

BODY SHAMING

Reframing the Perfect Picture
through Active Youth Participation

‘Reshaping the Perfect Image’ Educational Guide



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Introduction

The European programme 'Body Shaming: Reframing the Perfect Picture through Active Youth Participation' is being implemented by the Cyprus Youth Clubs Organisation and its members, with the main aim of informing, educating and raising awareness amongst young people regarding body image and mental health.

The programme was created in response to a significant social challenge of our time: the increasing pressure young people feel to conform to specific standards of appearance. Through educational initiatives, workshops, discussions and participatory activities, the programme aims to give young people a voice and help them develop critical thinking skills regarding the beauty standards promoted by the media and social media.

Specifically, the project has the following objectives:

- Promoting inclusion and mental health: Educating and raising awareness among young people about body image and its impact on mental health, particularly in rural and marginalised communities where access to relevant information may be limited.
- Empowering and supporting young people: Empowering pupils and young people aged 13–30 by developing skills in self-esteem, resilience and positive self-perception.
- Creating spaces for dialogue: Providing opportunities for young people to actively participate in discussions with experts, educators and policy-makers on issues that affect their daily lives.

The project 'Body Shaming: Reframing the Perfect Picture through Active Youth Participation' also aligns with the objectives of the EU Youth Strategy, focusing on Objective 5 'Mental Health and Well-being', Objective 3 (Inclusive Society) and Objective 8 (Quality Learning), empowering young people aged 13–30 with practical skills for active participation in their communities and in bringing about social change.

In modern society, many young people feel pressure to conform to specific appearance standards promoted by social media, advertising and the media. These standards often depict bodies that appear 'perfect', without flaws, creating the impression that this is the normal or desirable appearance. These images can influence the way young people perceive their own bodies and create a sense that they do not meet the standards presented.

The aim of this guide is to inform and raise awareness amongst young people about body shaming, body image and the importance of mental health. At the same time, it aims to reinforce the understanding that every body is unique and that a person's worth is not determined by their appearance.

The guide is aimed at young people regardless of their social, cultural or educational background and can be used both individually and in educational settings, workshops or school programmes .

Key terms and concepts

Body image

Body image refers to the way in which a person perceives their own body and how they believe others perceive it. It encompasses the thoughts, feelings and attitudes a person has regarding their appearance. It also relates to how a person feels inside their body, how comfortable they feel in social situations, and how their self-esteem is affected by their appearance.

Body image can be positive or negative. When a person has a positive body image, they feel comfortable with their appearance and accept their body, even if they recognise that it does not meet all social standards. Conversely, when they have a negative body image, they may feel dissatisfaction, shame or insecurity about their appearance. This can affect their daily life, their social relationships and their self-confidence.

Body image is influenced by many factors, such as:

- the standards promoted by the media
- comments from friends and family
- experiences at school or online
- personal experiences and comparisons with others.

Body Shaming

Body shaming is the act of criticising, mocking or humiliating someone because of their appearance. These comments may relate to weight, height, body shape and specific physical characteristics. It is a phenomenon that can occur in many different situations in everyday life, such as at school, in sports settings, at social gatherings or online. On social media, body shaming can take the form of negative comments, insults or mockery under photos and posts.

Sometimes body shaming can also take the form of negative self-talk, when someone judges themselves harshly, repeating thoughts such as 'I don't like myself', 'I'm fat' or 'I'm not attractive enough'. This form of self-criticism, also known as self-body shaming, can be just as damaging .

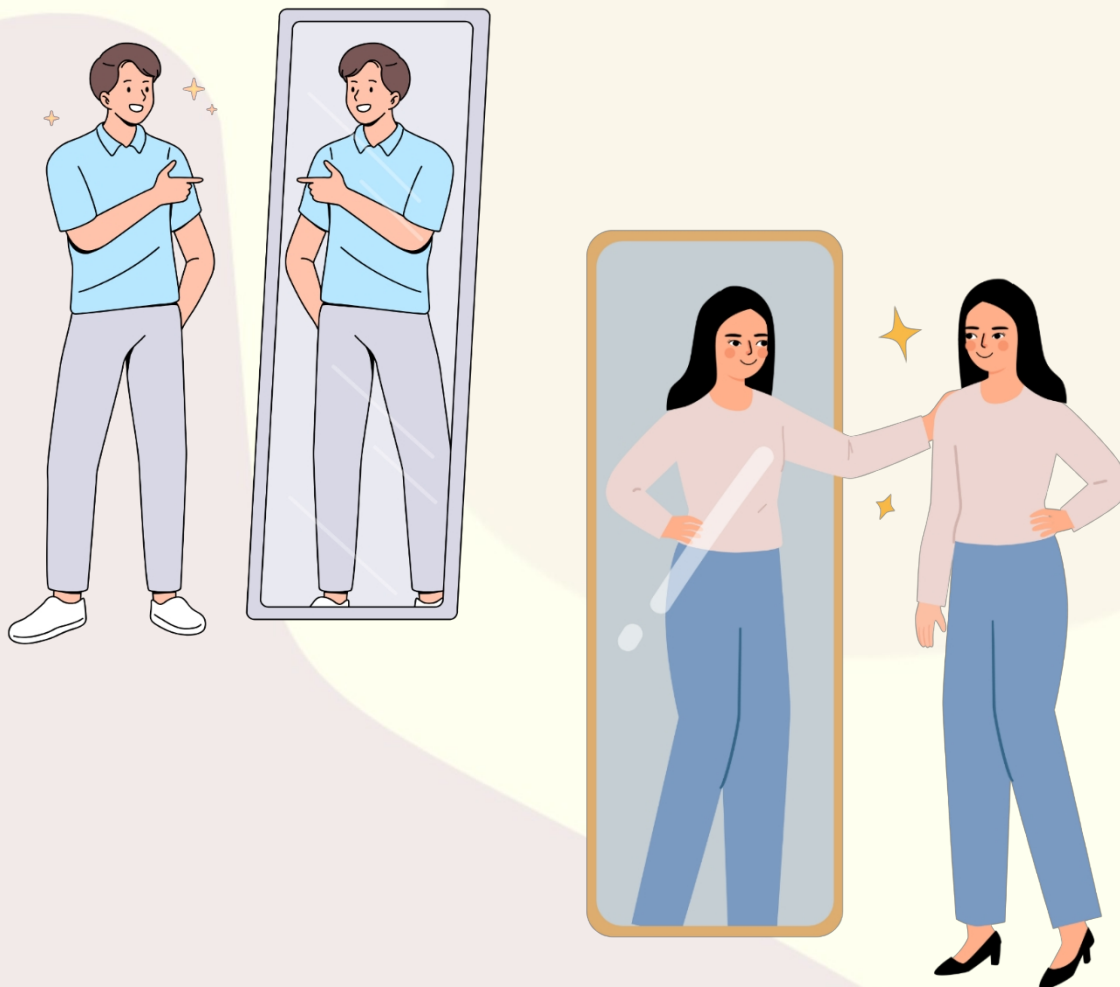
Mental health

Mental health refers to a person's emotional, psychological and social well-being. It affects the way we think, feel and cope with life's challenges.

Mental health helps people to:

- manage stress
- build healthy relationships
- make decisions
- cope with difficulties.

Mental health does not mean that a person does not face difficulties or experience negative emotions. Rather, it means that they have the resources and support they need to understand their emotions, adapt to change and seek help when they need it. Promoting mental health is particularly important during adolescence and young adulthood, a period in which young people are developing their identity, self-esteem and relationships with others.



Body image as a key pillar for young people

Adolescence is a crucial stage in the development of personality, identity and self-esteem. During this period, young people begin to discover who they are, what they believe in and how they wish to present themselves to the world. In this process, appearance and body image often take on particular significance, as they are strongly influenced by their social environment, friends, family, teachers and the media.

Social media plays a particularly important role in shaping body image. Platforms such as Instagram, TikTok and other apps often feature images that promote specific beauty standards. However, many of these images are edited, carefully selected or do not reflect people's real everyday lives.

At the same time, young people are influenced not only by the images they see every day, but also by broader social and cultural standards of beauty. In many societies, the idea is promoted that there is a specific way for a body to be 'beautiful', 'attractive' or 'acceptable'. These perceptions may vary from era to era and from culture to culture, but they often put pressure on people to try to conform to standards that are neither realistic nor healthy for everyone.

Constant exposure to such images and standards can lead to comparisons with others. These comparisons can cause:

- anxiety
- low self-esteem
- body dissatisfaction
- fear of criticism from others
- avoidance of social activities.

Developing a positive body image helps people feel more confident and participate actively in social life, as it contributes to building healthy relationships and improving mental wellbeing.

Findings from the programme's activities

As part of the programme, three focus groups were held with a total of 80 participants, an open discussion with 70 volunteers from five youth centres across Cyprus, as well as youth workers, and two workshops involving 80 young people aged 13–30. A total of 330 participants will take part in all the programme's activities. These activities created a safe space for people to express their thoughts and experiences. At the same time, they enabled researchers and trainers to better understand how young people experience body shaming in their daily lives.

The young people described body shaming as negative comments or criticism relating to a person's appearance. These comments may relate to weight, height, body shape, facial features, hair or other physical characteristics. Although some people initially associated body shaming mainly with weight, during the discussions they recognised that the phenomenon can take many different forms.

Participants reported that body shaming can occur in many areas of daily life, such as at home, at school or university, in the workplace, at sports venues and on social media. Particular emphasis was placed on the role of social media, which often promotes unrealistic beauty standards and intensifies the pressure on young people to conform to specific images of the 'perfect' body. Many people shared personal experiences from their childhood or adolescence, noting that certain comments about their appearance had stayed with them for years and influenced the way they view their own bodies.

Young people's suggestions for tackling the issue

During the discussions, the participants also suggested ways to prevent and tackle body shaming. One key point they highlighted was the importance of social support, emphasising that support from friends, family and teachers can be of significant help to those who have experienced body shaming. At the same time, they emphasised the importance of personal development and self-improvement, namely building self-confidence and self-acceptance.

Among the prevention strategies proposed were:

- education and awareness-raising on body image
- promoting respect for and acceptance of diversity
- teaching children to respect others
- promoting healthy lifestyle habits
- the presence of psychologists and nutritionists in schools.

The participants concluded that addressing the influence of social media and fostering personal development are key steps towards reducing the negative effects of body shaming.

International research & body shaming

International scientific research (Gearhart, 2018; Vitzthum, 2013; Kapsetaki, 2017; PSHE Association; Centre for Appearance Research) show that comments about appearance can have significant impacts on people's mental and physical health, particularly during adolescence and young adulthood. In modern society, beauty standards are frequently promoted as ideals, mainly through the media and social networks, so when a person feels they do not meet these standards, they may develop a negative body image and believe that their self-worth is linked to their appearance.

Eating disorders

A negative body image is a significant risk factor for the development of eating disorders, such as anorexia nervosa, bulimia nervosa and binge eating disorder. Many people who are dissatisfied with their bodies may start strict diets or adopt unhealthy behaviours, such as skipping meals, excessive fasting or inducing vomiting after eating. Over time, these practices can have a negative impact on physical and mental health. Scientific evidence suggests that dieting during adolescence significantly increases the likelihood of developing eating disorders later in life. Furthermore, the internalisation of beauty standards has been found to be a key predictor of the development of such disorders.

Body Dysmorphic Disorder

In some cases, constant preoccupation with one's appearance can lead to Body Dysmorphic Disorder (BDD). People with this disorder focus excessively on a minor or even imaginary 'flaw' in their appearance. This can lead to intense anxiety about their body, a constant need for reassurance from others, or avoidance of social activities.

Excessive exercise

Physical activity is important for health, but when it becomes excessive and compulsive, it can cause problems. In some cases, the pressure to change one's body can lead to excessive exercise, which is linked to fatigue, injuries and increased stress. When

If the energy the body takes in is not sufficient to sustain intense exercise, health problems may arise. Compulsive exercise is often linked to a distorted body image and eating disorders. Furthermore, chronic energy deficiency can affect the endocrine system, particularly in adolescents and young adults.

Anxiety and depression

Negative comments about one's appearance can lower self-esteem and lead to feelings of shame, anxiety or loneliness. Some people begin to avoid social activities or situations where they fear they will be judged on their appearance. Over time, these experiences can lead to increased levels of anxiety and depressive symptoms. According to studies, body shaming and appearance-based bullying are linked to higher rates of depression and social anxiety. This effect appears to be more pronounced when the comments come from peers or people in the immediate social circle.

Impact on physical health

Fat shaming, that is, mockery or criticism based on weight, is particularly widespread in many societies and is often linked to stereotypes about people who do not conform to the social weight norm.

Research shows that a large proportion of teenagers have experienced ridicule because of their weight, which can lead to a reduction in physical activity, increased food consumption or emotional overeating. Over time, these experiences can have a negative impact on physical health and increase the risk of developing conditions such as high blood pressure, high cholesterol, cardiovascular disease and type 2 diabetes. Furthermore, studies show that weight stigma is associated with elevated levels of cortisol (the stress hormone), which can have a negative impact on metabolism and overall health. At the same time, the stress caused by such experiences can reinforce unhealthy behaviours rather than leading to positive changes.

Practical advice for teenagers and **young** adults

Body shaming is... a problem faced by many teenagers and young adults today, particularly in an era where social media plays a significant role in everyday **life**. It is important to remember that developing a positive body image means learning to accept and look after our bodies, without trying to ...live up to unrealistic standards.

At the same time, it is useful to recognise that it is not always necessary to change every aspect of our appearance in order to have a healthier relationship with our bodies. Sometimes, a more realistic first step is 'body neutrality'. This means learning to treat our bodies with respect, without constantly judging them as 'perfect' or 'imperfect'. The emphasis shifts from how our bodies look to what they allow us to 'express'.

The following practical tips can help teenagers and young adults to cope with body shaming and develop healthy self-confidence.



Social media show only part of reality

Social media often presents a 'perfect' version of reality. In reality, many of these photos are:

- επεξεργασμένες

- . retouched ...: with specific **lighting**

- * the result of filters or editing adjustments.

Most people only post their best moments.

This tends to create the impression that everyone has 'perfect' bodies or 'perfect' lives.

Understanding this phenomenon can help young people reduce their comparison with others.



Limiting exposure to content that makes you feel bad

If a social media account makes you feel insecure about your body

, it's perfectly normal to choose to delete it:

- . unfollow

- mute

- block

Alternatively, you can follow accounts that promote:

- self-acceptance
- mental health
- diversity of communities.

This way, the content you see every day can become more positive and encouraging.



Healthy habits – not just for **appearance**

Adopting healthy habits is important for both physical and mental well-being.

This may include:

- * balanced diet
- * sufficient sleep
- * regular physical activity
- * time for relaxation and rest.



Food as your friend, not your enemy

When we feel ashamed or under pressure about our weight, it's easy to develop a difficult or conflicted relationship with food.

It is important to realise that food is not the 'enemy', ... but a fundamental part of self-care του σώματός μας.

A healthier relationship with food can develop when:

- * we eat more mindfully and not hastily
- we avoid eating ...: out of guilt
- we listen more closely to our body's hunger and fullness cues

More mindful eating, also known as mindful eating, can help young people approach food with greater calm, balance and respect.



Θέτοντας όρια

Sometimes people make comments about your weight without realising how much they might hurt you. If you feel this way, you can set boundaries by saying things like:

- 'I don't want to hear comments about my body.'
- . 'Comments like that make me feel bad.'
- . "Why ... do you think it's okay to comment on someone else's body?"
- . "People's bodies aren't there to be commented on."

Expressing boundaries is an important skill that helps us build healthier relationships.



Respect and understanding

The thoughts we have about ourselves significantly influence how we feel. Many young people tend to be very hard on themselves, particularly when they compare their appearance with images they see online. If you find yourself thinking things like:

- * 'I'm not good-looking enough'
- ' -I don't look like the people I see online'
- -'Everyone else is better than me'

Try to remember that these thoughts often do not reflect reality and..... treat yourself with the same respect and understanding that you would show to another person.



Thinking before action

It's important... to have the skill of empathy before we say 'Kc'm T(0U' – I'd like to say that vu rtAnvu'Joa s'va (1llo (For example, just as comments on social media can affect you, so too can they affect many other people; comments that may seem 'joking' can have a negative impact on someone's self-esteem.

Respect for diversity helps to create a safer and more positive environment. We can choose to express ourselves in a way that encourages and supports others, rather than criticising them. Even small changes in the way we speak can make a big difference to how those around us feel. Responsibility in our speech is a key element for healthier relationships based on respect.



Supportive Environments

Support from friends can help you see the situation in a different light and feel less alone. If someone makes comments about your appearance and this affects you, you can talk about it. Talking to Kc'mOlov rtou summabsoal can be very helpful.

You can ... contact:

* New member

a member of the family

- coach
- εκπαιδευτικό
- ' counsellor or psychologist.



Your body is **not** just **about** its appearance

Your body allows you to:

- κινείσαι
- χορεύεις

- . to explore
- . you embrace people
- . you inspire
- . You create experiences.

Focusing on what your body is capable of can help you develop a more positive relationship with it.



Accepting imperfection

You don't need to feel good about your body every single day. Changing the way we treat ourselves is a process that takes time, patience and practice.

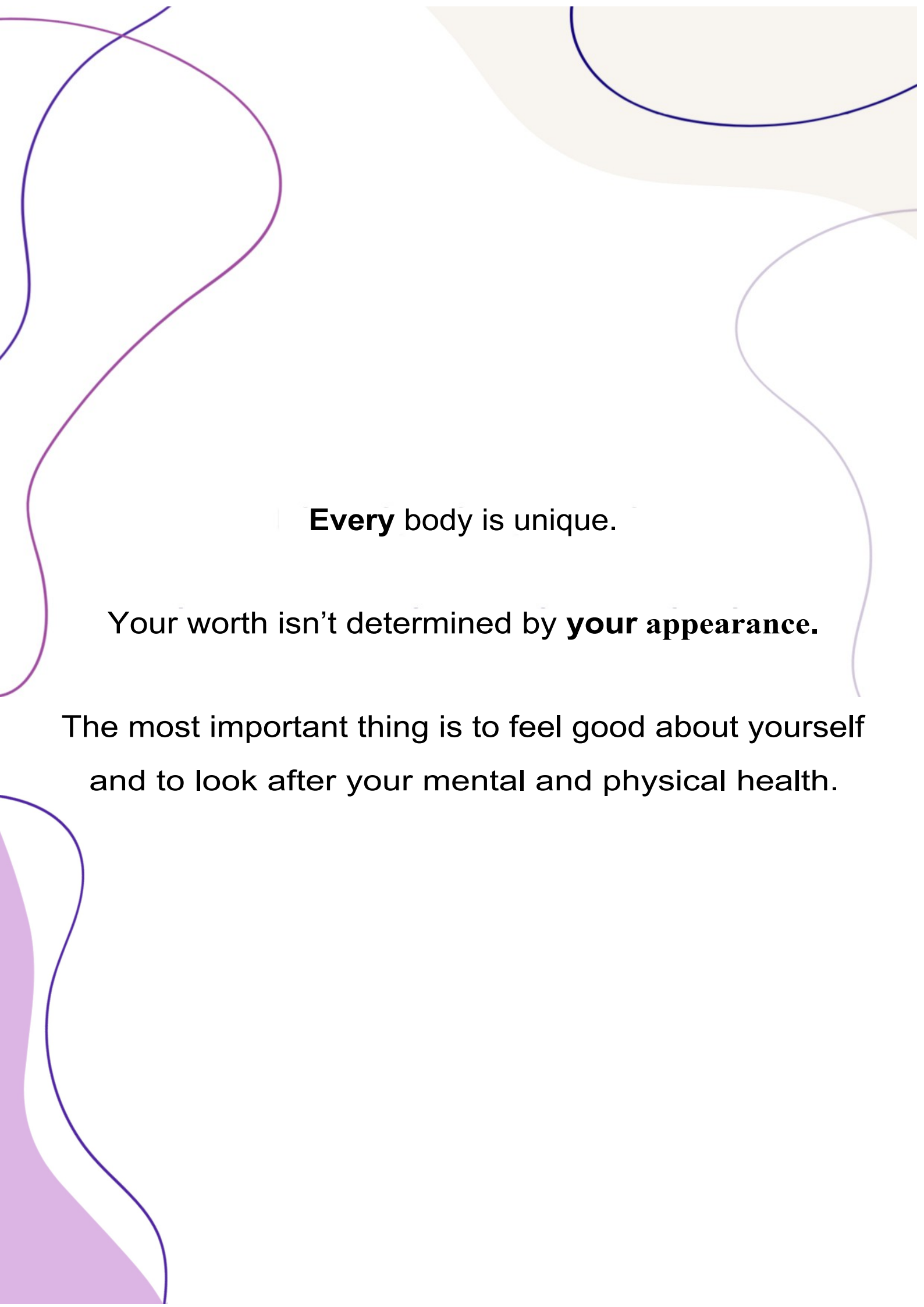
If it doesn't seem easy for you to say 'I love my body', you can start with simple statements such as:

'My body deserves respect.'

'It's not wrong to be happy...'

'I can look after my body without hating it.'

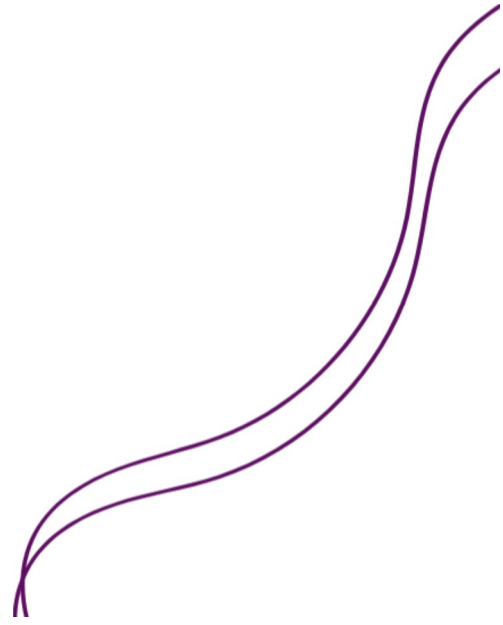
This mindset can be an important first step towards a more positive body image.



Every body is unique.

Your worth isn't determined by **your appearance**.

The most important thing is to feel good about yourself
and to look after your mental and physical health.



How to support someone experiencing body shaming

If someone – a friend or someone close to you – is receiving negative comments about their appearance, your support can make a huge difference. Often, someone experiencing body shaming feels ashamed, embarrassed or isolated. Having someone there who listens without judging can make a huge difference.

You can offer support in simple yet meaningful ways:

- listen to them carefully without judgement
- acknowledge that their feelings are genuine and important
- avoid phrases such as ‘don’t worry about it’ or ‘it’s nothing’
- remind them that their worth does not depend on their appearance
- encourage them to speak to an adult or a specialist, if they need to.

Whether body shaming happens at school, at university, in your workplace or online, it’s important not to remain silent when there’s a way to safely support the person being targeted. Support from peers can significantly reduce feelings of loneliness and shame.

Furthermore, research shows that experiencing body shaming can have a negative impact on self-esteem, body image and even mental health (e.g. increased anxiety or depressive symptoms). Social support acts as a protective factor, as it reduces the internalisation of negative comments and strengthens an individual’s resilience. In other words, when a person feels that they belong and are accepted by those around them, they are less likely to adopt the negative perceptions imposed on them by others. For this reason, your stable, consistent and non-judgemental attitude is not merely a matter of ‘good intentions’, but has a proven positive effect on their psychological well-being.

Sources of support

Seeking help is a positive and courageous step towards self-care and improving mental health. Some possible sources of support include:

Mental health services

Mental health professionals, such as psychologists, psychotherapists or counsellors, can help young people better understand their emotions, develop a positive body image and cope with the effects of body shaming.

Youth support organisations

Many organisations and youth centres offer programmes, activities and counselling support on issues relating to young people's self-esteem, mental health and personal development.

Bullying helplines

There are telephone or online helplines where young people can speak to trained professionals and receive guidance in cases of bullying or cyberbullying.

School counsellors and teachers

School counsellors, psychologists or teachers can be an important source of support for pupils facing difficulties in the school environment.

Family and friends

Support from people we trust, such as friends and family members, can be a great help in coping with difficult experiences and boosting self-confidence.

Creating an environment of understanding, acceptance and respect can play a key role in preventing body shaming and promoting the mental health of young people.

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The information and educational material presented in this guide are based on international research, scientific publications and educational organisations working in the fields of mental health, body image and the prevention of bullying.

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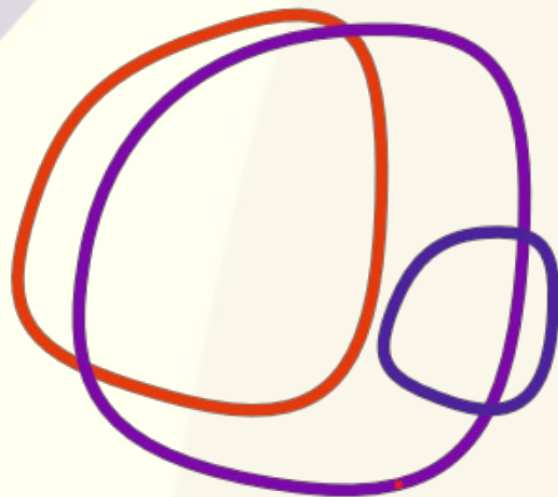
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www.bodyshaming.info



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