpits, and bikini areas, pluck their eyebrows, dye and either curl or straighten their hair, pierce their ears, paint their faces and all twenty nails, and walk around in uncomfortable (and sometimes dangerous) high heels. Women are also told that they should worry about unsightly age spots, split ends, the sprouting of a single gray hair, a chipped nail, and a visible panty line. It's no wonder that many girls and women feel objectified and find so many things faulty about their looks!

## The Handsome Prince

Although less demanding than women's appearance standards, societal norms and expectations definitely exist for men. Guys are supposed to be tall and have broad shoulders, a muscular chest and biceps, a small rear, strong facial features, and a full head of hair. Most manly heroes and leading men are handsome hunks—George Clooney, Brad Pitt, Patrick Dempsey, Colin Farrell, Jude Law, Denzel Washington, Orlando Bloom, Richard Gere, and so on. A generation ago, John "Duke" Wayne protected his masculine "stand tall" image by refusing to appear "topless" in public—that is, without his hairpiece.

These masculine body prescriptions lead some boys and men to jeopardize their health with steroid abuse and excessive exercise. A fascinating book entitled *The Adonis Complex: The Secret Crisis of Male Body Obsession* (Pope, Phillips, and Olivardia 2000) details the difficulties of males with muscle dysmorphia, that is, those who seek a perfect muscular physique but often feel inadequate and scrawny. Today, more than ever before, men seek cosmetic surgery, including nose reshaping, liposuction, hair transplants,

and face lifts. In America in 2006, they received over 250,000 surgical and 850,000 nonsurgical cosmetic procedures (American Society of Plastic Surgeons 2007). So, clearly, many men feel pressured to be physically attractive, believing that good looks are a prerequisite for success in relationships and life in general. The popular new term "metrosexual" was coined to characterize the single, heterosexual, urban male who is highly invested in his appearance and its expression of "esthetic style."

Cultures are not uniform. Every culture consists of subcultures that may differ greatly from one another. For example, within the United States, African-Americans have norms and values that do not mirror the majority culture's norms and values. With respect to physical appearance, the appreciation of a fuller-figured female body and the valuing of personal style and "attitude" in dress protect some African-American women from developing as self-deprecating a body image as European-American women (Roberts et al. 2006).

Another subculture pertains to sexual orientation. A recent scientific review (Morrison, Morrison, and Sager 2004) of studies comparing gay and lesbian people with those who are heterosexual concluded that, on average, gay men report more body dissatisfaction than heterosexual guys, perhaps in part because of excessive emphasis on appearance among gays. Research findings are less clear for lesbians, but on average they may be slightly more body accepting than heterosexual women of comparable body weight.

## From Cultural Images to Body Images

In various cultures at various times, attractiveness has required decorative scars on the face, a shaved head, tattoos fully covering the body, jewels placed in holes drilled in the teeth, large disks inserted in the lips, stacked rings to elongate the neck, and the maiming of women's feet to make them petite. All these things were done, and most still are, in service of societal standards of attractiveness. Moreover, societal norms are ever-changing. For example, only a decade or so ago in Western culture, body piercing and tattooing were only popular among men—especially bikers, gangs, and prisoners. Today, body art is very popular among young women. What was once taboo has become socially acceptable and "cool."

Just as you may dismiss other cultures' foreign appearance standards as "really crazy," I urge you to begin to question the mandates of your own culture or subculture. Who are the appearance masters that you feel obliged to serve? Throughout this workbook, I'll help you defend yourself against these unhealthy messages. Right now, I want you to contemplate two crucial facts:

- **Fact 1: Societal standards can't harm you unless you buy into them.** You don't have to adopt these ideals and pressure yourself to live up to them. You don't have to allow your sense of self-worth to be determined by voices not of your choosing. If you think you should possess some trait that you believe you lack, you'll experience distress in situations that remind you of this "inadequacy."
- **Fact 2: Other people don't judge you as harshly as you judge yourself.** In numerous studies, researchers have discovered that many people demand more physical "perfection" of themselves than they think others expect of them, and even more than those others truly expect. Often, such people are out of touch with reality. Many men

are often more appreciative of a heavier female body type than women believe they are. Guys don't idealize blonde beauty to the degree women assume. Likewise, lots of women don't idolize the narrowly defined images of "macho" attractiveness that men often assume they do.

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## INTERPERSONAL INFLUENCES

Dr. Kevin Thompson, an esteemed body image researcher at the University of South Florida, points to three pivotal sources of influence in body image development. One of these, as we've already touched upon, is the influence of our culture's mass media. The other two causes are embedded in our relationships with others—our peers and our family.

### Sticks and Stones: "Hey Fatso!"

Your family has most likely taught you a lot about your own body. Parents remind you to brush your hair, put on clean clothes with patterns and colors that don't clash, and stay trim. When you were growing up, how many times did you hear "You're not really going to leave the house looking like that, are you?" Families also communicate expectations by what psychologists call *modeling*. For example, if you grow up with a parent who consistently complains about his or her appearance, you learn that looks can be something to worry about. If you have a brother or sister doted on for being attractive, you may come to feel shortchanged by your own looks. You may feel resentful and envious that you aren't as nice-looking.

Being repeatedly criticized, taunted, or teased about your appearance during the childhood or teen years can leave a lasting effect on body image development. Many adults who dislike their appearance can recall experiences of being teased or criticized as children because of their looks. Deeply etched in their memories are episodes of rebuke or ridicule for being too chubby or too skinny, too tall or too short, for having a large nose or big ears, or for how they dressed or wore their hair.

In one study (Rieves and Cash 1996), 72 percent of college students revealed that, while growing up, they had been repeatedly teased or criticized for an average of over six years, usually about their facial features or weight. Many reported having had an unwelcome nickname—Bubble Butt, Pinocchio, Freckles, Pizza Face, Four-Eyes, Carrot Top, Beanpole, or Horse Face, for example. Of those who had been teased, 71 percent said it had been moderately to very upsetting, whereas the remainder—only 29 percent—were able to shrug it off. The most common teasers were brothers and peers in general. An earlier study (Cash 1995a) revealed that 65 percent said that appearance teasing had marred their body image. Both studies revealed that a reported history of such treatment was linked to a more negative adult body image.

Teasing is just one type of appearance-related maltreatment. People who are overweight also experience other stigmatizing difficulties—for example, social exclusion, public stares, fat jokes, and shopping for clothes that fit. As a 2004 study by Annis, Cash, and Hrabosky revealed, among overweight women, experiencing such stigma during childhood, adolescence, and adulthood is subsequently associated with more body dissatisfaction, excessive psychological investment in one's appearance, and more psycho-

logical problems. Being body-stigmatized represents a contradictory, double message that one's looks are unacceptable yet essential to social and personal well-being.

As we grow and interact with our peers, the topic of physical appearance comes up fairly often, especially for females. Girls and young women engage in familiar "fat chat" with one another. They discuss weight and dieting, and the social expectation is that one is supposed to complain about being too fat. Unfortunately, this "ritual" of self-criticism seems to encourage and produce body dissatisfaction (Nichter 2000; Tucker et al. 2007). By the same token, it's difficult to imagine that "skinny talk" about male bodies would be very healthy for boys.

Romantic relationships can exert strong influences on our thoughts and feelings about our looks. Their power results from the fact that we may see an intimate partner's view of us as a valid reflection of our worth—after all, our partner "really knows us." Moreover, in a sexual relationship, the partner can see the "naked truth" of what we look like. Having a relationship in which our loved one is complimentary and accepting can promote a positive body image. Of course, the opposite is true as well. Having a partner criticize or seem oblivious to our looks can erode our body image acceptance.

You can clearly see that, as we grow up, our relationships with peers and family members can have both positive and negative effects on our body image development. In a survey of nearly five hundred college students (Cash, Rudiger, and Williams 2008), we asked them how happy they were with their appearance during childhood and during their teen years. For those who had a positive body image as children, we simply asked them to list all the factors that contributed to their acceptance of their physical appearance. You might think they would have talked about having a nice body or cute face, but less than 18 percent of their responses mentioned physical attributes as the most important influence. In both childhood and adolescence, *social support* was most often given as the primary influence, as 32 percent pointed to having good friends and family who accepted and cared about them. Moreover, our results indicated that family support was more important than peer support in childhood, while the opposite was true for adolescence.

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## PHYSICAL CHARACTERISTICS AND CHANGES

The human body changes dramatically at puberty. This time can also bring intense preoccupation with these changes and with physical appearance in general. Having the "right" body type, clothes, or hair-style often becomes far more important than algebra or geography. The relative timing of physical maturation can also be important in body image development. Girls whose hips and breasts develop earlier than those of their classmates may feel self-conscious. They don't appreciate their new shape as a sign of approaching womanhood but can only see it as grotesque fat. Boys whose spurt in height and muscularity is slower than that of their peers may worry privately that their body will never catch up.

The teen years are an especially tough time for body image. Teenagers' feelings of social adequacy depend in part on how they think their appearance is perceived by peers and how that will affect their chances in the dating game. One common occurrence during adolescence is facial acne. Acne can have a profound effect on body image and social adjustment. In a series of studies I conducted, I found that 74 percent of teenagers with moderate to severe facial acne reported that it had a damaging effect on their body image, and 43 percent indicated it had negatively affected their social lives (Cash 1995b). Their blemishes were more than skin-deep.

Sometimes the physical focus of your discontent—the chubby body, the zits, the knobby knees, or whatever—improves with time, but an emotional afterimage still burns in your private perceptions of yourself. Your body image remembers. Let me give you some examples.

In two studies (Annis, Cash, and Hrabosky 2004; Cash, Counts, and Huffine 1990), we compared the current body images of three groups: average-weight women who had never been overweight; average-weight women who had been overweight; and women currently overweight. We discovered something quite interesting—something I call “phantom fat.” In many respects, currently and formerly overweight groups had a comparable body image in several (but not all) respects. However, despite the fact they had lost their excess weight, the previously overweight women had not lost the nagging feeling that their body is unacceptable. Somehow, it still felt fat, even though it wasn’t anymore. At one time, they had viewed their bodies as their enemies; it’s hard to forgive and forget your enemies.

This phantom fat phenomenon goes beyond matters of body weight. Evidence from my teen acne studies also confirmed that “adult survivors of adolescent acne” had a more negative body image years later as compared to their peers who had had minimal or no acne (Cash 1996). Physical scars faded, yet some emotional scars remained. Again, our body image remembers!

Bodies don’t stand still. They change naturally over time. You are able to control some aspects of your appearance—for example, you can get a new hairstyle or choose what clothes to wear. But other changes are beyond your complete control. For better or worse, heredity and life events influence your looks. Take hereditary pattern hair loss for instance. Scientific research (Cash 1999) indicates that some individuals—men and women—feel helplessly unhappy about progressively thinning locks, while others just take it in stride—“hair today gone tomorrow.”

People also struggle to cope with their altered appearance following traumas, such as a mastectomy or severe facial burns (Partridge 2006). These unwanted changes certainly challenge one’s body image. But the inspiring fact is that many of these people come to accept such drastic changes, incorporate them into a healthy body image, and move forward in their lives (Rumsey 2002; Rumsey and Harcourt 2004, 2005).

Please appreciate the crucial point I’m conveying here: How your body appears on the outside does not have to determine how you feel on the inside. Many people who are quite short or heavy or look their elderly age or have some noticeable physical difference live enormously fulfilling lives, unaffected by what they look like. Some women become upset by their body shape changes during pregnancy; other women don’t—they actually value those changes.

As some people age, they fret over wrinkles and try to erase them with expensive creams and Botox® treatments. Others age gracefully and accept physical changes as a natural fact of life. Among people born with a disfiguring condition, some agonize that they don’t look “normal,” yet many others have little difficulty “looking different.” At the same time, do you realize that some folks whose appearance you may envy are unhappier with their looks than you might think? Your appearance doesn’t mandate how you must feel. If you’re faced with unwelcome changes or differences in your appearance, know that it is possible to accept these differences. *The Body Image Workbook* will teach you how to accept your body—no matter what.

## DIFFERENT PERSONALITIES, DIFFERENT PATHS

The arrows of adversity aimed at us by our culture, family, or peers do not affect everyone's body image identically. Some of us have been able to transcend the ill effects of our culture's prescriptions, our peers' teasing, pimples on prom night, and even disfiguring conditions. Who are these resilient people?

They are people with solid self-esteem—they believe in themselves. Self-esteem is a powerful ally in facing and defeating life's challenges. The child, adolescent, or adult who has a secure sense of self—as being competent, lovable, and invested in hope and in living—doesn't so easily fall prey to societal "shoulds" or assaults on his or her physical worth. Self-fulfillment doesn't rely on aspirations for a perfect appearance. On the other hand, people whose nature and nurture have handed them a basic sense of inadequacy are all too eager to find fault with themselves. The infection of their inner insecurity spreads to their "outer" self.

Although poor self-esteem can pave the way for developing a negative body image, it's only a predisposition—it's not a predestination. Learning to improve body image is possible for everyone. If your self-esteem is as negative as your body image, working on improving your self-esteem can benefit your body image as well (as Danielle Lavalley and I discovered in a 1997 study).

One important personality characteristic has to do with individuals' psychological orientations to people and relationships. For example, some of us approach human relationships with enthusiasm, trust, and an expectation of enjoyment and acceptance. Others among us are more apprehensive about closeness and expect adversity or rejection, even though we may truly need just the opposite. Psychologists refer to these two orientations, respectively, as *secure* and *insecure* attachment patterns. Having a secure attachment orientation may promote a positive body image. In contrast, an insecure attachment may be a catalyst for body image insecurity to the extent that one expects or worries about the rejection of one's physical self (Cash, Theriault, and Annis 2004).

Perfectionism is another personality factor that may affect body image. There are different types of perfectionism, and the one that may be pivotal here is called *self-presentational perfectionism*. This refers to the need to present oneself to other people, in actions and appearance, as exemplary and flawless. Having this need is likely to lead to excessive investment in one's looks and concerns about being "less than perfect." One recent investigation (Rudiger et al. 2007) found that this type of perfectionism leads people to have more body image ups and downs in their day-to-day lives. Of course, the converse is also true; less perfectionism about self-presentation lowers one's vulnerability to negative body image.

Let me give you the bottom line about the people who are most resilient to threats and challenges to their body image. First and foremost, they are individuals who are protected by not being overly invested in their physical appearance for their identity or self-worth. In Step 1, they would have scored in the Acceptance Zone for body image investment (i.e., on their Appearance Importance Test). For them, looks aren't everything and don't affect everything. This doesn't mean they don't care about how they look, because they do. They enjoy looking nice, as a simple pleasure in their relationship with themselves, but not because they think of life as a beauty contest or because their worth as human beings is dictated by conforming to some societal standard of physical perfection. They keep their looks in perspective and are invested in many other things (family, friends, achievements, work, leisure interests, etc.) for self-fulfillment.

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## EXPERIENCING YOUR BODY IMAGE: FROM THEN TO NOW

Before we shift from the historical influences to the current causes of your body image concerns (discussed in Step 3), I want you to get in touch with your own personal body image history. I ask you to carry out the following two extremely valuable exercises to accomplish this.

### Snapshots from Your Past

First, based in part on what you've just learned about the various historical causes of body image difficulties, I want you to take a few minutes to picture your body and the pertinent events and experiences that influenced your own body image development. I'm providing you with the Self-Discovery Helpsheets below to take these snapshots for specific periods of time in your life. After you complete this exercise, I'll guide you in taking more fine-grained, close-up pictures of your past.

### Pictures with a Zoom Lens

On your Self-Discovery Helpsheet, you've pointed to some key events and issues in the formation of your body image. Now I want you to deeply examine those experiences that you think were especially influential. To do this, you will carry out a helpful exercise called *Expressive Writing*. Developed by Dr. James W. Pennebaker, a prominent psychologist at the University of Texas at Austin, this innovative approach helps people resolve emotionally challenging experiences (Pennebaker 2004). Scientific research on Expressive Writing has verified its therapeutic value for a range of human difficulties (Lepore and Smyth 2002; Pennebaker 1997; Pennebaker and Chung 2007).

The premise of Expressive Writing is actually quite simple. Troublesome or upsetting events may happen to us as we are growing up or during adulthood. To feel better about them, we mentally push these stressful experiences aside and try to not think about them or we forget them. The passage of time also permits the particular details to fade or become distorted. Yet the emotional aftereffects often persist, now separated from the original events that created these feelings. Sometimes these experiences even overshadow memories of events that were truly positive and satisfying during that period. As a result, we just live and react to our current feelings—disconnected from their formative history.

The purpose of Expressive Writing is *not* to ventilate or get things off your chest. Its aim is to help you create a coherent narrative that tells the meaningful story of your past experiences, along with your emotions about them. The narrative that you will write concerns your body image and the events that you believe have been influential over the course of your life. In writing your story, you will revisit the unfolding of your body image and its difficulties. You will pull together your formative body image experiences into a personally meaningful narrative.

Before you start worrying that you'll have to write an autobiographical novel, let me reassure you. You will write for only *twenty minutes each day over the next four days*. You will write in a stream of consciousness—just letting your thoughts flow, without getting bogged down with a need for correct spelling or grammar. This is not a graded assignment by an English teacher. What is essential is that your writing tells your personal story from your own viewpoint and reflects the guidelines following the Self-Discovery Helpsheets.

## Self-Discovery Helpsheets: My Body and Experiences from Then to Now

**Instructions:** At each period of your life listed below, what did you look like? What were the major influences on how you felt about your looks? Be sure to mention significant cultural and interpersonal influences.

*Early Childhood (up to age eight)*

My Body:

Influential Events and Experiences:

*Later Childhood (age eight to puberty)*

My Body:

Influential Events and Experiences:

*Earlier Adolescence (during the physical changes of puberty to about sixteen)*

My Body:

Influential Events and Experiences:

*Later Adolescence (sixteen to twenty)*

My Body:

Influential Events and Experiences:

*Adulthood to Now*

My Body:

Influential Events and Experiences:

- Write in the first person (say “I” and “me”) and *write only for yourself*. This is not a letter and is not to be read by anyone but you. Just express yourself honestly.
- For each twenty-minute session, write at a time and in a place where you have *complete quiet and privacy*. You don’t want to be interrupted by telephones ringing or by distractions from friends or family. Write *continuously* for twenty minutes without taking breaks.
- If there are topics that you aren’t ready to write about yet, *don’t push yourself* to do so. You can always write about them later when you are ready.
- When you write about specific events that happened, describe the events and express your *deepest thoughts and feelings*. Don’t just focus on negative thoughts and feelings. To tell the whole story, include positive feelings as well.
- It is not essential to write on four consecutive days. If you need to take an occasional one-day break, that’s perfectly fine. However, Expressive Writing will be most helpful if you accomplish all four sessions within a single week.

To facilitate your Expressive Writing there are two Helpsheet pages for each session. The first page gives you instructions for that session. At the end of each session, you will answer a few questions about your writing experience. Here are the Helpsheets:

## Helpsheet for Change: Expressive Writing on Day 1

**Instructions:** On this first day of writing, write about significant body image experiences that occurred *during your childhood (before puberty)*. Express your deepest thoughts and feelings as you recall events and experiences concerning your physical appearance then. As you write, you may become aware of how these experiences connect to other feelings from that time or now—for example, feelings about yourself, about your peers, friends, or family members, or about other aspects of your life.

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There is no text or other markings on the paper.

## This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.

1. How much did you express your deepest thoughts and feelings? \_\_\_\_\_
2. After writing today, how bothered or unhappy do you feel? \_\_\_\_\_
3. After writing today, how happy, satisfied, or at ease do you feel? \_\_\_\_\_
4. How meaningful for you was your expressive writing today? \_\_\_\_\_

## Helpsheet for Change: Expressive Writing on Day 2

**Instructions:** On this second day of writing, write about significant body image experiences that occurred during your *early teenage years (including puberty)*. Express your deepest thoughts and feelings as you recall events and experiences concerning your physical appearance then. As you write, you may become aware of how these experiences connect to other feelings from that time or now—for example, feelings about yourself, about your peers, friends, or family members, or about other aspects of your life.

1. **Introduction:** The study aims to investigate the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the mental health of healthcare workers.

2. **Methodology:** A cross-sectional survey was conducted among healthcare workers in various hospitals and clinics. The survey included a demographic questionnaire and a validated mental health assessment tool.

3. **Results:** The study found that a significant proportion of healthcare workers reported symptoms of anxiety, depression, and stress. The severity of these symptoms was correlated with factors such as the duration of the pandemic, the intensity of the workload, and the availability of social support.

4. **Conclusion:** The findings highlight the need for mental health support and intervention for healthcare workers during the COVID-19 pandemic. Further research is needed to explore the long-term effects and to develop effective strategies for mental health care.

## Helpsheet for Change: Expressive Writing on Day 2

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal blue or grey ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There is no handwriting or other markings on the paper.

Use numbers from 0 = "Not at All" to 10 = "A Great Deal" to answer these questions about your expressive writing today:

1. How much did you express your deepest thoughts and feelings? \_\_\_\_\_
2. After writing today, how bothered or unhappy do you feel? \_\_\_\_\_
3. After writing today, how happy, satisfied, or at ease do you feel? \_\_\_\_\_
4. How meaningful for you was your expressive writing today? \_\_\_\_\_

## Helpsheet for Change: Expressive Writing on Day 3

**Instructions:** On this third day of writing, write about significant body image experiences that occurred during your *mid-to-later teenage years*. Express your deepest thoughts and feelings as you recall events and experiences concerning your physical appearance then. As you write, you may become aware of how these experiences connect to other feelings from that time or now—for example, feelings about yourself, about your peers, friends, or family members, or about other aspects of your life.

[illegible]

## Helpsheet for Change: Expressive Writing on Day 3

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal blue or grey ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There is no handwriting or other markings on the paper.

Use numbers from 0 = "Not at All" to 10 = "A Great Deal" to answer these questions about your expressive writing today:

1. How much did you express your deepest thoughts and feelings? \_\_\_\_\_
2. After writing today, how bothered or unhappy do you feel? \_\_\_\_\_
3. After writing today, how happy, satisfied, or at ease do you feel? \_\_\_\_\_
4. How meaningful for you was your expressive writing today? \_\_\_\_\_

## Helpsheet for Change: Expressive Writing on Day 4

**Instructions:** On this fourth and final day of writing, write about significant body image experiences that occurred *recently or in the past year or so*. Express your deepest thoughts and feelings as you describe these events and experiences. In addition, step back somewhat and try to express any insights you have about the body image issues that you've been dealing with and how they connect to other feelings or themes in your life. This is your opportunity to wrap up the story of your relationship with your body.

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There is no handwriting or other markings on the paper.

## Helpsheet for Change: Expressive Writing on Day 4

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.

Use numbers from 0 = "Not at All" to 10 = "A Great Deal" to answer these questions about your expressive writing today:

1. How much did you express your deepest thoughts and feelings? \_\_\_\_\_
2. After writing today, how bothered or unhappy do you feel? \_\_\_\_\_
3. After writing today, how happy, satisfied, or at ease do you feel? \_\_\_\_\_
4. How meaningful for you was your expressive writing today? \_\_\_\_\_

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## FINAL WORDS OF ENCOURAGEMENT

Having learned about body image development and having engaged in Expressive Writing, you should now have a deeper, more coherent sense of the story of your own evolving body image. Past experiences and social conditioning can certainly program you to develop a negative body image. But history isn't everything. Understanding it differs from blaming it. Blaming your past or forces outside of your control may help you justify having a problem, but it doesn't help you solve it. Instead you conclude you are a helpless victim and you try to change nothing.

The current causes are especially important; that is, the here-and-now factors that affect your body image experiences in everyday life. These influences can propagate and reinforce your personal body image struggles, or they can extricate you from your past programming. If past conditioning was all-powerful, achieving a positive body image would be practically impossible. Most people find ways to transcend the nasty lessons of the past and accept their overall appearance, despite real or perceived physical imperfections. So can you!

Change will occur if you begin to take responsibility for the choices you make today. After all, today is tomorrow's history, and that's history you can do something about. Taking responsibility for change starts with a two simple realizations: First, you feel what you think. Your judgments and interpretations of events, not the events themselves, govern your emotional experiences. Second, how you mentally and behaviorally react to your thoughts and feelings can either make things worse or make them better. Step 3 will empower you take this responsibility for acceptance of your inner experiences and your body.