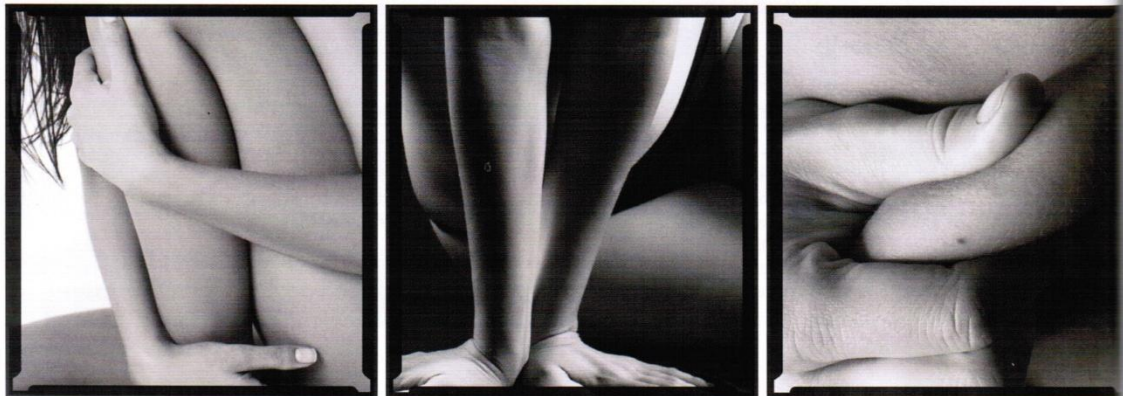


MEASURING UP

In a society where we measure our self-worth by the numbers on our clothing labels and scales rather than our whole person, it can be hard to appreciate your body for the valuable, beautiful wonder that it is.

Words by **Joanna Tovia**



Our society is so appearance conscious that our very worth as human beings can depend on how good we think we look. For women in particular, weight loss is often seen as the key to happiness and many men look to protein shakes and weight training as their tickets to body satisfaction. The good news is that with the right attitude, anyone can feel good about their bodies, no matter what their shape or size.

The level of body dissatisfaction in Australia is concerning. A Deakin University study found that more than 70 per cent of girls want to be thinner and the same percentage of boys want to be thinner or bigger, and a recent Mission Australia Youth Survey of more than 50,000 people found body image was the number one concern for a third of participants.

Body image problems aren't restricted to those who are overweight, however. According to Professor Susan Paxton of La Trobe University's School of Psychological Sciences, carrying extra kilos can increase the likelihood of body dissatisfaction but is not the problem many people think it is. While there may be health risks for people who are overweight, many health risks can also exist in thinner people who aren't eating well or doing enough physical activity. Health is improved at any weight with healthy eating and regular activity, Paxton says.

SOCIETAL ATTITUDES

"A person's attitudes are a lot more problematic than actual body size ... people can have body image issues at any weight and these issues are just as relevant for people who are quite thin as they are for people who are a bit larger," she says. "On the other hand, you can feel good about yourself at any size."

Body dissatisfaction would not be nearly so common if weight bias wasn't so rife in our society. "It's not socially acceptable to express race-based discriminatory views but people can say anything they like about overweight people," Paxton says. "If weight-based discrimination were not present, most of our body image problems would disappear."

How we look and how we think we look can be worlds apart. Self Essentials clinical psychologist Dr Julie Malone says we each have a perceived self, an actual self and an ideal self, the latter constructed through media and other social influences.

"When there is a significant difference between how we perceive ourselves and how we think we

"Many people with body image problems are at a healthy weight and believe they are being judged when they are not. It's really about what you value in yourself that matters; what somebody else thinks is not really that important."

FITS ALL SIZES

Body confidence can be an issue for people of any size. It can affect people who are thin as much as those who are a bit larger.

should look – our ideal self – it can lead to negative thoughts and feelings. It is common for people to have a distorted view of themselves, and this view of their body can actually change from day to day or week to week."

MEDIA INFLUENCES

Malone says the messages and images delivered through the media place people under pressure to conform to certain body ideals. When someone perceives themselves as not meeting these body ideals, they are often left with a sense of body shame that can lead to other potentially serious mental health and behavioural problems and an unhealthy relationship with food.

One of the first things Malone advises clients on is how to 'read media'. "We are all being bombarded with the 'thin ideal' almost everywhere we go; learning how to analyse the hidden messages in media and to be aware that a lot of images are altered can help people distance themselves from the pressure of media," she says. "The trick is to be mindful that the pressure is there and to choose not to take those messages on board."

Learning to accept your body is like a gift to yourself and can be a liberating experience, Malone says. "Stop beating yourself up, stop comparing yourself to unrealistic 'thin ideals' and get on with living your life the way you want to."

The process of learning to accept your body regardless of your shape or size is easier when you focus on what your body does for you and how it helps you live your life. "For example, your legs allow you to go walking along the beach and they take you to the movies with friends. We encourage people to engage in activities which demonstrate that it's the person you are that is important, not whether you fit into a media 'ideal!'"

MAKING COMPARISONS

One of the factors putting people at risk of developing body image problems is what psychologists call 'body comparison tendency'. "The people who are at risk are those who frequently make comparisons between their own body size and shape and other people," Paxton says.

Unfortunately, people tend to compare themselves only with those who have a body they admire. "They inevitably end up feeling negative about themselves, whereas if they compared themselves to the average person on the street they would reach a different conclusion." ▶



Extreme Measures

Being self-conscious is one thing but a small percentage of people become obsessed with how they look and develop body dysmorphic disorder (BDD). People with the mental disorder can be difficult to diagnose (and help) because they tend to seek the help of cosmetic surgeons rather than mental health workers.

Plastic surgeon Andrew Greensmith says about 10 per cent of plastic surgery patients have BDD and surgeons do what they can to weed them out and find help rather than try to fix a flaw that doesn't exist.

Many sufferers believe correcting perceived flaws will transform their careers, relationships and self-esteem when what will be of most benefit is the help of a mental health professional.

A helpful exercise can be to compare yourself with the next 10 people you see. "See whether you reach the same conclusion about yourself," Paxton suggests. "Typically you don't."

It's also helpful to think about people you like or admire, Paxton says. "When you think about people you admire in your life and what it is you admire about them, it probably isn't the thinnest person you know and probably the reason you admire them is not that they are thin," she says. They could be fun to be with, interesting or confident, for example, and we should be valuing qualities such as these in ourselves.

Many women believe very strongly that if they don't meet the thin ideal they are not a worthy or attractive person and consider it crucial that they meet this often unattainable standard.

Identifying what really is valuable in their lives, whether it be their partner, friendships, interests or talents, can put the importance of appearance in perspective. "We're not saying it's irrelevant - we live in a world that is appearance focused - but it helps when people realise that really, this is not the way they want to value themselves as a person," Paxton says.

CHANGE OF FOCUS

Focusing on eating healthily and getting enough exercise is far more effective than aiming for unrealistic weight-loss goals when it comes to improving body satisfaction. Many women in mid-life who are trying to juggle work and family find it particularly difficult to engage in "self-care behaviours" that lead to feeling good about life and themselves. For example, women often feel guilty

about leaving their families to go to a yoga class or to catch up with friends. But Paxton says feel-good self-care activities are part of a healthy lifestyle and should be valued in their own right.

Going to the beach or anywhere else where their bodies will be 'on display' can be difficult for many people unhappy with their bodies but, rather than avoiding them, Paxton suggests focusing on the

"Many women believe very strongly that if they don't meet the thin ideal they are not a worthy or attractive person."

pleasure these experiences offer (think about the thrill of catching a wave or warming up in the sun after a swim, for example) rather than what you think other people may be saying or thinking about you and your body.

"Many people with body image problems are at a healthy weight and believe they are being judged when they are not. It's really about what you value in yourself that matters; what somebody else thinks is not really that important," says Paxton.

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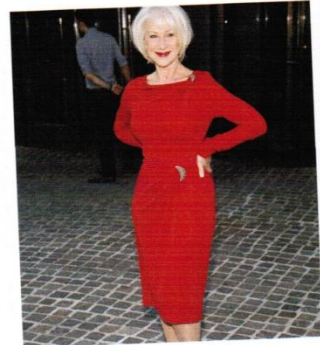
VISIT Read former model Lisa Cox's remarkable story of how illness inspired her to become a spokesperson for positive body image.

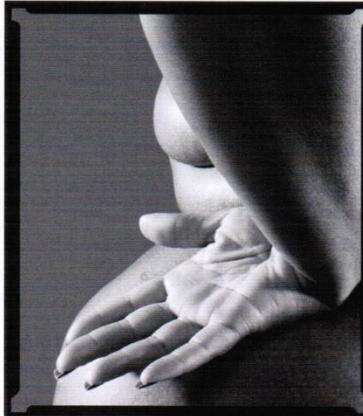
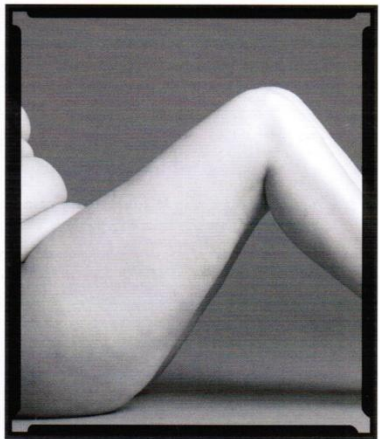
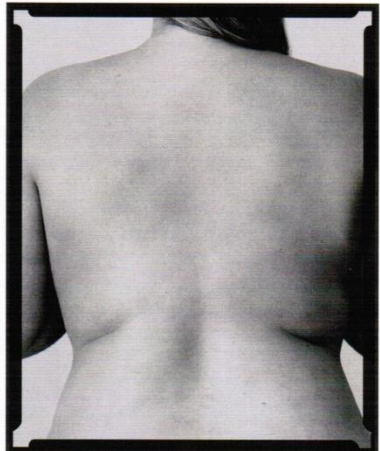
KEYWORDS: LISA, COX

Helen Mirren: Body Of The Year



On a recent episode of the US talk show *The View*, 66-year-old Dame Helen Mirren became uncomfortable when talk turned to her winning the 'Body of The Year' award by gym chain, LA Fitness. "It's kind of embarrassing, really, because it's not true," the Oscar-winning actress said on the show. "I think it was recognition of the fact that you don't have to be perfect." Mirren is also uncomfortable with the media frenzy that erupted when a photograph of her in a bikini (pictured left) was published in 2008. She said in an interview in the UK's *Daily Mail*, "Someone took the photograph of me at exactly the moment my husband was taking a photograph of me, too. So I was posing for his camera, holding my stomach in and doing all kinds of things I wouldn't normally do if I'm just walking around."





PHOTOGRAPH BY JELLY