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How to tackle poor body image in older women

We're often told that with age comes confidence and that as we grow older, we will feel more self-assured and comfortable in our own skin. In reality, though, women of all ages can struggle with poor body image, particularly as we age.

The relationship we have with our self-esteem can be a tricky one. Some days you feel great, but at other times, you are your own worst enemy.

Popular opinion suggests that poor body image is a problem most acutely felt by teenagers and millennials – in part, because they have grown up with the [damaging effects of social media](#) – but this isn't always the case.

[Research](#) shows women over 40 face a myriad of factors which influence the way they feel about their appearance, from seeing their bodies change, to feeling under pressure to rid themselves of lines or grey hairs.

"As I've got older, I actually feel less confident about the way I look," says Jane*, 41. "I'm confident when it comes to my work and other aspects of my life, but I feel more conscious of my weight and lines on my face. I'm also busy working and looking after my family, so it's difficult to make time for [self-care](#)."

Why does body image change as we age?

Andrea Huttly, a psychotherapist, eating disorder therapist and service manager at Priory Arthur House, a residential service in south-west London for clients with eating disorders, explains that having a negative body image is a common problem among women as they grow older.

She says there are three main factors that can impact the way women experience their bodies in later life: ageing, life stages and the underrepresentation of older women in the media.

"As we go through life, our bodies experience constant change, which means that the way we see ourselves, and the relationship we develop with our bodies, will also change – and adjust – to the new you," Huttly explains.

Over time, our bodies go through hormonal, physiological, psychological and environmental transformations that can impact our relationships with our bodies. We go through puberty, pregnancy, changes in family dynamics, [menopause](#), retirement, health problems and more. In particular, menopausal symptoms such as hot flushes, [low libido](#), [vaginal dryness](#) and [night sweats](#) can alter how we feel about ourselves.

"All these pivotal points in our lives will have an impact on our overall well-being, ability to manage [stress](#), self-esteem and our perception of ourselves, which of course includes the bodies that we live in," Huttly says.

Societal ideals of beauty

Often, beauty is equated with youthfulness and thinness in our society. Models in magazines, newspapers and adverts are often young and slim, which alters our perception of what beauty is supposed to be. Even the phrase 'anti-ageing' on cosmetic products reinforces the message that ageing is a condition we should be fighting.

"Underrepresentation of beauty at any age in the media and an emphasis on the 'young ideal' can leave women feeling unable to meet expectations," Huttly says. "In turn, this can cause high levels of stress and anxiety. It can make women feel undesirable, and there is a risk of them 'disconnecting' from their own body."

Paradoxically, though, women also face added pressure to 'act their age' – and failing to fit into these narrow parameters can contribute to our insecurities.

"It simply makes women feel a lot of pressure and as if they cannot win. Women have to walk this fine line between the two concepts and find the perfect balance," Huttly explains. "If they dress to look 'youthful', women are often judged for trying too hard. If they 'act their age', they can be unfairly judged as being boring. Society does not give women enough room to express themselves but instead puts many unrealistic demands on them."

Ultimately, this can negatively affect our sense of who we are and our ability to feel attractive. "This can make women feel overwhelmed or that they are constantly failing," Huttly says. "Overall, it is a contributing factor to increased body image negativity, which can lead to low [self-esteem](#), [self-harm](#), anxiety and [depression](#)."

How to improve your body image

Accepting yourself and developing a positive body image isn't a simple task. However, there are steps we can take to help us understand our bodies and improve how we treat ourselves.

See beauty ideals for what they are

The first step is to accept that this is a long journey and that the way we see our bodies will not change overnight. "We need to deconstruct the 'beauty ideal' that society is selling us. It is unrealistic and unachievable in many cases," Huttly says.

Have a think about what beauty means to you and where these thoughts come from. "Are these beliefs yours or what you heard from others as you were growing up?" Huttly says. "What thoughts come to mind when you think about your body as a whole, or specific parts of your body? How can you challenge those thoughts and reframe them?"

Practise gratitude

For all of our perceived 'faults', our bodies do incredible things every day. Practising gratitude can help us recognise and appreciate these things more. Think about your abilities, skills and achievements and how your body has helped you fulfil these.

"Have positive messages around your mirror or anywhere in your room or house," Huttly says. "Always be patient and gentle with yourself."

Seek professional help

If body image concerns are having a seriously negative impact on your day-to-day life, it's worth making an appointment with your GP. Your doctor will be able to advise on the best course of action to help you, which may be a form of therapy or medication.

Talking therapies such as cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) may be recommended for poor body image. This can help you manage symptoms such as constantly worrying about your appearance by helping you identify triggers and altering the way you think.

Cut down on social media

Social media can also be problematic for our body confidence. Whether it's fitness gurus on Instagram or carefully curated photos of friends on Facebook, we are constantly invited to compare and critique ourselves against others.

Spending less time on social media reduces the opportunity to compare yourself with others. You don't have to delete your accounts, but limit the time you spend scrolling instead.

Have a good support network

It's important not to suffer in silence. Surrounding yourself with supportive friends or family who you can talk to about worries or concerns is essential. And if you do struggle with poor body image, it's helpful to remember that you aren't alone.

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