

## Exploring Body Image and Weight Prejudices

We often think about body image in terms of physical appearance, attractiveness and beauty. But it is so much more. Body image is an individual's experience with his/her body. It is our mental picture of our body as well as the thoughts, feelings, sensations, awareness and behaviours we have about/ around our body. These feelings can be positive or negative and often change quickly in response to feedback from our environment. These feelings may or may not be accurate or well defined, or may focus only on specific body parts.

We all experience the world in a unique way due to differences in physical characteristics such as height, weight and the size of specific body parts. Body perceptions, feeling and beliefs govern our life plan – who we meet, who we marry , our day to day comfort level, and the tendency toward psychological disorders.

Body image is not a static concept. It is constantly being developed through interactions with people, the social world, changes across the life span and changing feedback from the environment. Body image is shaped by positive and negative experiences we have, such as:

- Judgements and comments from others – family, friends, spouses, partners
- Sexual and racial harassment
- Prevailing cultural norms
- Physical changes in the body during puberty, pregnancy, and menopause
- Socialization
- Emotional factors such as how a person feels about themselves, tendency toward depression, anxiety, and our overall sense of well being.
- Violence whether physical, verbal or sexual
- The actual state of the body such as illness and disabilities

The majority of women struggle with body image, food and weight problems. It has been estimated that up to 80% of women dislike their bodies and up to 70% are preoccupied with weight. Body dislike is not just limited to middle class, white women or young women. Girls are dieting in grade four and many women post menopause are concerned about their bodies. Boys and men are showing an increasing amount of body dissatisfaction. A positive body image is extremely important to an overall state of well being.

## Building Positive Body Images

A shift from a weight centered approach to a healthy living approach

### Weight Centered Thinking

#### Dieting

- Restrictive eating
- Counting calories or fat grams
- Yo-yo dieting
- Eating disorders
- Mega-vitamins to correct for diet inadequacies
- Good food, bad food judgements

#### Exercise

- No pain, no gain
- Prescriptions: such as three times per week in your target heart zone
- Burn calories
- High attention rates for vigorous exercise programs

#### Dissatisfaction with self

- Unrealistic goals for body size and shape
- Obsession and preoccupation with weight
- Fat phobia and discrimination against overweight people
- Striving to be a perfect "10" and maintain and impossible "ideal" (thin or muscular) body size
- Accepting the fashion, diet and tobacco industries' emphasis on slimness

### Healthy Living

#### Healthy Eating

- Take pleasure in eating a variety of foods
- Enjoy complex carbohydrates, fruits and weight vegetables
- Meeting the body's energy and nutrient needs through a lifetime of healthy eating
- Take control of your eating by listening to your hunger cues
- All foods are part of a healthy diet

#### Active Living

- Value and practice activities that are moderate and fun
- Be active your way, every day
- Participation for the joy of feeling your body move
- Enjoy physical activity as part of your daily lifestyle
- Have fun.

#### Positive Self and Body Image

- Accept and recognize that healthy bodies come in a range of weights, shapes, and sizes
- Appreciate your strengths and abilities
- Be tolerant of a wide range of body sizes and shapes
- Relax and enjoy the unique characteristics you have to offer;
- Be critical of messages that focus on unrealistic thinness (in women) and muscularity (in men) as symbols of success and happiness

- Support magazines and companies which emphasize the message that everyone comes in different shapes.