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Season 2, Episode 7: Body Image: How NOT to Dread Summer

Welcome to Healthier You by Vanderbilt Health & Wellness, a podcast to help Vanderbilt faculty and staff live their healthiest lives.

MB: Hello everybody and welcome to the Healthier You Podcast. I'm Megan Bergfeld, a clinical counselor in Vanderbilt's Employee Assistance Program. Thanks for tuning in. Summer is upon us! The temperature is going up. Retailers are full of bathing suits, shorts, crop tops, what have you. For some of us, the idea of shedding our layers may be pretty uncomfortable this time of year, so I think this is something we should talk about. Today on the podcast, I'm joined by my friend and colleague, Lisa Jackson. Welcome, Lisa.

LJ: Thank you.

MB: Lisa is a clinical social worker in VUMC's Weight Loss Clinic, and you may remember her from the March episode of Healthier You on stress-eating. We'll include a link to that episode in our show notes for anyone who's interested in that. Lisa, I'm seeing conflicting messages these days that I'm hoping you can help me sort out. All of my feeds seem to vacillate between two messages this time of year. On one side, there are so many targeted ads and articles about getting our bodies "swimsuit ready," implying that our current bodies are not ready, right?

LJ: Correct.

MB: That, you know, there's something we have to do before we are considered ready to wear a bathing suit. Then, on the other hand, there's this wave of information on body image, body positivity, body neutrality, etc., just so many terms. Can you speak to this and give us a breakdown of these terms?

LJ: Yes. Okay, you are correct. What you are seeing is not just solely your experience. I think this is all of our experience. So first, body image refers to thoughts, feelings, beliefs, perceptions, and actions that pertain to your physical appearance. Appearance ideals are societally-built standards of body size, shape, color, and other characteristics that are deemed the most ideal or desirable. Okay, so there can be a reaction or a response to these 'appearance ideals'. The first that you kind of mentioned is body positivity. Body positivity encourages individuals to love their bodies regardless of shape, size, color, gender, or ability. So, this can be tricky, because if you have spent a large portion of your life feeling uncomfortable in your body, to suddenly stop and say, "I'm going to love her. This is great." This can be hard. So, even if you're able to achieve this goal of body positivity, like "I love it all," things can change. So, we age. We gain weight. We might be injured. Then we can get stuck. So, this is where in my practice I spend a lot of time trying to find maybe an easier entry point to navigate when we're struggling with body image, and so that's where body neutrality is something that I really focus on. What body neutrality says is you do not have to love your body, but it doesn't mean you have to hate her. We often spend a lot of time in this 'all or nothing', kind of this cognitive distortion that's so common to us as humans, and this pushes back against that. Body neutrality says I can focus on what my body can do, not necessarily how he or she looks. Now, that can be a place we kind of try to get comfortable in, and once we do that, we may not be able to transition right into body positivity, but another space we can go into is this idea of body acceptance. Body acceptance isn't simply about saying "I love my body!" We're not there. We might want to get there, but it's more about accepting that this is my body, and it's mine no matter what the shape, the size, the state of my body, so I can focus on that it exists, that it helps me do things.

MB: Yeah.

LJ: When we think about body positivity, again, I think sometimes we also feel like if we can't get there, we're falling short. So now, not only do I not like the way I look, but I also can't do what other people think I should do or what everyone else is saying they're doing. And so, this gives us a space, whether it's that middle-of-the-road neutrality space, whether I'm looking to feel more acceptance, I think there can be a spectrum.

MB: When I think about body image and all these terms, I think about it mostly in regard to women, probably because I am one.

LJ: Yes.

MB: But also, I just feel like that's a focus. But what does this look like for men?

LJ: For men, this is sometimes called the 'muscular ideal'. Because of the emphasis on overall muscularity as one of the most important factors that represents masculinity. Now, I am married to a short king, and as he and I were speaking about this last night, because I was really picking his brain, he really does fit the muscular ideal, but because of that and because of his height, his BMI is overweight. And when he saw that on his medical record, and this even started back when we were in college, that was really distressing to him. Even if I look at him, even if he can see a photograph, even if he can look on social media and maybe see appearance ideals that he looks like, someone else is telling him he's overweight, and that's, again, within our medical community. So, that would be another podcast to have where we'll think about BMI, but I would say I have witnessed this play out, where even if you meet a standard or ideal, there can be another standard or ideal that now you're not reaching.

MB: Yeah, it's a moving target.

LJ: It is.

MB: Now, I'll admit, body image has been a years-long battle for me, to the point where that almost seems like the normal thing, right? Like I'm not supposed to like my body the way that it is. I should always be aiming for something different. And I think this has really impacted me emotionally, socially, behaviorally, all the things through my life. So, what would you say are the primary risks for living with a low or negative body image.

LJ: Okay, this is a great question. I think everything we think is normal, shouldn't be. Negative body image is one of the many known contributors to eating disorders. And this is something in my practice that I work with day in and day out. So, for those who struggle with body image, this time of year can take all the fun out of what's meant to be this joyful and carefree season, and it can trigger disordered eating behaviors. So, again, going back, if we're looking at social media and we're trying to see what are those appearance ideals, it's hard to know what's real. We've got filters now, and I'm going to age myself, but like Photoshop. I mean, things that we did where, AI, I mean. My uncle took a picture of my grandparents and like brought it to life, and they were dancing, and I said, I've never seen my grandfather smile so long. Because in the AI version, he's just constantly smiling, and it looked real, but that's where I would have called it out. I would have been like, oh, this is odd. So, again, I think whether it's messages we've received about our bodies, about how they should look, whether it's TV media, this can lead to, at best, it's just taking away from

my enjoyment of this vacation, and at worst, I'm developing, whether it's disordered eating behaviors or actually it's triggering my eating disorder.

MB: Yeah, yeah. That is not a fun way to walk through life. To your comments about social media, we even see all these skin products and all of these fancy devices and stuff, but you have no idea if it's an actual person that you're seeing, or if it's filtered out flawless skin. But, there's always something to aim for, and it contributes to this view of ourselves, I think. So, if you're noticing this, right, how might somebody assess how their body image is impacting them?

LJ: There are three kind of questions that I'll encourage people to ask. The first is: how do you talk to yourself about your body? So, what kind of words do you use? Are they primarily positive words? Are they negative? And these can lead to feelings of disgust. So, when we think about ourselves, again, what am I saying? Now, this can be internal. This can be something that I'm not sharing, or this can be how I talk to somebody, but just asking, and without judgement, can I just pay attention to what are the words I'm using about myself? How does your self-talk about your body affect your mood? So again, if you don't meet the ideal, you did something wrong. And this can even be when you're trying to improve body image, like I said, but you're falling short of what you think should be body positivity. Now, all of a sudden, I'm doing something. So, I can feel overwhelmed by all of the terms. I can start to feel shame, like it's not just that I did something wrong, there's just something wrong with me. And then last, what activities or situations do you avoid because you feel physically self-conscious? And I think the season, even your opener about it's summer and we're seeing all these things about a beach body or bikini ready, indicating that we're not ready. I think that can make us feel isolated. So, this can, I mean, I would ask our listeners to think about how many photographs do you have with your significant other or your children? Are you the one always taking the pictures? Do you intentionally try to stay out of them? Are you choosing not to do this activity or not because it's hot and I'm not going to wear shorts? Or, "Let's not do this vacation, because this would mean I would need to wear a bathing suit." So, I think those would be the questions I'd ask.

MB: That's very helpful, especially for people, like me, where it has become that normal thing. It's just part of your life, but maybe this deserves a new look, right? So, do you have any strategies that you recommend for folks to improve body image and maybe move toward that body neutrality and acceptance side?

LJ: Yeah, I think having a healthier body image is an important part of your mental wellbeing, like when we talk about just how we feel, but also eating disorder prevention. So, it's okay to struggle with your body image, but it's not acceptable to project your insecurities on others, and I think this is where we can really start to pick up some of these

strategies. So, stop criticizing or judging others based on their physical appearance. And I know that if I think it's okay for me to say this out loud, what am I saying to myself when no one else is listening? Because I think, I mean, we're much harsher critics to self, so again, when we're listening to social media and people are talking about others, or we're talking with our friends and we're commenting, we're people-watching, I think we need to be very aware of how we observe others, what words we use. I think setting healthy boundaries when it comes to how we speak about ourselves, so this may be saying to someone like "I'm not interested in talking about other people's bodies," and just kind of setting that out there, or it could be with a family member. You know, again, they may not be saying anything about me, but they're really talking negatively about themselves. So, this is where I could say, you know, "Please don't comment on my body or anyone's body, not yours," like, "Let's not talk about how people look." I think wearing clothes that are comfortable and fit well. Clothes are not created, they're made to fit us, and not the other way around. But I think often we buy that inspiration outfit. "By the end of the summer, this is the suit I'm going to get in," and so we do either wear it, we don't go out because I don't have a suit that fits, or I feel really insecure, and so we talk about this. If you see someone hunching their shoulders, pulling their shorts down, covering their midsection because they're insecure, this is where I pause and say: find clothes that fit. And when we think about comparing yourself to other people, trying to limit what we see on social media, maybe the feeds you choose to look at. Going back to that question of what words we use, are these feeds promoting positive words when we talk about body shape/size? Or are these negative? But I think, also, one of the benefits of social media is maybe you can find people who represent you.

MB: Thank you, Lisa, that's very helpful. Do you have a final message or encouragement you want to share with those who are relating to all of this right now?

LJ: Yeah, I think because of the work we do, because we work in a medical setting, I think appearance ideals we can often really relate those also to health ideals. So, is there one single definition of health that fits every single person? I think we want to believe there is, but no, there is not. So, health is multifactorial. So, can you engage in enjoyable activities? Are you exercising happily? Are you interacting with loved ones and more? Some aspects of health are beyond our control, so I think it's important to prioritize providing our bodies with what they require instead of idealizing this particular status, whether that's a health status, whether that is an appearance ideal. In my practice, I encouraged individuals to achieve a weight that helps them live nourished, fulfilled lives versus working toward this societal healthy ideal. And we're going to go back to my husband, and again, this concept that there's this BMI that you have to reach for versus being healthy in who you are. For example, 'being healthy is super active'. Well, again, if you're someone who's living with a

chronic illness, if you're someone who has a different ability status, if you're in pain, if you're in eating disorder recovery, super active may not be an ideal that we're going to push for or try to achieve.

MB: Thank you so much for chatting with me today. I love listening to you talk about your jam, right? This is what you do, and you're so good at it. Also, thank you to our listeners. If this is a topic that resonates with you, consider scheduling your no-cost, confidential appointment with EAP today by calling 615-936-1327. We're also including a list of books recommended by Lisa in the show notes, so until next time, take care.

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