All over the place a person can read about body image. But what is it? With so many people using the term casually, the term itself can sometimes lose its meaning. In the field of psychology, there are several definitions that are often applied to body image. In one book on the subject Thompson, Heinberg, Altabe, and Tantleff-Dunn (1999) presented a table with 14 definitions. These authors officially defined body image as “the term that has come to be widely accepted as the internal representation of your own outer appearance-your own unique perception of your body (p. 4).”

Perhaps the easiest way to understand body image is the definition presented by Cash, Phillips, Santos, and Hrabosky (2004). According to these authors, there are three aspects of body image that are important to understand. The first is evaluation. Think about all the people you know that are of the same age and gender. How do you measure up in comparison to them? Would you say you are more physically attractive than most or less? Would you say that you are more physically fit than most or less? This comparison can be about your physical attractiveness, fitness, health, etc. The next aspect of body image is investment. How important is it to you that you are attractive (or physically fit, or healthy)? Is it very important to you? Or is it something that you really do not think much about? The third and final aspect of body image is the emotion one has about their body in specific situations. Do you avoid doing certain activities because of your body? Does your body embarrass you? Do you draw attention to your body? Do you wear revealing clothing?

The way these three areas of body image interact is a reflection of how one feels about their body. So, for example a person that feels they are extremely unattractive, but believe that being attractive is extremely important, and who avoids swimming because he/she does not want to be seen in a bathing suit has poor body image. In other words, body image is a complex idea and multidimensional in nature.

Why is body image so important? These three areas of body image have an impact on self-esteem and behaviors. In fact, many researchers believe that it has a significant impact on one’s self-concept and quality of life (Cash et al., 2004). Many patterns of disordered eating and exercising are often symptoms of deeper problems; one of these being poor body image. Body image is a crucial element in the understanding of people with disordered eating and exercise.

Not only are eating disorders associated with significant levels of anxiety, depression, and obsessive thoughts about food, but, depending on severity, they may also lead to irreversible damage to the body, and in some cases, death. Eating disorders have the highest death rate among the psychological disorders for health related reasons and also because of the higher rate of suicide among individuals with eating disorders (Chavez & Insel, 2007; Park, 2007). Park notes that the risk for suicide in individuals with eating disorders is 50 times that of the general population.
If you are concerned about yourself, a friend, or a family member, it is important for you to contact Counseling Services for more information at http://www.k-state.edu/counseling.

References


