

CHAPTER 1

WHAT IS BODY IMAGE?

#BodyImageBasics

*"You are a
wonderful creation."*

Oscar Wilde, Irish Poet
and playwright

MY STORY

Sage Elizabeth, 14 years old, she/her, UK

I'm not sure I've ever really liked my body. On some level, I know there's nothing wrong with my body, but it's just hard to really embrace it.

I think when I was 6 or 7, I started to not be as fond of my body. Around that time, I was bullied by this girl at school. She called me fat. At the time, I was devastated. Now I understand that she was just trying to be hurtful. It's the most basic and upsetting thing that people think they can say when they want to make you feel bad. It's actually very unoriginal when it comes to insults!

At school, popularity is linked with appearance. Being friends with the popular people increases your status, and the prettier girls are often the most popular. People want to be friends with these prettier people. The same thing happens on social media.

Online, all the people you see are perfect. They have perfect hair, perfect make-up, and perfect, skinny bodies. Of course, this is all supposedly "natural" beauty, but these people don't seem to exist in real life. Most of us just don't look like people do on social media. We all look different – we aren't all supposed to look the same!

Every now and then I think I want to change parts of my appearance, but I realize that I can't really change how I look. I have to learn to accept how I look. Some days I feel like I can focus on what I like about myself, but I have to be in the right headspace for that.

I wish I could tell my younger self that it's important to talk to other people when you're feeling dissatisfied with your body. Talking about all of this is underrated. I wish schools and parents talked more with kids about body image. Talking about my insecurities out loud has helped me to realize how ridiculous some of them are. Keeping those concerns inside your head allows them to grow.

Do you ever feel like you're too short (or too tall)?

Do you ever wish that your hair was straight and not curly?

Have you ever looked in the mirror and wished for longer legs?

Do you wish your breasts were larger (or smaller)?

If you've ever had a negative thought about your appearance, you're not alone. Most girls and women would like to change at least one thing about how they look – if not many.

Even celebrities – the people we often think of as looking “perfect” – often struggle with concerns about their appearance. Taylor Swift said, “I definitely have body issues, but everyone does.” Actress Amandla Stenberg admitted that she gives herself body image pep talks while looking at herself in the mirror, and actress Lili Reinhart said, “I felt this strange, constant struggle of having to live up to the expectation of the appearance that I had already established to the world.”

It's not just average people who think about their appearance and wish they could look different; it's almost everyone. The goal of this book is to help you develop a positive view of yourself. A positive view of yourself doesn't mean that you think you're better or more beautiful than everyone else. Lili Reinhart has also confessed that she thinks it is ridiculous that so many of us feel like we need to explain anything about our body to other people.

Your life isn't a beauty pageant. A positive view of yourself means learning to treasure and care for your body. You can achieve this goal, and this book will guide you along the way.



IN THIS CHAPTER YOU'LL LEARN:



- how body image is defined
- why it's important to have a **positive body image**, and
- why reading this book and working on developing a positive body image will improve your life in a variety of ways.

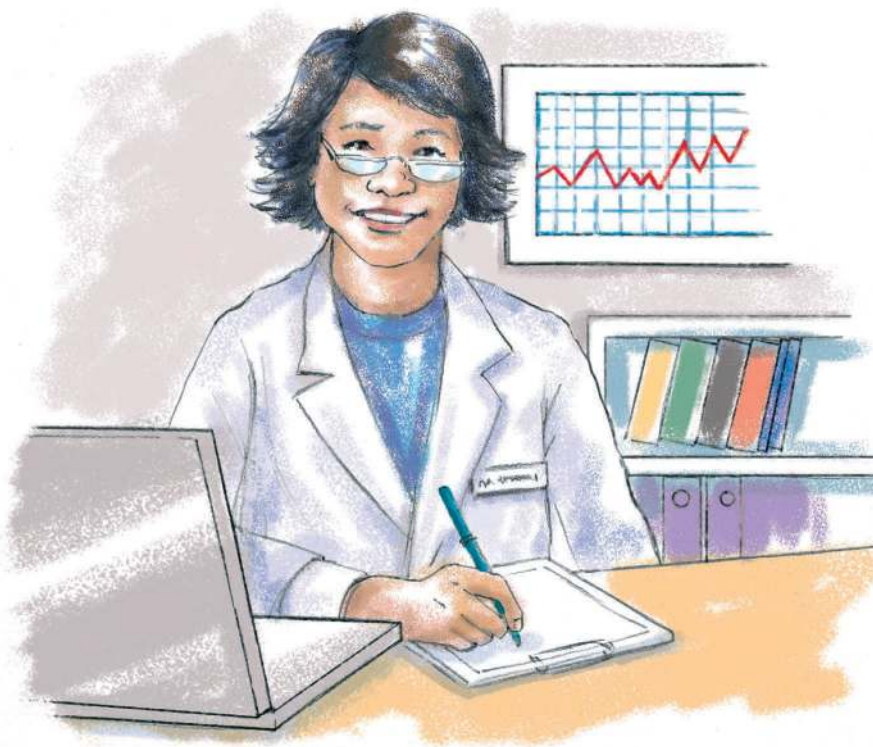
What is body image?

Body image is how you think and feel about your body. But it is also much more than this. It is a part of your identity, and how you view yourself. Your body image affects your mental health and it can affect your behaviors. For example, if you dislike your curly hair, you may spend a lot of time trying to straighten it. If you wish you were taller, you may wear shoes with platform soles or high heels. If you really want

your nose to be smaller, you may consider getting surgery to change the size or shape of it.

But what if there is a better way to think about your body? Maybe changing how you look isn't the answer. Maybe there is an easier way. **This book is full of information and advice about body image that will help you understand your body and develop positive feelings about it.**





Most women I know (including myself) wish they'd had this sort of information when they were girls your age.

Why I wrote this book

I have a daughter, and when I worked on the first edition of this book, she was about 12 years old. She actually read some of the chapter drafts and provided me with feedback about them. I remember desperately wanting her and her friends to have this book and to read it either on their own or with their moms, dads, sisters, cousins, and friends. I wanted a book that was full of helpful, **evidence-based information** that my daughter and her friends – and you and your friends – could turn to for answers to questions about body image and related topics, such as **nutrition** and physical activity.

Even though, as I write this, my daughter is 17 and my son is 19 years old, I still worry about them. Most moms worry about their kids, but sometimes I think it's worse as a parent when you know too much. With



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almost 30 years of experience as a **research scientist** studying eating behaviors and body image, I know all about the mistakes people make, and I don't want my kids to make those mistakes. I don't want you to, either.

There is a lot of bad information available about the topics I cover in this book. This bad information is dangerous and can lead to risky decisions. In fact, adults often don't do a good job of making sense of what to eat, how much to exercise, and when to go to sleep. This book can help you develop good habits while you're young – good habits that I hope will stick with you as you get older.

My goal in writing this book is to create a resource that you will refer to again and again as you become a teenager and young adult. I hope that you'll read it from cover to cover, but also pick it up when you have a question about something and you want a factual answer. Sure, you can google all the topics I cover in this book, but you'll find a lot of misinformation and myths about body image on the Internet. My goal is to provide you with **scientific evidence** about the issues I discuss, not just my opinions.



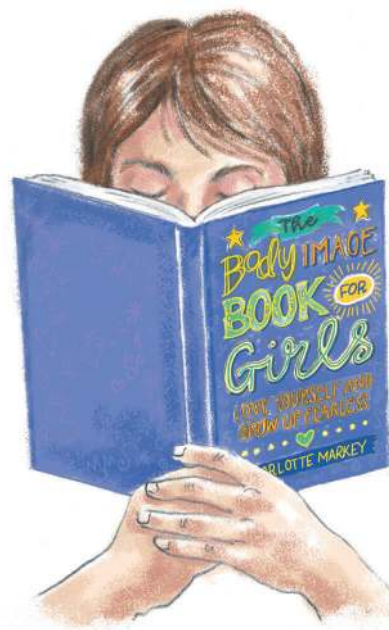
EXPERT ADVICE

Tracy Tylka, PhD, body image expert, Professor at Ohio State University

"Having a positive body image means that you appreciate your body, which helps you **respect** and care for it. You don't focus on how your body looks as much as how it feels and all the cool things it is able to do. It's so important to build a positive body image because it can help you feel good about yourself and cope with **stress** in healthy ways. Overall, a positive body image can offer peace of mind."

In each chapter, you'll find:

- **Reliable information:** I summarize the latest **science** on the topics covered in each chapter. If you see a word you don't know, check the glossary in the back of this book. As you read, remember you're a member of a large community that cares about these issues. I don't know any women who haven't been concerned about these issues, and talking about them can be helpful and **empowering**.
- **Q&A:** During my career, I've talked with hundreds of girls. For this book, I've asked them what questions they have about their bodies, eating, exercising, and all the other topics in this book. I provide factual answers to their questions – which are probably the questions you have, too.



Q&A???

Are any of the pictures of people in magazines or online real?

A lot of the pictures that you see are actual people, but nearly all images are modified: one photographer I talked with estimated 99%. Photographs of famous, beautiful people are almost always altered to make them look prettier, younger, and thinner. It's easy to think that other people have perfect hair, bright eyes, no pimples, perfectly white teeth, long legs with no **cellulite** anywhere on them, and enviable noses, but they probably look a lot more like you in real life. If a professional photographer edited pictures of you, you'd look like a star, too! The next time you see a photo of a famous person, remember that the photo is edited.

- **Myths and misbeliefs:** In each chapter, I'll share "myths and misbeliefs" about body image and related topics and explain why they aren't true.



Telling people that they need to lose weight or look better – "body shaming" – will motivate them to do so.

There is no evidence that this is true! In fact, it seems that the opposite is true!

People come in different shapes and sizes, and not everyone is going to have big feet or be tall or slender. You may think that someone should lose weight, but this is not necessarily true! Suggesting to a friend that you don't find her acceptable as she is may be a good way to lose that friend.

Making people feel bad about themselves is not "motivating." If you are concerned about a person's health or **well-being**, the last thing you should do is shame them. Instead, you should aim to be a supportive friend. For example, if you notice that you have a friend who spends a lot of time on **social media** and this leads her to feel depressed, you may want to suggest that she take a social media break. If a friend is trying to pick up a new activity, such as volleyball, you may want to offer to practice with her.

- **My story:** In the process of writing this book, I've relied on scientific research that takes into account hundreds and thousands of girls' experiences. But I've also interviewed individual girls between the ages of 14 and 22 to hear about their specific experiences in detail. In this chapter, I feature Sage and Graciela. Each chapter will feature other real girls' experiences in their own voices. **The more that we all talk about body image and learn from each other, the easier it will be to feel supported and to develop a positive body image.**

- **Inspiration:** When it comes to feeling good about our bodies, all girls and women can use some inspiration. Each chapter will contain quotes, illustrations, and bits of information to help you think about your body in a positive way – and maybe even laugh about some of these issues.
- **Expert advice:** I've had the opportunity to connect with many different types of experts, from scientists to journalists to Olympic athletes, who have helped me think more deeply about the issues discussed in this book and have offered words of wisdom to help you think more about these issues too.
- **Surveys and activities:** There are many body image scientists who have developed ways to measure and improve body image. Some of these surveys and activities will be included throughout the book to provide you with some hands-on ways of working to understand and improve your body image.



EXPERT ADVICE

Jason Wood, speaker and author, Director of Community Engagement at ANAD (*The National Association for Anorexia Nervosa and Associated Disorders*)

"Who doesn't want to wake up and be proud of what they see in the mirror? Sadly, we live in a **society** that often values physical appearance above all else. This, combined with unrealistic and unhealthy stereotypes and expectations around body image, can have a devastating impact on our mental health. We need to remember that our bodies are our one true home. Rather than punish them, we should love, or at the very least accept them, as they are."



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BODY IMAGE GOALS

Take some time to think about these questions and write out your answers.

How would you describe your current body image?

What thoughts and beliefs about my body image do I want to change? (Note: this is not what you want to change about your body, but what *thoughts and beliefs* you want to work on.)

What are three goals that you have for yourself as you work toward a positive body image?

Note: This activity was adapted from an exercise developed by Nichole Wood-Barcalow, Tracy Tylka, and Casey Judge in their *Positive Body Image Workbook*.

- **Find out more:** The information in this book is evidence-based and scientific in nature. In other words, it's not just my opinion but is based on thousands of scientists' research and understanding of body image and the other topics discussed. If you want to read more about a topic, these references at the end of each chapter will be a good place to look.

I want you to grow up to be strong, independent, and powerful. **Once you know the facts about the smartest way to nurture your positive body image, nothing will be able to hold you back!**