

A minimalist line drawing of a person's head and hand. The head is shown in profile, with the ear and hairline visible. The hand is positioned near the face, with fingers slightly curled. The drawing is composed of simple black outlines on a white background.

# UNDERSTANDING BODY IMAGE

## THE BASICS

What is Body Image?  
Real Stories  
Facts & Stats  
Getting Help



# WHAT IS BODY IMAGE?

Let's start with what "body image" actually means.  
**Body image is how we view our physical appearance.**



Our body image might not always be the same as how our family, friends, peers or strangers see us; it's subjective. The way we see ourselves is rooted in our personal beliefs and attitudes, shaped by the culture, environment, family, society and media around us, to name a few. We'll go into more detail about these factors in our next guide '[Causes and Consequences](#)'.

[LEARN MORE](#)

Throughout life, most people experience times where they don't feel 100% happy about their bodies. But for some of us, body image can bring up lots of different emotions that can be difficult to cope with. The more these feelings show up, the more it can begin to affect our lives.

I was always so worried about what my body looked like, I found it hard to concentrate on anything else. I was so anxious about what everyone thought of me. My body image struggles affected my studies, my relationships and my career choices. But once I took steps towards shifting my mindset, I realised that my body is nobody else's business and I started to build on my self-worth.

ANON

# THE FOUR ASPECTS OF BODY IMAGE

So, body image is how we view our physical appearance, but what about the thoughts and feelings we experience because of our body image?

We can categorise this into the four aspects of body image which help explain the different ways body image can influence us; perceptual, affective, cognitive and behavioural.



## PERCEPTUAL

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**How you perceive your body.**  
Your perception isn't always a true representation of how you really look.

## AFFECTIVE

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**How you feel about your body,** based on your perceptions. If you view different parts of your body, your weight, or your shape negatively, you might experience emotions like shame, sadness or disgust.

## COGNITIVE

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**How you think about your body.**  
You might not be able to stop thinking about your body weight, shape or particular parts of your body, if you're feeling negatively about them. Maybe you think that you'd look better if you lost weight, or had bigger muscles.

## BEHAVIOURAL

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As your feelings and thoughts about your body become more frequent, **you may start to act on them.** You might change what you eat, how you exercise, or avoid social events because of the way you think and feel about your appearance. You might have beauty procedures and cosmetic surgery to try and feel better about the way you look, or fit into a societal expectation of beauty.

# WHY DOES IT MATTER?

Struggling with your body image can significantly impact your life, and shouldn't be ignored. Pushing these difficulties aside can cause (or worsen) mental health problems like depression, anxiety and low self-esteem.

Sometimes, negative body image can lead to disordered eating behaviours (like restricting what you eat and yoyo dieting), eating disorders, excessive exercising, compulsive exercise and Body Dysmorphic Disorder.

It can also begin to affect your social life, making it difficult for you to maintain or form relationships, and leaving you feeling socially isolated.

“ Learning that the problem wasn't with my body, but with my mind was my first real turning point.

Whilst working on developing a better relationship with my body and self, I noticed so many changes in other areas of my life. I felt more connected to people, to life, to everything.

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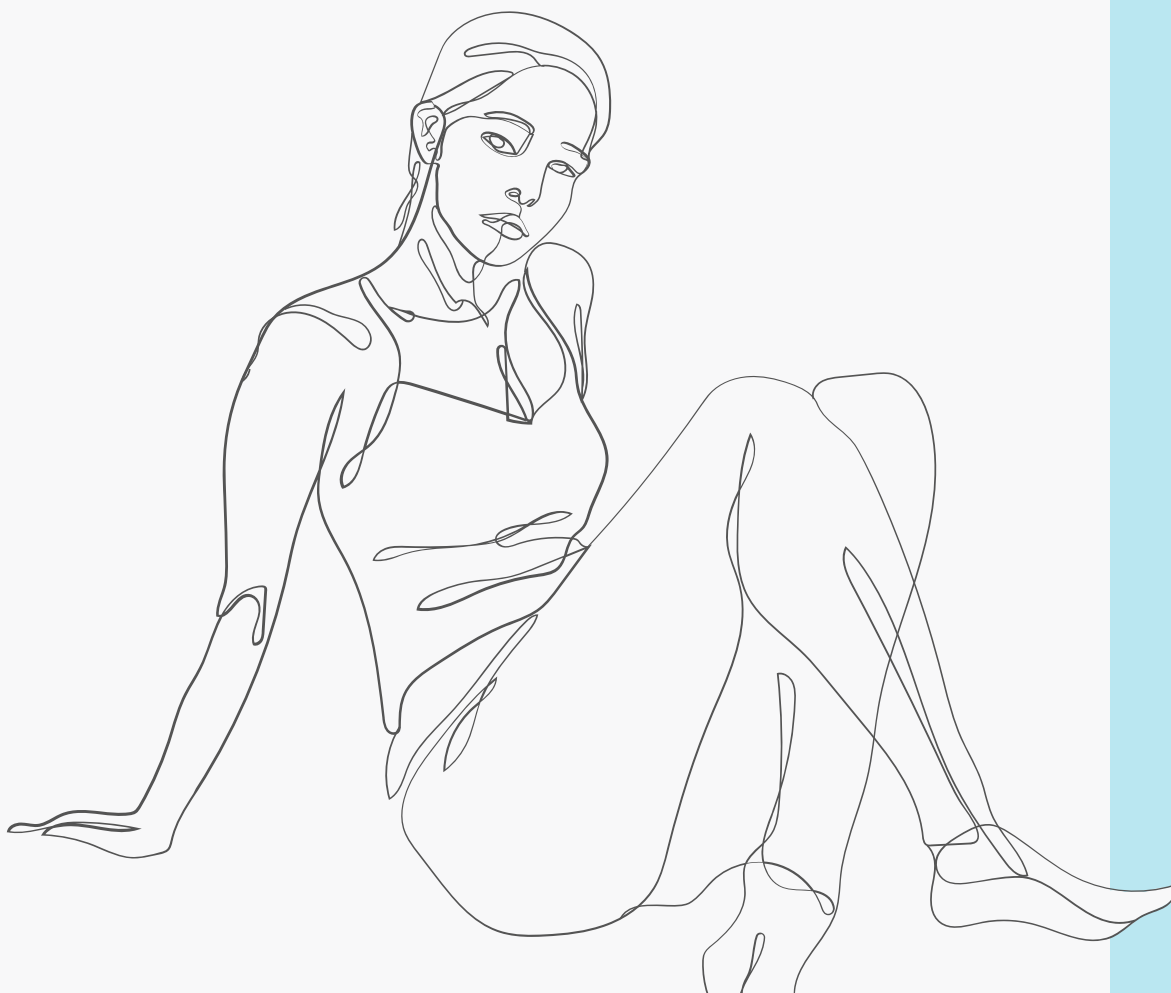
# REAL STORIES



"I thought that everyone had body image problems - so much that I didn't even label it that - nobody seemed to like their bodies. I thought it wasn't a real problem worthy of help so when I first started counselling sessions I felt guilty that I was taking up a space that someone with "real issues" could take. I later realised I so needed this help, and that I was worthy of help.

My body image issues affected my relationships, my career choices and my decisions in life. I put so many limitations on myself because I hated my body so much and because my self-esteem was so low. Healing takes a long time but it's definitely possible. I never thought I'd have the confidence to travel to Australia and hang out on the beach every day in a swimsuit - but I did!"

**ANON**



# QUICK FACTS

Over a third of adults had anxious or depressed thoughts in relation to their body image.

(Mental Health Foundation 2019)

**78%**

of young people want to learn more about positive body image at school.  
(parliament.uk)

**44%**

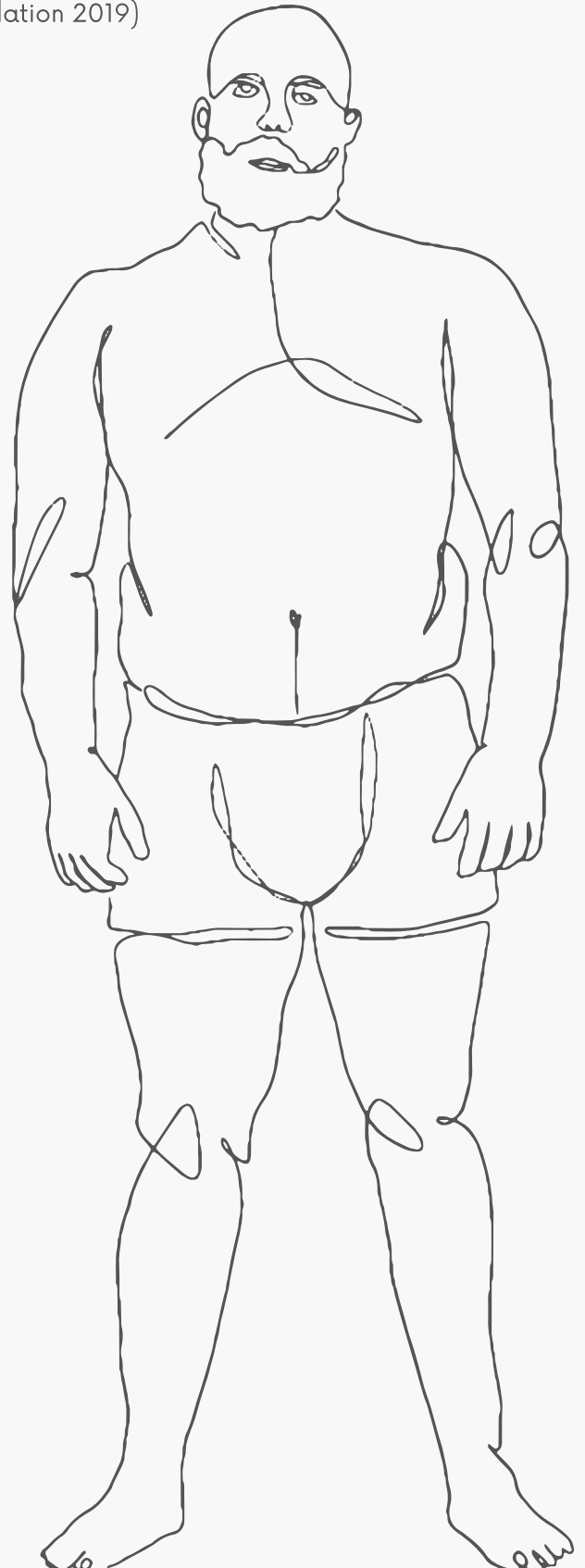
of adults want to see greater diversity in mainstream media.  
(Mental Health Foundation 2019)

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"School was always an anxious time for me. As a twin, I was often compared to my slimmer sister which always made me feel quite embarrassed or ashamed.

I wish there was more discussions at school at the time around 'all bodies are good bodies' and all the reasons why our bodies might differ from one another. It has taken me so many years to break down all my body burdens."

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# PAUSE FOR THOUGHT

## How would you describe your body right now?

Have a think about the adjectives, words or phrases that come to you. If you have a pen and some paper, you could write these down.

Notice whether your mind went straight for the negatives first, and if it did, don't worry. Our brains naturally tend to take a negative bias; a bit like anxiety, this response used to help us be aware of life-threatening situations.

## Do you remember a time when you thought differently about your body?

Negative body image isn't always something we grow up with, it can develop after experiences and big changes in our lives, like puberty, pregnancy, moving home or starting university. If you can, have a go at pinpointing any moments in your life that may have triggered negative thoughts about your body.



## It might be that you've had negative body image for as long as you can remember...

Exposure to certain narratives, attitudes and beliefs around body image can affect us from a very young age, and run very deep. We'll explore this in more detail in '[Causes and Consequences](#).'

# BODY DYSMORPHIC DISORDER

Body Dysmorphic Disorder (BDD), also known as Body Dysmorphia, is a mental health condition where somebody spends a lot of time worrying about certain parts of their appearance. Often, these "flaws" aren't noticeable to other people.

Having BDD doesn't mean you're vain or self-obsessed. It's associated with a severe, negative and distorted body image, and can be very upsetting. It can affect your ability to work, have friendships and relationships, or even leave your home.

If you think you might have BDD, you should talk to your GP or seek further guidance on the [NHS website](#). For some people, getting a diagnosis can be really helpful.

If you'd like to know more about BDD, check out this insightful BBC documentary, [click here](#).

“Often I felt like a stranger in my own body. Why couldn't I see what others would see when they looked at me?”

Every day was different though. I could go from obsessing over every imperfection to hiding from them, but every single day I felt trapped and surrounded by self loathing.”

**ANON**







Someone with BDD may not present with all or any of the symptoms listed here. It's important you speak to a professional if you're worried about yourself or a loved one.

# GETTING HELP

Whether you're having niggling, negative thoughts about your body, have a BDD diagnosis (or think you might have BDD), or anything in between, this resource is here for you to use. No matter how you identify your relationship with body image, or how big or small the problems you might be having, you deserve support.

## SUPPORT THAT WORKS FOR YOU

Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) can help people address their negative body image, which often underpins both BDD and body image difficulties. We'll teach you some handy CBT techniques to try by yourself later on in our '[Support and Self Care](#)' guide, but you might find it useful to have somebody to guide you. If you'd like to explore 1-2-1 sessions, you can access these through [First Steps ED](#) or the [NHS](#).

There are lots of other types of services and therapies which can help too. The most important thing is finding a therapist you trust and feel comfortable talking to, so don't worry if it takes a couple of times to find somebody you click with.

If you don't feel like therapy is for you, we offer plenty of other services, including support groups and befriending. You'll find all the information you need at the end of this resource, or you can head to the [First Steps ED website](#) to find out more.



# WHAT NEXT?

You've done it! That's the basics.

Hopefully you feel a little clearer about what body image is and how it can affect us - maybe you've started to reflect on your own body image, too.

Next, we look at answering the big question. Why do we struggle with body image? Exploring where these struggles might have come from in the first place can help us on the road to healing our relationship with our bodies.

## WHERE DO BODY IMAGE ISSUES STEM FROM?

- Genes and biology
- Culture
- Environment
- Discrimination
- Childhood
- Attachment styles
- Trauma
- Weight stigma and diet culture
- Media

And more!

There's a lot to cover here, so join us in part two '**Causes and Consequences**', where we'll break it all down and give you plenty of explanations, thinking points, personal stories, statistics, helpful resources and more.

See you there!

