

THE #1 BODY INSECURITY WE ALL SEEM TO HAVE

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Can you guess what it is?

No matter how confident we may be (or at least aspire to be), all of us will — at some point or another — feel shame about ourselves.

And unfortunately, the emotion has many negative consequences. “What makes shame so tough is — opposed to guilt, which makes us feel bad about something we’ve done — shame makes us feel bad about *who we are*,” psychologist Guy Winch, PhD, author of [Emotional First Aid](#), tells Yahoo Health. “It can be a very damaging emotion, impacting self-esteem and emotional health in general.”

And shame is pretty common. A [Yahoo Health survey](#) revealed that four out of five people have felt it — and more than anything else, it’s with regard to weight.

Specifically, for millennial women — born between the early 1980s and early 2000s — the top 10 sources of shame are:

1. Weight
2. Breast size or shape
3. Clothes
4. Teeth
5. Skin marks or conditions (like acne or moles)
6. Not wearing makeup
7. Butt size
8. Leg size
9. Hair
10. Cellulite

For millennial men, the top 10 sources of shame are:

1. Weight
2. Teeth
3. Muscle tone
4. Clothes
5. Skin conditions
6. Hair
7. Height
8. Genitals
9. Chest (size or shape)
10. Body hair

Young women may have it the worst. The research suggests that, overall, women carry more shame than men, and younger women “far exceed” older women in how much shame they have about every aspect of their bodies. Signs of aging was the only characteristic in the survey where Generation X (born between 1961 and 1979) and Baby Boomers (born between 1946 to 1964) females felt more shame than millennial and teens.

So how do we beat shame — and put our best selves forward *no matter* what we look like?

1. OWN YOUR SHAME

“The typical response to shame is withdrawal,” says Winch. If you’re insecure about being in a bikini, hate your legs, or are shameful about cellulite, you might skip a trip to the pool. Ashamed about your weight? You might avoid the gym because you think everyone’s looking at you (even though they’re likely not), he says.

The fix: “The antidote to shame is to own that thing that you feel shameful about,” says Winch. Think to yourself, “My weight hasn’t been a priority, but I’m changing that now.” There’s an empowerment in taking hold of something rather than hiding it, says Winch.

2. CHECK YOUR COMPARISONS

“We typically have fundamental distortions about what we perceive other people think of as attractive,” says Winch. For example, he notes classic studies show that women tend to think men rate thin female bodies as more attractive, when they actually rate the most attractive bodies one size bigger than women believe.

This is why Winch suggests people normalize their comparison groups. If you’re thinking, “I’m not as thin as that model” or “I’m not as tall as those athletes,” he would ask you: “Are you a model?” or “Are you in the NBA?” Get a good hard look at the people around you, and ask yourself if you really stand out that much. “If we’re just looking at the people who look ‘the best’, and say we don’t look that, then we’re setting ourselves up for shame.”

3. ASK YOURSELF: HOW MUCH TIME DO I SPEND WORRYING?

Worried your shameful worries are getting the best of you? Consider how much of your day they take up, Gail Saltz, MD, a clinical associate professor of psychiatry at The New York Presbyterian Hospital, tells Yahoo Health. “It’s not unusual or abnormal from time to time to say, ‘I wish I weighed less,’ or ‘I wish my teeth were whiter,’” she notes. But if you’re ruminating over these thoughts, they cause you to avoid activities, or they get you down, start writing them down, she suggests. Seeing your specific thoughts on paper can help you realize they’re extreme, unfair, or unrealistic, says Saltz.

4. CONSIDER PROFESSIONAL HELP

One key factor to fighting shame comes down to determining if your thoughts are reasonable. That’s why Charlie Seltzer, MD, a weight loss and obesity expert suggests seeking an objective opinion on what you’re feeling bad about. “If you think something is wrong and everyone else says you’re crazy, that might not be a physical issue but a psychiatric one,” he says.

In fact, body dysmorphic disorder — a mental condition when you’re focused on a perceived flaw or body part — is not incredibly rare, says Saltz. If you’re seeing something other people aren’t, or have a family history of anxiety, depression, or obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD), you may be more likely to be in that camp, says Saltz.

Checking in with your doctor or a therapist to see if a larger mental health condition is at play proves important. Lowering general levels of anxiety — through exercise, meditation, mindfulness, and sleep — can be done without a therapist, too, she notes.

5. TARGET THE PROBLEM

If you feel shame, you likely also feel the need or want to improve the area of your life you're shameful about. But that's easier said than done. After all, say you want to lose weight: While the math may be simple — you must eat less and exercise more — if your self-esteem is low, addressing the problem head-on can be hard. The good news? You don't *need* a gym membership or a nutritionist to drop weight, says Seltzer.

“Doing things privately is helpful,” Seltzer says. “If it's not realistic for you to join a gym, start exercising in your house.” After all, bodyweight moves like push-ups and planks can be done anywhere.

Not ready to tell your friends about your weight-loss quest? Instead of skipping dinners out, order what you normally would but leave four or five bites on plate, says Seltzer. “No one will notice that.” After all, small changes add up over the long run.

On the other hand, if you have a specific body part you don't like — it's reasonable you don't like it, and it's not an all-consuming thought — work to change it, says Seltzer. Want more muscle tone but don't know where to start? Ask a personal trainer at the gym, he suggests. Want to learn to cook healthier food? Google affordable classes in the area. And don't assume you know what others are doing, he adds. For example, if you see someone thinner than you drinking a cocktail on the beach and assume they're just naturally more fit than you, Seltzer reminds: “You don't know what they're doing at 5 a.m.”