



Weight and Intimacy

by Jessie Mae Estrada, LPC, NCC

What is Intimacy?

Intimacy is the feeling of belonging with someone and having a deep personal connection with them. To be truly intimate, you experience a transparency in the relationship, a feeling of knowing and being known.

The depth to which a person allows him/herself to experience intimacy in relationships can be affected by trust issues, a lack of self-confidence, a history of abuse or various other issues. In this article, we're going to focus on how self-confidence and body image, in relation to weight, can keep people from experiencing a deeper, more fulfilling intimacy in their personal relationships.

The Link between Self-confidence and Intimacy

I work in a bariatric clinic, so I see a lot of people transition from being morbidly obese, or obese, to reaching a healthier, more active weight. One of the areas of life I tell people to think about prior to surgery is how their relationships will be affected by experiencing a dramatic weight-loss.

A lot of people give me a blank stare, because they haven't really thought about the connection between the two. And while there are lots of people who are in healthy relationships, there are those that realize they may have settled. They felt no one else would ever love them or want them, so they chose to be with the one person they felt would. Maybe they chose to stay in an abusive relationship because they didn't feel they deserved better.

Some love the person they are with, but wonder how their partner could love them back on the same level or find them attractive due to their weight. These relationships miss out on experiencing that deeper level of intimacy; the mutual feeling of transparency, where you can be yourself and comfortable in your own skin. This stems from a lack of self-confidence.

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Body Image

Various issues can affect a person's self-confidence, one of which is their body image. While there are lots of overweight people who have confidence and feel beautiful in their bodies, this is not true for everyone. Body image can be affected by mainstream society's belief system surrounding what is thought to be sexy, beautiful and attractive. It is also affected by our own thoughts, beliefs and by our family and friends.

Body image is what a person thinks of when they picture themselves in their mind or what they see when they look in the mirror. It is what you believe about your appearance, how you feel about your body and how you feel in your body.

Many overweight people scrutinize their bodies and feel ashamed of how they look in comparison to what they believe is “ideal.” As most of us know, the media is not kind to those affected by obesity. Every channel you watch on television and page you flip to in a magazine shows the perfectly airbrushed body. This “ideal” body is hard to achieve, even for those with the genetic structure to be naturally thin. While this has been a common struggle for women for several decades, men are now joining the struggle to obtain the “ideal” body as well.

When the majority of people stop to think about their body, they focus on how different it is from the “ideal.” A thin person can point out a variety of things they dislike and want to change about their body, because to them, it does not compare to the “ideal.” So imagine the struggle for those that are overweight and obese. Many overweight people have reached a point where they look at themselves in the mirror only from the chest up. They have stopped seeing their bodies and appreciating the beauty within them.

When we start ignoring our bodies, we cannot continue to care for them and nurture them. Even those that lose weight through diet and exercise or bariatric surgery can still struggle with seeing the “old” them in their minds or their focus can shift to the excess skin or how they feel they look older. Many hide in the dark or in another room if their clothes are coming off and their partners are near.

Body Image and Intimacy

So what does our body image have to do with the level of intimacy we experience in our relationships? When we don't feel confident in ourselves and take the time to know, appreciate, respect and love our bodies, we take that opportunity away from our partners as well. We stop being transparent; we stop communicating honestly and start building walls of shame to hide. We start to feel we are not worth loving, not attractive and definitely not sexy. We question our relationships and wonder why they stay with us. This way of thinking and feeling does not encompass the definition of intimacy. In fact, it can make you feel alone, misunderstood and unwanted, even when surrounded by those that love you.

Some people have a more realistic body image by seeing themselves for how they truly are. They see their flaws, but embrace their bodies because they can also see the good their bodies have to offer. I have weight-loss surgery patients that instead of focusing on their loose skin, they see it as a reminder of where they came from and what they have accomplished. They see their body as healthier and stronger.

Being able to see the good in your body and in yourself, regardless of weight, allows your self-confidence to grow. Self-confidence allows you to embrace your body and appreciate yourself as a whole person. This confidence can be seen in the way you carry yourself and how you interact with others. When we reach a level of knowing and appreciating ourselves, we are then able to open up to others and let them into our world, experiencing a deeper level of intimacy.

Society has seen some evolution in how we view beauty. We are slowly starting to see more curvaceous models and actresses that refuse to shrink down to the Hollywood standard. Many have come out to show their cellulite, wrinkles and saggy skin, to show us that they are real people and real people come in all shapes and sizes. Organizations such as the Obesity Action Coalition (OAC) are helping to educate people on obesity and offer support for those who struggle with it.

Quick Tips for Your Body Image

So what can you as an individual do to start making changes in your body image? Here are some quick pointers for creating a new, healthier and more realistic body image:

- **Surround yourself with positive people** – people who make fun of or consistently criticize others give off a negative energy that can easily rub off on you and make you more critical, not only of others, but of yourself as well.
- **Take new pictures of yourself and take down the old ones** – while it is good to keep old pictures to remind yourself of how far you have come, putting up new ones helps you see what you look like now.
- **Replace any negative thoughts with positive ones** – starting now, any time you start to think negative, “I hate my thighs,” replace it with something you love about yourself such as, “I really look good in this skirt,” or “I love that I have strong legs.”
- **Wear clothes that fit you and that you are comfortable with** – get rid of the old baggy clothes that hide your entire body; instead, find things that accentuate your favorite body parts and flatter your overall figure.
- **Take notice of the things your body can do** – as you lose weight, notice how much easier it is to do things or how strong your body feels.
- **Do nice things for your body and mind** – get a massage, take a warm bath and wear nice lotions or colognes.
- **Participate in activities you enjoy and love** – you deserve to live life to the fullest.
- **Make a list of the things you love about your body and yourself** – add to this list when needed and read it when you're feeling down.
- **Stop comparing yourself to others** – love and appreciate your body for what it is and what it is becoming as you live a healthier life.

Conclusion

Once your confidence grows, it will shine through in the things you do. Keep those you love involved in your weight-loss journey and keep communication open and honest with your partner. If other underlying issues need to be addressed either in your life or in your relationship, seek support. Therapy can be a great tool to help you reach your potential in your personal goals as well as achieve a deeper level of intimacy in your relationships.

About the Author:

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ABOUT THE OBESITY ACTION COALITION (OAC)

The Obesity Action Coalition (OAC) is a National non-profit organization dedicated to giving a voice to individuals affected by obesity and helping them along their journey toward better health. Our core focuses are to elevate the conversation of weight and its impact on health, improve access to obesity care, provide science-based education on obesity and its treatments, and fight to eliminate weight bias and discrimination.



VIBRANT COMMUNITY



NATIONAL AWARENESS CAMPAIGNS



ANNUAL CONVENTION



ADVOCACY



PUBLIC EDUCATION

LEARN, CONNECT, ENGAGE

The OAC knows that the journey with weight can be challenging but we also know that great things happen when we learn, connect and engage. That is why the OAC Community exists. Our Community is designed to provide quality education, ongoing support programs, an opportunity to connect, and a place to take action on important issues.

Through the OAC Community, you can get access to:

- Weight & Health Education • Community Blogs
 - Community Discussion Forum
 - Ongoing Support • Meaningful Connections
- AND MUCH MORE**



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