

Tackling negative body image among women by emphasising functionality

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Credit: Mika/Corbis

Women who nurse negative thoughts about their appearance think that people look at them just as disapprovingly. Such a negative body image

can lead to a wide range of complaints, from depression to eating disorders and obesity. A solution appears to be at hand: women who concentrate on what their body can do instead of what it looks like are far more satisfied about their appearance. Psychologist Jessica Alleva discovered this during her PhD project 'Give us a smile and lighten us up' that she carried out with funding from the Free competition of NWO Division for the Social Sciences. Alleva defends her PhD thesis on Wednesday 25 November at Maastricht University.

Jessica Alleva investigated approximately sixty existing '[body image interventions](#)', including interventions for people who suffer from an [eating disorder](#) or have a low self-esteem with respect to their appearance. She discovered that the measures and therapies investigated only provided relief in a rare few cases. The interventions have the most significant effect among [women](#) who constantly compare themselves with the most beautiful women on earth and have therefore ended up in a negative spiral.

Painful and annoying

Jessica Alleva: 'Some women are in such a terrible state they no longer dare enter a party or a room with unknown people without immediately thinking: See, I told you; they are looking at me and they find my appearance just as ugly and ridiculous as I do. You can imagine how painful and annoying this is. This "co-variation bias", seeing a connection without basis in advance, is often related to such a [negative body image](#).'

A therapy called 'Expand Your Horizon' seems to be a very promising approach, even though it has a temporary effect. It is a regularly recurring written assignment the women have to do. Each time they perform this assignment, they describe what their body can do and why that functionality is so important to them. A total of 81 women with

doubts about their [appearance](#) took part in the experiment. Over the course of time, the participants exhibited an increasing appreciation of their bodies. They were also able to objectify their body to a lesser degree than they did before. Furthermore, according to the PhD researcher, the benefit was that the majority of participants did not fall back into old patterns after therapy had ended.

Alleva: 'We do not yet know why this approach in particular works relatively well. Follow-up research needs to demonstrate whether written tasks have a longer or even permanent positive effect. We are hopeful that an effective intervention can emerge from this.'

A negative self-image often leads to unhealthy eating habits and physical inactivity. However, serious cases can start practising sport fanatically or, conversely, suffer from depressions, obesity and eating disorders.

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