Much has been written about body image over the past decades – almost all of it suggesting that both men and women are growing increasingly dissatisfied with their physical selves. The 1997 *Psychology Today* Body Image Survey of 4,000 men and women asked participants about weight and attitudes towards their physiques and specific body parts. Fifty-six percent of women revealed that they were dissatisfied with their overall appearance, and an astounding 89% of women wanted to lose weight. Fifty-four percent of girls aged 13-19 were dissatisfied, and 41% of boys in the same age bracket reported overall dissatisfaction.

Concern with body image – the internal personal picture boys and girls have of their bodies – can become a major preoccupation during adolescence. The 'perfect body' as defined in the social culture can become a measure of self-worth and can cause many teens to undervalue other abilities, interests and talents. Adolescents must also deal with developmental challenges such as adjusting to hormonal and physical changes, as well as to new social and academic demands. Overemphasis on conforming to current standards of beauty renders them vulnerable to developing psychological problems.

Normative Discontent

In the early adolescent and pre-teen years, girls whose bodies develop at a different pace than the average are especially prone to dissatisfaction and low self-esteem. Girls who are precociously developed as well as those less well developed than peers are at risk. There have been very few studies examining adolescents' attitudes towards their bodies over time. However, in one such study, the authors measured body image, objective (rater) physical attractiveness and body mass index in the same 115 boys and girls at ages 13, 15, and 18. The results were compelling; across the same period in adolescence, girls' body image worsened while boys' improved. At age 13, the differences between the sexes were not dramatic, but the gap had widened considerably by age 15. The authors point out that as a normal consequence of puberty, girls experience an increase in body mass with an accumulation of fat around the hips and thighs.

Distortions of Body Image

Clearly, adolescent females who subjectively distort their body image, or those for whom there is a mismatch between their image and the environment, are at risk for several serious

psychiatric disorders. Chief among these are the eating disorders – anorexia nervosa and bulimia nervosa. Anorexia nervosa, as defined in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fourth Edition (DSMIV) is an intense fear of gaining weight or becoming fat, even though underweight. Bulimia nervosa, felt to be a related disorder, is characterized by recurrent episodes of binge eating followed by recurrent inappropriate compensatory behavior such as purging) in order to prevent weight gain.

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