

How To Improve Your Body Image While Still Hating Your Body

Bodies - can't live with them, can't live without them. They are what give us life and yet they drive us crazy. Low body-esteem is a big issue for people with eating disorders. In my practice as a psychologist specializing in weight management and eating disorders, almost everyone I work with who has an eating problem has a body-image (how you see your body) and body-esteem (how you feel about your body) problem. In this article, I am using body-image and body-esteem interchangeably.

Many people tend to see their bodies and body-esteem as separate from themselves and their self-esteem, "My self-esteem is fine, it's just this disgusting body that's the problem." It can be hard to believe that the disgusting body is really an aspect of self-esteem. Everyone wants better self-esteem. **Does everyone want better body-esteem?**



Not necessarily. It can depend on how much you hate your body. For many people with an eating disorder, there seems to be very little reason to work on liking their bodies. After all, why work on liking something that is disgusting and hateful? Why work on something that needs to be fixed by dieting or other measures? Why work on that ugly body; isn't it better to just hate it and punish it? Of course not, but this kind of eating disordered thinking comes into play when people contemplate working to improve body-image. "Improve my body-image? You don't understand. My body's awful! My body needs improving, not its image."

Herein lies the dilemma and here also is a unique opportunity for healing. The healing of body image can proceed in many different ways. I find it can be helpful for people to work on hating their bodies a little less, but hating them none the less. What?

Yes, you can improve your body-image while still hating your body. For many, this is a relief. But it also seems impossible. **"How can I hate it and still work on liking it?"** It doesn't make sense."

It does make sense if you imagine an eight inch ruler which is the low body-esteem/high body-esteem ruler, illustrated below. It is a long continuum with many positions. At one end is the idea that "I hate this disgusting body" and at the other that "I love this wonderful crucible of goodness." In between are degrees of hate, neutrality and like. Some people are clear that they don't hate their bodies, they only mildly dislike them. Others describe themselves as alternating between hating their bodies a lot and thinking their bodies are O.K. The ruler has room for them all.

The Body-Esteem Ruler

1" I hate my body a lot. In fact, I detest it. It's hard to describe how much I detest it.

2" I don't like my body; it's gross, and I somewhat and sometimes detest it.

3" I dislike my body. I won't go so far as to say I hate or detest it.

4" It's not great. It's not awful. It just is. I suppose it could be better, but I don't really think about it that much.

5" My body is OK . I can't say I like it, but I do feel OK with it.

6" I like my body at times. There are things about it I don't like, but those don't bother me much at all.

7" I like my body most of the time. I'm actually glad it's mine.

8" I have really good and positive feelings about my body. I deeply respect and like it.

At the outer end of body-hate, at 1" or less, lies a territory that is rough and rugged in terrain. Here there is constant torture of the body, constant insults hurled at one's looks, constant beating up of the body. This is real bad body hate. It is vicious. It is "let me spend the next two hours telling myself how bad I look" body hate. And it really hurts. It may, for some, be an attempt to punish the bad body by hurting it (with insults) and to get it to behave (i.e., transform into the good body) which one could then love. Whatever the cause, it lowers body-esteem and keeps it beaten down. Since body-esteem is a part of self-esteem, it also lowers self-esteem and keeps it beaten down. Wherever you are on the ruler, to work on healing low body-image, **your object is to slowly move towards a higher number, but, and here is the key, just by a fraction of an inch.**

When the topic of body image arises, my patient is very frustrated. She asks, "Are you saying I have to like my body?" She doesn't realize that I would never say that. That's going too far. To go from vicious body-hate to "I like my body" is not a possibility. To go from vicious body-hate to just plain body-hate, that works. As I describe the ruler to my patient, she mulls it over. "Ah," she looks at me amazed, "you think I should hate my body just a little bit?" She believes I have lost my mind. "Exactly my point," I say. "How about hating your body just little tiny bit less?" I use my hands to show a little tiny bit of air. "You hate your body this much," I gesture to a whole lot of air, "and I don't expect you to like it or even not hate it, but how about lessening the self-hate a mite? **Even a little lessening goes a long way to making you feel better about yourself.**"

My patient is stunned by my seemingly insane thought pattern, but something about its crazy logic is making sense. Also, though my patient feels justified in hating her body, she really doesn't want to have low self-esteem, so she is willing to entertain my notion.

"That's the way I've seen people recover from body-hate and low body-esteem," I persist, "just a bit less starts the process. The hate lessens by a smidgen, it feels pretty good, and it creates a beginning, a first step in healing body-esteem. The bits add up over time and changes occur." Often the patient is shocked. She hates her body but not as much. How did this happen? It's weird. "Where did that intense body-hate go?" It can be a confusing experience.

I warn my patient, "**As you work on hating your body a little less, it will test you.** It will try to win you back, try to get you in the swing of the old self-punishment, self-humiliation cycle. "Please, please," body-hate will beg, "come and play with me. Just call yourself a fat pig and I'll call you that too, and we can play." Or it may just call you a fat pig, or something equally unflattering, and see if you bite. You will bite at first. But gradually, your response will be firmer. "I am tired of hating my body. It takes too much time. I don't want to spend my energy this way."

Time goes on. My patient is working on decreasing body-hate. One day, I hear the magic words. "Of course my body's disgusting, but I just don't care if it is or not. I want to live my life. I can't think about it so much."

When I hear a patient say those words I am jubilant. I know she's getting better. It makes me happy when she says she doesn't care about hating her disgusting body. I know that sounds funny, but it's because I know she is improving. She is picking up stakes and moving out of the body hate-camp. She is leaving behind years of body-hatred, of endless insults and mirror terror. She is leaving a vicious kind of inner abuse. It is so good for her. It will help her in many ways. Her body-esteem will rise and with it, her self-esteem. The energy tied up in the vicious self-hate will be released and, after she gets her bearings and gets used to this new state, she will feel proud to have made this change.

So you see, as crazy as it sounds, you really can greatly improve your body-image while still hating your body. You just need to use a ruler.