

8 ways to manage body image anxiety after lockdown

June 15 2021, by Tracy Tylka



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Being able to socialize again may bring enthusiasm and a sense of normalcy—but it may also increase anxiety over how your body might have changed.

I am a psychologist who has [studied body image](#) for over 20 years, and I've seen how the COVID-19 pandemic could [affect health and well-being](#) in numerous ways, including [body image](#). Gyms were closed. Self-care rituals may have fallen by the wayside as stress and hardships like homeschooling and strained finances piled up. The pandemic also took away a major way people cope: [Social support](#) through [physical contact](#).

Pandemic stress has led many people to turn to other coping mechanisms, with some harmful to both physical and mental health. In one study of 5,469 adults in Australia, [35%](#) reported increased [binge eating](#), or eating large amounts of food in a short amount of time, due to pandemic life. In another study of 365 adults in Italy, [25.7%](#) reported increased [emotional eating](#) over the course of lockdown. And in a survey of 3,000 adults in the U.S., [61% experienced undesired weight changes](#) since the start of the pandemic. It's no wonder that people may feel anxiety over what others think about their changed appearance.

What is body image?

[Body image](#) is a person's "inside view"—or feelings, perceptions, thoughts and beliefs—of their body. Body image can be positive, neutral or negative, and it can fluctuate. Situations that provoke negative [body image](#)—like not fitting into formerly comfortable clothes, noticing age-related changes in appearance, seeing an unflattering picture of yourself and comparing your body to a social media influencer—are called [body image threats](#).

Body image threats have been [part of the COVID-19 experience](#) for many people. The pandemic has also seen an increase in [struggles with eating](#) too much or too little, preoccupation with food, and anxiety about weight and [body shape](#).

Fortunately, there are healthy ways to manage body anxiety and cultivate

a positive body image while reemerging from the pandemic.

1. Focus on what you appreciate about your body

Rather than focusing on what has changed or what you don't like about your body, focus on [what your body does for you](#). This is different for everyone. For example, my arms allow me to hug my dogs, my legs allow me to take them for walks, my stomach allows me to digest food so I have energy and my brain helped me write this article. Your body is much more than its appearance. Appreciating your body and what it does for you is central to cultivating positive body image.

2. Engage with others who accept and appreciate all bodies

Be selective with who you want to spend time with after the pandemic. Start with people who are "[body accepting](#)," meaning they don't talk badly about your body, their body or anyone else's body—they may not even focus on appearance at all. [Positive body image increases](#) when people engage with others who are body accepting. You can also practice being a person who shows body acceptance to others and [pay it forward](#).

3. Practice self-compassion

People's bodies have helped them survive the trauma of a global [pandemic](#). It's important to be kind to yourself and your body if your appearance has changed. [Self-compassion](#) is being as kind to yourself as you would to a loved one going through a hard situation. Many studies have found that [self-compassion](#) is linked to [higher positive body image](#), and self-judgment is linked to a higher [negative body image](#). Try to be mindful, or aware, of your experiences without judging them, and understand that others are in these difficult experiences with you.

4. Engage in mindful movement

If you are able, [move your body](#) in ways that bring you joy and rejuvenation and help you connect with and listen to your body. Bodies and abilities are different, and what is mindful movement for someone else may not be for you. Some activities, [such as yoga](#), have been shown to promote positive body image as long as they don't focus on appearance. Move in ways that help you focus on how much you enjoy moving rather than how you look while moving.

5. Practice self-care

[Ask your body what it needs](#) every day. Bodies need a regular supply of fuel, hydration, relaxation, stimulation and sleep. Self-care can be hard to fit into a schedule, but it is very important to plan actions and activities that restore you to your best self.

6. Engage with nature

[Interacting with nature](#) is associated with a variety of health benefits, including [higher positive body image](#). Activities that engage with nature, like hiking, may help you focus less on your appearance and more on how your body functions. Experiencing the beauty of nature can also help create opportunities for self-care, such as through rejuvenation and mindful movement.

7. Refrain from body comparison

It's common for people to compare themselves to others. However, when they [frequently compare their appearance](#) to others perceived as more attractive, their body image becomes more negative. Body comparison can occur in many settings, and not just through social media—it can

also happen in commonplace settings such as the beach, supermarket and school. When you find yourself comparing your body to others and start to feel negatively about your body, try one of the strategies above to restore a positive body image.

8. Avoid the diet hype

Studies show that [dieting does not work](#): It is [not associated with long-term weight loss](#) and often decreases overall well-being. Instead, focus on fueling your body when you are hungry with foods that provide your body with lasting energy. [Eating intuitively](#)—using your natural hunger, appetite and satiety cues to determine when, what and how much to eat—is linked to health and well-being.

Reemerging from the pandemic with confidence

There are many strategies to help build a positive body image, and [resources are available](#) to help you find one that works best for you. For those struggling with an [eating disorder](#) or severe negative body image, [professional help](#) is the best path forward.

[Positive body image](#) isn't just about feeling good about your appearance—it's also accepting and loving your body regardless of how it looks, and engaging in self-care to attend to its needs. Practice these strategies regularly to promote and maintain positive [body](#) image as you safely and confidently reenter your social world.

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Provided by The Conversation

Citation: 8 ways to manage body image anxiety after lockdown (2021, June 15) retrieved 20 April 2024 from

<https://medicalxpress.com/news/2021-06-ways-body-image-anxiety-lockdown.html>

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