

Look At that Beauty in the Mirror! How Body Image Affects Young People Today

By Lucia

What is One Thing You Love About Yourself?

Three self-conscious women who refused to wear a bikini in public were asked to do so on a stage and on live TV in front of millions of people to show their confidence. One of them, Alaina, had some extra body fat and had recently lost her partner. Another, Shay, had struggled with a terrible body image and eating disorders her whole life. The last, Sarah, was horrifically body shamed by her ex-boyfriend. Backstage, none of them would even look at the bikinis that they had to put on because they felt that they were not good enough to wear them or even imagine themselves in them.

“I’m gonna look so fat. I can’t do this.” Alaina said.

Iskra Lawrence was in charge of changing their minds and giving them the strength and confidence they needed to go out on that stage and have fun in a situation that they originally saw as embarrassing and uncomfortable. As Iskra was thinking about how she would do it and how hard it would be, she was called into the changing room because all three women were breaking down in tears of fear and self-hate. It made sense that they would be feeling a lot of pressure, I mean, they were each given a bikini and all shared a room and mirror and were told that they must put on the bathing suit and go on a stage and showcase themselves to millions of people on the streets.

She took them all one by one and placed them in front of the mirror in the bikinis. Of course, the first thing each of them saw was their insecurities and the things that they hated about themselves. She told them to each say a few things that they loved about themselves. *Alaina is an amazing friend and always brings life to a party. Shay is hardworking and funny. Sarah is independent and brave.* They started to notice all these great things about themselves and really got into it. She then told them to pick out a few things that they love about what their body *does* for them. Alaina is proud of her stretch marks because they show that she was able to birth her children and create life. Shay is proud of her hands because she loves to sew and was able to sew her whole family clothes. Sarah loves her legs because they allow her to hike up any mountain.

Iskra watched as their faces lit up and when they were called to the stage they ran out there and danced around like no one was watching. This experience was not only heart lifting for the women on stage, but for any man or woman at home or watching who felt shame, just like they originally did. These three women demonstrated how quickly a mindset on yourself and how you look can change when given the right coaching and techniques. People shouldn’t need someone to tell them to look at the good things about themselves and their bodies abilities, we should be taught that from society starting at a very young age. The media should not be continuing this cycle of wanting to look perfect for everyone else and never being satisfied with how you look. By hating on yourself or judging others, you spread that it’s normal and okay to not like how you look. This self-love mindset should be taught to and adopted by all people no matter their gender, color, size, or shape because in our world today, the media and many companies engrave a “perfect” and unachievable image into our head for us to unhealthily strive for.

People’s thoughts are influenced by what is around them, it’s natural to compare things to other things. This includes comparing yourself to others you think are better than you and judging what you and others look like subconsciously or very consciously. It’s uncontrollable and something that everyone does, whether they realize or not. Many people look in the mirror every morning and see the things they wish they could change about themselves. That could mean straightening your hair or putting on high waisted pants to make your stomach look flatter. Lauren Muhlheim, a certified eating disorder expert, says that “negative body image is often characterized by a dissatisfaction with appearance and engaging in behaviors such as dieting, checking, and/or avoidance, in an attempt to ameliorate the dissatisfaction” (Muhlheim). This means never being satisfied with how you look and never being able to focus on what your body does for you in place of what you look like. Even children as young as 10 years old are subject

to looking at their body or face and seeing something that they think isn't good enough or is too ugly or has too much extra fat. Many brands take advantage of these insecurities by using the typical beautiful, skinny, blue-eyed model as their main marketing strategy. People need to learn how to accept the way they look and even love and show it off from a young age in order to prevent mental health issues ranging anywhere from low self-esteem to depression and eating disorders. Although young people are taught that there is a specific image to the word "perfect", body-positive and all-inclusiveness is gaining popularity, helping to put an end to the cycle of negative body image.

Has Body Image Always Been a Problem?

How you look is something that has been important to people since any fashion or trends began. Close to everyone obsesses with looking good whenever they leave the house and some people are embarrassed to even walk outside without putting on makeup or changing out of their sweatpants. A poll conducted by Pink News on March 11th, 2019, asked its Snapchat viewers if they ever felt insecure about how they look. Out of 100k+ responses, 95% of people voted that they had. This whole issue of never being satisfied with how you look starts with the media and what people in that time find attractive. Right now, in order to be considered as good-looking in our society, women must be unachievably thin and curvy, and men must be tall, broad, and muscular. This can be easily noticed on magazine covers, in tv commercials, and when shopping for clothing (especially online). In 2016 a former Victoria's Secret retoucher spilled some of the companies biggest photo magic secrets to Teen Vogue to show the public what goes on behind the scenes and why it happens. They stated that "consumers want to see skinny women, but they don't want to see the reality of what being skinny looks like" (Teen Vogue). Seeing these seemingly perfect models can cause people to think negatively about themselves even if they are perfectly healthy and in good shape. A guy who eats healthy and exercises regularly can be taken down by a mere ad, just because he doesn't have the man in its muscles and jawline.

The idea of body image is not a new concept at all though. In the 1800s, women were expected to be curvier and more voluptuous. More towards the late 1800s, the image of the ideal body was placed on The Gibson Girls and Lillian Russell, a famous actress and singer. Even over a hundred years ago celebrities represented what people wanted to be, what they idolized. Lillian was big-boned and on the heavier side, and all the men at the time loved her. A Gibson Girl would be soft and dainty and framed by a swan bill corset. This corset was to create a seemingly thinner waist while defining the hips and chest to make women look curvier. Women in the early 1900s were expected to have rounded shoulders and a soft neck, curvy but not overweight, opinionated but not too political, and exercise some feminism but not to "stray too far from feminine ideals" (Medical Daily). In the 1920s, flappers were on top of women's trend with bob haircuts and slender builds. These women would protest female expectations by smoking, drinking, dancing however they wanted, driving, and listening to jazz. This is around the time when men began to worry about their own appearance as well. Now that women were on the rise to equality and there wasn't much that men could do that women couldn't, men had to find ways to reinforce the definitions of masculinity. These attributes included growing a mustache and keeping facial hair shaped because it was the *thing* that only men could do. Later on in time, Marilyn Monroe, a long-legged, curvy blonde woman was the leader in trend and beauty. Men wanted to be with her and women wanted to be her, and even still she is considered one of the most beautiful women to ever have lived. At this time women were trying to figure out ways to get better curves without eating so much that they became overweight. Moving closer and closer to the 21st century, women wanted to be as skinny as possible while men wanted to dress and look more feminine. The beauty ideals completely "turned upside down" (Medical Daily). Men started to grow their hair out and adopted a more scrawny (today's unmanly) look. While women wanted to look like models Twiggy and Audrey Hepburn, both very thin and extremely iconic at the time. Today, both women and men (mostly women) are pushing for body positivity and representation of all shapes in sizes in the media.

Lauren Muhlheim states that "negative body image often emerges during childhood" (Muhlheim). A study conducted recently in the US shows that about 50% of young girls and 30% of young boys

dislike how their body looks and these numbers climb up to 60% of adult women and 40% of adult men. There is no denying that people are rarely satisfied with how they look. Everyday people talk about how they think they look and how they think people around them look and this may even go without noticing it's even happening. It's natural to compare yourself to someone else. Just like how it's natural to judge people merely on how they look. During her TED Talk, Iskra Lawrence -an influencer and model for the body-positive brand Aerie-, told her audience that many brands don't even offer sizes over extra large or under a small (Lawrence). This can make regular people feel embarrassed even to try to find something that fits them in the store. All people can really do to better their body is to be healthy and exercise. So it's not fair to not even offer someone's size who maybe can't control that aspect of their life. Lauren Muhlheim explains that an extreme negative body image can lead to an eating disorder or vice versa (Muhlheim). According to ANAD (National Association of Anorexia Nervosa and Associated Disorders), at least 30 million people in the US suffer from an eating disorder of all genders and ages and eating disorders have the highest mortality rate of any mental illness. In fact, teenage girls are 12x more likely to die from an eating disorder than any other illness (Lawrence). One of the big issues, though, is that the center for disease control and prevention says that only about 18% of young people are overweight. So when any person in the other 82% goes on a diet and overworks their body to make it "better," it can be very unhealthy.

Photoshopping Professional Models is a Lose-Lose

Although in the past brands have used photoshopped and non-diverse models as a significant part of their ad campaigns, some companies are starting to adapt to today's society by minimizing the use of photo-magic. The University of Cincinnati Law Review says that "Digitally altered images of models in beauty ads" are in direct correlation with "negative body-image" because they are "harmful to consumers as they are misleading [and] manipulative" (UC Law Review). Since brands started taking advantage of photoshop, as most people already know from simply "flipping through a magazine" or "putting on the TV", "the fashion industry ran on a platform of exclusivity, granting entry to a select few by perpetuating an expectation of beauty that can be met by only a certain type of woman: tall, skinny, blond." (Andrea Cheng). This is because by manipulating consumers into believing that anyone who purchases their product will look like the model shown wearing/using it, they earn more money. For example, if someone sees a model at JCrew that they think looks better in something than a model at Hollister does, they are most likely going to be more inclined to purchase the former.

Photoshopping models is not the only issue here though, plainly not using different sizes and types of people can have a major effect on what people believe to be what they are supposed to look like. As Ed Razek, Victoria's Secret's own chief in marketing, says, the company does offer larger sizes but will not showcase them because "the show is a fantasy" and that other brands come at them "because [they're] the leader" (Razek). Women buy into this fantasy, and it keeps Victoria's Secret's profits coming in and making them one of the most well-known lingerie companies worldwide. Companies like these are most likely not going to stop utilizing their successful marketing strategy anytime soon, but this does not make the negative impact they have on people of all ages and sizes disappear. The companies that abuse this marketing strategy tend to take either average or below average weight models and retouch them to look even thinner and curvier to create an image of a person "that rarely exists in nature" (Teen Vogue). Think Barbie. A toy marketed to young girls from the ages of about nine to twelve. Barbie first debuted in the 1950s. This means that for decades upon decades, even children as young as 9 years old have been exposed to this unfair image of perfection. Barbie, without a doubt, is -and has been- such a popular toy because of the way she looks and dresses. Mirror mirror, an association that focuses on eating disorders, says that this image is also very effective in luring consumers in since less body weight and more beauty seems to be highly associated with wealth, popularity, success (mirror-mirror.org).

This technique, however, is beginning to shift with many body-positive brands on the rise. More people are starting to lean towards these brands that are all inclusive with all different sizes and body types showcasing their products. Aerie and American Eagle were some of the first and most well-known brands to take on the anti-retouching movement. In fact, with the tag "The girl in this photo has not been

retouched. The real you is sexy”, “American Eagle Outfitters saw a 32 percent growth in just the first quarter” of 2016 (Andrea Cheng). When Jen Foyle, the global president of Aerie, was asked how she believes that this new way of marketing has contributed to the success of both American Eagle and Aerie, she said that “it’s relatable” (Foyle). She strongly believes that when a girl comes into one of their stores and (for example) a sales associate talks to them and helps them find something right for them, “it makes them feel comfortable” (Foyle). This relatability and comfort vibe that certain stores give off even just by looking into one of their shops is a major contributor into the success of the company, especially with the mindset of self-love that more and more people have been trying to shift onto over the past few years.

In comparison, “only looking at its brick-and-mortar stores, sales at Victoria's Secret fell 8 percent in January, compared with flat sales in” the last year (CNBC). Victoria’s Secret has always been the brand to push sexy onto its consumers and Ed Razek, the companies own chief in marketing, even admits to this in an interview with Vogue. He says that their show is meant to be a “fantasy” and they, therefore, refuse to use plus-sized models in any sort of showcase. When it comes to this, VS is falling behind. Amanda Brennan, an agent at Natural Model Management reports to Andrea Cheng that she is “seeing a huge shift where all these brands are asking for plus-size (sizes 14+) models and in-betweeners (sizes 6-8)” (Amanda Brennan). Most clothing brands and even others, like the beauty company Dove, are starting to diversify their model selection and put an end to the retouching of them. In today’s society, people want to feel good in their skin and be comfortable, not be forced into a misconception that you need to be perfect in order to be happy.

Negative Body Image Can Be More than Just a Bad Feeling

“Every 62 minutes, someone dies as a direct result of an eating disorder” (ANAD). Because of the way pop culture portrays the idea of beauty, eating disorders and other mental illnesses in young people are on the rise. The American Psychiatric Association defines eating disorders as “illnesses in which the people experience severe disturbances in their eating behaviors and related thoughts and emotions” (APA). Eating disorders are statistically more common in women than in men, and this can’t just be a coincidence. For years women have been expected to look a certain way and the media defines this every time a new trend or look comes along. In most cases, regular people are unable to attain this so called perfection. Naturally, a woman will look at themselves after seeing what they believe to be ‘perfect’ on a retouched model and see someone who is not even close to good enough for the society we live in. According to certified eating disorders expert, Lauren Muhlheim, having a negative image of your body is one fairly large contributor to potential eating disorders. Although anorexia and bulimia are the most commonly associated with a poor view on one’s image or weight, “research indicates that about 60 percent of binge eating disorder patients met criteria for overvaluation of shape and weight” (Muhlheim). Body Dysmorphic Disorder (BDD) is a category of OCD but rather than being obsessed with various habits or cleanness, one constantly checks up on a few minor or even non-existent flaws that he sees in himself and can’t stop.

Eating disorders, though, are not the only negative effect of a negative body image. According to Tabitha Farrar, a fully recovered past victim of anorexia, just a few of the health concerns linked to poor self confidence are depression, anxiety, possible substance abuse, and problems in relationships. As most people are told from a young age, in order to love others or have a good relationship with others, one must love themselves first. Without this, she may not be able to give another person the proper experience with her that they deserve. Although this may seem like a small problem and something that can be easily fixed, it can actually lead to many other mental and physical risks that can be linked back to having low self esteem and not being able to love oneself no matter what others think of them or how they fit in.

Depression can be one of the most serious results of either an eating disorder or self hate. When someone is constantly engaging in talk that puts themselves lower and lower down, of course they won’t know how to be happy with themselves. In today's society, it is normal to hear someone say things like “I’m so fat I need to slim down” or “I can’t even look at myself” because people now are just born into others around them constantly saying it and it catches on quickly. It is much less often that you hear someone say, “Wow I really love how I look today”, it may even be considered weird or narcissistic.

Depression is defined as “a common and serious medical illness that negatively affects how you feel, the way you think and how you act” (psychiatry.org). Beyondblue.org says that “depression usually results from a combination of recent events and other longer-term or personal factors, rather than one immediate issue or event” (beyondblue.org). This would mean that the repeated action of self-hate over time could easily cause some sort of depression or just generally being sad all the time and not knowing how to lift oneself back up. Not only can self hate cause this, but hate from others, or bullying, can be something that really sticks with someone. By simply checking a person’s public instagram page, you may see hate comments and random people that he/she has never met telling them they are ugly, fat, etc. A whole “16% of high school students were electronically bullied in the past year” and “55.2% of LGBT students” experienced cyberbullying (American SPCC). Not coincidentally, “16% of transgender college students reported having an eating disorder” and out of all men with eating disorders, “42% identify as gay” (ANAD, NEDA). To put that into perspective, only about 5% of the entire male population are out as gay. A definite cause of this is body image. If people were able to love themselves, other people’s hate and the advertising of various companies like Victoria’s Secret would not have as major of an effect on all different types of people.

Most People Don’t Even Know It’s an Issue

Although it seems that people know what the effect of thoughts and words is, people often disregard that they may be hurting themselves mentally or physically. Millions of people around the world have eating disorders and engage in negative talk about how they look on a daily basis. But, there is also a symptom of disorders by the name of Anosognosia. What this term essentially refers to is when a “person is unaware or “in denial” of their illness or symptoms of their disorder as a result of a brain-based issue” (mirror-mirror). This is extremely commonly seen in people recently admitted to the hospital and people who have disorders like eating disorders. This, however, is not the same as acknowledging that one has a problem but keeping it a secret from others. For example, it is relatively normal for someone to think that they need to lose weight and go to the gym to try and do so. But, what some people don’t know is when this is taken to an extreme. One may think that she is just very motivated to get in shape or anything along those lines, but really be suffering from a life-threatening disorder. Anorexia is one of the more well-known disorders that causes denial in its victims. When a person with anorexia looks in the mirror, he may see a body that is either normal weight or even overweight, while the rest of the world sees him as “dangerously underweight” (mirror-mirror). This can also have negative effects on people close to him. They may be confused as to what is going on in his head, and they may not know whether to seek professional help for him or to just leave him to decide what’s best for himself. This issue of not being able to identify how to treat the victim can actually very easily lead to the disorder worsening which can have huge effects on the person’s health.

Eating disorders and negative body image do not only affect home and personal life though, teenagers have school to worry about as well. Having high self-esteem correlates with “high academic results” (UK Essays). In a test conducted with university-aged students, the higher one scored on the self-esteem factor, the higher their actual grades were. The lower one scored, the lower they were doing academically at the time. This proves that low confidence in oneself can be connected to academic performance. For one person this could mean not being able to pay attention to school work because she is preoccupied with the way she looks. For someone else, this could mean having generally poor mental health because of how much he hates how he looks and not being able to function normally in school and do work. One could argue that doing poorly in school impacts self-esteem, which is not wrong. But, when focusing purely on confidence in looks and being okay with how one is, having bad grades does not affect this at all. Most people know that models are often photoshopped to be perfect but what many people don’t even realize is that this can affect self-love immensely. People subconsciously compare things and this can be very hurtful to those being compared and to those making the comparisons. This is especially true when comparing oneself to an unrealistic image of a person shown on today’s media. Perfection in the modern world is unachievable and people need to be taught this before self-hate becomes an unstoppable cycle passed on for generations to come.

Stop Calling Yourself Fat

Although negative body image is a widespread problem, there are ways that people can learn to treat it and eventually be happy with their bodies. The issue of never being pleased with how one looks is huge all over America, and even the world. Using certain strategies and teaching people how to love themselves can hopefully be a significant factor in minimizing these numbers or at least bringing them down and changing the norm of never being satisfied when looking in the mirror. Iskra Lawrence, a well-known model, and influencer went through hating her own body too. She told BUILD Series that “health is actually from the inside out and we are not taught that” and that this is an essential idea that we need to teach ourselves and each other (Lawrence). She used to look at other models she would have model shoots with or look at other women in the gym and think about how she wished she had one of her physical traits instead of her own. This was until she taught herself that if she cares for herself and is an overall healthy person, there is nothing to be dissatisfied with. Even being a model, Iskra is not perfect. She is curvy and has stretch marks just like much of the rest of women in the world. This is one of the major components into why people are able to relate to her no matter how famous or idolized she may be.

Lauren Muhlheim also gives people a few strategies to learn that can help anyone deal with negative feelings towards themselves. Fitness training can help not only improve how a person’s body looks, but also on the way that person thinks of their body. It can help people “focus more on the functionality of their body and less on their appearance” (Lauren Muhlheim). She also gives that you can “keep a gratitude journal,” “clean up your social media,” and “not engage in ‘fat talk’”. Keeping a body gratitude journal would mean writing at least one positive aspect of your body on a daily basis. This can also help people to stop engaging in something called “fat talk”. Fat talk is constantly saying negative things about your appearance whether you mean it or not. This can make it hard to believe in the positive things and therefore completely getting rid of negative sayings like “I’m so fat” or “I’m so ugly” can help someone to stop thinking them as well. Cleaning up your social media can mean unfollowing unrealistic “goals” like tiny models and people who want you to change who you are to be more “beautiful”. It can also mean not only posting about positive things in your life and pictures where you look better than usual. All these are effective, mental, and personal ways to improve anyone's body image. But, this does not necessarily mean that if one is at risk with their health because of their weight (whether that means over or underweight) that they should love how they look and move on. It is encouraged to be as healthy as possible and do everything in one’s capacity to be their best self. Self-love is a hard journey, but well worth it in the end. All the hard work of telling yourself that you’re good enough and eating healthy and exercising will make you a happier person and even more successful in life.

A few years ago, a CMS student who was also working on a project about body image chose to have a fashion show at Arch Street. She and her partner named this event EveryBodyBeautiful. The objective was to raise awareness about body image and eating disorders. The idea was to pair with a local dress designer and get a bunch of girls who would be willing to walk the runway and have their picture taken. Turnout was more than expected with about 200 participants and people just coming to watch. By having an entrance fee of \$40 for adults and \$15 for children, they raised over a thousand dollars for NEDA while spreading the word of self love and confidence to young girls and their families. This was very successful and definitely benefited many young girls who showed up by giving them reassurance and allowing them to have the ability to love themselves. This worked out so well because the prices were not too high, it was a cool idea, and many people who came would bring their friends from other schools, family, and anyone in town who wanted to come and join the fun.

By June 2019, I will have helped eighth graders at my school feel more confident in their bodies using different self-love and self-care strategies. I know when I will be successful when I see that people feel better about themselves after participating in a talent show or spin class. The benefits of achieving this goal will be that students will feel much more confident in turn making them happier and even boosting grades and participation in out of school and in school activities. I will conduct a short and anonymous survey available to eighth-graders at CMS who will attend or be a part of the talent show before and after holding it and having a guest speaker from NEDA. This survey will measure how many

people actually feel confident in their bodies before participating in a self-love show and being taught ways to think about yourself in order to be happier with the way you look. I will conduct this same survey before and after having an out of school charity spin class open to anyone at CMS and family. After both, I will know if both methods work out and help contribute to the progress of self-love in young people. I plan on achieving my goal with the help of another eighth-grade student, Abby Wilson. The biggest factor that would prevent us from achieving our goal would be dishonest responses to the surveys. If people choose not to give us real answers, the contrast from the first to second time taking the survey may not display the actual effects of either of the events. In order to hold a talent show with a NEDA guest speaker, we will need permission from Mr. Healy, a set date with the speaker that matches up with the date of the show, and people that will either be a part of the show or just come to watch. For the spin class, I will need to choose a date and time that will be convenient for many people, I will be giving out a free piece of clothing for each attendant from either American Eagle or Aerie depending on gender, and I will need to create a sign-up sheet with all the information because it will be important that I know how many people will come. My mom is able to get the clothing because she does work as the Senior Vice President of design for Aerie. All of these components are reasonable because they are not too crazy and each part connects to another so that everything can work out. Achieving this goal is important to me because I know that an outrageous amount of people are not happy with what they look like and are constantly saying they're ugly or fat and this makes me really sad. It's not fair that so many young people all around the world are exposed to such negativity about themselves. I was raised in a very loving household where I am told every day that I'm beautiful and my own mom works for Aerie which is such a body positive company making girls feel more comfortable every day. I want to spread the word of body positivity and self-love to the people I have gone through middle school with so that we can be a more happy group of kids going into high school which will, in turn, make us much more successful.

Throughout the process so far, I have grown so much both academically and as a person. In order to be able to write a paper, I had to ask myself about what all the problems that arise with negative body image are and how they both are formed and affect people. I also had to come up with and find different ways to teach and help people cope with low confidence in appearance in order to come up with an action plan that would be sure to actually help people. While capstone has been very stressful, I have managed to not fall behind and even went ahead in some cases when I knew I would not be able to or have time to complete the next chunk later. In much of my research, I found that some people have very different points of view than me on the topics of body positivity, photoshopping models, etc, and I had to take these instances respectfully and incorporate them into my work in order to actually make it stronger. When I couldn't figure out how to write something or include a certain section into my paper, I let myself take a breather and just try to think for a moment for any possibilities which helped me so much which stress and actually, in turn, made these more difficult sections more fun to write and made them a lot stronger. Since I am having a guest speaker come in and speak to the students attending Abby and I's talent show, I had to reach out to NEDA to find someone who would be willing to create a specific presentation for the eighth grade. With the help of this speaker, we will communicate to these kids that we have known and grown with that body image is a bigger problem than it may seem like but it is also a very personal problem can be solved with relatively simple habits of self-care and love.

Tell Your Friends to Stop Calling Themselves Fat

Because of the way pop culture portrays the idea of beauty, a cycle of negative body image and low self-esteem is ingrained in the minds of the young thereby continuing the cycle. People are subject to comparing themselves to others and hating how they look even at a very young age. This is because negative body image is one big cycle of adults passing on that they dislike what they see in the mirror and the media very clearly showing what people are "supposed" to look like in order to be considered good-looking. Many companies see this definition of media as perfect as a perfect way to get themselves some extra profit. Because of all this, people must be taught how to love themselves before confident people go completely extinct and before these feelings are taken to extreme and health concerns can come into the

picture. Eating disorders and depression are already common enough and negative body image doesn't need to add to that population.

People are constantly comparing and being compared, it's pretty much uncontrollable, but one thing we all can control is caring for our bodies and being okay with how we are.

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