

If you want to lose weight, ask yourself if it's really self-improvement

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After the feasting of Christmas, January is a time of detox and self-denial. It's when people start new diets, begin new exercise regimes and make new year's resolutions. We promise ourselves that we will do better

– that we will better ourselves. But all too often – at least in the West – this means improving our bodies.

While losing weight or gaining fitness can be a good thing, [these types of resolutions](#) – "I will lose five kilograms," "I will join a gym," "I will stop eating sweets" – mark a significant change from previous generations.

Traditionally, new year's resolutions were about improving one's character – the inner self, [not the outer self](#). For example, [an extract](#) of an adolescent's diary, written in 1892, reads:

"Resolved, not to talk about myself or feelings. To think before speaking. To work seriously. To be self-restrained in conversation and actions. Not to let my thoughts wander. To be dignified. Interest myself more in others."

But today, more and more people are identifying themselves with their bodies, and, in a very real sense, think that improving their bodies is improving themselves. There are both positives and negatives to thinking about your [body](#) as your self. But when taken to extremes, this mentality [results in harms](#) such as low self-esteem and [body dissatisfaction](#), which can prevent people from doing other things.

Of course, exercise can improve both physical and mental health. But [my research](#) as a professor of global ethics has led me to believe that people often exercise to improve how they look, rather than how they feel.

For some, how they feel *depends* on how they look. Both men and women in Western societies judge themselves according to how closely they conform to beauty ideals. And [studies show](#) that young people admit to caring more about their appearance than their health.

The search for success

It is widely believed that improving your appearance will lead to success in other areas; jobs, relationships, personal well-being. And while there are some studies which suggest this is the case, for example, because of the biases which are often expressed against heavier people at school and in the workplace, there are others still which argue these effects don't last beyond first impressions.

The truth is, devoting too much attention to appearances can damage a person's self-esteem. Body dissatisfaction and body anxiety [has increased](#) to the point that there are calls to recognise it as a public health problem. The harms of body dissatisfaction [are severe](#), including diminished well-being, disordered eating, lower activity, risky behaviour, mental and [physical health issues](#).

Even people who haven't been diagnosed with body dissatisfaction will know that being over-worried about whether you're attractive enough is likely to make you self-conscious and less able to perform well. And being rated good-looking by others does not correlate with happiness.

Despite the lack of conclusive evidence, many young people still believe being successful means being attractive. Girls as young as three judge character based on body shape, and young women in focus groups have reported that they would [rather be thin than smart](#).

Key studies such as the [2016 YMCA report](#), which considered the challenges of being young in modern Britain, put body image as the third biggest and most harmful challenge facing [young people](#), after lack of employment opportunities and failing to succeed at school and university. Likewise, the [2016 Girls' Attitudes Survey](#) reported that girls "have to confront intense and unobtainable appearance pressures to be perfect and many say they feel they're not good enough."

The expectation is that work on the body will pay off. Of course, there comes a point where this is not the case. With age, everyone will ultimately sag, wrinkle and decay. Yet citizens of Western societies increasingly believe that improving the physical self makes them not just healthier, but better overall. In the words of one young woman, cited in [a recent journal article](#):

"I think people think 'oh I have to look like that because they think that they will have a perfect life as well. If I'm beautiful, if I'm attractive, if I'm skinny then everything else in my life has to come up as well, like my school grades will come up, I'll get a boyfriend, you know I'll have a great social life.'"

In a visual and virtual culture, it's inevitable that appearances matter. But should they matter most? There are many other ideals to live by—being kinder, more creative, more knowledgeable, more honest. How we look is not the best measure of who we are. So before you go ahead and purchase that gym membership, you might want to think about what it really means to be your "best self."

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