

Do You Hate Your Body?

by Amber Dean, Peer Health Educator

Every day as we walk around campus, all of us -- no exceptions -- look at the people surrounding us and find someone we think is more attractive than us, or thinner than us, or sexier than us, or has bigger breasts or broader shoulders than us... the list goes on and on. Then we may go home and flip on the TV... or maybe open a magazine, and the same thing happens all over again.

What is it that causes us to constantly compare our bodies to other people's and wonder if we're "good enough"? And just who is it that benefits from keeping us so insecure about our appearances? The answer is more obvious than you may think.

In the United States alone, women spend \$3 billion on cosmetics per year, another \$2 billion on hair products, and \$800 million on totally unnecessary feminine hygiene products. Men are not immune to the persuasion of the cosmetics industry either, spending small fortunes to find just-the-right aftershave or cologne or hairstyle. Cosmetic surgery and steroid use among men and women are also on the rise as we struggle to create the "perfect" body, no matter what the costs to our health, lifestyle, wallets, and so on.

Clearly, someone has a very strong interest in keeping us insecure about our looks. Take a



moment to imagine what the world would be like if everyone was suddenly satisfied with their appearance.

And here's a little secret that I bet you wouldn't have guessed at, and that certainly no one wants you to know : **DIETS DON'T WORK!** What's more, they can be harmful and often result in a weight gain instead of the much-craved weight loss we're all "supposed" to be looking for. While on a diet, we may lose weight for awhile, but you may have noticed that we usually gain it all back again -- and then some -- once the diet is over. As described by Dr. Dayle Hayes in her article "Body Trust" (Radiance magazine, Winter 1995), "although there are all kinds of ways to get people to lose weight, nobody has yet figured out how to maintain weight loss".

This pattern of losing weight repetitively and gaining it back is termed "yo-yo dieting" and can be harmful -- even more harmful than just being one weight and staying there, even if we're "overweight" to begin with. Repeated weight loss and gain can lead to loss of bone mass and increase the risk of developing osteoporosis.

But what else can we do to lose weight, you may be wondering? Cosmetic surgery certainly isn't the answer, for the risks are great and the results can be devastating (just read Betty Shermer's

account of her intestinal bypass in the book, *Shadow on a Tightrope*, and you'll know what I mean!!). So how can we drop these "extra pounds"? The answer is a radical one -- maybe we don't need to!!

Whether we're fat or thin, short or tall, male or female, one of the healthiest, most flattering changes we can make is to accept our bodies for what they are, love them, and appreciate the innate beauty that lies in each of us. You're probably thinking that this isn't going to do much towards changing your appearance. Well, guess again! If you believe in the beauty that's inside of you, you'll stand taller, walk with confidence, look radiant and truly be a beautiful person with a stunning presence. Do you think the world would be an interesting place if all of our bodies had been created from the mold of that "ideal" body type that we all seem to be striving for? Certainly not! Our bodies -- all of them -- are different, and this difference is what makes them special and beautiful, each in their own way.

As an alternative approach to diets, Dr. Hayes recommends what she calls her three simple principles: "feed your body, move your body, and love your body". She talks about body trust, which she defines as "an internally directed process, a gentle way to take care of yourself for the rest of your life". She also suggests letting your body settle at its own weight, which it will very likely do if you develop healthy eating and exercise habits. Once your body finds its optimum weight, it probably won't change much provided your eating and exercise habits remain the same.

So, if you've been feeling that you're too fat or too thin and you ought to do something about your weight, redirect the energy this would require into working to accept the unique beauty that is in you, just the way you are. Chances are you'll start to feel far better about yourself than you would on any diet or weight loss program!

Take a second again to think about what the world would be like if everyone was satisfied with their appearance. Hopefully now, it doesn't seem so unattainable!

For more information on avoiding unplanned pregnancy, managing stress, and generally staying healthy and productive as a student, visit the Student Health Resource Centre, 2-300 SUB, or surf over to www.ualberta.ca/HealthInfo