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HEALTHY BODY IMAGE MEANS ACCEPTING THAT NOBODY'S PERFECT

BY **KELLIE B. GORMLY**
TRIBUNE-REVIEW

Christy Culp, 41, of North Buffalo, Armstrong County, has been plagued by fears that she isn't pretty enough and perfect enough, so she obsessively counted calories when she was younger.

If only she could look that good again, she says.

"When I look at those old pictures, I think, 'What was I so stressed out about? Because I did really look good, and I was in shape,'" Culp says.

But now, Culp says she is happy and at peace with herself.

"I'm not that tight 30-year-old that I was in those pictures, and that's OK,"

she says. "I have more wrinkles than some people who are 50. ... I've just learned to accept that this is the body I've got."

While having a svelte body, taut skin or other signs of physical beauty can make people feel good about themselves, they can and should have a healthy body image. Despite the image projected by airbrushed models in magazines, everybody has imperfections, experts say.

"People look back at photos and think, 'Wow, I was kind of hot. What was I complaining about?'" says Rebecca Harvey, director of the Marriage & Family Therapy program at

Cultivate a healthy body image

- Look at your overall appearance rather than fixating on a flaw. Maybe your hair is graying, but your body is an ideal weight. Focus on your good traits.
- Avoid black-and-white thinking. A few flaws don't make you ugly.
- Focus on your positive personality traits, and put more stock in those than in your appearance. Are you a wonderful mother, friend or husband? Are you highly intelligent or funny?
- Remember that no one cares about or notices your appearance as much as you do.
- If you are obsessed with body image and flaws, seek professional help.

Source: Psychologist and author Sabine Wilhelm

A healthy body image means accepting yourself

BODY IMAGE · FROM D1

Seton Hill University in Greensburg, and an assistant professor. "You'll do that again in another five years, so why waste the next five years?"

"I help women understand that they now can embrace a different kind of power," Harvey says. "There's a wisdom and power in having survived that long in the world."

Nicole Steele, 35, of Bell Acres says that after giving birth four times, her stomach isn't so tight, her hips are a little wider, and her body just isn't what it was before kids.

"I am self-conscious about it," Steele says. "I am not overweight; I am totally into working out and eating right. I feel as healthy as I've ever felt my entire life. But my whole midsection — it bothers me."

Steele's husband, Brian, is supportive, and tells her she's beautiful the way she is. And Steele says she is reaching a point of peace and self-acceptance about her overall body.

"It's not going to get any better, so I might as well just enjoy it now," she says.

Although struggles with body image are more common in women, men experience it, too, says Dr. Sabine Wilhelm, a psychologist and associate professor at Harvard Medical School, and director of the Body Dysmorphic Disorder Program at Massachusetts General Hospital. Wilhelm works with patients who have the disorder, which is an extreme case of shame and criticism about one's body. Women are most commonly affected by weight issues and the desire for a youthful appearance, while men most often struggle with issues about their muscles, she says.

"Sadly, the women I've worked with very often compare themselves with the unrealistic images, and feel bad because they feel like they're falling short," says Wilhelm, author of the book "Feeling Good About the Way You Look: A Program for Overcoming Body Image Problems."

Obsessing about a bodily flaw causes people to miss the beauty in the rest of



Elizabeth Scott (right), 51, and Sue Duffy, 50 — both of Dormont — walk around Keystone Oaks High School. Scott has lost more than 100 pounds and gained self-esteem.

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Christy Culp, 41, of North Buffalo, Armstrong County, walks her 3-year-old Labrador mix Izzy along a path in her backyard. Culp says she long had been concerned with body image, but has reached a point where she is at peace with herself.

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their body, Wilhelm says. Maybe you need to lose weight, but have gorgeous hair, for instance. And the most important things go beyond looks, she says: What kind of person is someone? What talents do people have, and what kind of mother, husband or

friend are they?

"I think the most important thing in my opinion is that people don't base their self-worth on their appearance," Wilhelm says. "The problem is really on the inside; it's not on the outside. It's how you kind of interpret what's going on

with your appearance."

Elizabeth Scott of Dormont says she had had enough of her extra weight. She couldn't breathe when going upstairs, her back constantly hurt, and her 50th birthday was approaching.

Scott, now 51, lost more

than 100 pounds through the Nutrisystem diet, and went from a size 24 to a size 10. Her self-esteem rose as much as her weight dropped.

"I truly feel like a million bucks," Scott says. "It's just nice to walk into a room and feel like people aren't judging you because of your weight."

Yet, in retrospect, Scott says she wishes she wouldn't have been so critical of herself when she was heavy. Soon after losing weight, she cried when she saw earlier pictures of herself. "I thought, 'I can't believe I let myself get that big.' Now, I look at them, and I feel better."

Peggy Mitchell, 69, of Brookline, says she has struggled with body image since fifth grade, when she gained some pre-teen weight. Mitchell's size has fluctuated over the years. After her children were born, she went up to 200 pounds and was wearing a size 20. Now, she is straddling the line between a size 12 and 14.

And that's just fine, Mitchell says.

"I'm content with being a 12 or 14," she says. "I would love to be 150 pounds, but I don't know how to get there. But I'd love to content myself with what I am."

Mitchell says she looked into getting Botox injections for her wrinkles, but the expense wasn't worth it.

"Nobody can stay young forever, unless you're a movie star and you have the money," she says.

Mitchell's husband, Philip, always tells her she's beautiful, which makes her feel good. Philip Mitchell, 78, shares his wife's accepting view about his body, even though he's overweight. He says he would like to lose weight, but he's not self-conscious anymore. Philip Mitchell has lower back pain and other issues that make exercising difficult.

"I don't feel bad about my weight ... because I really try to take care of myself," he says.

"Nobody's perfect," he adds. "Nobody."

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