

IS BODY IMAGE THE KEY TO SELF-ESTEEM?

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ABSTRACT

There is little scientific evidence for the diet industry's claim of a link between weight and self-esteem. Our research on the factors of body-esteem, the body counterpart to self-esteem, illustrates a new relationship to self-esteem by demonstrating that:

1. feelings about weight are different from feelings about appearance;
2. only feelings about weight are related to weight; and
3. the best predictor of one's overall self-esteem is feelings about appearance.

Various articles in the media and advertising lead one to believe that girls don't like their looks, i.e., they want to be thinner. The other prevalent message is "Lose weight, improve your feelings about your weight and improve your self-esteem" or "Lose weight, feel better about yourself". In this presentation, I will demonstrate that the answer to the question is more complex than what the media endorses. I will outline the research that has led me to draw different conclusions. I will make 4 main points:

1. The relation between weight and self-esteem is, at best, negligible.
2. With reference to body esteem, feelings about one's weight are distinguishable from feelings about one's appearance.
3. Only feelings about weight and not feelings about appearance are uniquely related to weight.
4. The best predictor of one's overall self-esteem is feelings about appearance, not feelings about weight.

Apart from the physical aspects of obesity, overweight youngsters have been characterized as unhappy and mal-adjusted (Bruch, 1941). Clearly, they suffer social discrimination (Staffieri, 1967). Kindergarten children have an aversion to chubby children (Lerner & Gellert, 1969).

Third to fifth graders attribute negative attributes to the overweight (Young & Advzej, 1979). Parents and teachers rate endomorphs negatively (Walker, 1963). Lastly, overweight candidates are discriminated against in college acceptances (Canning & Mayer, 1966). Unfortunately, issues of the obese have been translated into issues of the moderately overweight individual and the diet industry seems to further reinforce this notion. However, such consistent prejudice may erode the self-esteem of the overweight individual starting in early childhood. But is this really the case?

A series of studies done in our lab (Mendelson, Mendelson, & Andrews, 1997; Mendelson & White, 1985; Mendelson, White, & Mendelson, 1996; Schliecker, 1996) bolsters Friedman & Brownell's (1995) conclusion that the relation between weight and self-concept is weak and inconsistent across studies. There are few significant correlations between weight and self-esteem and even these are very small. Thus, there does not appear to be a causal link between weight and self-esteem.

In contrast, Friedman & Brownell (1995) concluded that the relation between weight and body esteem is large, albeit inconsistent across studies. We have done extensive work on two body-esteem measures, one for children and another for adolescents and adults (Mendelson & White, 1982, 1985, 1993-94; Mendelson, White, & Mendelson, 1996, 1997). The measures contain three conceptually and empirically distinguishable factors: feelings about appearance, feelings about weight, and attribution of evaluations to others. That is, feelings about weight are distinct from feelings about appearance. Moreover, of the three body-esteem factors, only feelings about weight are uniquely associated with weight.

However, of the three factors, only feelings about appearance predict self-esteem. The fact that high global self-esteem is related to positive feelings about appearance, but not to feelings about weight may have clinical implications for weight-reduction programs. So, the following is the answer to the original question, and perhaps the revised title of this talk: Feelings about appearance, not feelings about weight, may be a key to self-esteem.

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