

Don't Be Obsessed!

Many of us are too worried about our weight, our wrinkles, our thinning hair or our sagging chins. Move away from the mirror and make peace with your body.

Exhausted, I plopped down on the couch. I decided it was my turn to engage in that familiar sport of channel surfing since my husband wasn't home. Clicking away at the TV to find something worthwhile to watch, I was astounded at the number of shows about weight and body image.

Click. Kirstie Alley in the movie *Fat Actress* is bouncing around the screen. Click. Waif-like Olsen twin Mary-Kate is discussing her recent eating-disorder treatment. Click. Supermodel Kate Moss is looking scary-skinny. Click. Bodybuilders are giving new meaning to the command, "Supersize it." Click. Cosmetic surgery is being heralded in graphic scenes.

From fat to thin and thin to fat, the polarized back-and-forth media messages struck me like cultural whiplash: "Big is beautiful!" "Nip it, tuck it!" "You can't be too thin, too buffed or too beautiful!"

My head was spinning!

Clearly, weight obsession and physical fitness are national pastimes in America. Witness the popularity of makeover and plastic-surgery programs on television and the billions of dollars spent on diet and exercise products. The sculpted workout body is everywhere—plastered on billboards, splashed onto magazine pages, paraded across movie screens.

Real or not, it all influences our view of “body image.”

Body image is no more than a mental picture we hold of ourselves. That picture can be positive, negative or somewhere in between.

Body image develops through our perceptions but also forms with the help of our own attitudes, imaginations, emotions and feelings, as well as comments others make about us. When it comes to the human body, our goal is to learn to accept it and celebrate it.

Now I realize that for most of us acceptance and celebration remain an act of faith. The fact is, we are really good at seeing our physical flaws. You might say, we are experts.

We constantly make comparisons with those whom we deem to be better than us. The result of all our comparing is frustration, dissatisfaction or anxiety about our own physical appearance.

Though our culture offers numerous commercial solutions for body image dissatisfaction—from Botox to the Ab Roller and beyond—the problem cannot be solved apart from an appreciation for our human history. We need the spiritual perspective to understand that what we see in the mirror is not the whole picture.

Body image distortion goes way back—in fact, it began at the beginning. Genesis 3 provides an explanation of how we moved from not even questioning our created bodies to embracing feelings of shame and inadequacy about them.

In short, the origins of our distorted body image developed when a man and woman decided to share a treat. Didn't you just know food had to be involved? The only surprise is that it was fruit, not chocolate!

God had created Adam and Eve in His image. Thus they were flawless and unaffected by sin. The very creator of the universe gave them His own seal of approval by calling them "good."

Picture it—perfect bodies roaming the garden, naked and unashamed! Body acceptance was at an all-time high.

God tells Adam that the two can eat from any tree in the garden except the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. That tree was forbidden, and tacked to it so to speak was the added revelation from God that if they ate from it they would die.

I can't imagine any food being worth that price, but apparently Eve felt differently. Maybe it was a tree of dark chocolate-covered strawberries dripping Starbucks coffee sap!

Anyway, the serpent comes to Eve and asks her if God really said what He indeed did say. She basically answers, "Yes," and adds that touching the fruit is a no-no. Then the serpent boldly lies to her and says: "You won't die. In fact, you'll be like God, knowing good and evil."

The next phase of Eve's temptation exemplifies seduction in three areas:

1. It enticed her with personal benefit.

2. It caused her to focus on appearance.
3. It blinded her with false wisdom.

When Eve saw that the fruit on the forbidden tree was “good for food,” she was enticed. Never mind that God said to avoid it; she saw a personal benefit there. It looked like it would taste great and provide nourishment.

Her reaction illustrates a truth about us all: When we are deceived we make certain choices solely because we believe personal gain will come from the decisions.

Attaining the perfect body usually includes this temptation. We’re convinced there is real benefit to all the obsessing we do and all the improvements we make.

The culture reinforces this belief. Having beauty, thinness, the six-pack abs and whatever else, equals success, opportunity and wealth. We are drawn in by the potential for personal reward. Especially when the benefit to us would be instant and, we think, permanent!

Eve also noticed that the fruit pleased her eyes. She liked what she saw. She took her attention off God and the truth of what He’d said and got all caught up in appearances.

How often this happens to us! We get wind of something that falsely promises us incredible physical results, and we want it.

The offer of plastic surgery, creams, bodybuilding systems and so on are so tempting because they are “guaranteed” to enhance personal appearance, to make us more pleasing to the eye. But,

like Eve, when we turn impulsive and care too much about how things look, we lose sight of the long-term consequences of deception, and those consequences cause havoc in our lives.

Finally, Eve believed she could behave independently of God and be OK. For that moment, she didn't trust that what God had said was true. Blinded by false wisdom, she thought she knew what was best and did her own thing—and something shifted. In fact, everything changed.

Now, there is no indication from Genesis 3 that sin changed Adam's and Eve's physical bodies outright. They still had those glorious, perfected forms. What did change, however, was their awareness, or perception, of how they looked.

What to Wear ... ?

After eating from the forbidden tree, Adam's and Eve's eyes were opened. They didn't become like God, as the serpent promised; they became aware of their nakedness instead. And apparently they didn't like what they saw because they tried to hide their bodies.

Think about that. Even people with perfect bodies want to cover up and hide! Their perceptions became distorted, even though they still were physically, or outwardly, beautiful.

Adam and Eve's newfound awareness led them to once again take matters into their own hands by clothing themselves. Don't you just want to shout at them and say, "Quit while you're ahead?"

Their solution this time was to quickly sew together the first

designer fig-leaf outfits and cover themselves. But because it's impossible to hide from God, God found Adam and asked him a question, "Who told you that you were naked?"

Now, it's not like God didn't know the answer. He's God. So why would He ask such a question? He wasn't the one upset by their nakedness; He designed those incredible bodies and declared them good, remember? Rather, God was asking a question that went to the heart of why they were hiding and feeling shame.

For the first time we hear Adam respond to God's question by saying that he hid because he was afraid and naked. But like the messed-up people we are, Adam goes on to blame Eve and God by saying that the woman he was given was the problem. And then when God asks Eve what happened, she blames the serpent. Blame is everywhere. No one is simply acknowledging that they made mistakes and need help.

Adam and Eve's view of their nakedness, or their body image, changed because of their decisions to act independently from God. Their newfound knowledge of good and evil brought them anxiety about their unclothed identity. On their own they tried to cover their nakedness and stop the shame, but they failed, and self-hatred began.

This story explains, in part, why we struggle so much with complete body acceptance. Our perceptions are distorted.

Like Eve, we tend to listen to the voices all around us that don't have our best interests in mind. When we take matters into our own hands and try to deal with those perceptions without God, shame keeps us buying more products or taking

unhealthy supplements to lose weight or build muscle. Shame also distorts the image in the mirror and says to us, "You are inadequate and don't measure up."

The good news is that God sees us in our natural state, naked and all, and formed us intentionally just as we are—for a unique purpose! He doesn't shame us. When we try to deal with distorted images of ourselves apart from God, we won't be successful. Our self-deception is just too strong.

The First 'Designer' Clothes

Thankfully, God sought Adam and Eve in their naked state. He didn't hide from them but pursued them. I love that about God. We are the ones in hiding, not Him.

When Adam and Eve were ashamed, they really needed God to take control. Someone bigger had to intervene. And that's just what happened.

God had them discard the fig leaves and made tunics of animal skin to clothe them. This is important, not because it was a fashion shift, but because of the significance of God's clothing them instead of them clothing themselves.

When God clothed them it wasn't because of shame. It was a covering of protection. Forget the ineffective fig leaves. They were man's and woman's attempt to solve their shame problem on their own.

Skins, though, had significance. They required the shedding of blood.

God offered the first blood sacrifice to save Adam and Eve from spiritual death. What an incredible provision and foreshadowing of our need for a personal Savior who would keep us from destroying ourselves and give us an alternative to solving our problems on our own.

Just as was true for the first humans, God our designer is capable of clothing our distorted perceptions with truth. He does not condemn us or our bodies. He offers grace and love.

Dealing with our perceptions requires a reality beyond ourselves and others. Will we listen to our own or others' thoughts and act accordingly?

Or will we listen to God—the One who formed us in the womb and called us by name before we were born—and believe what He says? The path we choose will determine how well we'll come to accept our bodies.

'Hand Over the Fig Leaves'

The first step in achieving body acceptance is to acknowledge your nakedness, your neediness, before God. Second, you must decide who will be allowed to "cover" you. Your own efforts, the words of family members, cultural images, plastic surgeons—all these can keep you in hiding with feelings of shame and insecurity.

Wouldn't you rather let God's truth speak to you? Wouldn't you prefer to listen when He calls you beautiful and tells you why?

Personally, I don't want to cover myself with fig leaves any longer. I don't "sew" anyway. That's not to say I haven't tried to make my own coverings, but this hasn't worked. I still felt naked. It was only when I allowed God to clothe me in His righteousness that I could stand before Him, just as I am, and experience no shame.

It's time to hand over the fig leaves and let God sew the garments that protect us from the deceiving voices in our heads. We have a spiritual heritage that brings truth to us—body, soul and spirit. It's our choice to stand alone, naked and ashamed, or, with God's help, to make peace with our bodies.

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