

## Introduction

### Becoming Positive – Our Growing Understanding of Positive Body Image

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As body image researchers, we have recently witnessed the significant growth of research on positive body image. This change is exciting and revolutionary in the field, representing a shift in the way researchers – and hopefully the public – think about body image. As contributors to this volume have articulated in their chapters, body image is not simply what people do not like, or wish they could change, about their bodies. Instead, it is a much more holistic, multifaceted concept that consists of both positive and negative body image. Researchers disagree, however, about how to conceptualize these aspects of body image. Some view them as distinct constructs on separate poles that reflect thoughts, feelings, and attitudes toward the body, whereas others see them as overlapping, given that some components of both constructs are strongly correlated. What is clear is that both positive and negative body image are multifaceted and carry significant implications for health and well-being. In fact, working to develop a positive body image, rather than striving to reduce negative body image, may be a better approach to sustaining long-term health and well-being.

Research is only just beginning to unravel the meanings, antecedents, and consequences of positive body image. Historically, research has focused on the causes and consequences of negative body image, yielding much less knowledge about the positive aspects of body image. Thus, less is known about what it means to feel good about one's body, who feels good about their body, and how to encourage positive body image across different groups of people. This imbalance in the literature has been cited as problematic by leading body image scholars, both for the direction of the field and for clinicians' ability to foster well-being in their clients (Smolak & Cash, 2011; Tylka & Wood-Barcalow, 2015).

Researchers have responded to these concerns. A recent search on PsycInfo (August 2017) with "positive body image" as a key word yielded ninety results. In contrast, a similar search with the general term "body image" as a key word yielded 7,356 results. Thus, positive body image is a small but growing area within this larger field. The result of the positive

body image search represents significant progress since the 2005 publication of the first version of the Body Appreciation Scale, a widely used and psychometrically sound measure of positive body image which has subsequently been revised and expanded. To that end, we saw this as an important time to create a volume that summarizes and reflects on the work that has gone before it. The aim of this book is to provide an overview of the existing research on positive body image. In the volume, we have included related topics such as positive health behaviors and body image interventions. Leading researchers in the field have synthesized existing evidence and offered future directions for the field. Below, we highlight some of the key points from each of their chapters.

Chapter 1, “Overview of the Field of Positive Body Image” by Tracy L. Tylka, provides an introduction to and review of the field of positive body image research. Tylka details the origins of the study of positive body image, including an operational definition of the construct, as well as the development of measures to assess the various components of positive body image. She also reviews existing research on positive body image, the majority of which has focused on outcomes for psychological well-being and physical health. Finally, Tylka concludes the chapter with a discussion of future directions for research on positive body image.

Chapter 2, “Positive Body Image by Gender and across the Lifespan” by Lina A. Ricciardelli, Marie L. Caltabiano, and Laura D. D’Antuono, synthesizes research on populations that have not received much research attention, such as pregnant and postpartum women, Canadian Aboriginal adults, adults with spinal cord injuries, and middle-aged and older women. The research included is both qualitative and quantitative and highlights themes related to positive body image (e.g., body pride, gratitude for the body’s capabilities). The authors concluded that more research is needed among boys and men as well as middle-aged and older women and men, and that the field should move beyond measuring body appreciation to tap into additional components of positive body image.

Chapter 3, “Considering Positive Body Image through the Lens of Culture and Minority Social Identities” by Viren Swami, explores positive body image within different social and cultural contexts, and reminds us that positive body image – and, in fact, body image in general – is culturally constructed. From a small body of research, findings suggest that there are generally few between-group racial/ethnic differences (within the United States and across different countries) in positive body image. However, rural residents may be conducive to positive body image development. Further, sexual minority status may pose a risk factor for men’s, but a buffering effect for women’s, positive body image. Swami points out that there is work to be done, however, to

determine more than group similarities and differences and to discover the explanatory mechanisms leading to the potential for positive body image to emerge in diverse contexts.

Chapter 4, “Moving beyond Body Dissatisfaction and Risky Sexual Behavior: A Critical Review of Positive Body Image and Sexual Health Scholarship” by Virginia Ramseyer Winter, includes research on positive body image and multiple components of sexual health. Winter reports that positive body image is generally associated with better sexual health and offers some compelling recommendations for research, practice, and policy. She argues that improving research is the foundation for enhancing practice and policy, and that this should include drawing on existing theories and creating new ones, developing new measures, and increasing diversity among participants. Throughout the chapter, she highlights the importance of diversity and theory in moving research on positive body image forward.

Chapter 5, “Appearance-Related Practices: Can They Be Part of a Positive Body Image” by Kristina Holmqvist Gattario and Carolina Lunde, reminds us of the complexities associated with living in one’s body in a world where body modification of all sorts is accepted and even promoted. However, unlike many past conceptualizations of body modification as inherently “bad” or “antifeminist,” Gattario and Lunde propose that appearance-related practices may be conducive to positive body image. They explain how enhancing one’s appearance *may* be a statement about one’s identity and/or an act of self-care, and can elicit positive social feedback, which in turn may enhance positive body image. Further, they describe the conundrum of whether or not to engage in appearance-related practices that is faced by women in particular. It is clear that refraining from engagement in such practices may have social costs. Although they frame their discussion in terms of theory and research, Gattario and Lunde also make it clear that some of the issues pertaining to appearance-related practices are cultural and philosophical. For example, they pose the question: To what extent is body modification a suitable part of body acceptance?

Chapter 6, “Mindful Self-Care and Positive Body Image: Mindfulness, Yoga, and Actionable Tools for Positive Embodiment” by Catherine Cook-Cottone, describes the constructs of positive embodiment and mindful self-care and their relationships with positive body image. Positive embodiment entails being present in the body and attuned to its needs and desires. Mindful self-care involves behaviors aimed at taking care of the body (e.g., planning for and preparing healthy meals). Cook-Cottone presents a theoretical model of positive embodiment as well as a new measure of mindful self-care. She also describes how individuals can

implement self-care practices and yoga into their lives to enhance body image and cultivate positive embodiment.

Chapter 7, “The Health at Every Size® Paradigm: Promoting Body Positivity for All Bodies” by Patti Lou Watkins, Dawn Clifford, and Brian Souza, introduces the Health at Every Size® (HAES) paradigm, which rejects the traditional weight-centric approach to health in favor of a wellness-focused approach. In the HAES approach, weight loss is decentered as a target for interventions intended to improve health. In contrast, enhancing physical, emotional, and spiritual health without focusing on weight loss is the aim of the HAES approach to health. The authors review existing intervention research using the HAES approach. They also describe how the HAES paradigm can be applied in clinical, fitness, and educational settings and provide resources for accessing HAES curricula and other materials.

Chapter 8, “Better than Before: Individual Strategies for Body Image Improvement” by Jamie L. Dunaev and Charlotte H. Markey, highlights evidence-based practices that individuals can engage in on their own to enhance positive body image, such as therapeutic writing, physical activity, and mindfulness training. However, most studies are qualitative or have used small samples, so more research is needed to support use of these programs. Considering the challenges involved in changing the current sociocultural context (e.g., media) and, for some, in gaining access to interventions or treatments to improve body image (e.g., individual therapy), their strategies are practical and have wide implications for use.

Chapter 9, “Programmatic Approaches to Cultivating Positive Body Image in Youth” by Elizabeth A. Daniels and Tomi-Ann Roberts, describes body image programs for youth in three critical settings – school, sport, and dance – that have the potential to impact positive body image. Many of these existing programs focus on reducing negative body image, yet the authors argue, importantly, for a shift toward the inclusion of curricula that also foster positive body image. This approach may be better for maintaining well-being and may also “undo” the negative emotions generated by body image disturbance. The authors also include an important point about bridging research and practice, to incorporate theory into the design of body image programs.

Chapter 10, “Clinical Applications of Positive Body Image” by Nichole L. Wood-Barcalow and Casey L. Augustus-Horvath, discusses positive body image work in clinical contexts. As both clinicians and researchers, the authors offer insight into facets of positive body image that can be addressed through specific clinical interventions. They stress the importance of both clinicians and clients being committed to body

acceptance, as opposed to behaviors aimed to alter the body to meet a particular ideal. Some of the possible avenues for intervention described include nurturing gratitude and self-compassion, educating about beauty ideals, and promoting self-care (e.g., healthy nutrition, sleep, and physical activity). Further, the authors discuss how clients can be taught to filter information that is not conducive to the development and maintenance of positive body image.

In conclusion, there clearly seems to be some cultural movement in popular media toward an aim to promote positive body image. Celebrities post pictures of their curvy physiques on Twitter, athletes proudly promote muscular bodies, and YouTube users post how-to videos about loving your body. As researchers, we may have fallen behind the cultural milieu when it comes to how we think about body image. However, the research discussed in this volume brings us closer to thinking about body image in a more holistic way; studying our view of our bodies as dynamic and full of potential instead of objects in need of fixing. We hope you find these chapters as novel, informative, and practical as we did. We encourage body image scholars and clinicians to continue their important work in unraveling what positive body image means and how to cultivate it. Similar to the movement toward promoting positive body image in the wider culture, we hope that researchers begin to adopt a “body positive” outlook in their research as well.

### References

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