

BODY IMAGE

What do you look like? How big (or small) are you? How tall (or short)? How much do you weigh?

When I ask participants how much they weighed when they were teenagers, I hear this lament: They thought they were very heavy, but when they look at those old photos now, they realize they weighed a weight they'd be thrilled to weigh today.

To feel comfortable *feeding the smaller person you've become*, be honest about your weight, silhouette, image, and self. You might be having a hard time giving up the big person image with which you are so comfortable. It is, after all, familiar, possibly since childhood. Unhappiness about weight is a public manifestation about unhappiness about self. Real or imagined. Recent or ancient.

How you looked as a child is how you might now see yourself. If you were a thin child, you might still see yourself as thin, even though you've gained weight. And if you were a heavy child, you might find it hard to believe you're thinner, even though you've lost weight. Getting comfortable with the new smaller you is a matter of taking a few steps to re-enforce a body image more closely related to the new reality.

Buy a full-length mirror, if you don't already have one.

1. Undress and look in it daily.
2. Repeat step one.

Just like keeping a food diary or drinking 10 glasses of water or weighing twice daily, looking in your full-length mirror must be part of the structure of your program. A mirror jolts you out of your weight-loss complacency.

Another assignment of awareness is to get your picture taken. Take out your camera, get a roll of film and have a friend snap shots of you sitting, standing, front view, side view, back view, standing straight, and bending over. Smile, frown, pose, and change outfits. Wear slacks, suits, skirts, dresses, cover-ups, and fitted clothing. Wear nothing. A photograph is the moment in time when you know your weight problems and/or successes are no longer a secret. Others know you've gained (or lost) weight.

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When I was 50 pounds heavier, I dressed differently. I tended to buy shapeless overblouses, A-line dresses and skirts, and generally baggy-type clothing. I thought of myself as young and thin so I was really startled to see a photograph of me looking old and fat. One winter day, while waiting for a bus and even more padded than usual with extra sweaters and a quilted jacket, someone asked me how many months pregnant I was. I was not.

When I lost the weight, however, I again saw myself in a photograph with a friend I'd always considered half my size. I'd thought of myself as much bigger than my friend, even though the photograph showed clearly I was actually much smaller.

The late comedian, Selma Diamond, told a wonderful story about shopping in a Lincoln Road clothing shop in Miami Beach, Florida. "As I tried on a dress the saleswoman oohed and aahed while she lingered in the doorway of the dressing room," Diamond recounted. The saleswoman said "That dress was made for you." "Yes," Diamond deadpanned, "But you made it too small."

Weigh, measure, and go shopping. Try on all kinds of clothing in a smaller size to corroborate what the scale says. You might feel heavy one day because of water retention possibly from overly salty

food, but if the scale is down or you slide into a smaller sized skirt, shirt, slacks, panties, belt, bra, or ring, it's because you're smaller.

Experiment with colors that are brighter, clothing in a different style from those worn by the heavier you. A lot of people who have lost weight are thrilled to see themselves wearing a belt for the first time in years, buckling a belt a notch tighter, or wearing tuck-ins rather than over blouses. Get your hair styled, shave off your moustache. Dress the smaller person you've become.

Kirsten lost a fair amount of weight and followed an assignment to buy one new article of clothing in a smaller size. She paraded around my office pretending to model her new dress. I applauded; she did look terrific. "It's a size 8," she exclaimed incredulously. I beamed for her. She deserved it. And then her smile faded, as if she couldn't believe she was wearing a size 8. "Of course, it's not really a size 8," she said. "It's cut very big." Yet, all the evidence pointed to the fact that when she was 20 pounds heavier, she could not have fit into that size 8 dress even if it was *cut big*.

You weigh more than you want to weigh all over, and that is how you will lose it. It will happen gradually and subtly and won't always be noticeable, so don't expect extreme, daily, dramatic changes.

Weight loss becomes obvious when you've lost anywhere from 5 to 15 pounds. With me, no one noticed until I'd lost about 25 or 30 pounds because I continued to wear those tent-like cover-ups.

Many of the clothes in your closet might be brand new, because as soon as you bought them, your weight increased; some clothes might even have the price tags still attached. Try them on. You might need to tailor them to fit. You might decide to give your clothes to charity. Clean your closets so that everything in them, fits. Then you won't grow back into those bigger sizes. When everything fits perfectly and you eat more than you need, you'll feel the discomfort. If you continually eat more than

you need, and wear elastic-waisted clothing, your waistbands will stretch to accommodate any amount of food and the discomfort won't be obvious.

When you put on something new in a smaller size that fits, people will notice the fit or the color and corroborate the fact that *you look marvelous!* Compliments are the best encouragement for you to continue feeding the smaller you. Sometimes, however, it is the inclination of a person with low self esteem to neutralize a compliment by saying something like “*Yes, but* (the words of an addict), *I have so much more to lose.*” By doing this, you're wiping out all that you have accomplished. *If you don't take responsibility for the baby steps you have achieved, and don't acknowledge you really are a smaller person and are the one responsible for having become a smaller person, you'll never feed the smaller person you've become.* When someone tells you, you look great, say: Thank you. Period. Don't say thank you and then take it away with a *yes, but, it's not really a size 8; it's cut big.* Just say: Thank you. Period.

Suppose you have a pair of slacks or a pretty brown shirt that you've worn through a twenty-pound weight gain, only you know the nuance of the fit as it moves from comfortably big to uncomfortably small. Friends of course, only know you're wearing the pretty brown shirt, again. If you go through life reinforcing destructive behavior by pointing out your imperfections, people will only notice your imperfections, i.e., big stomach or wide hips. They won't see your handsome or pretty face.

When I was 50 pounds heavier, I looked down and saw breasts and belly and thighs not quite the shape and girth I wanted them to be. Fifty pounds lighter, I look down and see the same body parts. I know my body is 50 pounds lighter but it sort of looks and feels the same to me. I do know, however, my daily weight, measurements, clothing size, ring size, belt size, and shoe sizes are all telling me I am a smaller person. *When you lose your weight, you have to*

acknowledge the weight loss and feed the smaller person you've become. The smaller you doesn't have to eat as frequently as before and doesn't require as much food.

When I had just lost the weight, I went to a casual clothing shop and stood on line at the check out counter waiting to buy a pair of elastic-waisted pants. A woman standing behind me in line told me I had such a cute figure that I could wear anything, including the pants I planned on buying. I proudly told her I had just lost 50 pounds. "Then don't buy those elastic-waisted pants," she whispered. "You'll only grow back into them and gain all the weight back." She is absolutely correct, I thought. I put the pants on the counter and fled the store, thanking her over my shoulder as I raced toward the street. Do your clothes fit because the material stretches? Have you grown into your jogging pants?

Health note: When you've lost (or gained) a few pounds whether from overeating or pregnancy (even if you don't carry the baby to term or have a cesarean), get your diaphragm refitted. You lose inches inside as well as out.

Summary: (Rewrite into your log book for daily reviews.)

1. Get photographs taken of yourself.
2. Weigh morning and evening.
3. Look at yourself in a full-length mirror. Buy new items that fit.
4. Make sure all your clothing fits properly especially when you arrive at your weight loss destination. Have your diaphragm refitted. Size your rings.
5. Wear a belt with a buckle whenever eating, whenever possible. If you like oversized clothing, wear a thin belt under your clothes.
6. Remind yourself you are smaller (mental repatterning).

7. Get rid of the old slacks, the big sacks, the tents and tarpaulins, the boombalati dresses.
8. Find a tailor or do it yourself but alter your clothes to reflect the new smaller you. Those of you with relatively big weight fluctuations have several wardrobe sizes hanging in the closet. Get all your clothes to fit properly; get rid of the rest.
9. Don't eat so much that you're stuffed or bloated, ever.
10. Throw away the biggest article of clothing you own. Tear it up and march it out to the curb or at the very least, throw it into the trash. What you're telling yourself symbolically is: I'll never grow into that size again!
11. Go to your closet or a store and try on clothes in a smaller size that fits. Begin wearing one new smaller article of clothing every few weeks.
12. Walk tall. You lost weight. You are a smaller person. Be proud!
13. Keep a photo of a thin you visible. Look at it daily.

This article is an excerpt from the book *Conquer Your Food Addiction* published by Simon and Schuster. Caryl Ehrlich, the author, also teaches *The Caryl Ehrlich Program*, a one-on-one behavioral approach to weight loss in New York City.

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