verdadera
BODY IMAGE SEPTEMBER 2011

The Verdadera staff encourages you to discuss and explore the issues and stories, as the publication aims not only to offer an outlet for expression, but to improve our lives. Keep in mind that the emotions that flow through the text and the feelings behind the words could be those of your child, your classmate, or your best friend.

THINGS TO CONSIDER:
-Why do people care so much about the body and appearance?
-How is your life affected because of your body concerns?
-How much do other people and the media affect your body image?

STUDENT SUBMISSIONS

I used to care about they way I looked, but now, I could really care less. Sure I want to be fit, but I don't have that urge to look in the mirror every five seconds, or to fix my hair 3 different ways before the bell rings. I've seen just from these few days of high school that everyone seems to be so confident in themselves. So now, unlike a few months ago as a self-conscious middle-schooler, I've realized that as long as I am happy with the way I look that I don't need to constantly stress about looking "in."

> "Beauty comes in all sizes, not just size 5."
> - Roseanne

Back in the 7th grade, I was accused of being fat. The girl who used to bully me somehow found out that I was insecure about my body, so she would draw pictures of me as a very fat girl and pass it around the class. She would mock about my body's structure to everybody, and it made me feel like crap. I know that I should have ignored her, and that it really didn't matter who she thought I was, but I couldn't help it. I was driving myself crazy by believing her and staying away from everybody, because I thought they hated me for being fat. Despite being bullied by her, I had not changed my diet or increased my exercise time in order to get thinner. But the real shock came upon me in the physical test in PE9, in my freshman year. My weight indicated that I was actually really underweight. I was really confused, because I had always been told that I was fat, and this was a big shock for me. It turned out that I was anorexic. That's when it hit me. I was never fat. She wasn't skinny, so she got jealous of me and made fun of me to bring me down. And I believed her like an idiot because I was insecure. I was always anorexic. Right now, I'm working hard to bring my weight to a normal level. But I never really understood why she was jealous. I mean, does being skinny mean that one is prettier than someone who is not? I certainly don't agree. I think that a simple smile can make anyone look beautiful, as long it is genuine. Some of the most gorgeous girls I have seen are not skinny. But when they smile, they look absolutely stunning. And sadly, yes, one of these girls is the one who bullied me. So to girls out there, smile. And things will get better.

> "I've never seen a smiling face that was not beautiful."
>
> -Author Unknown

I find society to be incredibly stupid. I mean, sure, we're supposed to be noble and all that and think about how people act rather than how they look, but that's so not true. We look at appearance much more than personality and kindness, and we therefore cause people to be insecure about themselves. I have seen my friends struggle a lot with their body image, and it's not only girls, but boys too. Sometimes I wonder why we do this to ourselves. We almost purposely listen to people telling us that we should look this way, that we should look that way.

> "Everything has beauty, but not everyone sees it."
>
> -Confucius

It's almost impossible to find someone who is perfectly happy with their body. There's always something that doesn't "look right" or something that should be "a certain way". I wish I could say I'm above the influence and that I don't feel pressured, but just like everyone else I am. Sometimes I can say that I'm happy with how I look, but usually it's not like that. Usually I just hate on my body for not being a certain way, for not being skinny for not looking "right". It really gets on my mind sometimes, how I obsess about being the perfect size, but I'm lucky in that I have friends who help me. I keep them in check and they keep me in check. We make sure we're not falling into depression or becoming too upset over our bodies and we make sure that we tell each other we're beautiful. I hope other people can remember to do this too, instead of just falling into one of society's superficial traps. In the end, it really does matter your character and not your body.

> "Beauty is not in the face; beauty is light in the heart."
>
> -Kahlil Gibran

One of the things I dislike about MV is the way that nearly everyone seems to be able to wear short shorts and tank tops when it's hot. They can wear bikinis to a pool party and not panic about the way they look or about photos being put on Facebook. Most people have naturally smooth skin, with no visible stretch marks or scars or eczema or random shit like that.

And I hate it. I'm not fat, I know that. And trust me when I say I'm not exaggerating about my skin issues. My knees are dark, and I have weird lumps on my legs, not to mention the stretch marks. I have stretch marks ALL over my legs- from my hips to my ankles. Seriously? It's like the ultimate rip off. I want to have sexy legs. I want to be leggy.

And about the bikinis- not happening. Thanks to my wonderful, gorgeous legs, wearing a swim suit is an issue enough for me, but then to see everyone wearing freaking bikinis? Sure I'll wear a bikini. Yeah, look at that mini-pot belly sticking out. And that hair on my back. Check out that covered-in-cellulite-stretch-mark-patterned butt. I should just be a model.

I don't want a perfect body. I'm okay with a little jiggle. I just want to be comfortable enough in my own body to wear shorts [even basketball shorts] and not feel ugly. The thing is, even if no one tells me my body's ugly, my hairy, unproportionate, lumpy body cannot hold a finger up to all those Asian girls at school who can pull on shorts without a care and go a few days without shaving and don't mind wearing tanks because their necks aren't spotty and don't look dirty.

I hate knowing that no matter how hard I try, I'm never going to be as comfortable as they are with themselves.

"It's not only fine feathers that make a fine bird."
-Aesop

Body image. So many things race through my mind, such as the pressure to look amazing each and every day. Nobody knows how much time I spend looking through my closet every night, trying on multiples of outfits, and trying to look pretty. But for who is this for? People don't care what others wear at school, but I constantly feel I will be judged for my outfit, hair, and makeup. I would love to go to school in a tshirt and shorts, but that just gives me an uncomfortable feeling. I compare everything to everybody, my hair isn't as shiny as her, her arms are more toned, it's endless. Forever and always.

"Remember that the most beautiful things in the world are the most useless; peacocks and lilies for example."
-John Ruskin

As a guy, I'm not going to lie when I say that some girls have hot bodies, and some just don't. Still, I think it's the saddest thing in the world when a girl hates her body, because nobody should feel that way. But then, it's guys like me, who ask out the hotties, that probably make those girls feel like they aren't good enough. I'm so sorry. I wish I could tell each and every girl out there that just because some stupid guys in your high school don't think you're attractive doesn't mean that nobody does. You know, guys are into different things (I'm only listing physical things here, but that's because the topic is Body Image- it doesn't mean that personality doesn't matter). Some guys are

into legs. I have a friend who's into collarbones. Other guys hate the super skinny girls and like curvier ones instead. Girls, listen, you're beautiful, no matter what. I sound like a hypocrite, but looks can only take you so far. In the end, it's your personality that really matters, and I'm sorry that I and others of my gender can be douchebags that make you feel bad about your bodies.

"You've got your body for life, you might as well learn to get along with it."
-Sandy Kumskov

Body image. The phrase conjures images of my friends looking in the mirror and complaining about how fat they are. I'm pretty skinny even though I eat a lot, but I don't want to look this way. I want to look normal and healthy. I especially hate when people say, "I hate you! You are so thin.' Well, you know what? I don't want to look this way. I look scary and nothing fits and I feel like everyone really DOES hate me. So, I guess I'm, unsatisfied with my body image.

"Is 'fat' really the worst thing a human being can be? Is 'fat' worse than 'vindictive', 'jealous', 'shallow', 'vain', 'boring' or 'cruel'? Not to me."
-J.K. Rowling

God. I hate it when pretty people complain about the way they look. Like seriously, just shut the fuck up. I subscribe to several teen beauty magazines like seventeen and teen vogue, and I cant help but to just be so effen jealous of these gorgeous girls. Okay yes, I know these girls aren't real, but that doesn't make me want to look like them any less. And even if these girls aren't real, id kill to look like a bunch of other perfect looking girls at school. Okay not perfect, because I know youre

thinking "don't worry, no one is perfect!" but really I feel like if I looked a little more like them, I wouldn't feel so ugly. Okay ugly's a strong word, but I think id be more confident. Maybe I wouldn't have to cake on so much make up in the morning, or wear massive push up bras so that I could just look a teeeeeeeensy bit more like those gorgeous ass victoria secret models. I mean seriously, how can people look like them. Theyre just so ANNOYINGLY GORGEOUS. And then I look at myself and I just don't understand how we can be the same species. Ugh.

"Even the models we see in magazines wish they could look like their own image."

-Cheri K. Erdman

I have Always been incredibly vain. Since elementary school I made sure I had my hair neatly combed, and parted nicely in the middle and that I presented myself to the world nicely. Sometimes I spent 20 minutes just getting ready for school. It wasn't so much that I was obsessed with how I looked, it was more that I was very conscious of what other people thought of me and how they saw me. It was probably cause I was fat too.

   In middle school I lost some weight but discovered that I was the first of my friends to have acne which at the time was just one of those terms we learned in HGD and went with puberty for some reason or another. It was hell. I tried not to let it get to me but it wasn't the acne- it was other people that got to me. I remember vaguely at a sleepover where someone told me very frankly that I needed to wash my face more often. It's quite funny now to see all those people in high school starting to breakout, I'd really like to tell them to wash their face more thoroughly. Whenever someone complains to me about breaking out I just tell them that it comes and it goes and that it doesn't matter, everyone is too

self absorbed in high school and too worried about themselves breaking out to notice your breakouts. Which is true.

"Outside show is a poor substitute for inner worth."

~Aesop

Let me get something out in the open, right now. I am not pretty. Well, first let me clarify. I take mental stock of my body, and the inventory goes something like this: my eyes are too small, my face both too wide and too flat at the same time (a relatively common yet still tragically disconcerting pitfall of Chinese blood), my hair likes to slide its way down across my eyes at any given time. We move further down, and the list gets longer. My arms are freckled and oddly shaped, my hips somehow manage to balance between pointy and thick at the same time, I have a bit of a stomach, and my legs are stubby. So, all in all, not the greatest collection of body traits, and not the most heartening self-evaluation. This isn't to say I'm body depressed - one of those sundry collections of individuals who hate themselves and either go through purgatorial diets or indulge in obscene amounts of plastic surgery, or hide their body in layers of thick, baggy clothing and pretend they and their body do not exist. Of course, I'm not very proud, either. I have no qualms with admitting that I like to indulge a stray thought, imagine life as one of those pretty, anorexically waifish little girls who float through the school, cloaked in something pretty, diaphanous, and floral (dresses and I are not on speaking terms), the ones adored by male peers and who seem to exude an air of "I am pretty and you are not" - which is true, I suppose. I have tried diets before, but it hadn't worked out. Diets won't cure my small eyes, my square jaw, or my motley collection of

other ugly little flaws- it took too much effort to maintain when the results were sadly lacking. Anyway, back to the point. I am not pretty. I will, probably, never be pretty. Pick a girl off the street, and five times out of ten they will be better looking than me (or at least have bigger eyes). I average around "okay" and "pretty okay-ish", occasionally "kind of cute" under really good lighting and only for brief snatches of time, if you squint. But that's okay. That's really, really okay.

Because, well, yes appearance means something. Appearance means a lot. You see it everywhere, (do not even attempt to deny it) the pretty people win. And the ugly people have to work twice as hard, three times longer, to make up for that difference. You see an attractive person, all the stereotypes come pouring in. You can trust them more, you like them more, they seem funnier, more open, nicer, sweeter, smarter. Yes, appearance means a great deal, but it doesn't have to mean everything.

Sometimes I envy the attractive population, other times I ask, "so what?" Yes, you are thinner, taller, cuter. I don't resent you for that because I'm still me. I'm fifteen years old, I like science and writing, I love reading books, my friends are all awesome, and I have a stuffed tiger named Krawlitz. I want to succeed in life, and I'll fight you tooth and nail for it. Hey, maybe I will come out on top- or you could. I won't define myself by my looks because I don't want to, and the things I want to do in life don't depend on it,

or if they do, I'll work twice as hard and three times longer to overcome it.

I'm not pretty. You might be, but I'm not. And that's okay.

Of course, it all started with my mother. Always commenting on whether I gained weight. Never noticing when I would lose it. Always reminding me not to eat too much. And she also made it a point to tell me whenever she saw something while out shopping that wasn't available in my size. "May be if you lost some weight."I'm the only girl in the family. I have two older brothers and lots of male cousins. I finally got some female cousins when I was in middle school.

What really hurt the most was my mother's attitude when I went from a Size 3 to a 5/6. She told me to stop buying Size 5/6 and lose some weight instead. She would poke and pinch at my fat. I hated it.

I have always had problems with my weight. When high school came around I had my second boyfriend of all time. He was older than me by 2 years and seriously the sweetest kid ever. I felt pretty around him even though he was 30 pounds lighter than I was. But, like any guy, he wanted one thing and I wasn't ready for that. So we broke up and I went into the 'eat Ben and Jerry's and watch The Notebook all night' slump. During my freshman year I stood at 180 pounds.

It was hard to recover from that phase but I got myself together and began to weigh out the different things in my life. I re-prioritized everything I had going for me, academically and my extra-curriculars. I started my sophomore year with a new mentality. I wasn't going to let my mother's words harm me any longer and I

wanted to start the year headstrong and put my education and health at the top of my list.

It was hard at first, seeing other girls flaunt in their skimpy outfits when I was still working to get there. I started experimenting with makeup and switched up my clothes to things that flattered my body shape. In the end, my brothers did really come through for me, and once in a while noticed when I lost a couple pounds and would even mention a sweet compliment.

In the end I realized that it was not the curves on my body that got me down, but the lack of acceptance I had from my own family. It's been two years and I'm now beginning my senior year. I have so much in my life to look forward to. I've worked so hard to become the healthy individual I am today and I will continue to do so several years into the future.

Body image will always relentlessly tackle my confidence, especially in this last year of high school when everyone is worrying about how they look in their prom dresses. All I know is, it's not going to go away and I can never expect it to. In today's world where every woman is expected to look their best all hours of the day, it's impossible to avoid the critique.

I will undoubtedly break down numerous times but I know that I got the friends and brothers to pick me back up again. And anyways, Kim Kardashian is no stick but she nailed Kris Humphries, so let there be hope for us all.

"Beauty is only temporary, but your mind lasts you a lifetime."

-Alicia Machado

You see- to me body image doesn't solely refer to ones body, but rather how one perceives themselves of being. I can t tell you how many times I've looked in the mirror and hated what was reflected back (a flat nose; small, too close together eyes, and utterly un-

silky black hair) or how many times I have consciously (and unsuccessfully) tried to eat not much more then an apple a day. Because, it seems that no matter how much you try to convince yourself otherwise, your body is (in the eyes of everyone else around you) who you are; that it doesn't matter how smart you are, or how funny, or how ambitious.

I took Oral Composition in my freshman year. In the second semester of the class we did a unit on advertising. Our teacher had us come up to a mirror in the front of the classroom and anonymously write a comment on a post--it note. At the end of the exercise we read them out loud (the majority of them were people claiming they were ugly). But throughout the whole thing, the people who I considered to be my very closest friends looked at me with pity when a negative comment was read, as they were so sure it was me who had written it. That was the saddest moment of my 15 years- the moment when I realized-that's when it hit me that in a way my body was me. That's what thee people in my life thought I was (or an aspect of who I was) nothing more then a pile of self-loathing. My body did define me- just not in the way I was led to believe. My body, only mirrored my perception of my self. In a way my body was me-showing other people how worthwhile I thought I was.

A friend recently mentioned to me that it is scientifically proven that people who think they are luck are actually lucky. That makes sense. When you are confident, when you are sure with who you are and that something good will happen-or even when your not sure and pretend to be anyway- you carry yourself differently, you make people want you, to want to be with you…Most days I still have to remind myself to stand tall. It's new to me this feeling that I am worth it, that I have something to contribute. I think I finally realized that we spend so much

time thinking about how others perceive us how others judge us, when instead we should be taking the time to improve how we judge and perceive ourselves.

"The body is meant to be seen, not all covered up."

- Marilyn Monroe

Body image is something that I have struggled with in my family. I guess you could call me lucky because people don't make fun of me at school for it. But, when it happens in your own home, from the people you love, it's even worse. My stepmom always hints to me saying that I'm fat. She always asks me: "How much do you way?" or "You need to stop eating junk food." Blah blah blah. And when I tell her how much I way she always says: "oh I was less than that." I mean…why are you comparing yourself to a 16 year old anyways? That's just (for lack of a better word) LAME! And it hurts me too. It doesn't make me feel fat, but at the same time it doesn't make me feel skinny either. Now, off to a not so personal level, I hear girls all that time talk about how fat they are when they are so damn skinny! I mean they probably don't even have fat on them its just skin! It sickens me when I see the skinniest girls out there call themselves fat. Especially when there are bigger girls around them. I mean don't they understand they are probably make them feel really fat and self conscious. Its just rude. Oh! And when girls just do it so they can hear people say: "You're not fat! You're so amazing and pretty!! Any guy would be lucky to have you." That just sickens me.

One last thing (call me cliché but…): To everybody out there, you are beautiful. You are you. There is no one like you in the world. You were born and made the way you were made for a reason. You might not know that reason yet, but you will. (and no, the reason isn't so you can be made fun of.)

"Each body has its arts."

-Gwendolyn Brooks

I don't think males are as concerned over body image is their female counterparts, but they do display some degree of care. Guys like feeling healthy and looking presentable, but they definitely don't pay as much attention to nit-picky details pertaining to fashion and grooming as girls do. That's not to say, however, that they won't go out of their way every once in a while to bolster their overall appeal. An example I can think of to attest to this would be ear piercings. I still remember when the first one of my guy friends to get his ears pierced told me what he was planning. I didn't believe him at first, and laughed it off as a joke. But when I realized he was serious, I asked him what his motivation was for getting earrings. His response was something along the lines of "It looks cool". This really got me thinking. Was "looking cool" really something worth irreversibly altering one's body over? In my mind, my friend's decision wasn't an intelligent one for many reasons. Sure, walking around with studs could possibly make him look more attractive to certain girls and catch people's attention, but it just didn't seem like a wise investment to make. For one, it all seemed so superficial. Also, if he were to ever get sick of his piercings, he wouldn't be able to get rid of them. After a certain stage in life, piercings aren't considered as widely accepted for males, and can be professionally inhibiting. He'd always have holes in his cartilage, reminding him of the tomfoolery he exhibited during his youth. Despite giving my friend's prospective actions a considerable amount of thought, I didn't make much of the whole situation. He was, after all, entirely entitled to make his own decisions, and I

figured there was nothing wrong with him having fun in his own way. As a few months elapsed, I started seeing more and more guys I knew following the trend of getting their ears pierced, and an increasing number of people saying they wanted to do the same. This once again got me thinking of the implications that come with ear piercings for males. I realized that I was slowly becoming more open towards something I had previously deemed stupid and senseless. If a girl piercing her ears was entirely acceptable, then why should it have been any different for a guy? For a while I was even considering getting my own ears pierced. People I knew were doing it, it wasn't illegal, and it just seemed alright. But after asking a few people whose opinions I valued, I changed my mind once again and reverted back to my old stance, which was that it wasn't worth it. I decided it was shallow and risky, and I thought there were honestly better ways to make yourself more physically/visually appealing. But with all that being said, I hold nothing against any guy who wishes to pierce his ears because I think everyone deserves the freedom to make his or her own decisions regarding his or her body. Part of the beauty of the human body is, after all, its malleability. There are many things we can't change about our appearance, but if a guy wants to change how he looks through piercing his ears, then power to him.

''Choose rather to be strong of soul than strong of body.''

-Pythagoras

I hate how tall I am. My thin lips and boobs also need a little tweeking, but those can be fixed with plastic surgery and implants so I'm not that annoyed by them. However, height is something that you can't fix. Surgeons can't cut up your legs and give you new, shorter ones.

I was that girl who had always been taller than everyone else. I remember when I was 11, my parents were forced to pay full adult admission price for me at buffets and amusement parks since no one believed that I was in 6th grade. In those class photos where they arranged everyone by height, I was always the one who stood in the back of the group with the equally tall guys. Tall guys are okay but tall girls…that's just weird.

I remember at one homecoming dance during my freshmen year, the guy I went with was shorter than me. Wasn't any better that I was wearing heels (I didn't really consider that when I got my outfit. I just wanted to go on a shopping splurge like normal girls). It was really awkward having to dance with him. Even during the Welcome Back Dance and the Farewell Dance, guys never ask me to dance because they're intimidated by my height. Needless to say, I no longer go to dances in general. I hate being tall.

''There is but one temple in the universe, and that is the body of man.''

-Novalis

With time, I've learned to grow more and more paranoid about my body image. Already I'm quite the paranoid person, but now that I'm growing, it's a real concern for me.

In my Indian-American society, a lot of aunties judge really harshly. I've had my friends criticized and told to change themselves completely just to be more appealing. Some aunties will straight up say, "You shouldn't wear glasses, you look nicer without them." or "You should grow you're hair long, you'll look more feminine." or even "You should put some coverup, acne isn't your thing." . I, myself, have been a victim of this. A week ago, I went to my friend's house wearing shorts to go out running together, and one of her Mom's friends was

there. This aunty conveniently said, "Hey, your shorts look kind of tight. It looks like you've gained some weight!". I didn't exactly know how to respond besides saying, "Oh". I was mostly confused because that was a major question going on at home. So it kind of bothered me because I felt like I really did gain weight on my rear end. But truth is, my bone structure is just naturally wide, so I'm cursed and destined to be pear shaped. Which, of course, people will interpret as fat. I'm well beneath one hundred pounds. In fact, I'm hardly even ninety. And for my age and height, I should be around one hundred and ten. To make things worse, I'm not very healthy either. Anemic, to be honest. So that's another reason Indian aunties cringe when they see me. But that's okay, because I know I'm great. Be jealous. Ever heard of the song "I Like Big Butts and I Cannot Lie"? Yeah, so I'm amazing.

''Taking joy in living is a woman's best cosmetic.''
-Rosalind Russell

I feel that in life today our perspectives of our body images have become warped. What is beautiful...Stick skinny..Loads of makeup..and revealing clothing! Being a student in High School we have all felt pressure of having to live up to this image. If we were all the same, then this world would be boring. I went through that stage of fitting in with the latest trends. Everyone wants to be one of the cool kids who look like they got it all. We look for ways to be accepted through how we look. We wear certain things, put a feather in our hair, diet all in the act of just wanting to fit in. Body image in high school is put on such a high pedestal, and for some controls our life. I recently dyed my hair a very different color, and as anyone would do i contemplated the decision for a long time. I thought well what if its ugly, weird looking, or no

one likes it. I soon realized that it doest matter what others think or say, Its not for them its for me and if they dont like it to bad its not their head anyways! The way i dress, the way i do my hair, and the way i do my makeup or somedays no makeup is not because im trying to fit in its because i like it!We are all unique individuals, don't let your self get dragged into the thoughts that achieving this image will make you better or more accepted by others. People should like you not because you look a certain way, but because of your personality and your ability to be your true self. Be yourself, Accept yourself, Be proud of who you are and in that is true perfection. Dont hold back from being different your making this world colorful! I feel that in life today our perspectives of our body images have become warped. What is beautiful...Stick skinny..Loads of makeup..and revealing clothing! Being a student in High School we have all felt pressure of having to live up to this image. If we were all the same, then this world would be boring. I went through that stage of fitting in with the latest trends. Everyone wants to be one of the cool kids who look like they got it all. We look for ways to be accepted through how we look. We wear certain things, put a feather in our hair, diet all in the act of just wanting to fit in. Body image in high school is put on such a high pedestal, and for some controls our life. I recently dyed my hair a very different color, and as anyone would do i contemplated the decision for a long time. I thought well what if its ugly, weird looking, or no one likes it. I soon realized that it doest matter what others think or say, Its not for them its for me and if they dont like it to bad its not their head anyways! The way i dress, the way i do my hair, and the way i do my makeup or somedays no makeup is not because im trying to fit in its because i like it!We are all unique individuals, don't let your self get dragged into the thoughts that achieving this image will

make you better or more accepted by others. People should like you not because you look a certain way, but because of your personality and your ability to be your true self. Be yourself, Accept yourself, Be proud of who you are and in that is true perfection. Dont hold back from being different your making this world colorful!

''The beauty of life is that you don't have to be modernly beautiful to live it.''

-C.S. Lewis

I'm normal. When I'm asked about body image, I think about people who are conscious about being overweight or underweight. But what about those who are just... normal? In a sense, I never feel like I stand out in any sense. My heigh, weight, and size are all incredibly average. Even my doctor tells me that I'm "normal", and so I've come to be really annoyed with that term. To those who fret about being overweight and underweight or not good looking enough, think about those who look too average. What I would give to stand our a little more.

A WORD FROM THE PROFESSIONAL

Lindsay Smith is a Licensed Clinical Social Worker working in private practice in Los Gatos. She provides individual, group, and family therapy to teens. She is currently running a teen girls group with a focus on body image and self-esteem. She is also certified as a Trauma and Loss Clinical Specialist. Please see her website for more information: **www.LosGatosTeenTherapy.com**

I'm too tall. I'm too short. My hair is too curly. My hair is too straight. I'm too fat. I'm too skinny. I'm ugly. If only I looked more like Blake Lively/Taylor Lautner, then I would feel good about myself. Sound familiar?

Body image is your perception of your physical appearance. Unfortunately, many people are unhappy with their appearance and would like to change how they look. Some of us spend a long time getting ready in the morning, others spend lots of money on certain brands or styles of clothing, and others go as far as altering their appearance through plastic surgery. We do these things for a variety of reasons: to impress others, to feel good about ourselves, or to look a certain way in order to get or achieve something we want. For most of us, the bottom line is that we want to be comfortable in our bodies, with our appearance, and with ourselves. Unfortunately, this is often easier said than done! Body image can be influenced by a number of different factors including the media, culture, parents, and peers.

Media. The media shapes what society believes to be beautiful and it is a moving target. From the curvy figure of Marilyn Monroe in the 1950s to the waifish figure of Kate Moss in the 1990s to the voluptuous figure of Kim Kardashian in 2011. The media leads us to believe that we have to look a certain way to be beautiful and can lead us to doubt ourselves or feel inferior if we do not achieve that look. Some pop culture icons, such as Lady Gaga with her song "Born This Way" and Christina Aguilera with her song "Beautiful," are fighting back against this notion and encouraging self-acceptance.

Culture. Each culture views the body in a different way and the expectations of one's culture can also put pressure on a person to look a certain way. Some cultures and families value a thin, small figure, while others value a more voluptuous, curvy figure. Some value fair, light skin and others believe that tanned skin is beautiful. The cultural expectations of how we should look can be difficult for teens in general, but can become even more stressful or confusing when the expectations of one's culture or family differ from the expectations of Western society.

Parents. Parents have a tremendous amount of influence over a teen's body image. What a parent verbalizes regarding feelings about his/her body can influence how a teen feels about his/her own body. If mom is dissatisfied with her body, her daughter may think that it is normal and okay to be dissatisfied with her own body. Additionally, parents loving and supportive words can help teens to feel good about themselves and confident with their bodies, while parents harsh or un-accepting words can lead teens to dislike themselves or their bodies. Through their words and actions, parents can help teens to know and believe that they are loved and valuable regardless of how they look. Unfortunately, parents can also lead a teen to believe that they must look a certain way in order to be loved, valuable, and beautiful.

Peers. Our peer group also helps to shape our desired body image. One group may perceive being very thin as beautiful and another may perceive being very muscular as beautiful. One group may prefer a preppy style of dress, while another may prefer an eclectic style of dress. Peers, like parents, can positively or negatively affect a teen's body image. When peers criticize or tease, it can negatively affect the teen they are talking to or about as well as the others who hear these comments. Those who hear the comments, even if the comments are not directed at them, may feel

badly about themselves as they realize that they are likely judged by those same standards. Peers also have the ability to bolster each other up by sincerely complimenting each other and accepting each other. Sports teams can be another type of peer group that can place extra pressure on a teen to look a certain way or be a certain build. Some sports teams may even require a teen to be within a specific weight range. While sports teams may add extra pressure, they also have the ability to build a teen's confidence and allow them to feel in control of their body, which may lead to a more positive body image. Risks of a negative body image: If we do not feel good about the way we look, this can affects our self-esteem – how we feel about who we are in general. It can cause us to believe that how we look equals the total value of who we are, disregarding our personality, strengths, and incredible uniqueness. Sometimes, extreme dissatisfaction with one's body can lead to eating disorders, including anorexia nervosa, binge eating disorder, and bulimia nervosa. If you or someone you know has an eating disorder, it is important that you seek help immediately. See "The Lowdown" for local resources.

Self-perception. Body image is based on perception. Although you can be influenced by all of the above, ultimately, YOU are the one who determines how you feel about your own body. A negative body image can lead to low self-esteem and a positive body image will typically mean that you like and accept yourself. It is important to understand that YOU determine how you feel about your body. You can allow your perceptions of your body to be determined by the media, culture, your parents, or your peers, OR you can choose to like and accept yourself for who you are regardless of what others say.

Changing your body image. You cannot control the way media, culture, your parents, or your peers view body image or view you. But you can change the way you see your body and the way that you think about yourself. First, you have to want to change the way you think about yourself. Some people feel that they have to think negatively of themselves in order to motivate themselves to make the changes they want to make. (For example –"If I hate my stomach, then I'll be motivated to work out.") It is possible to be kind and accepting towards yourself and still work to improve certain aspects of yourself.

Once you have made the decision to change the way you think about yourself, identify the negative things you say to yourself. Pay attention to the things you think about yourself. For example, "I'm ugly" or "I should be thinner" or "My nose is too big." Once you have identified these negative comments you can do one of two things when these comments come up in your head:
1. Accept and embrace the thought. (Example – "I do have a big nose, but it fits my face well.)
2. Change the thought to a more positive, but equally believable thought. (Example– "I have really beautiful brown eyes.") Every time the old negative thought comes into your head, replace it with the new thought. It takes a lot of effort in the beginning, but it will get easier and easier until you no longer have the original negative thought.

Improving self-esteem. In addition to changing the negative dialogue in your head to a more positive, self-accepting dialogue, there are other techniques you can use to improve your self-esteem and learn to like and accept yourself. Remember that you are more than just your looks and that self-esteem is about accepting your whole self.
1. Give yourself three compliments a day. If you can say them out loud, while looking in a mirror, this exercise will be even more powerful and believable.
2. Write a list of 30 things you like about yourself. Include things about your personality and about the way you look. Read this list every morning and every evening. It is a great way to start and end the day.
3. Write a list of 30 things you can do that you enjoy (example – read a book, go skateboarding, paint my nails). Do at least one of these things every day.

To parents: you clearly love your teen or you would not be taking the time to read this article. Teens want and need to feel accepted and loved by their family, regardless of how they look, and you have the ability to provide this to them or withhold this from them. Show and tell your teen that you love them all the time – no matter what they look like. You can improve your teen's body image and self-esteem by sincerely complimenting your teen daily. Know and understand the power that you have through your words, looks, and actions.

You are a role model for your teen, even if they never admit it. Model a positive body image by showing that you are comfortable with your body and by saying positive things about yourself and refraining from talking negatively about yourself. You can also choose to model a healthy lifestyle for your teen by eating healthy foods and exercising.

So remember, your body image is your choice. As Eleanor Roosevelet once said, "No one can make you feel inferior without your consent." So, what will you choose – to feel badly about your body or to like and accept your body?