

1-25-19 Body image: perception or truth?

My daughter and I recently experienced the fun adventure of shopping for a wedding dress for her next September wedding. My other daughters would have joined us, but the weather conditions of lowering temperatures and icing conditions were not safe, especially for one's lengthier trip from Connecticut.

It was fun watching my daughter try on numerous dresses, feeling happy for her, her intelligence, her beauty and her serious analytical mind. What was she thinking? It became clear that everyone has their own comfort zone, and, conversely, our discomfort zone. While listening to my daughter's concerns about her hips, her shoulders and other body parts, I realized that no matter how great we look (and she looks great!) we all have our insecurities and our wishes. You know what I mean. *I wish I was ten pounds lighter. I wish I had better core strength. I wish my hair was smoother or wavier.* And on and on. What's on your wish list?

The dress assistant (I do not know the official title.) was kind, helpful, knowledgeable, and had a sense of humor. As we conversed, and my daughter tried on various dresses, it was so interesting to hear the variety of comments. Mermaid (very curvy and hugging), sparkly, lacey, strapless, off the shoulder, and oh, so many more!

While the dress trying on was happening, we could not help but make friends with the staff, on that day when they had appointments for 100 cut down to 20, due to weather conditions.

So... they had the time to chat and tell stories. They told of many young brides-to-be fainting during the fitting appointments. Why? Because they are starving themselves, and not hydrating, the woman explained. One time, a woman, fainted straight into the mirror, crashing her chin into it, landing on the floor in a pool of blood. She might have arrived with friends and family but she left by ambulance.

While we all want to improve our lives, we must also wonder at what cost. It is one thing to improve our diet, it is another to reduce it to the point of anorexia. Or to ignore all guidance, as though obesity has no consequences. Why is it so challenging to accept ourselves? To love ourselves, as we are?

I began to advise myself: Love yourself. Live your life; really live it! Take things slowly. One step at a time will do. Be aware of thought patterns.

While contemplating the importance of taking good care of oneself, I found the website of National Eating Disorders Association (NEDA). They have a nice list of ten things we can do to build a positive body image:

1. **Appreciate all that your body can do.** Every day your body carries you closer to your dreams. Celebrate all of the amazing things your body does for you—running, dancing, breathing, laughing, dreaming, etc.

2. **Keep a top-ten list of things you like about yourself**—things that aren't related to how much you weigh or what you look like. Read your list often. Add to it as you become aware of more things to like about yourself.
3. **Remind yourself that “true beauty” is not simply skin-deep.** When you feel good about yourself and who you are, you carry yourself with a sense of confidence, self-acceptance, and openness that makes you beautiful. Beauty is a state of mind, not a state of your body.
4. **Look at yourself as a whole person.** When you see yourself in a mirror or in your mind, choose not to focus on specific body parts. See yourself as you want others to see you — as a whole person.
5. **Surround yourself with positive people.** It is easier to feel good about yourself and your body when you are around others who are supportive and who recognize the importance of liking yourself just as you naturally are.
6. **Shut down those voices in your head that tell you your body is not “right” or that you are a “bad” person.** You can overpower those negative thoughts with positive ones. The next time you start to tear yourself down, build yourself back up with a few quick affirmations that work for you.
7. Wear clothes that are comfortable and that make you feel good about your body. **Work with your body, not against it.**
8. **Become a critical viewer of social and media messages.** Pay attention to images, slogans, or attitudes that make you feel bad about yourself or your body. Protest these messages: write a letter to the advertiser or talk back to the image or message.
9. **Do something nice for yourself** — something that lets your body know you appreciate it. Take a bubble bath, make time for a nap, or find a peaceful place outside to relax.
10. **Use the time and energy that you might have spent worrying about food, calories, and your weight to do something to help others.** Sometimes reaching out to other people can help you feel better about yourself and can make a positive change in our world.

Their confidential hotline for people with eating disorder questions and concerns is 1-800-931-2237.

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