



# What Is Body Image Disturbance?

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## Body Image Disturbance

Body image is how you feel about your body and what you do about those feelings. Unfortunately, much of these feelings about your image and appearance, is externally imposed on you, through culture, society and the media. Also, these feelings are often distorted, misinformed and disproportionate. What is worse is that these feelings are reinforced by comparison, comments and body shaming.

Thus, body image disturbance is a universal problem that is steadily increasing in all age groups, genders and ethnic groups. It is associated with some mental health consequences including anorexia, bulimia, body dysmorphia, depression and suicide.

## What Is Normal?

Society has established certain parameters of good looks, shape and size. And it seems that one must fit into those parameters to be good looking. Also, the increasing cultural fixation on youthfulness as well as exposure to an idealised representation of beauty has distorted perceptions of what's normal. There is also growing media emphasis on slimmer bodies and fairer skin (especially in India). Additionally, our idea of good appearance is often ill-perceived and linked with self-esteem and confidence.

## Body Image And Behaviour

Our tendency to surrender to relativism is a paradox of modern times and beauty it seems, 'lies in the eyes of the beholder' rather than within oneself! Some feel bad about their body image and do something about it, in the way of routine behaviour such as make-up, grooming, dressing and working out. Others engage in non-routine behaviour, like dysfunctional eating habits, excessive exercise, or even cosmetic surgery.

## Understanding Body Dysmorphia

This is a psychological issue with an obsessive preoccupation with a perceived defect of physical features. In its milder form, which is so common, individuals may seek to camouflage the imagined or over emphasised defects with make-up, clothing, etc. But when one suffers from overriding worry at the expense

of day-to-day functioning with social withdrawal, then it becomes a disorder or illness.

Apart from external factors, dysmorphia is underpinned by low self-esteem and an inherent desire for acceptance. The root of some of these feelings can date back to formative years with experience of neglected discontinuous upbringing or abuse (sexual, physical or emotional abuse). Worryingly, many dysmorphic individuals seek a surgical solution (through cosmetic surgery) for deep-seated psychological problems. Here, the psychological intervention will be more efficient than ‘going under the knife.’

## The Story Of Eating Disorders

Eating disorders and body image disturbance go hand in hand. In other words, an eating disorder may be a consequence of an evolving emotional dissatisfaction that translates into an excessive preoccupation with appearance, leading to restrictive eating, over exercising and mitigating behavior, after episodes of binge eating such as purging or abuse of laxatives. One comes to associate acceptance with appearance and thereby believes that losing weight would enhance appearance, self-esteem and eventually lead to better acceptance.

Disturbed eating attitudes amongst other vulnerabilities and risk factors, when



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left unattended, eventually develop into anorexia, bulimia, binge eating disorder or compulsive overeating. And contrary to popular misconception, disorders related to eating are never about being thin or food. Instead, they are a form of maladaptive coping mechanism, wherein individuals abuse food and adopt unhealthy behaviours like purging, starving or bingeing, as a way to deal with the unpleasantness of trying situations and emotional stress.

## Identifying Eating Disorders

Eating disorders can’t be interpreted with a look at an individual’s appearance. Establishing presence of a particular eating disorder requires fulfilment of criteria, as outlined in the standardised diagnostic manual. Two common and well-known eating disorders are bulimia nervosa and anorexia nervosa. Both are characterised by an eating pattern and body image disturbances.

Bulimia nervosa is known for behavioural symptoms of recurrent episodes of bingeing, followed with fasting and purging and an excessive evaluation of weight and shape. On the other hand, anorexia nervosa patients perceive themselves being fat when in reality they are rather emaciated. They are in denial about the low body weight and harbour

a strong fear of gaining weight and relentlessly pursue thinness.

## Treatment

Body image disturbance and associated eating disorders are not a weakness of mind or character flaws or choices but are psychological illnesses, which require structured and compassionate approach, to effectively evaluate and treat. Remember, body image and eating problems are represented differently across various cultures and identifying possible risk factors related to abnormal eating behaviours is necessary to initiate a viable treatment plan, prevention strategy and to educate the people.

Professionally guided awareness to recognise and acknowledge feelings and accompanying body sensations will help one become more comfortable in his/her body and reduce the tendency to suppress feelings or revert to maladaptive and unhealthy behavioural patterns. Specialised psychotherapy has proven to be effective. Additionally, Family Therapy addresses dysfunctional dynamics and communication styles and treats the family as a whole. There is also Nutrition Therapy and Art Therapy that takes a holistic and therapeutic approach to treat secondary medical conditions and correlating self-denial symptoms.