

# A Woman's Body Image

By Suze Hargraves

I have never looked like those women on TV or in magazines. I'm not petite. I have shoulders that made that whole shoulder pad fad in the 80's completely unnecessary for me. My arms are long enough to make tree hugging a literal possibility and I have always towered over most of my friends. Those things used to bother me. I embrace them now as a critical and beautiful part of who I am. It didn't happen overnight. There were many obstacles to creating a positive body image and journeying through them was difficult. To help you take that journey, let's take a look at some of the primary enemies to positive body image and see what actions we can take to change our vision of ourselves.

Beauty magazines and major fashion designers foster the image that to be beautiful a woman has to be ultra thin. As a matter of fact, on October 6, 2009, a major fashion designer was forced to issue an apology for an ad portraying a ghastly thin model. In the picture, the model's head is actually wider than her pelvis. These are the types of images people are looking at and subconsciously or consciously judging themselves against-impossible, digitally altered women (and men) who don't actually exist. Although the fashion industry is taking steps to end the reign of anorexic looking models, there is a long way to go. You can do something right here and right now to help force them to change: Stop buying the magazines. Don't allow them in your home or office. Chose to make a statement-Real women come in a shapes and sizes...and we are proud of it!

Parents can play a major role in a child's body image. A well meaning but critical parent can damage a child's self esteem and body image by a simple off-hand comment. My father once called me his "baby elephant". It's stayed with me for life, although when I said something to him about it he had no memory of the comment at all. To him it was meaningless but to me it was devastating. Although childhood obesity is epidemic and does need to be addressed, there are positive ways to do this. These tips are from empoweredparents.com:

- \*Model a healthy relationship with food.

- \*Educate children, teaching them to regard the body as a wise and predictable machine requiring fuel and maintenance rather than as an object of beauty; food as a life-sustaining fuel rather than as the enemy; healthy eating as a balanced and moderated lifestyle rather than as an exercise in food restriction.

- \* Listen to "know" their child, and to help their child understand herself. When the child makes negative comments about her shape or size, parents must not dismiss them even if they seem irrational; rather, they should start a discussion about how your child thinks she could look better and why.

- \*Help the child develop immunity to the steady stream of media messages that distort her perspective by teaching her to become a more critical consumer of the media, and by canceling subscriptions to fashion magazines.

- \*Become aware of their body image concerns and attitudes that may stimulate their child's fears, distortions and misconceptions. Parents must be careful not to complain about their own weight.

Abusive relationships can take someone with a positive body image and throw them into a tailspin. The abuser will often seek to gain control by chipping away at self esteem. Often this comes as a constant stream of criticism about appearance. Sometimes it is disguised as "helpful advice". It's not. It's difficult to have the strength and courage to get away from an abuser, but the first step is always to call it what it is; abuse. Call Starting Point at 800-336-3795 if you find yourself in this type of situation. Emotional abuse is just as devastating and often just as life threatening as physical abuse. It must stop. You deserve to be loved, appreciated and cherished for exactly who you are and what you look like right now.

The US Department of Health and Human Services says, "Being unhappy with your body can affect how

you think and feel about yourself as a person. A poor body image can lead to emotional distress, low self-esteem, unhealthy dieting habits, anxiety, depression, and eating disorders. Developing a positive body image and a healthy mental attitude is crucial to ...happiness and wellness.” I’m here to tell you that statement is 100% true.

Changing your body image is not an easy journey, but it can be done. Speak kindly to yourself and surround yourself with people and places that nurture your self esteem. Get a sensible plan for diet and exercise from your healthcare provider and follow through. Be honest with them when talking about body image and weight and emotions associated with it. When you learn to love, respect and care for your own body you’ll find that it’s much easier to see it in a positive light.

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