Strive for a healthy attitude about your body

By Lisa Eierman
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Editor's note: This nutrition column appears the first Tuesday of the month on the Food pages.

With this unseasonably warm weather, the summer swimsuit and shorts season is just around the corner. These more revealing clothing styles make many of us focus more on our body's appearance.

Some of us may be uncomfortable with our body's shape and may be tempted to start dieting to lose weight. Before you start any crash diets, stop, take a deep breath and reassess your thinking about your body.

Keep in mind that healthy people come in many shapes and sizes: tall or short, stocky or lanky, muscular or not. Each person's body shape is unique. There is no "perfect body" or ideal body weight, shape or size to strive for.

The most important thing is to be healthy so you can enjoy a fulfilling life with the body you have.

If you're wondering whether you're at a healthful weight range for your body, here are some ways to assess that.

One method is the body mass index, a comparison of your weight with your height. Higher BMI is correlated with increased risk for weight-related health problems.

Adults ages 20 and older can check their BMI at cdc.gov/healthyweight; children and teenagers ages 2 to 19 have separate BMI growth charts.

You also can check your waist circumference, which assesses the upper abdominal fat on your body. Women with a waist circumference of greater than 35 inches, or men with a measurement greater than 40 inches, have increased risks of health problems.

Another tool is the Hamwi Method, which assesses ideal body weight based on height.
If you find you are above the range at which you would like to be after comparing your weight with these standards, take a realistic look at what you want to do about it. The My Plate website, choosemyplate.gov, contains guidelines about healthful weight loss. Stay away from fad diets; drastic weight loss isn’t healthy in the long run.

In addition, reflect on how you think about your body. If you find yourself focusing on your appearance and feeling negative about it, be aware you may be struggling with a negative body image and this may keep you from being happy with your weight.

Jeanne Rothaupt, a counselor with UW-Stout’s Counseling Center in Menomonie, says she sees college students struggling with body image issues in her practice there.

She finds students often have unrealistic images of what their bodies should look like - they compare themselves with fictional or surgically modified bodies that define a cultural ideal of beauty that is unhealthy and essentially unattainable.

Rothaupt defines negative body image as being dissatisfied with your body and in some cases actually hating your physical self. Happiness becomes associated with weight.

People often comment that they will be happy when they lose another 10 pounds. But when they lose that weight, they find they are still unhappy.

Rothaupt encourages students to have a more positive body image by valuing and, essentially, befriending their body.

People with a healthy body image appreciate their physical form and deal with their emotions directly, she said, without becoming preoccupied with thoughts of being fat or unacceptable.

Eierman is a registered dietitian with more than 25 years experience in the food and nutrition field. She has bachelor's and master's degrees in nutrition and is certified as a diabetes educator by the American Association of Diabetes Educators and a certified dietitian by the state of Wisconsin. She is the owner of Nutrition First, a nutrition consulting business in the Eau Claire community, and is a registered dietitian with UW-Stout Dining Services.

**Hamwi Method: Ideal Body Weight**

Females: 100 pounds for the first 5 feet. Add 5 pounds for every inch over 5 feet or subtract 5 pounds for every inch under.
Males: 106 pounds for the first 5 feet. Add 6 pounds for every inch over 5 feet or subtract 6 pounds for every inch under.

Both: Add 10 percent for a large frame or subtract 10 percent for a small frame.

**Healthy Mindset**

Following are UW-Stout counselor Jeanne Rothaupt's tips for promoting a healthful body image:

Combat the media and cultural pressure of a particular body shape setting the standard for all people. The media send powerful messages, especially to adolescent girls, that their bodies are unacceptable. In college students, these messages may have become ingrained and need to be confronted.

Affirm your body as the gift it is. Really work to love yourself, and remember you are much more than your appearance.

As in confronting racism, also confront "fatism." Watch for attitudes in yourself that judge others - and yourself - just because of their weight. We are all more than our shapes.

Recognize that you may be more self-critical of your body shape and weight when you are upset about something else. Strive to uncover the thoughts and feelings that are really bothering you.

Watch for and challenge negative self-talk. When you notice yourself saying you are too fat or your body is ugly or disgusting, stop the train of thought, take a deep breath, and be compassionate and nurturing to yourself.

Focus on health and not size. If you believe you need to lose weight for health reasons, stay focused on loving and caring for your body versus despising and being critical of yourself.