

Enhancing Male Body Image

Recognize that bodies come in all different shapes and sizes. There is no one "right" body size. Your body is not, and should not, be exactly like anyone else's. Try to see your body as a facet of your uniqueness and individuality.

Focus on the qualities in yourself that you like that are not related to appearance. Spend time developing these capacities rather than letting your appearance define your identity and your worth.

Look critically at advertisements that push the "body building" message. Our culture emphasizes the V-shaped muscular body shape as the ideal for men. Magazines targeted at men tend to focus on articles and advertisements promoting weight lifting, body building or muscle toning. Do you know men who have muscular, athletic bodies but who are not happy? Are there dangers in spending too much time focusing on your body? Consider giving up your goal of achieving the "perfect" male body and work at accepting your body just the way it is.

Remember that your body size, shape, or weight does not determine your worth as a person, or your identity as a man. In other words, you are not just your body. Expand your idea of "masculinity" to include qualities such as sensitivity, cooperation, caring, patience, having feelings, being artistic. Some men may be muscular and athletic, but these qualities in and of themselves do not make a person a "man."

Find friends who are not overly concerned with weight or appearance.

Be assertive with others who comment on your body. Let people know that comments on your physical appearance, either positive or negative, are not appreciated. Confront others who tease men about their bodies or who attack their masculinity by calling them names such as "sissy" or "wimp."

Demonstrate respect for men who possess body types or who display personality traits that do not meet the cultural standard for masculinity; e.g., men who are slender, short, or overweight, gay men, men who dress colorfully or who enjoy traditional "non-masculine" activities such as dancing, sewing or cooking.

Be aware of the negative messages you tell yourself about your appearance or body. Respond to negative self-talk with an affirmation. For example, if you start giving yourself a message like, "I look gross," substitute a positive affirmation, "I accept myself the way I am," or "I'm a worthwhile person, fat and all."

Focus on the ways in which your body serves you and enables you to participate fully in life. In other words, appreciate how your body functions rather than obsessing about its appearance. For example, appreciate that your arms enable you to hold someone you love, your thighs enable you to run, etc.

Aim for lifestyle mastery, rather than mastery over your body, weight, or appearance. Lifestyle mastery has to do with developing your unique gifts and potential, expressing yourself, developing meaningful relationships, learning how to solve problems, establishing goals, and contributing to life. View exercise and balanced eating as aspects of your overall approach to a life that emphasizes self-care.

Office of Health Education and Promotion, Health Services
University of New Hampshire
(603) 862-3823
www.unh.edu/health-services