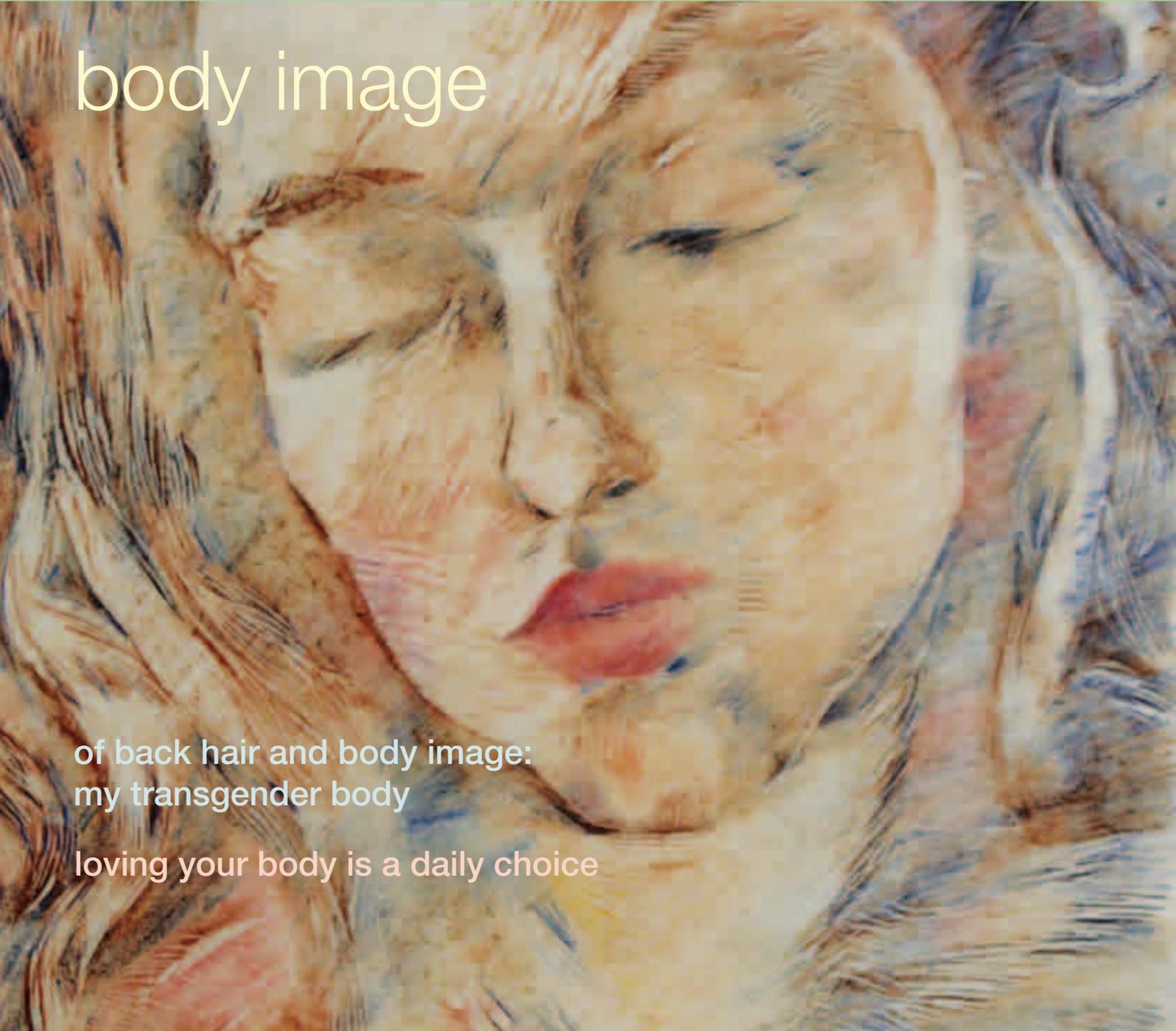


visions

Vol. 12 No. 1 2016



body image

of back hair and body image:
my transgender body

loving your body is a daily choice

visions

Published quarterly, *Visions* is a national award-winning journal that provides a forum for the voices of people experiencing a mental health or substance use problem, their family and friends, and service providers in BC. It creates a place where many perspectives on mental health and addictions issues can be heard. *Visions* is produced by the BC Partners for Mental Health and Addictions Information and funded by BC Mental Health and Substance Use Services, an agency of the Provincial Health Services Authority.

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Cover illustration: "Self Forgiven" by Chloe Allred, California USA (more details, p. 32)

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footnotes reminder

If you see a superscripted number in an article, that means there is a footnote attached to that point. In most cases, this is a bibliographic reference. For complete footnotes, see the online version of each article at www.heretohelp.bc.ca/visions.

we want your feedback!

If you have a comment about something you've read in *Visions* that you'd like to share, please email us at visions@heretohelp.bc.ca, or you can mail or fax us at the address to the right. Letters should be no longer than 200 words and may be edited for length and/or clarity. Please include your name and city of residence. All letters are read. Your likelihood of being published will depend on the number of submissions we receive. For full guidelines, please visit www.heretohelp.bc.ca/visions



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I spent time reading *Visions* Journal and am really impressed with the helpful information in the journal, the excellent writing, and editorial work. As I was reading it hit me so strongly that I need more community supports and I have been in contact with my mental health worker about my need for support. The editor's message for the *Visions* edition on social support [past issue from 2011] hit home, "Social support is absolutely fundamental to our well-being."

In the short time I have been reading *Visions* editorials and testimonials I have been motivated in advocating for my needs, applying for respite care, and working on re-cultivating mutual support with friends and acquaintances. In retrospect, I realize the lives of my caregivers and myself have fallen apart when we have not had the social supports we needed in place. The guest writers of *Visions* are people I can relate to, and their stories are an inspiration. This has helped me see that sharing meaningful experiences with others is a part of our lives that is very important to our mental health.

— Jessica Dawson, Courtenay, BC

editor's message

Body image was top of mind for me while producing this issue. For example, I remembered how before my wedding, one of my relatives suggested that I stuff my bra and that my husband wear lifts in his shoes (he's 2" shorter than me) to "look better" in our photos. I was flabbergasted that she *thought* that, let alone shared it. Did others? Even though she didn't even grow up in the West, "masculine" and "feminine" ideals clearly followed her here. And yet other ideals are very culture-dependent. For example, tanned skin is not attractive to her at all. She grew up in a culture where fair skin had the highest status. Huh. If so many beauty ideals of ours shift across times and cultures, isn't the very idea of an ideal just a sham? We are chasing ghosts.

I didn't follow her wedding advice, of course; my body image was pretty good in my 20s. Then I grew older and had kids. My body has inevitably changed. I've never had any disordered eating behaviour, but now in my late 30s, I have plenty of negative body self-talk. And this is despite being happier and healthier than I've ever been. I really struggle with reconciling those two things, but I need to, not only for myself, but for my two young daughters.

This *Visions* features diverse stories—and doesn't, too. We've tried to include voices you don't hear as often, such as a transgender woman's perspective, two stories from men, and even one from a service provider. But you will notice quite a few stories preoccupied with weight and disordered eating, too. Now, body image is much bigger than that, but society's preoccupation with weight is a major concern and of course a leading risk for disordered eating.

Finally, for obvious reasons, we have included many photos of the contributors themselves instead of idealized models. And just as well: the search term "plus sized" in the stock photo library only brought up people who were overweight and depressed or exercising. Only a fraction featured proud, beautiful, real-looking people happy in their own skin. On the flip side, whenever I go to our local municipal pool, I'm surrounded by a range of people in all shapes and sizes who walk around with confidence. Boy I wish our society were more like that and less like stock-photo catalogues.



Sarah Hamid-Balma

Sarah is Visions Editor and Director of Mental Health Promotion at the Canadian Mental Health Association's BC Division

Love Your Body, Love Yourself

Laurie Kohl, MEd, RCC

Few of us today escape some kind of dissatisfaction about the way we look. In a 2008 study, only 10% of BC adolescent girls in Grades 7 through 12 rated themselves as very satisfied with their body image, compared to 19% of adolescent boys.¹



Laurie is Director of Community and Provincial Programs at Family Services of the North Shore. She oversees Jessie's Legacy eating disorders prevention and awareness programs, which provide education and inspiration for BC youth, families, educators and professionals through online resources, live events, social media and the Love Our Bodies, Love Ourselves movement. Laurie worked for years as a psychotherapist and clinical supervisor supporting survivors of physical and sexual violence, many of whom struggle to attain healthy body image

Photo credit: TomFullum

By high school, more than half of adolescent girls are dieting to lose weight, despite being in a normal weight range.² "Fat talk" (such as "Do I look fat in this?" or "You look great! Have you lost weight?") is a part of everyday conversation. More than a third of healthy-weight teen boys are trying to gain weight and muscle to look like the masculine heroes they see in sports, video games and movies.² People perceived as being fat experience discrimination and size-shaming.

I am delighted to be the guest editor for this issue of *Visions*, focused on body image. Since body dissatisfaction is one of the strongest

predictors of unhealthy dieting, and is also linked to higher rates of depression and anxiety, we at Jessie's Legacy are serious about promoting healthy body image. Healthy body image encompasses far more than weight, shape and size. People of all ages can feel pressured to attain a myriad of beauty ideals dictated by mainstream media, society and family. It can be really challenging to love your body and yourself just as you are.

What is body image?

Body image is both the mental picture you have of your body and the way you feel about your body when you look in the mirror. Healthy body

image means accepting and liking the way you look right now, and not trying to change your body to fit some idea of how your body should look. It means valuing the individual qualities and strengths that make you feel good about yourself—beyond your weight, shape or appearance.

Many external factors contribute to poor body image: thin body idealization, false and unattainable images of beauty in media, weight bias and stigma (seeing overweight people as lazy, lacking in self-control or less credible), family attitudes and behaviours, and a billion-dollar diet industry, to name a few. We don't see a variety of natural body shapes and sizes reflected in mainstream media. We don't see hair on women's bodies—and increasingly not on men's bodies, either. We still don't see a broad representation of people from different cultures and ethnicities on TV or in movies. Gender expression is presented only as binary (“masculine” men or “feminine” women); transgender people rarely see their bodies or identities reflected. In short, we are all bombarded every day in many ways by messages that tell us we are not okay the way we are.

How we internalize this endless spray of negative messages is what hurts the most. We take in the words and images. We start thinking, “If only I could lose a few pounds, I'd look better and life would be easier.” Or, “Once I'm thinner, I can join that new group.” Or, “Once I can afford to remove all my body hair, I can go on that date.” The marketing campaigns have done their work. It's impossible to measure up. No wonder so many of us experience poor body image.

How we internalize this endless spray of negative messages is what hurts the most. We take in the words and images. We start thinking, “If only I could lose a few pounds, I'd look better and life would be easier.”

Poor body image affects self-esteem, particularly in teens. Self-esteem is the opinion you have about yourself, both inside and out. When your self-esteem is good, you can value and respect yourself. There's room for making mistakes and you see yourself as good enough—even when you're dealing with difficult feelings and situations. If you don't like your body, it's hard to feel good about your whole self. It's easy to feel inadequate or not good enough.

None of us is immune. Kristi Gordon, Global BC's senior meteorologist—and a person who happens to fit the thin body ideal—tells a story about a particularly negative email she received. The viewer complained that she had sock marks on her ankles. Gordon had worked out at the gym before going on air and the sock marks were still visible. This story may seem a bit funny and harmless. But after she read the email, Gordon made sure not to wear sports socks before a broadcast again. She had internalized the negative message and changed her behaviour.³

What can we do?

Become media aware

We can become critical consumers of advertising and media messages.

Parents and other adults with influence can help mitigate the negative impact of media and advertising by teaching children how to look at and think critically about the images and messages they are seeing. Parents can also monitor and limit screen time and help make choices about the content their kids are taking in through fashion magazines, the Internet and social media.

Be a positive role model

Examine your own attitudes and beliefs about body image, weight, shape and appearance, and be a positive role model for your family and friends. Rather than talking about your child's weight and appearance, for example, focus on his or her overall health and personal strengths. Promote the importance of having a fit and healthy body rather than a thin or “ideal” body. Create space for children to talk about how they feel about their body—and make sure to listen.

Promote the Health at Every Size model

We cannot judge the state of a person's health from an individual's body shape or size. For example, some skinny people have very poor diets and can experience heart problems, while some large people engage in regular physical



Photo credit: Tassii

activity and are healthy and fit. The Health at Every Size model focuses on a person's overall health rather than the number on the scale or a person's body mass index (BMI). BC Mental Health and Substance Use Services recently developed Balanced View, an online learning resource designed to raise awareness about weight bias and stigma in health care and to help health care professionals reduce weight bias and stigma in practice.⁴

Teach children to value difference

Teach children that bodies come in all shapes, sizes and capabilities. Teach children that body hair is natural. Teach children about different gender identities. Teach children that teasing hurts. Help children develop a broad palate for what they consider beautiful. Make comments that show you value their qualities and actions in the world, not their looks. Be a positive mirror for them—by reflecting who they are in the world, not what they look like in the world. Help them understand their body image within their own ethnic and

cultural context by looking at photos of their ancestors and connecting them with their communities.

A future of diversity and acceptance

I look forward to a world where people aren't valued for their appearance and where weight stigma and size-shaming don't exist; a time when children are supported and empowered to feel confident about their bodies; a time when media images reflect the natural diversity in body weight, shape and size; a time when society celebrates diversity in gender expression.

Marilyn Wann, self-proclaimed fat activist, author of the book *FAT!SO?* and keynote speaker at the Fourth Annual Weight Stigma Conference (Vancouver 2016), sums it up nicely: a time when "people of all weights and identities feel at home in [their] bodies and welcomed in society."⁵

I'm with Marilyn Wann. Let's strive to make our society a welcoming home for every body. ▽



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Changing the way
we think about
mental health and
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Body Image, Self-Esteem and Mental Health

Canadian Mental Health Association, BC Division (CMHA BC)

Body image and self-esteem start in the mind, not in the mirror. They can change the way you understand your value and worth. Healthy body image and self-esteem are a big part of well-being.

CMHA BC Division is a member of the BC Partners for Mental Health and Addictions Information and HeretoHelp. This info sheet was written for the BC Partners in 2015 and can be found online at www.heretohelp.bc.ca to read, download or order

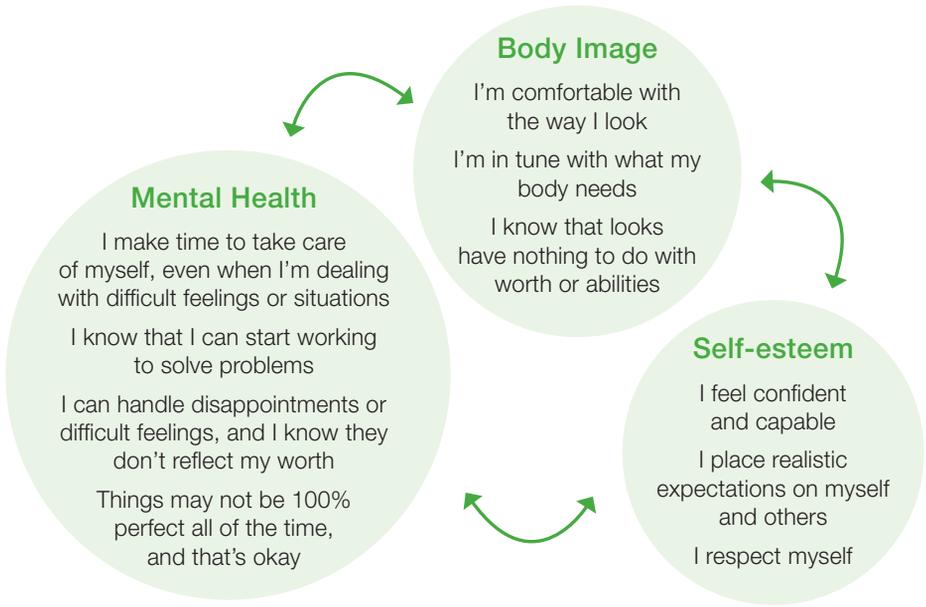


Photo credit: blackwaterimages

Body image is mental and emotional: it's both the mental picture that you have of your body and the way you feel about your body when you look in a mirror.

Healthy body image is more than simply tolerating what you look like or “not disliking” yourself. A healthy body image means that you truly accept and like the way you look right now, and aren't trying to change your body to fit the way you think you should look. It means recognizing the individual qualities and strengths that make you feel good about yourself beyond weight, shape or appearance, and resisting the pressure to strive for the myth of the “perfect” body that you see in the media, online, in your communities.

Self-esteem is how you value and respect yourself as a person—it is the opinion that you have of yourself inside and out. Self-esteem impacts how you take care of yourself, emotionally, physically, and spiritually. Self-esteem is about your whole self, not just your body. When you have good self-esteem, you value yourself, and you know that you deserve good care and respect—from yourself and from others. You can appreciate and celebrate your strengths and your abilities, and you don't put yourself down if you make a mistake. Good self-esteem means that you still feel like you're good enough even when you're dealing with difficult feelings or situations.



How can I encourage a healthier body image?

Treat your body with respect.

Eat well-balanced meals and exercise because it makes you feel good and strong, not as a way to control your body.

Notice when you judge yourself or others based on weight, shape, or size. Ask yourself if there are any other qualities you could look for when those thoughts come up.

Dress in a way that makes you feel good about yourself, in clothes that fit you now.

Find a short message that helps you feel good about yourself and write it on mirrors around your home to remind you to replace negative thoughts with healthier thoughts.

Surround yourself with positive friends and family who recognize your uniqueness and like you just as you are.

Why do body image and self-esteem matter?

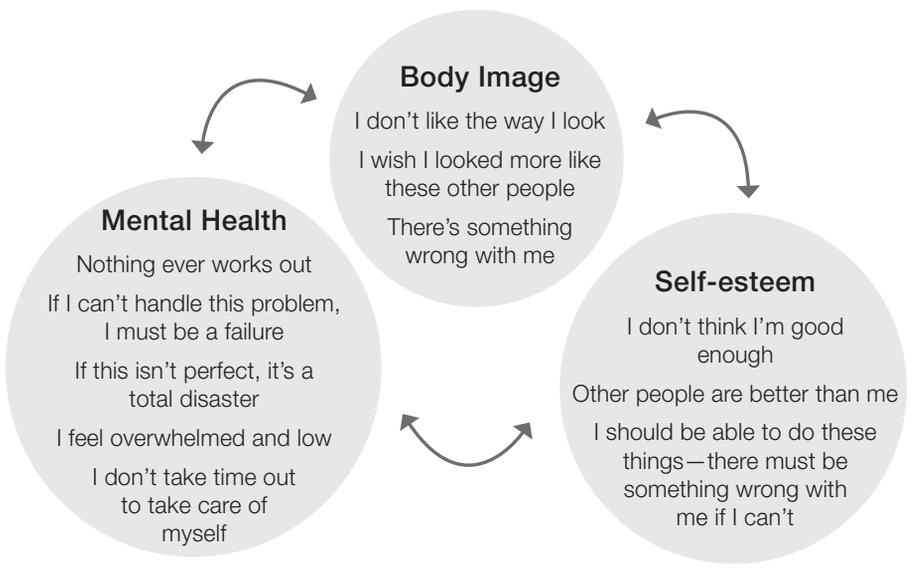
Body image and self-esteem directly influence each other—and your feelings, thoughts, and behaviours. If you don't like your body (or a part of your body), it's hard to feel good about your whole self. The reverse is also true: if you don't value yourself, it's hard to notice the good things and give your body the respect it deserves.

As you can see, the problem with negative thinking and feelings is that once people start to focus on shortcomings or problems in one area or one situation, it becomes very easy to only see problems in many other areas or situations. Negative thinking has a way of leading to more negative thinking.

In the figure above, see how good body image and self-esteem positively impact mental health.

These are just a few examples. As you can see, good body image, self-esteem, and mental health are not about making yourself feel happy all the time. They are really about respecting yourself and others, thinking realistically, and taking action to cope with problems or difficulties in healthy ways.

To the right, see how poor body image and self-esteem negatively impact mental health.



Dress in a way that makes you feel good about yourself, in clothes that fit you now.

Be aware of how you talk about your body with family and friends. Do you often seek reassurance or validation from others to feel good about yourself? Do you often focus only on physical appearances?

Remember that everyone has challenges with their body image at times. When you talk with friends, you might discover that someone else wishes they had a feature you think is undesirable.

Write a list of the benefits of the body part or feature you don't like or struggle to accept.

The next time you notice yourself having negative thoughts about your body and appearance, take a minute to think about what's going on in your life. Are you feeling stressed out, anxious, or low? Are you facing challenges in other parts of your life? When negative thoughts come up, think about what you'd tell a friend if they were in a similar situation and then take your own advice.

Be mindful of messages you hear and see in the media and how those messages inform the way people feel about the way they look. Recognize and challenge those stereotypes! You can learn more about media literacy at www.mediasmarts.ca.

Ask your community centre, mental health organization or school about

resiliency skills programs, which can help people increase self-esteem and well-being in general.

Where do I go for more information?

Jessie's Legacy at jessieslegacy.com provides education, resources and inspiration to prevent eating disorders and address disordered eating. Created and operated by Family Services of the North Shore, Jessie's Legacy supports BC youth, families, educators and professionals through online resources, live events, social media, and the **Love Our Bodies, Love Ourselves** movement.

Kelty Eating Disorders from Kelty Mental Health Resource Centre has a lot of information about disordered eating, eating disorders, and healthy living at www.keltyeatingdisorders.ca. The program finder tool can help you find service providers around BC.

HeretoHelp at www.heretohelp.bc.ca has a wellness screening self-test (and tests for other areas of mental health, including depression and anxiety), a Wellness Module that explores healthy eating, and many other resources to help you learn about mental health and well-being.

Blue Wave at www.bluewavebc.ca is a youth mental health initiative from the Canadian Mental Health Association BC Division. Blue Wave has adapted a resiliency course called Living Life to the Full for youth, which includes a session on building confidence, and you can learn how to find courses in your area.

Mindcheck, for youth and young adults, has a section on body image and eating with a screening questionnaire and self-help resources. You can find Mindcheck at www.mindcheck.ca.

About-Face at www.about-face.org is a US organization that encourages women to look at the way bodies are shown in media. They have resources on body image, self-esteem, media literacy, and more.

how do I know if I have healthy body image?

- When I see myself in a mirror or in my mind, I see myself as a whole person, not just a collection of specific body parts
- I accept and celebrate my unique body
- I feel comfortable in my body
- I know that confidence and attitude are more important than the way I look, and I carry my body with pride
- I know that the way people look in magazines, in movies, and in other media is not a realistic ideal—or sometimes even 'real'

self-test: self-esteem



Photo credit (from left to right): furtaev, Joan Vicent Canto Roig, seb_ra, john shepherd

Read each statement and circle your response.

strongly agree

agree

disagree

strongly disagree

On the whole, I am satisfied with myself.

3 pt

2 pt

1 pt

0 pt

At times, I think I am no good at all.

0 pt

1 pt

2 pt

3 pt

I feel that I have a number of good qualities.

3 pt

2 pt

1 pt

0 pt

I am able to do things as well as most other people.

3 pt

2 pt

1 pt

0 pt

I feel I do not have much to be proud of.

0 pt

1 pt

2 pt

3 pt

I certainly feel useless at times.

0 pt

1 pt

2 pt

3 pt

I feel that I'm a person of worth, at least on an equal plane with others.

3 pt

2 pt

1 pt

0 pt

I wish I could have more respect for myself.

0 pt

1 pt

2 pt

3 pt

All in all, I tend to feel that I am a failure.

0 pt

1 pt

2 pt

3 pt

I take a positive attitude toward myself.

3 pt

2 pt

1 pt

0 pt

Add up the number of points in each response you circled:

The higher the number, the higher your self-esteem: the range is zero (very low self-esteem) to 30 (very healthy self-esteem).

It's normal to occasionally feel less satisfied about yourself. But if you often have a hard time recognizing your value or worth, think about seeking some extra support. ▼

Adapted from the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale.

Bullying and a Broken Body Image

A SERVICE PROVIDER PERSPECTIVE

Michele L. Gardiner, MAC, CCC, IAEDP

This narrative is about body image and is based on my personal and professional experience. Sharing these details of my life makes me feel slightly exposed but reminds me of how important it is that we share our stories and the wisdom they can offer us.

Michele is a Certified Clinical Counsellor and operates a private practice dedicated to body image and eating disorders in Summerland, BC. Outside of counselling, she enjoys photography, a connection to nature and adventuring with her canine co-counsellor, Varo



Michele L. Gardiner

Body image is the experience of how we imagine our bodies to look and feel. It is an internal reflection of ourselves, based on our life experiences and the thoughts, feelings and beliefs we form about our appearance. Our body image begins to develop in middle childhood, when we are about six to eight years old. It can be positive, negative or distorted (referred to clinically as body dysmorphic disorder, or BDD). BDD occurs when we experience severely distressing thoughts and feelings about the way we look, to the point that it impacts our ability to function in our daily tasks and relationships.

When our body image is positive, we experience a greater sense of pleasure and confidence in ourselves. We are free from the self-punishing dialogue experienced by those with negative body image or BDD. For example, we may try on a pair of old shorts to find they're tighter than they used to be. If our body image is positive, we will look at ourselves in the mirror and think, *These shorts still feel pretty good!* The experience is one of acceptance and freedom.

If our body image is negative, however, trying on the same pair of

shorts may trigger feelings of anxiety, causing the thought, *I need to lose a few pounds before I wear these shorts.*

With BDD, the negative thoughts are all-consuming: *I am so ugly and fat. My thighs are disgusting. I'm too gross to leave the house. I'm cancelling my beach date!* In these experiences, we are held captive by our anxiety.

My first body image memory is from when I was about eight years old. I was standing before my parent's bedroom mirror, appreciating the yellow tube top and white shorts I had received for summer. I turned sideways, and my undeveloped body looked like a happy little jelly bean, with tummy sticking out and matching bum. I remember feeling good about myself, confident and capable.

Shortly before my eleventh birthday, my family moved. I changed cities, schools and friends, and endured relentless teasing. "Fat-ass" was the daily taunt from the older, more developed girls. As the new girl, I was shy, yet small, pretty and athletic. Years of gymnastics had given me a muscular bottom, lending itself to the nickname. I was also sensitive and passive. The combination made me a target for bullying, as well as body image issues.

Within a year, the verbal teasing had become physically violent. A quiet kid, I chose not to talk about the bullying with parents or teachers. As a result, I experienced anxiety and lost sleep, and I had nightmares. As my confidence diminished, I projected the negative feelings onto my small frame, which ballooned into focus and became the emphasis of my distress. Nothing fit right, looked right or felt right. I thought I was ugly and unlikeable. My

body seemed unsafe—like a target for my enemies, one that I couldn't make small enough.

On a purely physical level, my body was healthy and the changes I experienced at this age were a part of normal development. What had become unhealthy were my perceptions—the thoughts, feelings and beliefs I had internalized about my body. Rather than talking about the negative feelings and letting them go, I had swallowed them down. Instead of reassuring myself that the bullying was wrong, I formed the misperception that *my body* was wrong. According to researchers, projecting emotions onto the body is common in those with negative body image.¹

Whether we are 12 or 21, and whatever our gender, culture, sexual orientation or background, maintaining a healthy body image in Western societies is difficult. In 1997, a US study revealed that 56% of women and 43% of men were dissatisfied with their body image.² Current research suggests that the high number of negative body image issues in Western societies is linked to unrealistic ideals of beauty promoted in mainstream media. These idealized standards are internalized and replicated by members of society—us, our family members, our peers.^{1,3}

Perhaps my story can be a reminder of how important it is to talk to someone when we are struggling with problems in life. When we don't engage with our support systems, the only voice we hear is the internal voice telling us that we aren't good enough the way we are—and that voice is simply amplifying the damage of our negative self-image. As the bullying continued and I continued to stay silent, I spent more time alone



Photo credit: Halfpoint

and began exercising to quell negative thoughts and feelings. As a teenager, exercise became a normalized means for me to manage my emotions and gain a sense of control over my life. But while exercise would boost beta-endorphins, lifting my mood temporarily, these quickly dissipated, returning me to depression. The only way for me to remain uplifted was to exercise for longer periods.

I went from a normal, healthy 45 to 60 minutes in the gym to two, then three, then six hours of exercise a day. I don't remember when the bullying stopped. By that time, running had become my addiction, my life controlled by the idea of making my body socially acceptable. Overstrained, nutrient-depleted and dehydrated, my body began breaking down. I felt exhausted, my weight dropped, my periods stopped, I experienced agonizing fractures in my feet and stress fractures in both shins. But I continued to run.

When I began to feel painful pressure in my chest, which I later learned was

caused by electrolyte imbalance from dehydration and poor nutrition, I was finally afraid enough to slow down and ask for help. I spoke with my family doctor, who referred me to a treatment program for eating disorders, which included components on positive body image and skills for monitoring negative thoughts and feelings and applying safer, healthier ways for reframing and coping with these. Over time, I began to feel empowered, confident and beautiful again.

Despite social and media pressure, cultivating a healthy body image is possible. There are many ways we can inspire an acceptance and appreciation of our body's shape, size and capabilities—free of addictive or disruptive behaviours.

The first step is to connect with trusted support systems—friends, family, a doctor or professional mental health workers—so we can improve our awareness and skills for managing negative thoughts, feelings and behaviours. Next, we can foster creative ways to express thoughts and feelings, such as journaling, art, dance and music. Improving our media literacy skills so we are able to think critically and challenge unrealistic social standards of beauty is also empowering. Lastly, and most importantly, we can practise positive self-care through healthy sleep habits, balanced nutrition and exercise, and daily routines that allow our bodies to feel naturally soothed.

It has been 20 years since I made peace with my body image. Now I view my body as a whole, capable and peaceful part of me, worthy of care and compassion. Today, refuge comes

are eating disorders and addictions related?

There is a high correlation between substance use and behavioural addiction problems related to negative body image.^{2,4,5} When we rely on alcohol or other mind-altering substances to cope with stressors or to experience events differently, we alter our natural brain chemistry. When we use a particular substance regularly (e.g., alcohol, caffeine, cocaine, nicotine), our body develops a dependency on the substance and experiences withdrawal without it. Food and excessive behaviours such as exercise also have powerful effects on areas of our brains associated with addiction, although these are not classified as addictions at this time.^{6,7}

One theory is that excessive behaviours and eating disordered behaviours are not accompanied by signs of tolerance or withdrawal (key indicators of dependency) in the way that substance addictions are.^{8,9} Yet recent research has shown that people demonstrate tolerance towards and withdrawal from certain foods (such as sugar, for example). When foods are ingested during binge episodes, there is a release of neurotransmitters in the brain—including dopamine, endogenous opioids, serotonin and norepinephrine—as with substance use.¹⁰ Despite this, there remains a general caution about identifying or treating eating disorders as addictions.¹¹

What we know at this time is that substance use and addictive behaviours such as compulsive exercise and bingeing commonly co-occur with eating disorders (anorexia nervosa: 27%; bulimia nervosa: 55%; binge eating disorder: 23%).¹ They are also regarded as risk factors for the development of an eating disorder, particularly bulimia nervosa.¹ Though the research on the similarities between addictions and eating disorders is still unfolding, it offers valuable insights for improved treatment and prevention programs.¹

One important difference between addiction and eating disorders: Eating disorders occur in Westernized (industrialized) countries that are more likely to idealize thinness. On the other hand, addiction occurs across genders, cultures and socio-economic classes.

from practising positive self-care and making lifestyle choices that bring inner peace and balance, including meditation, mindfulness, healthy sleep and nutrition, spending time in nature and limiting alcohol.

It is normal to have a bad body day every now and then. Many of my clients say that they *feel fatter* on a stressful day, or that the image they see in the mirror doesn't quite match the one in their mind. Becoming aware of these thoughts and feelings,

the experiences that trigger them and the ways to accept and cope with them can be both freeing and supportive to our well-being.

Life will always challenge us. Mainstream media will continue to set unrealistic standards of beauty and perfection. However, we have the capacity to challenge these inappropriate ideals and negative experiences. In a way, this resilience defines our true beauty, inside and out. ▼

My Body, My Story

A FAT, GAY MAN'S JOURNEY OF EMBODIMENT

Frank Colosimo

I have struggled with my body my entire life—mostly because I've been unhappy with it. I am finally at a better place with my body, as a proud, out, gay man in my late thirties, but it has taken a lot of time, effort and experience to get here.



Frank Colosimo

Frank is Program Coordinator at Egale, Canada's national lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans human rights charity. He also studies sociology and sexual diversity at the University of Toronto. Frank leads the m.bodiment project on gay, bi, trans and queer men's body image. He encourages you to visit m.bodiment.ca to learn more

I believe that in the gay community there is an unspoken hierarchy of attractiveness. Our experiences with other gay men depend on where we rank in the hierarchy. As gay men, we tend to measure ourselves, those we desire and those who desire us against certain ideals of attractiveness. The young, lean, muscular, smooth, white, cisgender (non-trans) male body is overrepresented in media and accepted as the most attractive. This ideal body is not just a physical type—it is also a manifestation of the abstract “masculinity.” Think: Abercrombie model, action movie superhero, pop star, athlete. You get the picture.

This idealized masculine body is not only unachievable for many of us—it is also anchored in *heteropatriarchy*. This means that the “ideal man” is represented in an image that replicates the standard construct of the straight man: athletic and muscular, but more importantly, not “feminine.” Typically, in gay culture, effeminate behaviour is a characteristic that ranks at the bottom of the attractiveness hierarchy. This form of homophobia is intimately tied to misogyny, a dislike of women.

When I was a younger man entering the gay scene, I quickly discovered that where I ranked and where I



Photo credit: BartekSzewczyk

My desire to maintain my new body was motivated by my (internalized) homophobia—I didn't want to be that person I hated, that person at the bottom of the hierarchy.

wanted to rank were two different places. I crushed on guys who were “out of my league.” I watched my “more attractive” friends meet or date guys who ignored me. I saw others get attention while I was ignored or rejected. I felt bad about my body, which was soft, mostly fat, with little or no visible muscle. I had small shoulders, and big everything else. My face was pretty and my mannerisms were effeminate, leaving me at the bottom of the social order.

So I took action.

Not at first—at first, I took drugs: MDMA (Ecstasy or molly), crystal meth and cocaine—party drugs—mostly on the weekend (which was Wednesday to Sunday on my calendar) and eventually every day. Partying became a way for me to numb my

experience as the guy at the bottom of the hierarchy. I was used to getting teased and being left out, but that doesn't necessarily get easier as you get older. In my teens, I had wrestled with thoughts of suicide. In my twenties, after I started partying, I became motivated to change my body and my life. I lost weight and things started to shift for me. I was living in my new, “non-fat” body, and I was exploding with excitement. I was still using drugs, but now I was hooking up with a variety of different guys. I was finally getting the attention I had always longed for. My health and safety took a back seat.

In a community where attractiveness has a certain value, I was no longer invisible. I abused my newfound power. I took advantage of other guys, mostly by capitalizing on my

knowledge and experience, having lived at both the top and the bottom of the hierarchy. I had gay men figured out: I had finally learned how to “play the game.” I felt I deserved to act that way, after having suffered for so long alone and in silence.

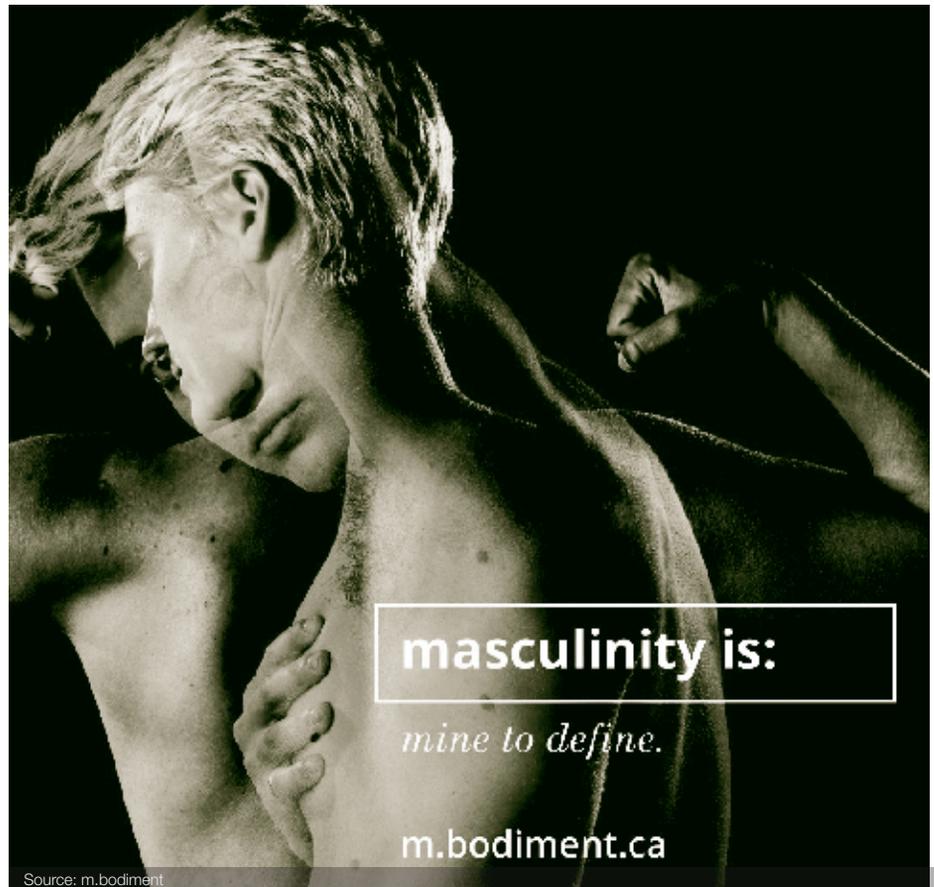
This continued for years. My obsession went from partying to working out. The gym became a priority in my life. My desire to maintain my new body was motivated by my (internalized) homophobia—I didn't want to be that person I hated, that person at the bottom of the hierarchy. I even considered doing steroids, as I knew many other guys who had done so.

Slowly, over time, my body insecurities have lessened. Now that I'm older, I just don't care as much about what other people think about my body. My increased comfort may also stem from spending time in gym locker rooms, where there is every body type under the sun and I got used to getting undressed in front of strangers, or from finally challenging myself to do the things I feared—like going to the beach and allowing people to see my body.

I believe all of these factors have helped me on my journey from being the young, fat kid with thoughts of suicide to being the gay party boy who abused drugs and sex, to being a man obsessed with muscle mass and “masculinity,” to being the person I am today. I still work out (though not obsessively), I still party (on special events and holidays) and I still use my knowledge and experience to my advantage with other men, though I am much more respectful about it now. I'm still me, just older and wiser.

Now, I feel good when I look in the mirror. I look more like a man I'd find attractive, and that is new to me. I finally embraced being a big guy. I stopped trying to have a lean body, and discovered there were many gay men looking for a big guy. I stick around spaces that celebrate huskier, thicker men, or go on dating apps specifically for larger guys. Simply talking about my body issues over the years has helped—with friends mostly, but also now with colleagues. The more I speak about the topic, the better I feel. Talking has also helped me to understand how my experiences and perspectives—and those of others—are influenced by socially constructed ideals of attractiveness and masculinity. When we know how social concepts influence us, they have less power over us.

I am fortunate to be able to bring my experience and learning into the work I do. I have recently created a project, funded by the Movember Foundation, called m.bodiment, which fosters dialogue about gay, bisexual, trans and queer (GBTQ) men's body image. Through a video series (available to view at m.bodiment.ca), the project highlights personal experiences and the impact of body image on men's mental and physical health. Though every participant's story is different, everyone had felt bad about his body in one way or another. Some experience racism, some feel too old or too fat or "not masculine enough." Some have felt—and some still feel—invisible in social spaces. Some have experienced anorexia, surgeries or hormone treatments, all in order to achieve what they perceive to be the desired body or image of a man.



masculinity is:

mine to define.

m.bodiment.ca

Source: m.bodiment

Campaign poster

Too many LGBTQ men have endangered their health trying to achieve the goal of the ideal body. Estimates of eating disorder rates among gay and bisexual individuals are significant.¹ Too many men feel bad about their bodies because they don't look like Justin Bieber, James Bond or Thor. Gay and bisexual men are disproportionately impacted by body image issues; research suggests that eating disorder development among gay and bisexual men is at least 10 times greater than that among heterosexual men.² Research also shows that body dissatisfaction among gay and bisexual men is associated with depressive symptoms and other negative psychological health outcomes.³

We need to shift our thinking: *all* bodies are good bodies. We need to understand that our *bodies* are not wrong; the *system* is wrong. Any system that makes us believe our bodies are somehow wrong is a bad system. We need to rethink what we find attractive and ask ourselves why we think the way we do. And we need to talk about all of it. By talking about it, we can share what we know, learn more from others and learn about ourselves.

And if we talk about it long enough, maybe we can dismantle the hierarchy. ▽

Of Back Hair and Body Image

MY TRANSGENDER BODY

Mary Ann S. Saunders

It is August 2013, and I am standing in front of a fitting room mirror in tears. I had just looked over my shoulder at my back, wanting to know how much hair would have to be shaved off before I could wear the dress I was trying on.

Mary Ann is a transgender woman who lives in Vancouver, BC. She teaches literature and academic writing at the University of British Columbia, often with a focus on transgender topics. She is passionate about educating others about trans people and trans lives

** Note from the author: Trans people's lives are incredibly diverse, and our ways of understanding our experiences vary considerably. This article is based on my personal story, and should not be viewed as "typical" of trans experience.*



Photo credit: Arina Saunders

Mary Ann Saunders

But my back looked smooth. After a few months of hormone therapy, my back hair was a light fuzz, like the back hair of many other women, and the tears that came when I realized this were tears of relief and gratitude.

This may seem like a small thing, but after years of removing hair from *all* over my body (and I mean all over: back, legs, arms, chest, bum, stomach, hands, feet and anywhere else you can think of), it was a huge thing to me in that moment, and remains one of the things I am most grateful for in my gender transition.

Born in the wrong body?

You may have heard that transgender people are "born in the wrong body." Many trans people actually dislike this expression and wouldn't talk about their experience this way. It's still common for cisgender (non-trans) people to say this, however, believing it sums up how transgender people experience their bodies.

One problem with the concept of being "born in the wrong body" is that it lets us be seen only as victims of a biological mistake. It leaves little opportunity to celebrate our bodies or to allow transgender bodies to be

seen—by the world and ourselves—
as inherently healthy and beautiful.

Personally, I would never say that I was born in the wrong body. Things about my body caused me distress (like its hairiness), but my body wasn't "wrong." The changes I have made to my body during my gender transition have come about as part of a journey of discovery and self-emergence rather than from a sense that I was "fixing" wrongness.

For example, I was nervous before I started hormone replacement therapy (HRT); I wondered if I should do this "to" my body. However, after a couple months of HRT, I realized that transition was something my body and I were doing together. I wasn't changing my "wrong" body to match my gender. Rather, my body and my gender were growing and changing in relation to each other.

Why did I need to change my body at all? The answer to that question is complicated, but I'll try to explain at least part of what led me to these changes.

Invisibility

My discomfort with my birth-assigned gender goes back to my childhood, when I wondered about what it was like to be a girl and sometimes had daydreams about turning into a girl. I never spoke to anyone about this, and was actively suppressing these thoughts by my early teens. But they were always there, sometimes very insistently so.

In my thirties, I came to the conclusion that I wasn't a man, but I probably wasn't a woman either, even

The changes I have made to my body have come about as part of a journey of discovery and self-emergence rather than from a sense that I was "fixing" wrongness

though I felt much closer to women than men. The one emotion I could be guaranteed feeling every day was envy of women... of their friendships, their lives, their clothes, and aspects of their bodies. And while women certainly accepted me as a friend, I never felt as if I *belonged* with them.

It was frustrating to be regarded as a man by other people. I often felt as if others couldn't see the real me. The basic difficulty I faced wasn't a mismatch between my gender and my body, but a mismatch between my gender and how others perceived me. I felt invisible.

In my mid-40s, the depression I had been diagnosed with years earlier stopped responding to medication. I found it more difficult to control my alcohol consumption, and I had increasingly intrusive suicidal thoughts. Finally, after a drinking binge I was lucky to survive, I knew something had to change.

Several months of counselling made me start to seriously consider HRT. When a friend confided that *they* had started HRT, not because they were going to transition but simply as a way of emotionally stabilizing their own gender struggles, I thought, "Why shouldn't I try that?"

By January of 2013, I had the pills in hand. I was nervous about taking them, but I remembered something that both my psychologist and endocrinologist had said: Just because I had the pills didn't mean I had to take them. If I didn't like them, or they weren't helpful, I could stop.

When I began taking them, I wasn't planning to transition to be a woman. Like my friend, I just wanted to feel more comfortable within myself.

It didn't take me long to realize that the hormones were exactly the right choice. For one thing, my depression disappeared as my body chemistry changed. So did symptoms of obsessive-compulsive disorder that I had experienced since I was a teenager, and anxiety I hadn't even realized I was carrying until I woke up one morning completely at peace. This was a brand new feeling for me.

My body becomes *my* body

As my body changed and people's perceptions of me changed, so did my understanding of myself and my identity. Hormone replacement therapy seemed to loosen the constraints I had placed on the "feminine" part of my identity—now I was able to acknowledge and embrace it, growing into it emotionally, psychologically and physically.

If I had been born with a body and gender that “matched,” I wouldn’t have been trans—and therefore I wouldn’t be me.

I was surprised to find I really liked the physical changes, the most obvious of which was breast growth. My breasts seemed completely consistent with who I was and who I was becoming. Soon I couldn’t imagine my body without them.

Most importantly, I realized that my body finally belonged to me. Up to that point, my body had belonged to society—a society that told me that because I had this particular body, I was a man. Now I was controlling my body, shaping it in a way that felt natural to me. It had become my body, and I could interpret it any way I wanted.

Increasingly, people were seeing me as a woman. Strangers started to refer to me in female terms, and some of my friends started thinking of me that way as well. Being called a man had made me feel invisible, but being called a woman made me feel seen and recognized. The one had felt uncomfortable (the social category was wrong), but the other felt comfortable (the social category seemed right, and I was glad to be placed in it). Most of all, being thought of and talked about as female made me deeply happy, which is what finally led me to know I *was* a woman.

The mirror again

So, what happens now when I look in the mirror? For one, I’m still grateful

for the changes in body hair. Also, when I scrutinize my body as a whole, I often like what I see. My body is a bit curvier than before, with a better-defined waist and slightly fleshier hips and bum. When I’m wearing makeup, I like my face—although I think I could do with fuller lips.

But while the hormones have done a lot, they have their limits. My body can still look pretty blocky to me. I worry that my breasts—much as I love them—are too small. Also, male puberty gave me a comparatively large rib cage, and I feel insecure about that. And when I’m not wearing makeup, I worry that my face looks too masculine.

Additionally, I recently turned 50, and my body is aging. I wonder—sometimes painfully—what it would have been like to have a young woman’s body. No matter what I do, I will never get to be a young woman.

When I start criticizing my body, however, I remember an article I once read. The trans author mentions that early in her transition she told her girlfriend that she couldn’t wait to look in the mirror and like what she saw. Her girlfriend replied, “You realize that’s never going to happen, right?... You’re going to look at your reflection and feel unsatisfied—just like every other woman.”¹

I like this reminder that any dissatisfaction I have with my body arises less because it’s a trans body and more because I live in a culture that teaches all women, cisgender and transgender, that our bodies are never good enough. It’s strangely comforting to know that I have this in common with so many other women, even though I wish none of us felt this way.

Born in the right body

Someone recently asked me how old I was when I knew I was in the “wrong body.” The question started me thinking:

I like being a transgender woman. To be trans is a gift that few people experience. My trans self has always been a part of me. I don’t know what it would be like to be anyone else, nor do I want to be anyone else. If I had been born with a body and gender that “matched,” I wouldn’t have been trans—and therefore I wouldn’t be me.

This means that, even when I’m dissatisfied with it, my body is (and always has been) exactly the right body. ▽

Coming into Your Own Skin

A BIPOLAR TAKE ON BODY IMAGE

Meegan Simpson-Cooke, BSW

It's funny what we remember about our bodies. As a child I was often told that I was thin. I remember a family friend comparing me to her daughter. "How come you're so thin?" she asked. I felt bad for my friend yet, at the same time, I felt special. I understood that being "thin" meant being liked and praised. My body became a symbol of my worth.



Photo credit: Janet Simpson-Cooke

Meegan Simpson-Cooke

Meegan is currently living in Bamfield, BC, on the west coast of Vancouver Island, taking a sabbatical and writing a book on mental illness

I spent my early teen years pushing my body with cross-country running, playing soccer, and riding horses. I felt this incredible strength in the control I had over my body. However, when puberty hit, I was sideswiped by the weight gain, mood swings, and cramps. I felt betrayed by my body for the first time. Although I didn't understand it yet, there would be another shame. Right around the corner was the onset of bipolar disorder. At that time, I didn't know that my body image would become key part of my journey with bipolar disorder.

When I was 15, I had my first breakdown. In the beginning of that school year, I started feeling anxious. I skipped meals and couldn't sleep.

I started reorganizing and cleaning my room, over and over while crying. I became very thin. One night I ran out of the house, after feeling frightened by my mom's ex-partner. I was experiencing psychosis. That night was my first time in the hospital. I was given a lot of medication to sleep and calm down. I slept many hours, and awoke to an allergic reaction to such a

When we make peace with shame, we allow ourselves to be who we are. When we deal with shame, we can use the very thing that hurts us to heal.

strong dosage of the drug. My tongue thickened and I couldn't speak. It was frightening.

When I went back to school people kept saying how thin I was. It felt like something to be proud of. Of course, I never talked about my experiences with my mental illness. I didn't want to face the shame.

But bipolar disorder was persistent in my life. I had to deal with medications, the side effects, and the symptoms of the illness. I had to deal with how the illness affected every part of my life. I had to adjust to a new way of life.

I did not do this gracefully, particularly because of the shame associated with mental illness. Shame equaled unacceptance. When we make peace with shame, we allow ourselves to be who we are. When we deal with shame, we can use the very thing that hurts us to heal.

It was at 19 that I really was put to the test with my illness and body. I ended up in hospital after travelling in the spring. I wasn't on medications, which made me vulnerable to breakdowns. In the hospital, they put me on a strong medication. Not knowing its side effects, I had ballooned from my size six to size 16 in a number of months. I was mortified and also depressed. Besides work, I mostly stayed at home, isolating

myself. I craved sweets. I slept a lot and felt drowsy from the medications. I hated my body. I could tell that other people felt judgement and frustration with where I was at.

After weighing myself, I decided to do something. I went off my pills without supervision from a doctor. At that time, my illness was new enough that I didn't have a regular doctor or treatment team. I started exercising compulsively with long runs and cycling.

We all can guess what happened to me going off medications cold-turkey: I got ill again. It was a problematic cycle: gain weight from meds, go off them and get ill.

Pressures surrounded me. Both my parents (and extended family) are very weight-conscious and have wanted to protect me from the judgement that comes with being overweight. Furthermore, watching TV you see image after image of impossible ideals. It is difficult to have a balanced perspective. We all want to feel attractive and healthy and fit.

Every day we have to work on caring for our bodies and our illness. We have to adapt our ideals about what we want in a body to something achievable. For me, it comes down to the fact that not taking pills and being ill is a lot worse than being

overweight. The consequences are just too hard for me and the people around me. This lesson was hard for me to learn. I really, really wanted a thin body. Exercising and eating well every day can mitigate the effects of the drugs. Finding the drugs that work and are also better with weight are important too. At the same time, we may need to accept a certain degree of weight gain.

In these times, our perceptions about body image may be changing for the better. The media runs Dove commercials and magazines include supermodels that are size 16. Perhaps we are opening up our definition of what is beautiful.

If you have a mental illness and are affected by weight gain due to medications, this is my message to you: you are my heroes. You have braved hardship and have strived to find treatment while trying to be healthy. I know managing a mental illness is an everyday struggle and, on top of this, to battle with weight, is a double whammy.

I recommend learning how to love yourself for who you are. Find a balance that you can live with in terms of treatment and your weight. Focus on your values and being who you are. Become health conscious. Practice acceptance. Become comfortable in your own skin. ▼

Purging My Eating Disorder

ONE MAN'S REAL-LIFE STRUGGLE AND RECOVERY

Tyson Busby

I struggled with an eating disorder from the time I was 18 until my mid-twenties. My struggles grew naturally out of a challenging childhood. I watched a friend pass away when I was five years old, and I was sexually abused when I was seven. By the age of 12, I had thoughts of suicide.



Photo credit: Nikita Graham

Tyson Busby

Tyson has recovered from an eating disorder not otherwise specified (EDNOS). He resides with his two beautiful children and his beautiful wife in Aldergrove, BC. Tyson has written newspaper articles and has appeared on Joy TV, using his experiences to help others realize it is possible to recover from an eating disorder and move on

Throughout this, I had very little contact with my father. I craved his presence but never really got the opportunity to develop a strong father/son relationship. He would come into my life for a short time and then disappear. I had no stable male role model, and I had little sense of what a man was supposed to be like.

At the age of 12, I went to visit my father for two weeks in Edmonton. For a brief period, I was the happiest kid in the world. He bought me gifts and—without my mother's knowledge—took me on his drug deals. For the first time in what seemed like forever I felt important to

him: I felt like his son. After that trip, I returned home and we stayed in touch for about two more weeks—and then he disappeared again. That's when serious depression hit. I started coping with my depression with food. I have always had a sweet tooth; sugary foods just seemed to make me feel better. I began to gain weight. I would look in the mirror and feel uncomfortable in my own skin. I learned how to hide these feelings from my peers, not showing that I was upset about who I was and how I looked.

In high school, I guess you could say I was a member of the cool crowd. I did get teased about my weight, but I

Some people know they're going to be judged and can deal with it, and some people are strong enough to not care what other people think of them. Then there are people like me, who do care.

teased myself first, which made it okay for others to do the same. I made jokes about myself almost pre-emptively, calling myself “chubby” or “big-boned” so that I wouldn't feel so keenly the harsh judgment of others doing the same. In hindsight, this was one of the worst decisions of my life: by making jokes about myself, I encouraged my internal belief that I was worthless and didn't belong.

I believe school has a huge impact on an individual's state of mind. If you go to school and you don't look a certain way, you are judged. Some people know they're going to be judged and can deal with it, and some people are strong enough to not care what other people think of them. Then there are people like me, who do care. For us, judgment takes its toll. I was desperate to fit in. Putting myself down was a way to fit in. But in my desire to fit in, I had created a situation where I constantly made myself feel bad, like I wasn't worthy of belonging just the way I was.

When I graduated from high school, my father got in touch with me again, and, like the hopeful idiot I was, I jumped at the opportunity to develop a relationship, thinking that this time things would be different. Again I went to Alberta to visit him,

but yet again, after a few weeks of renewed contact, he stopped calling and disappeared.

After this, I went to work in the oil fields. I lived in camp and didn't interact much with my colleagues. That's where my eating disorder really developed. At first I would just purge whatever food I ate, hiding my actions from everyone else. But eventually purging became a way to relieve bad feelings throughout the day. I would begin the day with a purge. If I thought I had upset someone, I would purge. If I thought I had said the wrong thing, I would purge. If I felt upset or sad, I would purge. It wasn't even about the food anymore. It was all about how I felt after I purged: for a short period of time, I felt better—before I felt the need to purge again. By the time I left Alberta, I was purging dozens of times a day: my eating disorder had total control over me. To make matters worse, at home I started receiving compliments from people I had gone to school with. This satisfied my desire to fit in and fueled my disordered eating behaviours even more. Not one of these people realized I had an eating disorder. But perhaps that's because people don't tend to think of men having eating disorders.

As I continued to receive compliments, I began to gain confidence about my appearance. It is then that I met the woman who would become my life partner. But I couldn't let go of my eating disorder. It had become an addiction for me. All those feelings I had when I was younger—the pain of grief, sexual abuse, an absent father and not fitting in—for short periods of time, the eating disorder soothed those feelings away. By emptying my stomach, I purged my feelings of guilt, worthlessness and depression. Purging gave me a high—and then I would crash. And it would start all over again. Every. Single. Day.

In November of 2011, everything crashed. I was so desperate to end the endless cycle that I tried taking my own life. As a man with an eating disorder, I couldn't find the help I needed. Individual therapy sessions were expensive and not very useful. The support groups I found were female-oriented. When I tried for a second time to kill myself, my wife and I decided it was time to find a solution. We found the Looking Glass Residence, a residential treatment facility, and I went there to stay in January of 2012.¹ There I learned to view the events in my life differently. I realized that a lot of things that had happened in my life were not my fault—but I had chosen to make them my fault and to take it out on myself and my body. Once I realized that, I began to recover.

One of the most important steps in my recovery was journaling. I did a very specific (very cheesy) thing in my journaling and I would encourage anyone struggling with body image

to do the same thing. Every day, I would write out all the ups and downs I experienced through the day—anything that made me feel good or bad. And then, at the end of every day, the last thing I would write was “I love you.” So every night I told myself that I loved myself. It was the last thing I told myself at night—and it was the first thing I read in the morning. It helped me begin to heal, and it made me think about myself in a gentler, more compassionate way.

I left the Looking Glass Residence in March of 2012. I look at my life differently now.

I’ve learned to accept the reflection in the mirror, and I’m proud of what I have lived through and achieved. I am happy with myself, and if I ever question that knowledge, I have the tools to change the way I am thinking about myself and carry on with my life. I have learned not to care as much about what others think of me because, at the end of the day, those people don’t define who I am or who I can be. ▼

visions snapshot

healthy relationships with food and substances: the campus context

Centre for Addictions Research of BC, Canadian Mental Health Association BC Division and Jessie’s Legacy Program

Like sex and other feel-good things in life, food and psychoactive (mind-altering) substances change the way people feel. While food and substances have benefits, they can also lead to health and social problems—in all areas of life, including campus life. University and college campus members’ choices about food and substances are influenced by many factors, including academic pressure, financial status, mental health, access (to food and substances), the built environment (e.g., the residences, dining halls, classrooms and walkways) and campus policies. These factors can have both positive and negative impacts. For example, eating or using substances to cope with stress can initially provide some relief, but it can also become increasingly less effective and lead to problems.

Over the past two years, the Centre for Addictions Research of BC (CARBC), Jessie’s Legacy eating disorders prevention and awareness (JL) and the Canadian Mental Health Association, BC Division (CMHA BC) have engaged with BC post-secondary institutions to explore issues related to substance use and eating on campus. The goal is to help post-secondary institutions move forward and define how CARBC, JL, and CMHA BC might help do that.

There was agreement that campus members (employees and students) experience a variety of relationships with food and substances. These can include challenges around accessing and preparing healthy food, pressure to attain an idealized body image, and more extreme experiences of food restriction. Food restriction includes eating only those foods deemed very healthy (orthorexia) or limiting food intake to compensate for added calories from drinking (often dubbed “drunkorexia”).

Campus community members noted a need to gain a better understanding of what a healthy relationship with food and substances looks like, how healthier choices can be made more available and accessible, and how social support and responsibility can be enhanced. Promising proposals include mentoring, delivering appealing and useful messages, encouraging conversations and engagement in dialogue, and monitoring how policies can improve conditions and facilitate positive choices.

We hope conversations will continue. CARBC, JL and CMHA BC wish to invite campus members to share their ideas and experiences with us by contacting Tim Dyck at tdyck@uvic.ca.

A Perfect Body in a Perfect World?

ANOREXIA, CULTURAL PRESSURE AND CHASING THE IDEAL BODY ACROSS TWO CONTINENTS

Laura Chapman

Following my Grade 12 year, I travelled to Italy as an exchange student. There, I became anorexic. Before I'd even realized what was happening, anorexia had devoured my life.

Laura is a second-year student at the University of British Columbia – Okanagan. She travelled to Italy as a Canadian exchange student in 2013. She is currently recovering from years of anorexia nervosa and hopes to use her story to inspire others in their recovery



Photo credit: Robert Pinna

I didn't develop anorexia out of the blue. Throughout high school, I had struggled with body image. I grew faster than my friends. I constantly felt like a big, hormonal outcast, never fitting in and always standing out.

In my family, we were always taught it was important to embrace whatever body type we're blessed with. But while my family was supportive and loving no matter what I looked like, I still battled with insecurity at school and felt incredibly uncomfortable in my own skin.

I didn't leave these feelings behind when I went to Italy. I brought them with me. But the difference was that I knew no one in Italy, and no one in Italy knew who I had been back in high school in Canada. I had the opportunity to reinvent myself.

Italian culture emphasizes the importance of being thin, yet it also constantly emphasizes the importance of food and eating. The thinner I got, the more I was praised—yet I was often shamed if I left anything on my plate.

Why is it that we are born with capable bodies, with unique curves and crevices and wrinkles that make us who we are, and yet at a certain point we are told we are supposed to achieve an impossible ideal?

At first I thought this contradictory emphasis—on both food and being thin—was something I experienced only because I lived in Milan, the fashion capital of Italy. But after talking with a fellow Canadian student who lived in Naples, I learned that she, too, had received the same mixed messages.

I tried to hide from the people around me the fact that I was restricting my food intake. But I tried to control every meal I ate and began to avoid going out with others so I could go running for long periods of time every day. Almost immediately, my relationship with my host mother began to deteriorate. She couldn't understand why I wasn't excited by the food she cooked for the family.

Not long after I started restricting, I began to receive compliments. It seemed as if being told one is thin was the biggest compliment one could receive in Italian culture. I had never been told so many times that I was beautiful. My new friends constantly praised me. I was being approached by modelling agents. I felt on top of the world. I was becoming the person I thought everyone wanted to be.

I was a smart girl. I knew I had a problem, but everything and everyone around me convinced me that I was

having a better time now that I was thin. I didn't know what to do. I tried to eat more and run less, but my efforts were minimal and I continued to lose weight. I felt alone, confused and exhausted.

Despite this, I thought I was hiding things fairly well. I didn't realize how much everyone around me was worried about me. I had lost my period. My clothes no longer fit, and my host mother refused to take me shopping for clothes because she was too worried.

I was excited to return to Canada and see what impact my new appearance would have on my friends and family back home. Would they be proud of me? At the time, my perspective was so skewed by my illness that I couldn't understand why anyone might have been upset. I thought I was the most beautiful I had ever been. I thought I had really achieved something. But the reality was that my obsession with weight loss had swallowed the type of care-free cultural experience I should have had as an exchange student in Europe.

When I finally returned to Canada, I was very thin and gaunt. My transformation shocked my friends and family, but my extreme weight

loss was also highly praised by those who didn't know me well. Suddenly, I was afraid of gaining weight all over again. I couldn't go back to the way I had been before. I was focused solely on being thin, much to the distress and concern of family and friends. My relationships began to suffer.

It was then that I realized that being thin was just as important in Canada as it had been in Italy. Sure, the ideal body was a bit different: the ideal Canadian woman was not olive-skinned and she wasn't adorned with a mane of dark hair. But my return to Canada made me realize there was an ideal Canadian woman's body, and that ideal was everywhere I looked—splashed across every magazine, TV commercial and social media outlet.

What is it that compels us to feel inadequate? Why is it that we are born with capable bodies, with unique curves and crevices and wrinkles that make us who we are, and yet at a certain point we are told we are supposed to achieve an impossible ideal? Why is this impossible ideal emphasized in certain cultures?

I don't blame Italy for causing my anorexia. Sure, the culture encouraged me to be thin, but it was my own determination that motivated me to pursue that ideal. In Italy, I felt pressure to be thin when I was among Italian people, who ate and lived in a certain way (often eating extremely small portions and taking long walks), which kept them looking a certain way. I did everything I could to achieve the ideal Italian woman's body. When I got back to Canada, I found the pressure hadn't remained behind in Italy. It had followed me back. And I was just



Photo credit: Martin Dimitrov

I now choose to accept, to love—to *value*—my body for exactly what it is, right here and right now.

as determined to achieve the ideal Canadian woman's body as well.

Months ago, I became so ill from anorexia that death suddenly loomed close like an unwelcome friend. I decided it was not yet time for me to go. I have been enduring the tumultuous process of re-feeding and recovery ever since. It has been anything but easy. However, the process has taught me more than I had hoped to learn, and I am thankful.

Today, it is a daily struggle to conceptualize and accept the fact that I am no longer the thin and child-like ideal that I so deeply valued for so long. But I now choose to accept, to love—to *value*—my body for exactly what it is, right here and right now. It

has done so much for me, and I have put it through even more as I continued to restrict and over-exercise, year after year, until my body couldn't take it anymore. I will never understand how I survived the past few years. All I can do is be thankful for my amazing body—the body that got me through it.

No matter what idea of perfection is emphasized in any culture I am immersed in, I realize that my courage to rise above unreal ideals and choose to be and do what I really *value* is what makes me who I really am. It may take years, but I am living proof that it is possible to change the way we accept, love and value our body, no matter where in the world we find ourselves. ▼

I Am Enough

MY JOURNEY TO A LIFE OF SELF-LOVE AND POSITIVE BODY IMAGE

Ruby Roxx

Even before I was a teenager, I hated my body. As young as 11 or 12, I stopped paying attention to my grades at school. I quit ballet, gave up piano and flute and became more isolated from my friends.



Ruby is a plus-size model, body-positive activist, and Editor-in-Chief of Beauty Mark Magazine. She currently resides in Vancouver, BC, where she was born and raised. She is engaged and set to marry the love of her life in October in Las Vegas

Photo credit: Chelsey Luren; Hair and Makeup: Ayesha Lakha

Ruby Roxx

What mattered to me was what was on the television programs I watched and in the magazines I read, with their messages about beauty and attractiveness. What society and the media told me felt all-important. I can't recall ever watching a show or reading an article about loving myself the way I was.

I've always been tall and curvy. At my smallest, I was a size eight, but to me, that was huge. I wanted to be a size two. I would go days without eating, weighing myself compulsively several times a day. I would count the calories in the food I ate. Only when I saw that

I'd dropped half a pound, for example, would I feel good about my body. But as soon as I ate another meal, I would hop on the scale and inevitably feel bad about myself.

As I got older, I took up smoking for a short time because I heard it was an appetite suppressant. I took laxatives after meals. And I dated men who would make me feel bad about my size, telling me I should avoid eating certain foods or that I would be so much hotter if I were smaller.

To the outside world, I seemed confident and happy. Behind closed

A little voice in my head constantly nagged that I wasn't good enough

doors, I was miserable. I hated myself and how I looked. I hid this ugly, inner battle fairly well, but a little voice in my head constantly nagged that I wasn't good enough.

Five years ago, my confidence started to grow. Three years before that, I had started modelling. It may seem odd that I began modelling when I felt so bad about my body, but I think many girls who begin modelling come from a place of being overly focused on their appearance. A friend asked me to model for her hair salon in exchange for a cut and colour. Once I got in front of the camera, I forgot my insecurities. When the photos came back, the positive reaction from friends and family was a huge confidence booster.

At first, I didn't take modelling seriously—I never thought I was very good. But one day I met a man who had seen a few of my photos and really liked them. He encouraged me to try modelling full-time. He also made me feel as if I was the most important person in the world. He listened to my stories. He laughed at my jokes. He encouraged me to be the best me I could possibly be. I didn't necessarily believe everything he told me about myself, but I did love the way he made me feel.

So I started doing more photo shoots. I began with pin-up modelling. I've always loved the look and feel of the 40s and 50s. The women were

glamorous, showing off their curves and proud of their bodies. As I became more involved in the local modelling community, I realized how many women of all shapes and sizes had the same struggles and passions as I did. When my modelling career began to take off, I started to receive messages from women and girls around the globe, telling me how I had inspired them to embrace themselves just as they are.

The attention wasn't all positive, however. Even today, I still get comments from people calling me "fat" or "a cow" or telling me I shouldn't be wearing *that*. At first, these comments were hard to take. I would spend hours crying, wondering why I allowed myself to go through this. Then, in the fall of 2015, a social media campaign called "Project Harpoon" altered photographs of me to make me appear thinner. The captions were insulting, insinuating that I could be more successful if I looked more like the falsified image in the altered photographs.

I got angry. I realized how damaging this message could be to the young girls I was hoping to inspire. On my blog I posted an open letter in response, and the letter went viral.¹ The story got picked up by *Good Morning America* and by news sites like BuzzFeed and Huffington Post. It felt great knowing that I had taken a negative message and used it as

an opportunity to make a positive statement about body image, body pride and acceptance.

I still have bad days, but what helps is thinking about the women and girls who look up to me. I also came to an important realization: people who write negative comments about strangers on social media sites are, quite simply, bullies. They get something out of making disparaging comments simply for the sake of making disparaging comments. Their words reflect poorly on them, not me.

As I continued modelling, I made connections with other plus-size models from around the world. They spoke about loving themselves, regardless of their size or shape: our bodies do so much for us, and they deserve our love in return. Slowly, with the support of the man who first encouraged me to do more modelling (now my fiancé!) and the support of the plus-size modelling community, I began to live a life of loving myself. I exercise. I spend time outside. I am conscious of what I put into my body. But if I'm craving a burger or pasta, I don't deprive myself. Life is made up of special moments, and some of the best memories I have revolve around being with friends, eating food, drinking wine and laughing. I will not avoid the opportunity to create these memories for fear of gaining half a pound. If I wake up feeling bloated after a night out, I will remember the delicious meal I ate, the wine I drank and the people with whom I spent such a wonderful time. The bloat will pass, but I will have the memory of that evening as long as I live. And I wouldn't trade that memory for anything.

It isn't always easy. I am sometimes sad and I sometimes have anxiety. And sometimes I still have what I call "fat days" — days when I feel too heavy and not beautiful enough. What has changed, however, is that when I have a "fat day," I tell myself that tomorrow will feel different. I remind myself not only about the things I love about myself that have nothing to do with my weight (my heart, my mind, my laugh, my smile) but also that "fat" is something I *have*. It does not *define* me. My dress size does not define me. The number on the scale does not define me. In fact, I haven't stepped on a scale in three years. I no longer allow the scale to determine whether my day will be a happy one or not.

Being a plus-size model gives me the opportunity to show the world that beauty does not come in only one size. As a plus-size model, I am able to challenge social perceptions of feminine beauty. I will continue to do more public speaking, inspiring others to appreciate their bodies inside and out, to be the best possible version of themselves. And one day, if I have children, I will teach them to love their body for what it can do for them, not for how it looks.

Every day, I strive to remember that I am enough as I am. I love myself and my body, and no one can take that away from me. It's not conceit or narcissism. It's simply giving myself the respect and love I deserve. As a character in one of Oscar Wilde's plays once said, "To love oneself is the beginning of a lifelong romance."²

I only wish I had begun that romance a bit sooner. ▾

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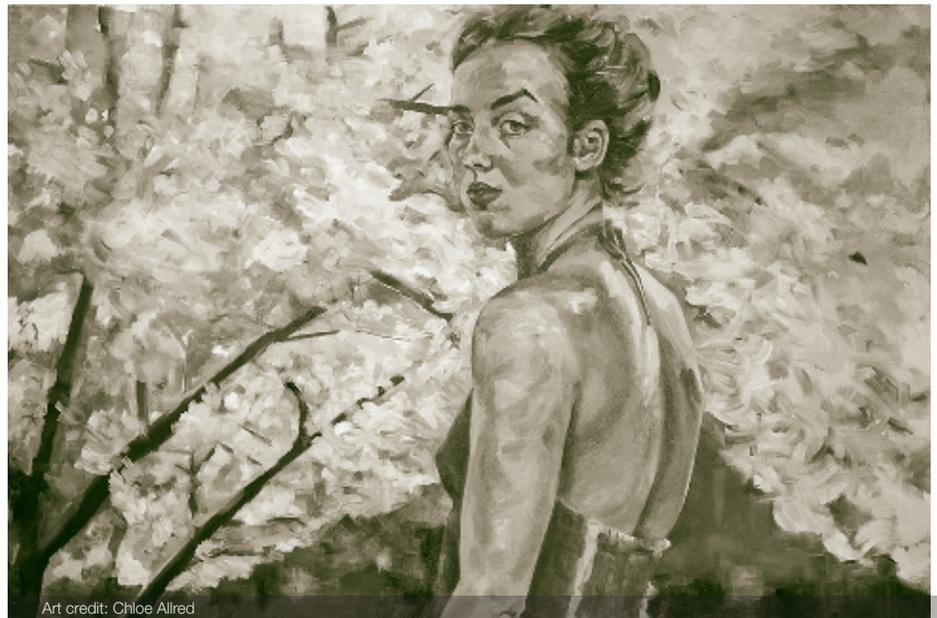
Loving Your Body Is a Daily Choice

THE ROLE ART CAN PLAY

Chloe Allred

There isn't a particular day or moment that I can look back on and say, "That is exactly when I became anorexic." Many things came together to facilitate my anorexia. I can identify a tipping point, though, when an eating disorder seemed inevitable.

Chloe is a painter, writer and co-founder of The Body Joy Project, a feminist artist collective. She creates work that reconsiders how our culture thinks about the body. Chloe is also co-creator of Daisy Donk, a body-positive online clothing store. Chloe is pursuing an MFA at Laguna College of Art and Design



Art credit: Chloe Allred

Spring Bloom (Self-Portrait)

My mother told me in the fifth grade that if I didn't lose weight, she would teach me how to throw up my food, just like she had done when she was younger. She said this as we stood at the bathroom mirror together. She was looking at my reflection with revulsion. I knew then that I was disgusting. To my 11-year-old self, this did not feel like an opinion. It felt like a fact, the way that gravity feels like a fact.

I didn't see anyone who looked like me in my mother's magazines or on the television shows we watched. No

one in these stories was both fat and happy. I wanted to be pretty and thin. It seemed like if I could only be pretty and thin, then I could be happy.

In school I was teased about my weight and I constantly felt ashamed. There wasn't any relief from the teasing and the shame when I got home. When my mom suggested I start purging my food, it didn't take long for me to act on it. I discovered calories and began to count the calories of everything I ate. I started going to the gym with my mom and exercising obsessively. I went without

food. My weight loss was met with compliments and excitement from friends and family—a sharp contrast to how I had been treated before.

But I didn't stop losing weight. I lost, and lost and lost weight. I felt proud of myself when I went an entire day without food. I stopped seeing friends and stopped talking in school. Losing weight and denying myself food became my life. Little else remained, except for my love of drawing.

I made my first self-portrait when I was 12. I was used to looking in the mirror and judging myself, thinking *fat* or *ugly* at my reflection. But when I was drawing myself, I didn't think that way. Instead, I was thinking about shapes, value, colour. It's hard to hate a shape. As I drew my reflection, paying special attention to the shape of my cheek bones and eye sockets, I began to really see myself. I had dark circles under my eyes. My face was incredibly thin. I looked very sad. I had thought that if I was thin I would be happy, but that idea crumbled as I made this self-portrait. I realized then that my weight loss *hadn't* made me happy—and it wasn't going to.

This doesn't mean that I instantly began eating regularly again, or thinking that I was beautiful and had value. But it was a turning point—the beginning of a journey towards health.

Later, in my seventh-grade health class, I learned what an eating disorder was. I recognized myself and my eating patterns in the definition of anorexia. Before that, I hadn't really known how to express what I was doing. Being able to name my anorexia meant I could talk about it directly, which made me feel empowered.

Being able to name my anorexia meant I could talk about it directly, which made me feel empowered.

I first openly addressed my anorexia in an essay I wrote for my eighth-grade English class. I called the essay "Those Big Sad Eyes" and put my first self-portrait on the cover. Around the same time, a close friend began to challenge me whenever I said hateful things about my body; she would counter my negativity and tell me I was beautiful.

Gradually, things began to change. I let go of counting calories. I started eating foods that I had previously forbidden myself. I returned to a healthy weight with the increase of calories to my diet. I was still obsessive about exercise, but started to put that energy into playing tennis for my high-school varsity team. My mom no longer commented on my weight, but there was always something to get into a fight about.

I see now that I grew up in a very unstable environment; my relationship with my mother was volatile, and my home life was chaotic. Anorexia was my way of controlling *something* amid that chaos. When I was fifteen, I moved out of my mother's house and chose to live with my father full-time.

I began to talk and write about my experiences with anorexia, and I continued making self-portraits. Finding people to talk to about my experience has been central in my recovery. Art has also been incredibly

important. Creating art lets me process my emotions, memories and experiences in a productive way. Through my art making, I also started to create my own definition of beautiful, one that could include *me*.

As a college student, I started to tackle the concept of body image head-on with my painting. First, I created paintings that reflected my own experience with eating disorders and body shame—as well as my experiences with trauma (in college I was sexually assaulted). While it was hard to address these issues publicly, it was also a release.

When I had the courage to show my work publicly, an incredible thing happened: people came up to me and said, "It happened to me, too." These people shared with me their own stories of survival—surviving eating disorders, sexual assault and body shame. As a young girl starving herself, and later as a college student coping with the aftermath of sexual assault, I had felt alone. But when I shared my artwork, I realized there was a community for me.

I went on to create The Body Joy Project with my two friends, Charlotte Dean and Gabriela Ayala. The Body Joy Project is a feminist artist collective, a group of like-minded artists who create art together from a feminist perspective. We create



Photo credit: sestovic

As I continue to paint myself and other survivors, my own ideas of what it means to be beautiful and strong continue to change.

pieces that critique how our culture thinks about the body. We strive to reveal the beauty in all people, no matter their body type, race or gender. Together, we've learned that developing a positive body image takes practice. Daily practice. As I continue to paint myself and other survivors, my own ideas of what it means to be beautiful and strong continue to change.

I would love to say that I'm no longer anorexic. But that wouldn't be the whole truth. Anorexia feels like a possibility that lives inside of me still, even though I am healthy and happy and have found a way to love myself.

Anorexia is a form of self-harm but it also feels like an old friend—a friend whom I know isn't good for me but

with whom I feel comfortable. When I am really stressed, I often find myself thinking things like, "Maybe I need to detox. What if I just try a juice fast?" I know that, for me, a juice fast is something I should not do, in much the same way that an alcoholic knows not to take that first drink.

I became anorexic gradually. Learning to love my body has happened gradually too. Day by day, I deliberately *choose* to love my body and to value myself. I do this by continuing to make self-portraits, by eating well, by playing tennis and doing yoga.

If you find yourself struggling with body image, take it day by day. Find something that you love to do and do it often. Pay attention to how your body *feels* instead of what it looks like. Eat food that is delicious and makes your body feel good. There may be moments when you feel bad about yourself, but know that you are always worthy of love. The positive things you do for yourself will add up over time. You will begin to see yourself as you are: beautiful, valuable and strong. ▾



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An Invitation to Love Our Bodies, Love Ourselves

Amy Pezzente

I don't think anyone can be fully prepared for working in the field of eating disorder prevention. It is frustrating, empowering and challenging all at the same time.



Amy works for the Jessie's Legacy eating disorders prevention and awareness program, where she coordinates the Love Our Bodies, Love Ourselves movement, part of the Provincial Eating Disorders Awareness (PEDAW) campaign. Amy also presents at schools, conferences, and workplaces on disordered eating, self-esteem and body image. You can contact Amy at pedaw@familyservices.bc.ca

Photo credit: Rob Lyons

Amy Pezzente

Having struggled with an eating disorder and negative body image myself, I felt that this was an area in which I could contribute. Through my own experiences, I understand the desperate need to prevent eating disorders; I would never want to wish that dark, controlling prison on anyone else.

I was in high school when my relationship with my body began to deteriorate. I started to feel that my body was never thin enough, and that I was never good enough. I couldn't look in the mirror without feeling disgusted with my reflection. I began to change my eating and exercise routines, gradually at first, until it felt too late to stop the patterns I had developed. I ate just enough to maintain the numbing, zombie-like fog that had become my existence. I starved myself, berating my

body, limiting my caloric intake during the day while running for miles like a ravenous machine during the night in order to burn more calories and lose more weight.

There were dozens of times where I wondered if I was going to faint on the SkyTrain as I clung to the pole in the early morning hours on my way to school. Yet even then I was more concerned with my weight than anything else. I felt more empowered the less I weighed, rather than having any concern for my health. Sure, my heart would beat irregularly, my hair was falling out in tumbleweeds, my skin yellowed and my throat was raw and bloody from purging—but all of those health problems, among many others, were acceptable to me if they were the price I had to pay to remain thin.



Photo credit: Miroha141

I wanted to contribute to society, make my family proud—eat a French fry without an internal battle, exercise as a gift to my body rather than a punishment.

But despite all that effort and the trauma I was causing myself, I still hated by body. I still hated *me*.

Every day was a struggle. Finally, exhaustion hit me—even my white flag of surrender felt too heavy to carry. I was sick and tired of being sick and tired, and I wanted my life back. I didn't want to see my mom's tears any more, or wake in the middle of the night to find her checking my pulse to see if I was still alive. I wanted to contribute to society, make my family proud—eat a French fry without an internal battle, exercise as a gift to my body rather than a punishment.

Roughly eight years have passed since then. I went through months of eating disorder inpatient treatment,

hours upon hours of therapy, and I cried gallons of tears—but I will save that chaotic rollercoaster narrative for another time and simply say this: In eight years, the practicalities of daily life haven't changed one bit—but *I* have. I have learned that who I am—my identity—is not just my body. I am so much more than that. My body is just a vehicle to get me through the day. It allows me to express my talents, goals, passions, humour and emotions. The eating disorder no longer takes up "rental space" in my mind; I now have the room and freedom to appreciate other things in life rather than focusing on thoughts of weight, calories, food rules, body size, exercise, diets and routines. Battling and overcoming an eating disorder left me with a strong, vengeance-like desire for prevention—

to demonstrate to others that they aren't put on this earth to look a certain way or be a specific size. And that's exactly where the Love Our Bodies, Love Ourselves movement comes in.

Love Our Bodies, Love Ourselves is part of the provincial eating disorders awareness campaign led by the Jessie's Legacy eating disorders prevention program. Jessie was a young woman who took her own life after a long battle with disordered eating and depression. The program continues to carry out her legacy of eating disorder prevention in order to help ensure that no other person is ever in the position she was in, facing the challenges she faced.

Love Our Bodies, Love Ourselves includes activities and events throughout the year, as well as a vibrant social media presence. We've organized flash mobs, educational videos, photography contests, and city mural paintings in order to raise awareness in BC about eating disorders prevention and positive body image. Just recently, we held a virtual, online scavenger hunt in which people completed missions to promote positive body image within their communities. These missions included things like writing a positive note on their workplace bathroom mirror and completing an online quiz about loving their body. We also managed to convince various organizations to decorate over 55 local landmarks across BC with purple lighting in honour of Eating Disorders Awareness Week. (Purple is the official colour for eating disorders awareness.)

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You Are More Than What You Eat

LEARNING TO TRUST YOUR BODY TO MAKE GOOD FOOD DECISIONS

Ali Eberhardt, RD

“You are what you eat” is a phrase I hear often as a dietitian working in the food and nutrition field. I often feel it’s misused—or that it’s simply incorrect. We aren’t simply what we eat: we are so much more than our food choices, and food is so much more than calories.



Ali is a Registered Dietitian with a BSc in food nutrition. She works in the Eating Disorders Program at Vancouver’s St. Paul’s Hospital and with the Looking Glass Foundation’s summer camp for girls. Her private practice specializes in disordered eating (www.ThriveBC.com). Ali is passionate about helping clients develop healthy relationships with food and body

For many, food represents family, culture, pleasure, experience and exploration, as well as a way to fuel our bodies and function in our lives. Our emotional, social and physical eating practices—in addition to the foods we eat—are all important elements of our well-being.

There is a common misconception that you can look at a person’s body and know how they eat. Imagine we walk into a fast-food restaurant and see a thin and athletic woman eating a double cheeseburger with an extra-large order of fries and a milkshake. We might feel envious that she can eat that way and still maintain a lean build. We might assume she

had done significant exercise that day to account for her meal, or that this is a special occasion or that she has a fast metabolism. Now, imagine we see another woman at the next table eating the same meal. This person lives in a larger body. Despite the fact that she is eating a meal identical to the one being eaten by the thin woman with the athletic build, we might assume that this second person eats at fast-food restaurants often. We might assume she is inactive, and we may have preconceived ideas about her health.

None of these assumptions is based on fact. We cannot know about a person’s health or experiences simply by looking at that person’s body. In

the same way, we cannot know about someone's relationship with food from the size or shape of his or her body.

We do not make these assumptions because we are bad people. Our assumptions represent widely held stigmas associated with different body types.

For my clients who struggle with disordered eating issues, early access to treatment and trained health care professionals is a key component in the recovery journey. Yet often my clients' struggles go unrecognized—even by themselves—due to common social stigmas related to eating disorders and weight.

The truth is that there are no "good" or "bad" foods. Clients often try to challenge me on this, but I stand behind the idea that when we label foods as good or bad, we set ourselves up to mistrust our bodies and create an environment for emotional eating—in which we have emotional reactions to the food choices we make. If I eat something "good," I feel proud, as if I am doing something "right." But if I eat something "bad," I might feel shame or that I can't make that "mistake" again. If I associate certain foods with a fear that my body will change, then I will feel a need to compensate afterwards. I might become more concerned or rigid with my eating, increase my exercise or experience guilt and shame.

I often hear people justifying their food choices. For example, an individual might say, "I can eat this because I did the Grouse Grind today," or, "I was bad today because I ate food X, which is bad." These statements



Photo credit: PeopleImages

By giving ourselves permission to eat for a variety of reasons, we create an environment where we trust and honour our body.

perpetuate stigmas about food and our bodies, and reinforce the idea that our bodies cannot be trusted. This creates a situation where people feel they need to be in rigid control of their own food or nutrition intake: they fear and mistrust their own body.

Certainly there are foods we might choose more often because they provide our bodies with more complete nutrition than other foods. Some foods provide us with different vitamins and minerals. Some foods provide us with more fibre or more protein than others. But all foods give us energy and fuel our brain. However, we eat for many reasons, not just health. We also eat for reasons of pleasure, culture, tradition, social interaction and comfort, and sometimes as a special treat for ourselves. By giving ourselves permission to eat for a variety of reasons (and not just for nutritional health), we create an environment

where we trust and honour our body instead of viewing food with resistance and fear.

When it comes to educating my clients about nutrition, I rarely allow calories to be part of the conversation. Our bodies need more than a certain caloric target to maintain or support weight. We need a variety of foods from all the food groups to meet our carbohydrate, protein, fat, vitamin and mineral needs for good health. Engaging clients in conversation about the types of nutrition their body needs, focusing on what foods feel satisfying to eat and satisfy the body for longer, and about how we feel different when we have energy is more important than caloric number.

Our bodies know what to do with nutrition: we need to learn to trust our bodies' cues. One of the ways I help teach my clients to trust their body is

through the skill of mindful eating. Mindful or intuitive eating means paying attention to internal cues rather than external rules to guide our food choices. Like any skill, mindful eating needs to be practised.

The first step in mindful eating is to *reject* dieting. Stop buying into the idea that we need to make drastic, rigid changes to the way we eat in order to support our bodies. One way to become in tune with our bodies is to explore and learn about our hunger and fullness cues. If we slow down and take the time to listen, our bodies will tell us what they want and need.

When we listen to our bodies, the most important thing to do is to remove all distractions so that we can taste the food and experience the act of eating, decide what we enjoy instead

of placing judgment on certain foods. When we eat what we really want, in an environment that is enticing and enjoyable, the pleasure of the experience will make us feel satisfied and content. This minimizes the desire to overeat.

Another important thing to do is to give ourselves unconditional permission to eat. If we tell ourselves that we “can’t” or “shouldn’t” have a particular food, we can experience feelings of deprivation. As with many things in life, we often want what we can’t have: feelings of deprivation can intensify into cravings, which often lead to bingeing. When we finally “give in” to foods that we have told ourselves we “can’t” have, we often overeat and experience feelings of guilt. And we promise ourselves to never eat this way again. Then, if we “give in” again in the

future, our broken promise compounds our feelings of guilt.

We all need to challenge food “rules.” We need to stop believing that “we are what we eat” and start seeing the complexity of the human body and our relationship with the food we eat. Challenge the thought that you’re “good” for eating minimal calories and “bad” if you eat something you enjoy. You don’t have to eat a perfect diet to be healthy. You will not suddenly get a nutrient deficiency or gain weight from one snack, one meal or one day of eating. It’s what you eat consistently over time that matters. The relationship you have with your body is the only relationship you are guaranteed to maintain for life, so I encourage you to nurture and care for it. Your body knows what to do with nutrition: you just have to learn to trust it. ▼

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We also distributed over 10,000 Love Our Bodies, Love Ourselves purple wristbands across the province. I have delivered presentations on disordered eating and body image at more than 30 local high schools. Following the presentation, some students vowed to never again speak negatively about their bodies.

A trait common to those of us who support or work at the Love Our Bodies, Love Ourselves program is a passion to encourage all of us to make a promise to love our bodies, no matter their size, race or gender, and a commitment to educate others in order to prevent the sort of negative thinking that can lead to disordered eating

thoughts and patterns. It’s incredibly empowering to use my experience to give back and provide hope for others. These days, when I look back at that girl clinging to the SkyTrain pole, I can hardly believe she existed within me. I have such deep compassion for that terrified and exhausted individual. Sometimes when I see others whom I suspect are struggling with their body image, or worse, battling an eating disorder, I wish I could look into their eyes and tell them that this is not how their story has to be. More often than not, I want to scream and shake them, force them to see the beauty in themselves and the world around them, and show them they have a purpose in this crazy world. But I can’t make

others see what is now so clear to me. That insight needs to come from them. But my frustration constantly reminds me that my torturous journey should never (and will never) go to waste—each and every instant of pain and suffering I experienced had a purpose. Through my suffering and subsequent recovery, I was given a second chance at life, and now I choose to use each moment to emphasize body positivity and eating disorders awareness through the Love Our Bodies, Love Ourselves movement. I invite you to check out www.jessieslegacy.com to help spread the message to all people that *every body is beautiful*. ▼

resources

Jessie's Legacy

Jessie's Legacy Eating Disorders Prevention and Awareness is a program of Family Services of the North Shore. Learn more about resiliency, disordered eating, and relationships with food, and find the Eating Disorder Prevention Toolkit. You can also learn more about Love Our Bodies, Love Ourselves, a positive self-esteem movement. For more, visit www.jessieslegacy.com.

Kelty Eating Disorders

Visit www.keltyeatingdisorders.ca or call 1-800-665-1822 (in BC) to find good information on eating disorders, disordered and risky eating behaviours, and prevention resources. You can also use the program locator tool to find help across the province.

Looking Glass BC: Online Peer Support

Looking Glass BC hosts regular, moderated, confidential online peer support sessions for anyone in Canada who is experiencing challenges around body image, disordered eating, and eating disorders. Sessions focus on support rather than treatment. For more, visit www.lookingglassbc.com/online-peer-support/

Being Me: Promoting Positive Body Image curriculum

Action Schools! BC's Being Me curriculum for Kindergarten through Grade 9 helps student build positive body image and self-esteem, develop healthy relationships with food and exercise, and think about the messages they hear. Visit www.actionschoolsbc.ca.

BalancedView

BalancedView, from BC Mental Health and Substance Use Services, is a free, online course for health professionals that examines weight stigma and bias in health care. For more, visit www.balancedviewbc.ca.

Media Smarts

Media Smarts aims to improve media literacy among Canadian children and youth. Visit www.mediasmarts.ca to learn more about body image and media like TV shows, movies, advertisements, and video games. They also have tips to help parents talk to children about body image and lesson plans for teachers.

National Eating Disorders Information Centre (NEDIC)

Visit www.nedic.ca, a Canadian resource centre, to learn about body image, self-esteem, disordered eating, and eating disorders. You can learn more about finding help, and find Beyond Images, a free body image and self-esteem curriculum for Grades 4 to 8.

About-Face

About-Face teaches young women about media messages around bodies and body image. Learn how to take a more critical look at media like advertisements, TV shows, and magazines. For more, visit www.about-face.org.

Nine body-positive blogs

Visit mashable.com/2015/02/28/body-positive-blogs/ for nine blogs that focus on self-esteem and healthy body image, including Stop Hating Your Body, Fat Girl Food Squad, The Militant Baker, and The Love Yourself Challenge. (Note: Some bloggers use strong language.)

 This list is not comprehensive and does not necessarily imply endorsement of all the content available in these resources.



stressed? down? screening can help

anonymous. confidential. drop-in. www.heretohelp.bc.ca/beyond-the-blues

Free, fun screening and education events by non-profit partners across BC can help you look at a range of issues including mental well-being, mood, anxiety and risky drinking. Presented provincially by BC Partners. **Get connected. Feel hope.**



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