

# LOOK

Take a  
better

Loving and accepting the body you live in by not falling into the trap of comparison can help you attain a positive and healthy body image, writes psychotherapist Marie Rowland





When it comes to her body, a woman's inner critic is often the harshest. We want to look and feel the best we can, but it's easy

to fall into the trap of unrealistic comparison. Real women come in all shapes and sizes, but the message from Hollywood and the media seems to be one skinny size fits all, which is both unrealistic and unfair.

Family and peer pressure can also contribute to a negative body image formed over a lifetime.

Unrealistic notions of how we should look are not only persuasive, but cause women to be constantly critical of the package they find themselves in. According to the UK's Social Issues Research Centre, standards of beauty have become increasingly hard to attain, and the current ideal of thinness for women shown in the media is achievable by less than five per cent of the female population.

As there is no sign of these ideals changing, we must re-examine how we view ourselves so we can create a positive body image culture and stop continually comparing ourselves.

Firstly we need to accept and be realistic about our natural body dimensions. In this way we can learn to promote our assets and live comfortably within our skin. Body image is all about personal perception. However, a woman's own impression may not match up with reality.

According to health data produced by the Victorian government, women in Western nations believe they are larger than they actually are. Almost 50 per cent of normal-weight women surveyed overestimated their body size and shape.

This distorted viewpoint means that only one in five women is satisfied with her body. For others it results in a lowering of self-esteem and self-destructive behaviour, including drastic dieting, social withdrawal, anxiety and even depression. It's estimated that nine out of 10 women have dieted at least once in their lives.

## Get real

So how do you start loving the body you're in? Firstly, look after it properly with regular exercise and healthy eating.

Research shows that working out in an environment that promotes good health creates a happier person, so hit the gym.

Exercise stimulates endorphins (happy hormones) and helps us feel good about ourselves because it improves fitness and strength. This contributes to overall wellbeing.

Exercising by yourself requires discipline and determination, so a gym can offer both support and expert advice to get you on the right track.

## "We need to accept and be realistic about our natural body dimensions. In this way we can learn to promote our assets and live comfortably"

Having people around with the same goals and who may have similar issues (such as unshed baby weight) is also hugely motivating and helps ease self-consciousness.

Becoming more pro-active and taking control of your body through exercise will help you start to take control of your body image. Feeling fitter and stronger and seeing what your body is capable of will also give you positive things to focus on. You may never have the legs of a supermodel, but there's a good chance you'll soon be able to leg press more weight.

Eating well is also part of this equation and that does not mean dieting. It means taking care with what you eat. Choosing unprocessed foods in their natural form and preparing meals in a healthy way leads to better eating habits and also optimises wellbeing. It should not be


about deprivation or starvation, but more about nutritional balance and moderation. It's often surprising how filling good food is.

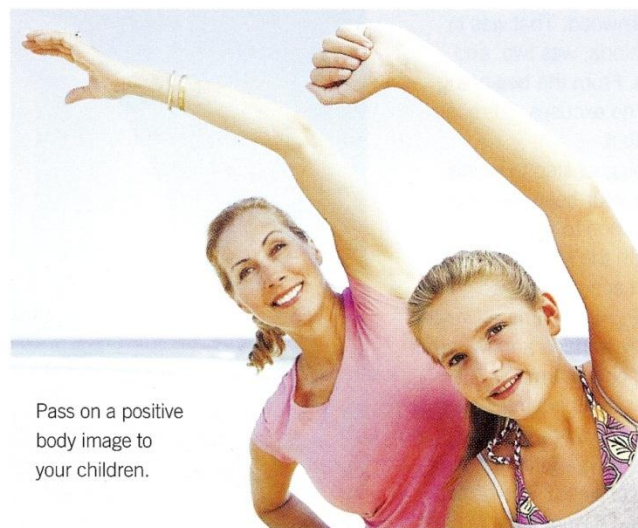
### Socialise more

Living well can be a vital key in feeling positive. Getting involved and having fun with family, friends and community will allow you to create a wider world and a perspective that reaches beyond the boundaries of your mind and body. It will help you place fewer limitations on what you can achieve.

As your confidence grows, you'll naturally strive towards looking and feeling your best, paying more attention to how you present yourself, but in a mindful and self-accepting way; focusing less on how you believe others perceive you and enjoying how you look – right here, right now.

Positive body image is about making the most out of what we have. It is healthy to work hard to achieve your version of the body beautiful – as long as you can define beauty based on your own body and not on some unattainable image that only serves to diminish and demoralise you.

Taking charge of looking after your body gives a greater sense of control in your life and makes way for a more realistic and also appreciative perception of your body. At last, the inner critic is silenced. 



Pass on a positive body image to your children.

## SIX WAYS TO BOOST YOUR BODY IMAGE

Here are some quick tips to get your head around your body image.

- ➔ **SHARE WITH OTHERS** how you feel; you're not on your own. Get professional help if your problem is deeper or long term.
- ➔ **MAKE A PACT WITH YOURSELF** to love and respect your body, giving it enough food and rest. Even the occasional pamper.
- ➔ **RETHINK WEIGHT LOSS** so that it becomes about improving your health, fitness and wellbeing.

- ➔ **STOP WEIGHING YOURSELF** and, instead, get frocked up, have your hair and make-up done and have a ladies' night out on the town. Have fun!
- ➔ **TRY SOME FORM OF PHYSICAL ACTIVITY**, such as dance class, bushwalk, or a community program, purely for the fun of it, not as a means of weight loss.
- ➔ **STOP COMPARING YOURSELF** to others and look to be inspired by real women's achievements rather than the images of airbrushed celebrities.