CHAPTER 1

WHAT IS BODY IMAGE?

#AppreciateYourself

"You are not a drop in the ocean.
You are an entire ocean in a drop."

– Rumi, *thirteenth-century Persian poet*

MY STORY: Alex René, 21 years old, she/her, USA

Some days, I really love and appreciate my body for what it is. I like my nose, curly hair, and stomach in particular. But some days, I don't even want to leave the house; the very features that make me feel unique and beautiful seem to change overnight into parts of myself I want to hide. I can wake up, look in the mirror, and not feel good about anything I see. I don't remember exactly when I started to feel ambivalent about my appearance – and myself in general – but it began early in life.

I was always close to my mom and we bonded over clothes from the time I was young. I loved "shopping" in my mom's closet for fancy dresses I hoped to someday wear. I knew my mom was saving them for me because she wasn't wearing them herself. My mom would claim that she was fat or needed to lose 15 pounds before she could wear whole sections of her wardrobe. My mom's negative self-talk was my introduction to the world of body hate. It didn't help that people started to tell me more and more as I became a teenager that I looked like my mom. It just wasn't clear to me if this was a compliment. My mom didn't view herself as beautiful, so how could I?

One moment that I will never forget was when I was in high school and crop tops were just becoming super trendy so I had a number of them. My mom did not like me wearing them and would make me show her what I was wearing every day before I left the house. While I was at school one day my mom put all my crop tops in a trash bag. When I got home, she told me that "crop tops are for skinny girls." I was crushed. I wore long sleeve, baggy tee-shirts and sweatshirts all spring and summer my junior year of high school.

It wasn't just my mom that contributed to my body dissatisfaction. Growing up, appearance-based comments filled my Christmases and christenings. I have had to work to not internalize other people's opinions regarding my appearance. The only person who really helped me develop a more positive body image was myself.

I definitely developed a confusing relationship with food along the way. There were perplexing messages about food in my house – some foods were "good" and some were "off limits." Sometimes only fruits and vegetables were on offer, but other times big Italian family dinners were pushed. For a while, my eating habits really suffered and across a few months I became emaciated. I eventually pushed myself to get medical help, but it was hard. One thing that really helped me rethink how I was treating myself was my doctor telling me the biological consequences of undereating and how it could put me at serious risk for developing osteopathic complications in early adulthood. Since then, I have made a sincere effort to appreciate my body for what it is, its functionality, and try to stay healthy by nourishing my body. Sometimes when I spend time with my family it's hard to keep focused on my health, but I just remember I am eating for my future self.

My advice to others is to try to evaluate yourself on qualities other than your appearance. It is perfectly OK not to love every piece of yourself; I think this is natural. It's not OK to take those insecurities and hyper fixate on them for the rest of your life; just accept them for what they are and keep moving along. If you wanted to maintain a healthy, happy relationship with a friend you wouldn't point out all of their blemishes or insecurities, so why do that to yourself? You are the only person who has to live in your body so it is important to be nice to yourself and take care of your health. It took me a while to learn that trying to be skinny can be counterproductive to being healthy.

When I talked with Alex while I was writing this book, so many pieces of her story resonated with me. I grew up feeling criticized for my appearance, too, and it took me a long time to unlearn that self-loathing. I know that it can be incredibly difficult to feel good about yourself in a world where so many messengers – your mom, your friends, your social media feed – all have ideas regarding what you should wear (crop tops or not?), what you should eat (is any food truly "off limits"?), and how you present yourself to the world.

IN THIS CHAPTER YOU'LL LEARN

- how body image is defined,
- why it's valuable to work towards a positive body image, and
- why reading this book and developing a better appreciation of yourself will improve your life.

Body image is how we think and feel about our bodies and our appearance in general. But your body image doesn't just affect your sense of self; it affects how you interact with people, the health behaviors you pursue (or skip), and your mental health in general. Body image is the extent to which you are comfortable in your own skin.

Improving your body image will not just improve your perceptions of your appearance; it will improve your day-to-day experiences and psychological well-being. Putting in effort to develop a positive body image may be difficult for some people, but the rewards are vast and sometimes even life-changing. You've picked up this book, so I'm guessing you're at least curious about what your life would be like if you had a more positive body image. I hope you'll read on and discover what the latest science, experts, and other people like yourself have come to understand about the value of improving your body image.

Is this book for you?

This book is for anyone who's ever wanted to feel better about their body image or felt interested in improving their mental health. I'm not sure that I know *anyone* who feels good about themselves all the time and is confident that their mental health is in 100% perfect, A+ shape. We all experience challenges and hardships. We all feel insecure and like we don't fit in at times. We all wish we looked a bit different (or even a lot different) than we do.

Although the scientific research and public discussions about body image often focus on women, body image concerns affect people of *all* genders. This book is for you regardless of whether you've always considered yourself female, always identified as male, or have ever been unsure of your gender identity.

Q&A:

Why does the ideal body type – for both men and women – change and why are we expected to keep up with an ever-changing standard of attractiveness?

Just as clothing styles change from year to year, so do trends in other aspects of our appearance. At one point, skinny jeans and skinny eyebrows (for women) were all the rage. Now, thick eyebrows and wide-legged jeans are back "in." For a while, referring to jeans as "mom jeans" was an insult, then those exact jeans became trendy. In the early 2000s, straight and sleek hair was preferred, and then wavy and more rumpled looking hair became fashionable. Waif-like, extremely slender female models and manly-looking men used to dominate the media, until "slim-thick" women (with slender waists but large breasts and bums) and slender, but ripped men took center stage. Then, the pendulum swung, and thin was back in.

How are we supposed to keep up?

First, it's important to consider whether or not you want to keep up with these trends. Maybe you don't mind buying new jeans every few years, but realize that this is somewhat different than trying to reshape your body every few years. Maybe you like to switch up your hairstyle regularly, but have no interest in lifting weights every day to tone and bulk up your body. You have a choice in terms of what trends you are going to care about.

However, you don't have much choice in terms of your body size and shape. We all come into this world with a particular genetic blueprint for what we will look like. Our genes determine our eye and hair color, almost completely determine our height, and have a *very* strong influence on our body size and shape. Of course, you can dye your hair and you can engage in eating and physical activity patterns that affect your body size and shape (to some extent!). You can even pursue cosmetic surgery if you really want to change some aspect of your appearance, but keep in mind that beauty trends are always changing (we'll explore this more in Chapter 9).

A central idea in this book is that I want you to think about these issues and decide for yourself if it is worth trying to "keep up" with appearance ideals. If so, which ones? I want you to realize that this takes up mental space, money, and energy. I want you to value yourself for more than your appearance and to consciously make decisions about how much time, money, and energy to invest in your appearance. I don't have all the answers for you, but I have information that is evidence based and I will help you find what works for you.

What you'll find inside this book:

- **Evidence-based information:** My primary sources of information throughout this book are scientific journal articles. Scientific research is our best bet in terms of discovering unbiased, reliable information about health issues.
- **Personal stories:** I've interviewed hundreds of people across my career as a body image scientist and include some of the latest interviews in this book.
- **Q&A:** I've been studying body image and eating behaviors for over 25 years, and I've been teaching university courses on these topics for over 20 years. Along the way, I've taken note of questions people have about the issues I discuss in this book, and I share them, along with answers, throughout the following 13 chapters.
- **Myths and misinformation:** A lot of the information about health that you see online or in other forms of the media is inaccurate, or downright dangerous. In each chapter of this book, I offer examples of the myths and misinformation about body image and other relevant health issues, along with scientific information to explain why these ideas, which are often quite popular, are wrong.
- **Expert advice:** I've had the opportunity to connect with many different types of experts, from scientists to journalists to Olympic athletes, who helped me think more deeply about the issues discussed in this book and offered words of wisdom to help you think more about these issues too.
- **Inspiration and humor:** Body image is a serious issue, but this doesn't mean that there isn't room to feel inspired or to laugh about some of these topics.
- **Surveys and activities:** There are many body image scientists who have developed ways to measure and improve body image. Some of these surveys and activities will be included throughout the book to provide you with some hands-on ways of working to understand and improve your body image.
- **Find out more:** At the end of each chapter, I direct you to good resources for learning more about these topics should you want to do so.

EXPERT ADVICE:

Katie Loth, PhD, MPH, RD, LD, Department of Family and Community Medicine, University of Minnesota, USA

"Body acceptance and self-love are so important for overall well-being. Research shows that young people who love and appreciate their bodies are more likely to take care of them by eating well, moving regularly, and avoiding risky behaviors."

MYTHS AND MISINFORMATION:

Being "body positive" means feeling good about your body all the time.

It would be nice if we felt good about ourselves all the time – in terms of our appearance, personality, intellect, and a variety of other qualities. However, it's incredibly unlikely and unrealistic to expect to feel good all the time. My goal in writing this book is to help you feel good about your body image – and yourself – most of the time. Body positivity does not mean that you'll always feel positive about yourself, but it does mean that you can appreciate, respect, and feel *mostly* positive about who you are at least *some of the time*.

What if this all feels too "positive" for me?

Some body image scholars and activists have suggested that aiming for a positive body image can keep you overly focused on your appearance. For some people, trying to feel good about how they look might involve too much thinking about how they look. If this resonates with you, then you might want to aim for **body neutrality**. Whereas the goal of body positivity is to feel good about your body, the goal of body neutrality is to just not really think about your body. For some people, body neutrality might be a stop on the way to a positive body image. For others, body neutrality is a satisfactory endpoint.

It may seem strange that the first chapter in a book about body image suggests that maybe one of your goals should be to think less about your body. I told you this stuff was complicated, but stick with me. I don't believe any of us need to love our bodies every second of every day to be happy, which is something that Liliana explains well (below). But we do need to value and respect our bodies. We should view the process of body image discovery as a journey and, above all, seek to take care of ourselves – body and mind.

Body Image Goals

The first survey in this book is the Body Image Goals activity, adapted from a book by Nichole Wood-Barcalow, Tracy Tylka, and Casey Judge. Taking the time to actually write out your responses to these questions can help you focus on your own experiences and desires.

How would you describe your current body image?

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What thoughts and beliefs about your body image do you want to change? (*Note*: this is not what you want to change about your *body*, but what *thoughts and beliefs* you want to work on.)

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What are three goals that you have for yourself as you work towards a positive body image?

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MY STORY: Liliana Grace, 25 years old, she/her, USA

I don't know if there's a moment in my life when I've felt truly good about my body. But I have come to understand that I don't have to feel good about it. I find value in myself in other ways and I appreciate myself for other qualities; I want the rest of the world to do so as well.

Growing up I felt abnormal. Everyone was skinny or trying to be skinny when I was younger and my body has never been described as "skinny." I was probably in my 20s before I came to understand that there was nothing wrong with my body. When I was growing up, I didn't feel like I fit in and I didn't see people like me in my town, in the profession I wanted to pursue (acting), nor in the media.

Today, I enjoy fashion and I only follow fashion creators that are my size or bigger online and that has made a huge difference in how I view myself. Similarly, in social media spaces I only follow people with varying body types. In this way I've been able to create a part of my world that is validating; it's such a relief!

When I was younger, online spaces weren't a strong influence on my body image but books were. Books were actually a negative influence, even though I loved to read. I always read books like the Pretty Little Liars series. There are always mean-girl-girls in these books and a lot of fatphobia. I also read books that told the story of someone with an eating disorder. Although those books were meant to be cautionary tales, they were also instructive in a way. All these stories seemed somewhat relatable and contributed to my sense of what it meant to be a teenager. Fortunately, I think kids today have more exposure to messages that are counter diet culture.

As an adult, books have been influential, but in a positive way. Two books really were life-changing for me. Shrill by Lindy West was an introduction to body acceptance. Then, I read The F*ck It Diet by Caroline Dooner. This was really the first time I had heard of not dieting. The F*ck It Diet called me out in terms of food

rules and all the ideas that had clouded my thinking about food. I realized that there were so many rules in my head about food that the rules were starting to contradict each other. I didn't even know which to follow anymore and now I don't follow any. My new diet is not dieting.

I am grateful that I am able to really enjoy eating now. I think my family is a big reason why I find a lot of joy in food. My mom eats intuitively and she has helped me to find pleasure in food. I like to do my groceries because grocery shopping feels like being an independent adult. Living in New York City is amazing because I can get any food I want. Food can be incredibly fun!

If I was to offer my younger self advice, I would tell her that she doesn't have to atone for her body and she has every right to exist in her body. We all deserve respect no matter what we look like. And we can't win at the game of trying to change ourselves. I am so glad I let go of the dream of what my body could be and just let my life start. That shift in mindset changed my life.

SUMMING UP #APPRECIATEYOURSELF:

- Body image is often defined as your thoughts and feelings about your body; these thoughts and feelings have far-reaching consequences.
- This book provides scientifically based information to help you improve your body image. It also offers real people's stories, common questions and their answers, myth-busting, and activities to help you develop a greater understanding of your body image.
- Having a positive body image doesn't mean feeling good about yourself every second of every day, but it does mean that you respect and care for your body.

FIND OUT MORE:

- Nichole Wood-Barcalow, Tracy Tylka, and Casey Judge's *Positive Body Image Workbook: A Clinical and Self-Improvement Guide* (Cambridge University Press, 2021) offers a ton of great information and activities for improving your body image.
- I edited a book with my colleagues Elizabeth Daniels and Meghan Gillen called *Body Positive: Understanding and Improving Body Image in Science and Practice* (Cambridge University Press, 2018), that includes chapters on many of the topics in this book written by leading body image experts.
- References that support this chapter's content and additional resources can be found at the book's companion website: www.TheBodyImageBookforLife.com.