

# The Dark Side of “Motivational” Body Images

By JEANA COST

*Strong is the new sexy.*

*Lean is lovely.*

*Fit is the new black.*

If you frequent Instagram or Pinterest, you've probably noticed a growing number of fitness accounts promoting these or similar mantras. These posts often include "motivational" or "aspirational" photos of healthy, strong and fit women, as opposed to skinny or underweight women that have traditionally characterized our culture's body ideal.

While this shift toward seemingly positive and healthy body-image messages is certainly a welcome departure from promoting an impossibly thin and often unattainable physique, there's something troubling about these messages as well.

Here's the thing about body-image messages: Whether positive or negative, these words and images affect the subjective picture of ourselves that we form in our minds. We know the obvious dangers of negative body-image messages (body shaming and pro-eating-disorder content) because they often contribute to the development of negative body image and eating disorders.



However, even positive messages can have an unintended *negative* impact in that they promote the notion that our size, shape and weight define us, underlie our value as people and are what others judge us by at the end of the day.

These messages promoting fitness and strength are generally well-intentioned, and physical health is an important pursuit. However, linking physical health with a culturally determined ideal of an attractive or perfect body shape can actually promote body dissatisfaction and fuel unhealthy or compulsive behaviors to achieve this coveted lean or muscular physique. For some people with a genetic or temperamental predisposition toward developing an eating disorder, a superficially "healthy" mantra can trigger the development of an eating disorder.

That said, **a truly healthy body-image message promotes body acceptance, acknowledging beauty in the physical differences that make us unique as well as celebrating our bodies for how they support us and allow us to engage meaningfully in daily life.**

In an effort to move away from a cultural paradigm that assigns value and worth based on how our bodies look, consider the following two strategies:

**Focus on *who* you are, not *what* you are.** It's important to identify and nurture the foundational elements that characterize us as individuals. Rather than strength of body, strive for strength of character. Instead of tirelessly pursuing a lean physique, exercise your intellect. Consider this: If asked to describe yourself without using physical terms, what would you say? Would you tout your compassionate heart or your sense of humor? Are you proud of your integrity, passion and spirituality? Ponder this question and feel confident in your response. After all, knowing who we are and what we value gives external influences far less power to define our worth based on how we look.

**Emphasize *health* -- physical, emotional and spiritual.** Our culture widely equates health with desirable physical attributes -- specifically thin, lean, toned and muscular bodies. In reality, health spans physical, emotional and spiritual aspects and does not have a singular size or shape.

It's possible to be healthy at many different sizes -- large, small and everything in between -- following an evaluation of an individual's unique circumstances by their health care providers. Alongside the pursuit of physical health, it's also important to nurture emotional and spiritual wellness. Eating and body-image disorders are unique in that they can involve a fusion of medical, psychiatric, psychological, dietary and spiritual issues -- all aspects that must be acknowledged and addressed in the [recovery process](#).

We're all exposed to external influences that encourage us to look a certain way and conform to body ideals; not just via social media, but also through television, magazines and peers. We all interpret these messages differently, and the result for some can be unhealthy thoughts and behaviors around food, eating and body size, shape and weight.

Understanding the impact of external influences on how we feel about ourselves and developing the ability to think critically about these seemingly harmless and "healthy" body-image messages is an important first step to achieving a healthy body image and promoting a more accepting, body-friendly culture.