A Healthy Body Image: Why Bother?
Health is more than avoiding disease. Good mental health, including how we feel about ourselves, is a very important component of overall health. How we feel about ourselves has an impact on our behaviors, such as what we eat, the physical activity we do, drug and alcohol use, and a wide variety of other health behaviors.

What Is ‘Body Image’?
Your body image is made up of 2 components:
1) How you perceive your body, and
2) What you feel about that perception.

Factors That Contribute to Body Image
We do not have a concept of our body image at birth. Therefore, it develops over our lifetime. This image is influenced by the information we receive daily about what is considered attractive and what is considered unattractive. This information is deeply embedded in our culture. Each culture has its own ideals of beauty, which change over time and are transmitted to individuals through family, stories and legends, and through the various forms of media.

Family
- For the first few years of life we are constantly in the presence of our family, and what we hear and see in this context influences our beliefs, values and attitudes. The language that our parents use shapes our perceptions and it can affect us much more than we realize.

Friends
- In adolescence it becomes very important to belong to a group. It is during this time that a person’s image becomes much more important, to the point that some children and teens are excluded from social groups because of how they look or what they wear.

Children’s toys and Fairytales
- The toys that children play with also help shape a sense of what is physically desirable and undesirable. These toys and children’s stories, combined with family influences, firmly set in place a young person’s attitudes about physical appearance and what he or she believes to be desirable physical qualities.

The Media
- Do the images of the people we see in the media reflect what we see every day? Not at all. In fact, only about 5% of women are capable of achieving the proportions of the typical woman’s body we see in advertisements. Our genetics determine how our body is shaped, how tall we can be, etc.
- The average person is not well represented in the media, especially in advertising, movies and television. The goal of the different forms of media is to make money by selling you products or services.

Remember: Advertisements are created to do one thing: convince you to buy or support a specific product or service. To convince you to buy a specific product or service, advertisers will often construct an emotional experience that looks like reality. Remember, you are only seeing what the advertisers want you to see.
Moving Towards a Positive Body Image!

- Be aware of the factors that contribute to your own body image.
- Concentrate on being healthy and having a healthy weight.
- Do things that make you feel good about yourself.
- Exercise for health and a sense of well-being and not just for physical appearance.
- Find balance. Life is meant to be lived, and we should try to enjoy our time while we are here.

10 Ways To Love Your Body

1. Play with your bellybutton.
2. Don’t let your weight or shape keep you from activities that you enjoy.
3. Use Sunscreen (and all other forms of protection!)
4. Do Yoga.
5. Admire yourself in the mirror.
6. Go for a walk.
7. Count your blessings, not your blemishes.
8. Dance.
10. Think of your body as the vehicle to your dreams. Honor it. Respect it. Fuel it.

Resources

**Local Austin Resources:**

- Body Positive Dance (www.bodypositivedance.org)
- Heartfelt Yoga (www.heartfeltyoga.com)
- Mindful Body Center (www.mindfulbodycenter.com)

**General Websites:**

- Something Fishy Website on Eating Disorders (www.something-fishy.org)
- Women of Color and Eating Disorders (www.something-fishy.org /cultural/roles.php)
- About-Face (www.about-face.org)
- Eating Disorders Awareness and Prevention (www.edap.org)
- National Association to Advance Fat Acceptance (www.naafa.org)

**Books:**

- Perfect Girls, Starving Daughters: How the Quest for Perfection is Harming Young Women by Courtney E. Martin
- Eating in the Light of the Moon by Anita A. Johnston, PhD.
- The Beauty Myth by Naomi Wolf
- No Fat Chicks: How Big Business Profits Making Women Hate Their Bodies– How to Fight Back by Terry Poulton
- Feminist Perspectives on Eating Disorders by P Fallon, S. Wooley, and M. Katzman
- Unbearable Weight by Susan Bordo
- Body Wars: Making Peace with Women’s Bodies: An Activist’s Guide by Margo Maine
- Rock My Soul: Black People and Self Esteem by bell hooks
- Big Fat Lies: The Truth about Your Weigh and Your Health by G. Gaesser

All material except for “10 Ways To Love Your Body” and “Local Austin Resources” taken from Concordia University pamphlet The University Student’s Guide to Body Image; “10 Ways To Love Your Body” taken from the Feminist Majority Foundation brochure Body Image and The Struggle For Equality.