We live in a culture that is obsessed with body image. Women are bombarded with images of female models who often weigh less than a healthy weight. Men must face pictures of “male perfection” that include being tall, handsome, muscular and having a full head of hair. Few people meet these portrayed ideals. When cultural ideals are so far removed from reality, it can harm an average person’s body image. And if it can harm an average person’s body image, imagine what it does to the body image of those who consider themselves to be out of the norm because they are struggling with excess weight and/or obesity.

In a 2013 quantitative study, 50 women described obesity as a barrier to both physical and emotional intimacy, and many reported avoiding intimate relationships because of it!
Defining Body Image and Recognizing Its Effects

Body image is the way we see our bodies and the level of comfort we have in them. Unfortunately, many people who carry extra weight have a negative body image. Having a negative body image is tied to a number of serious medical conditions including:

- Eating disorders
- Depression
- Substance abuse

Additionally, a high degree of body image negativity is also connected to being turned off by or uncomfortable with intimacy. While there have not been a great number of studies surrounding weight and intimacy, a 2010 study among 362 college undergraduates showed that having a negative body image correlated with avoiding sex. In a 2013 quantitative study, 50 women described obesity as a barrier to both physical and emotional intimacy, and many reported avoiding intimate relationships because of it!
WEIGHT & INTIMACY: A Closer Look

While scientific facts concerning weight, body image and intimacy are few and far between, almost anyone who has ever seen the display on their bathroom scale reach unintended ranges can tell you exactly what a person with extra weight feels like when faced with a potential intimate situation. These feelings often include reluctance, discomfort and shame.

However, it is not just weight and body image that affect these feelings. It is important to note that many people experience at least some level of reluctance, discomfort or shame when faced with an intimate encounter no matter what their weight is.

Intimacy can be a challenging road to navigate for many reasons – emotional, physical or logistical. If you’re someone who experiences reluctance, discomfort or shame, it may help to know that your feelings are shared by nearly three-quarters of humanity (who are those other lucky people?). Thankfully, there are also some things you can do to reduce those feelings, especially if your feelings are so strong that they cause you to avoid intimacy.

WAYS TO INCREASE INTIMACY:

✔ Increase the Amount of Time Spent in Non-sexual Intimacy

Remember, intimacy involves a lot more than just sex. Intimacy is defined as the sense that one can share thoughts and feelings not usually expressed in other relationships while having the expectation of being understood, affirmed and cared for in return. Sex is just one way people can be intimate. Talking about hopes and fears is another. Holding hands is another. Kissing without expectations of sex is another. There are many ways to express intimacy! Engaging in non-sexual acts of intimacy with a partner you’re attracted to can increase your desire for sexual intimacy. In the study with 362 undergraduates, researchers found that increased sexual desire reduced the tendency for those with negative body images to avoid sexual activity.

✔ Talk to Your Partner about Your Feelings

Being honest is never easy, but having a conversation about your feelings can be less emotionally risky than participating in an intimate experience you are dreading. Saying something like “I’m eager to do ‘X’ with you, but I’m anxious because of ‘Y’” is a helpful way to open a conversation about the topic. A good partner will be supportive, tell you they are attracted to you and may even be surprised to find out you have any doubts about your desirability. If you have a partner who isn’t supportive or who sows seeds of doubt about your body, you should see those actions as a red flag. Consider talking to a professional counselor or therapist. With your partner’s heartfelt assurances, your feelings of doubt may diminish or even disappear.

✔ Engage in Other Body-positive Activities

Notice that I didn’t say “weight-loss” activities. The goal isn’t to lose weight but to build a connection to your body. Swimming, hiking, bowling, yoga, dancing and other activities that require you to draw on your body’s strengths can leave you refreshed and feeling like your body is your partner, not your enemy.

✔ Talk to a Therapist

If you spend a lot of time in non-sexual intimacy, your partner is supportive and clearly interested in you, yet you still want to avoid sexual intimacy but wish you didn’t, try talking to a professional counselor or therapist. They can help you identify the source of your feelings and help you come up with ways to address them for improved health in your relationship.
You may also want to consider other reasons for your avoidance behavior. There are many reasons people avoid intimacy. Weight is one but there are others. Some medications suppress sexual desire and lead to avoidance of physical intimacy. Fear of certain medical conditions – like heart attack or stroke – may also cause people to avoid intimacy. Overuse of pornography may depress the need for intimacy. Low levels of testosterone in men can reduce desire and increase avoidance behaviors. Chronic pain and drug addiction can also lead to avoidance. And finally, having a negative body image, a precursor to avoidance, can be related to emotions as well as weight. Many of these conditions or situations can be moderated or regulated by a healthcare provider, so don’t be afraid to seek help if you need it.

In a 2011 Glamour Magazine poll of 300 women, respondents who were unsatisfied with their career or relationship tended to report more negative body thoughts than respondents who were satisfied in those areas. Similarly, women who felt unpleasant emotions including boredom, anxiety or stress reported more negative body thoughts than women whose emotions were more positive. If you’re avoiding intimacy and not quite sure why, consider consulting a healthcare professional.

Remember, intimacy should be a joy. Don’t let unwanted feelings keep you from enjoying what should be a very satisfying aspect of life!

About the Author:
Gwyn Cready, MBA, is a writer and branding consultant. She is also the author of nine novels and a graphic novel. Her work has appeared in Real Simple, USA Today and a number of other media outlets.