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# BODY IMAGE FACTS

College is often a time that is important for body image development. Students are making crucial decisions about their health and social life independently. Living in close quarters with peers and joining campus groups that emphasize appearance or unhealthy eating habits (e.g., sororities, certain sports teams) may also influence body image. However, this is also a time when body image problems may occur. These problems are often mistaken for vanity, shyness, or even normalcy. As a student you may have felt the widespread pressure that we have to look or act a certain way; so much so that a negative body image might be the norm.

Body image can be defined as how you see and picture yourself in your mind and what you believe about your own appearance (including memories, assumptions, and generalizations). It also includes how you feel about your body including your height, shape and weight as well as how you control your body as you move.

Body image is a widespread preoccupation. One study of college students showed that 74.4% of the normal-weight women stated that they thought about their weight or appearance “all the time” or “frequently.” 46% of the normal-weight men surveyed responded the same way. In Fall 2012, over 500 Cal State L.A students participated in the American College Health Associations National College Health Assessment (ACHANCHA). The results suggests that body image may indeed be a problem as 20.7% of men and 27.8% of females found personal appearance traumatic



or very difficult to handle within the past year. At a national level the NCHA data shows that nearly 23% of college students struggle with body image. A survey of 100 Cal State LA students conducted during the 2013 Spring quarter showed that 40% of students felt that they would be happier if they were thinner.

### **SYMPTOMS/ WARNING SIGNS**

Poor body image is an important issue as it may increase the risk for extreme weight/body control behaviors. Warning signs and symptoms of a negative body image may include but is not limited to:

- Distorted perception of body size or shape
- Feelings of shame and anxiety about the body.
- Feelings of failure
- Low self-esteem
- Depression
- Extreme dieting and eating disorders such as anorexia or bulimia
- Compulsive exercising
- Laxative abuse
- Use of steroids

### **HELPING YOURSELF OR A FRIEND**

If you feel that you or a friend need help with body image some of the following may be done:

- Spend time with people who have a healthy relationship with food, their bodies and physical activity.
- You can practice stopping negative thoughts about yourself.
- Broaden your thinking on what is healthy and beautiful.
- Be realistic about the size you are likely to be based on your genetic and environmental history.
- Stay active regardless of your size or appearance.
- Stay active (walking, dancing, yoga, etc.), regardless of your size.
- Work towards self-acceptance and self-forgiveness; be gentle with yourself.
- Ask for support and encouragement from friends and family when life is stressful.

How a person deals with body image varies and might be too complex for you to help a friend with or deal with by yourself. If that is the case then professional help is recommended. It is very important to reassure your friend that it takes mental and emotional strength for an individual to rec-

ognize when professional help is needed. As a friend, you can encourage and support your friend to be able to make the move to getting the tools and help needed to cope with body image issues. You can prepare yourself to help a friend, even when they are so ill they are physically harming themselves or thinking about suicide. To do so you can take the free online Kognito Gatekeeper training on the Kognito website listed as well as get suicide assistance from the resources listed.

### **RESOURCES**

There are many resources that are available for students to help deal with body image issues.

1. The Cal State LA Student Health Center provides counseling and psychological services (CAPS) that is free of charge for students. To make an appointment please call 323-343-3314.
2. The Cal State LA Student Health Center has a nutritionist available to help students lose weight in a healthy manner as well as learn healthy eating habits. To make an appointment please call (323) 343-3302.