



body love

Rae Sullivan's* yearbook picture looks really pretty—to everyone but Rae. "My nose is ugly and I have no cheekbones," the seventeen-year-old complains.

Chances are, though, even if Rae were to have plastic surgery to make her nose smaller and her cheekbones bigger, she would *still* be unhappy with herself. Rae has a negative body image—and it's got more to do with how she feels than with how she actually looks.

Poor body image can happen to women of all ages and body types, with all different kinds of features and looks. A study at the University of Houston revealed that the majority of ten-year-old girls polled saw themselves as the least attractive in their class, while *half* of the teenage girls interviewed said they felt ugly. There are classically beautiful women who hate the way they look, and there are women who don't fit any of the typical standards of prettiness who are considered very attractive by everyone who knows them.

Where do negative and positive body images come from?

Body image is how you see yourself physically. It's an internal picture, and it's based on a variety of influences.

Some people develop a negative body image as the result of what they hear from people in their family when they're growing up. Comments like "She's got her dad's stocky build" or "Wouldn't you know she'd end up with Grandma Wallace's nose?" or "How's my plump little princess?" can color the way someone sees herself. You can grow up feeling fat or too thin or unattractive just because of what you looked like when you were little or because family members liked to tease you. And the way you come to see yourself as a result can stick with you, no matter what you grow up to look like.

On the other hand, positive comments and reinforcement from your family can lead to a positive view of yourself. If you grow up in a family that doesn't pay much attention to appearance or if your parents and brothers and **BY KATHY MCCOY** sisters let you

know that they like the way you look, you're much more likely to think you're attractive.

Of course, you get your sense of how you look from people outside your family, too. "I'll never forget when I was in fifth grade and some sixth grade boy called me Fats," says Cathy Allen, fourteen, of Oklahoma City. "I matured earlier than any of the other girls and had these hips that no one else had. My parents kept telling me I wasn't fat, just curvy, but I kept thinking about what that boy said. I feel fat a lot, and I'm really sensitive to any criticism about my body. I don't have a lot of confidence in that way. Even though my parents think I'm cute, my friends don't think so, and I



don't think so, either."

Many women start to dislike their bodies because, like Cathy, they pick out a "flaw," one hated feature, and start to feel that it overshadows whatever may be right with their looks. Again, this flaw may or may not be evident to others. Dr. Richard B. Aronsohn, a plastic surgeon in Beverly Hills, California, says that he can never tell just by looking at a new patient what that patient might want to have changed. "Some people get hysterical about a slight bump on the nose," he says. "Others with bigger noses may not be bothered at all. I see this a lot. A patient will come in with a big nose but be worried about something else—like a little mole! So I never try to second-guess a patient. And I screen patients carefully. Some people will never be happy with themselves, no matter what surgery is done."

Having a negative body image can affect your life in a lot of different ways. Your confidence and self-esteem may suffer. You may feel insecure around other girls. You may worry that guys won't find you attractive or desirable. Your self-consciousness may keep you from doing things and enjoying yourself. You may even end up believing you're less deserving of love or happiness than other people.

What can you do if your body image is less than positive?

First, you need to change your *mind* about your body, because changing your looks—even given that it's possible and safe for you to do this—isn't always going to improve your body image. There are overweight people who lose weight and still feel fat. There are others who feel awkward and ugly or think their breasts are too small or too big who never outgrow these feelings, though their bodies change dramatically over time. You need to be able to feel positive about the way you look *right now*, even if you think you're far from perfect.

If you want to make changes, start with what you like: Get a great haircut if you like your hair or dress in a flattering new way or stop biting your nails if you have nice hands. These can be easy ways to make changes that will accentuate the positive in your mind, not emphasize the negative.

If you're worried about your weight, you can start doing things that make you feel better overall, like eating healthy foods, not just because they have fewer calories but because if you eat a good lunch you'll feel better all afternoon. Or walking to school because it will make *(continued on page 50)*

JODY GURBAJNICK

*All teenagers' names have been changed.

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you feel stronger and more fit when you get there—not because you'll burn off breakfast. If you change your attitude about your body and think of how you can feel better about yourself in small ways every day, you'll improve your body image almost immediately.

What if the people around you act as if looks matter more than anything?

Remember that a lot of people obsess about appearance and put other people down because they're insecure about their own looks. So the comments they make may have more to do with themselves than with you or whoever they're talking about. They may simply be trying to bolster their own self-esteem.

What you should try to do is focus on things besides appearance, even though it can be hard in the face of everyone's preoccupation with what people look like. Try paying attention to other attributes, like athletic ability or acting skill or intelligence. And do everything you can to keep from putting yourself down just because everyone always does it. Even casual talk about how "fat" you are or how much you hate your looks can eventually give you a bad body image, which in itself can make you less attractive.

In the same way, a good body image can make you more attractive. Most people wouldn't call Jana Curtis, sixteen, of Wichita, Kansas, beautiful, but there is something wonderfully attractive about her. She has a smile that makes people feel good about themselves. She is active, athletic, and friendly, and it's obvious she likes herself and her body. And she has more friends—including guys who like her and want to spend time with her—than classmates who some people say are "prettier." The difference is her confidence, her comfort with her body, and her obvious pleasure in being herself.

How can you give yourself a break?

One of the simplest and most important steps you can take toward self-acceptance and self-appreciation is to stop berating yourself for what can't be changed or what isn't perfect about your body. In the real world attractive people come in all shapes and sizes, and often what makes them attractive is what's unusual about them. Above all, you can see how people feel about themselves in the way they move, the way they hold themselves, the confidence with which they respond to others. Developing a positive body image can do more for your appearance than all the cosmetic treatments put together. It can be anyone's most beautiful feature.