

Beauty is in the Eye of the Beholder (Who is the Beholder?)

Our society is focused on external beauty. In North America, we often look to the Hollywood startlet and super model images as the standard of beauty to measure up against. It is interesting to note that this is not the same around the world nor is it necessarily the same over time.

For example, my mother grew up at a different time here in North America and received an opposite message ... her aunties telling her she needed to eat more. In their eyes, 'a little meat on the bones' meant a reserve if one fell ill. It meant a safety zone of sorts, something to fall back on.

As well, over Christmas this year, I was in New Zealand. It was very noticeable to me that TV advertisements and media images were of real people rather than the thin, buff images we see in our TV commercials and advertising in North America. I noticed people that were out walking and jogging and taking care of themselves and, again, they were not looking overly thin. Admittedly, I felt relaxed about that aspect of myself when I was there and relaxed about what I did or did not look like. It was not a focus. What a nice feeling!

When I look at other societies, there are a few things I have found:

- some cultures see thinness as a sign of being sick and view a bit more weight as healthy
- some see extra weight as voluptuous and sexy
- some see it as 'more to love' and they mean it
- for some, "the ideal body shape is lean (Asian)"₁
- for some, "being lean is not always the ideal (African-American and Latino)"₂

Be careful whose image of beauty you are upholding for yourself and possibly judging yourself against. The "standards of beauty have in fact become harder and harder to attain, particularly for women. The current media ideal of thinness for women is achievable by less than 5% of the female population."₃

Change starts with each of us. One way to do this is to be aware. Be aware of how you speak with others. Have you ever noticed that one of the first things women say when they get together for a visit is something about how they look? For example, 'Oh it looks like you've lost weight. You look great!' Also, be aware of how much time you are spending on what you look like or how much you weigh. The focus can take you away from other important areas of your life. Many women I talk with are trying to lose weight. It is a common topic of conversation for people, is prevalent in our society ... and takes up so much of our valuable energy.

The focus seems to be on 'losing weight'. Is that really what we are trying to do? There are many other things we are often trying to do in the process - to feel we are measuring up to a group standard of beauty, to fit in with others, to be seen as worthy, to feel good about ourselves, to feel comfortable when we look at a number on a scale so that it doesn't ruin our whole day. There are a lot of other ways this is broached and some are, on their own, very valid such as health. This can also be a way of masking trying to look a certain way.

Your reasons, attitude and approach are what make the difference. What healthful change really involves is learning new ways to nourish ourselves, new ways to cherish our bodies, changes in lifelong ways of handling stress and emotion, new ways of socializing with others (since food is often apart of it), new ways of movement and physical activity. It is far from a temporary focus on eating less and exercising more with the main purpose of losing weight. It is far more than measuring up to a standard of beauty that may not be right for you. It is a new way to approach our lives from many different aspects, and it takes patience and time. Be kind to yourself, treat the changes as mini-experiments and as a journey, and focus on what is meaningful to you.

1 & 2 "Ideal Weight Varies Across Cultures, But Body Image Dissatisfaction Pervades" – Science Daily as adapted from materials provided by Temple University (2007, October 24).

3 "Mirror, mirror – A summary of research findings on body image" – Social Issues Research Centre – Kate Fox, 1997.

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