“I’m so fat. I’m too skinny. If only I were taller, shorter, or had curly short hair. If I had a smaller nose, bigger muscles, longer legs, then I’d be happy.”

Do any of these statements sound familiar? Do they come out of your mouth, your friends’ mouths or both? Are these topics the source of most of your conversations 24/7? If so, you’re not alone. As a teen, you’re going through a ton of changes in your body. This is a rapid growth period when your body is in the process of preparing for childbirth later in life and becoming a full grown woman and man. Disturbing that process with fad diets can cause possible, permanent, long-term damage and affect. As your body changes, so does the image of yourself. Lots of people have trouble adjusting, and this can affect their self-esteem.

Why Are Self-Esteem and Body Image Important?
Self-esteem is all about how much people value themselves, the pride they feel in themselves, and how worthwhile they feel. Self-esteem is important because feeling good about yourself can affect how you act. A person who has high self-esteem will make friends easily, is more in control of his or her behavior, and will enjoy life more.

Body image is how someone feels about his or her own physical appearance. For many people, especially those in their teens, body image can be closely linked to self-esteem. That's because as kids develop into teens, they care more about how others see them.

What Influences a Person’s Self-Esteem?
Many teens struggle with their self-esteem when they begin puberty because the body goes through so many changes. These changes, combined with a natural desire to feel accepted, mean it can be tempting for people to compare themselves with others. They may compare themselves with the people around them or with actors and celebrities they see on TV, in movies, or in magazines.

But it's impossible to measure ourselves against others because the changes that come with puberty are different for everyone. Some people start developing early; others are late bloomers. Some get a temporary layer of fat to prepare for a growth spurt, others fill out permanently, and others feel like they stay skinny no matter how much they eat. It all depends on how our genes have programmed our bodies to act.

The changes that come with puberty can affect how both girls and guys feel about themselves. Some girls may feel uncomfortable or embarrassed about their maturing bodies. Others may wish that they were developing faster. Girls may feel pressure to be thin but guys may feel like they don't look big or muscular enough.

Outside Influences
It's not just development that affects self-esteem, though. Many other factors like media images of skinny girls and bulked-up guys can affect a person's body image too.

Family life can sometimes influence self-esteem. Some parents spend more time criticizing their kids and the way they look than praising them, which can reduce kids’ ability to develop good self-esteem.

Mom’s influence around the table, if we even do this anymore, has a big impact. If a mother is always eating lettuce leaves and on a diet, this sends a bad message and conveys her own, poor body image.

People also may experience negative comments and hurtful teasing about the way they look from classmates and peers. Sometimes racial and ethnic prejudice is the source of such comments. Although these often come from ignorance, sometimes they can affect someone's body image and self-esteem.

Healthy Self-Esteem
If you have a positive body image, you probably like and accept yourself the way you are. This healthy attitude allows you to explore other aspects of growing up, such as developing good friendships, growing more independent from your parents, and challenging yourself.

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physically and mentally. Developing these parts of yourself can help boost your self-esteem.

A positive, optimistic attitude can help people develop strong self-esteem — for example, saying, "Hey, I'm human" instead of "Wow, I'm such a loser" when you've made a mistake, or not blaming others when things don't go as expected.

Knowing what makes you happy and how to meet your goals can help you feel capable, strong, and in control of your life. A positive attitude and a healthy lifestyle such as exercising and eating right are a great combination for building good self-esteem.

Tips for Improving Your Body Image

Some people think they need to change how they look or act to feel good about themselves. But actually all you need to do is change the way you see your body and how you think about yourself.

The first thing to do is recognize that your body is your own, no matter what shape, size, or color it comes in. Embrace your changing body! If you're very worried about your weight or size, check with your doctor to verify that things are ok. But it's no one's business but your own what your body is like — ultimately, you have to be happy with yourself.

Next, identify which aspects of your appearance you can realistically change and which you can't. Everyone, even the most seemingly perfect celebrity has things about themselves that they can't change and need to accept — like their height, for example, or shoe size. If there are things about yourself that you want to change and can such as how fit you are, do this by making goals for yourself. For example, if you want to get fit, make a plan to exercise every day and eat nutritious foods. Then keep track of your progress until you reach your goal. Meeting a challenge you set for yourself is a great way to boost self-esteem!

Take a look at what you eat. It shows in your eyes, hair, nails, and affects how you feel, perform in exams, sports and your overall, day-to-day life. Active teens should be taking in lots of calories (2,400 for girls; 3,000 for boys). You should be eating regularly, with three meals and small snacks and developing good eating habits for later in life. Now would be a good time to actually listen in health class and to your parents. Learning the quality of nutrition and what food sources will make you feel your best will be well worth it in the long run.

When you hear negative comments coming from within yourself, tell yourself to stop. Try building your self-esteem by giving yourself three compliments every day. While you're at it, every evening list three things in your day that really gave you pleasure. It can be anything from the way the sun felt on your face, the sound of your favorite band, or the way someone laughed at your jokes. By focusing on the good things you do and the positive aspects of your life, you can change how you feel about yourself.

Where Can I Go if I Need Help?

Sometimes low self-esteem and body image problems are too much to handle alone. A few teens may become depressed, lose interest in activities or friends and even hurt themselves by resorting to alcohol, drug abuse, eating disorders or other anesthetizing coping mechanisms.

If you're feeling this way, it can really help to talk to a parent, coach, religious leader, guidance counselor, therapist, or an adult friend. A trusted adult, someone who supports you and doesn't bring you down, can help you put your body image in perspective and give you positive feedback about your body, your skills, and your abilities.

If you can't turn to anyone you know, call a teen crisis hotline (check the yellow pages under social services or search online). The most important thing is to get help if you feel like your body image and self-esteem are affecting your life.

As parents, teachers, coaches, and guardians of our precious teens, they are our future. Let's make time every day to L.E.A.D our teenagers and truly be a role model in their lives: Listen to them- Empathize with them- Acknowledge their feelings - Direct them

Let's encourage their passions, support their interests and keep them away from toxic influences that tell them they aren't good enough. Following these principals, our kids will have the necessary resources to ultimately decide on their own.