

HOW DO YOU FEEL

A

re you at home in your own body? If not, do you know why, and what you can do to like your body more? These were a couple of the questions we posed in our Body Image Questionnaire, which appeared in last May's issue of *Shape*. But we weren't interested in mere statistics. Our hope was that this survey would act as a catalyst to help *Shape* readers discover their innermost feelings about their bodies, from their eyes to their thighs.

More than 8,000 readers responded, and the findings are a mixed bag: surprising, but at times predictable; encouraging, but at times disheartening. But, ultimately, enlightening.

In a nutshell, those who responded are relatively satisfied with their figures but somewhat less satisfied with their actual weight. They are highly committed to exercise; only .05 percent of respondents fail to exercise regularly, and 99.5 percent exercise at least twice a week.

For the purpose of analysis, we've se-

lected the following questions from the survey. The questions are not in their original order, and in a few cases we've combined questions to facilitate discussion. All statistics are based on a random sampling of 2,000 responses.

Who are you? (education level and occupation)

Respondents are firefighters and police officers. Doctors, lawyers, lifeguards and letter carriers. Nurses, teachers and homemakers. Body builders and aerobic-dance instructors. Cashiers and sales clerks. Even a forest ranger or two.

Based on our survey, about 16 percent are professionals (doctors and lawyers), 13 percent are in managerial positions, 13 percent are homemakers, 12 percent are in service professions (nurses, teachers and social workers) and 10 percent are students. Technical workers, craftsmen, salespeople and others make up a smaller slice of the pie.

As a group, the respondents are highly educated; 40 percent have completed at least two years of college, 35 percent are college graduates, 8 percent have graduate degrees and 3 percent have advanced degrees. The number of college-educated respondents is twice that of the national average.

What is your height and weight?

At 5-feet-5 and 140 pounds, *Shape* respondents mirror average national height/weight figures. They're also about 15 pounds overweight, but are more aware than most women of what their goal weight should be.

The majority of respondents have been at their current weight for one to two years, 25 percent for more than two years, and 44 percent for at least one year. More than half say their weight has not gone up or down by more than five pounds in recent years.

Regardless of how much they weigh, however, *Shape* respondents are likely to outweigh what the media project as

the "ideal" body for a woman. However, most respondents have not escaped the adverse consequences of the unreasonable standard of trimness promoted by the media and the fashion world. The typical beauty-contest winner is grossly underweight by 15 to 20 pounds, a condition that borders on a serious health problem.

Have you been on a diet in the past six months? Have you ever used fasting, diuretics, laxatives or a bingeing-purging cycle to lose weight?

Thirty-nine percent of respondents report dieting in the past six months. An alarmingly high number admit to using questionable weight-loss methods, with fasting the most popular (27 percent), followed by diuretics (21 percent), medications (19 percent), laxatives (16 percent) and a routine of bingeing and purging (10 percent).

These figures indicate that many respondents resort to dangerous quick-fix shortcuts to lose weight. For example, frequent vomiting (as in bulimia) can deplete the electrolyte balance and lead to urinary tract infections, abdominal pain, dental cavities, erosion of dental enamel, cardiac arrhythmia and even death.

Have you ever had an eating disorder?

Twenty-one percent of our respondents say they have experienced an eating disorder at one time or another. That figure is ten percent higher than the statistics reflected in typical findings in college samples in recent years. By far the most common eating disorders are bulimia and anorexia nervosa. An alarming percentage of respondents write that they fear slipping into an eating disorder; very few tell us they have recovered from one.

This revelation raises an important question concerning exercise. Do these women use exercise to keep fit, or as a tool to aid and abet their eating disorder? Those who are preoccupied with ex-

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ercise and also have an eating disorder may be abusing exercise as a way to get thin rather than fit. Those in this danger zone should seek out professional counseling from internists or therapists who specialize in eating disorders.

Overall, how do you feel about your body?

While somewhat dissatisfied with their weight, respondents as a group are somewhat satisfied with their bodies. This shows that other factors—ranging from facial features to job—also contribute to body image.

Very few respondents (2 percent) are “extremely satisfied” with their bodies. A larger amount (12 percent) are “extremely dissatisfied.” Those who are extremely dissatisfied with their body image cannot maintain healthy self-esteem, and should seek professional help.

Which factors seem most important to you in determining positive feelings about your body?

Most respondents put shape and weight (both got 76 percent) at the top of the list. Fitness is a close second at 70 percent, followed by health and muscle tone, both 68 percent.

Other high-scoring factors include regular exercise (57 percent), strength (46 percent) and athletic ability (35 percent). One body builder writes that although she now weighs more as a result of losing fat and gaining muscle via weight training (muscle weighs more than fat), she is actually trimmer and doesn't worry about the number on the bathroom scale.

What forms of exercise do you engage in?

Aerobics wins the race with 71 percent, although weight lifting (51 percent) and (surprise!) cycling (50 percent) also are top contenders. Jogging, once a national pastime, slips to fourth place (30 percent) in our survey, followed by walking (19 percent), calisthenics (27 percent), swimming (26 percent), dancing (24 percent), skiing (17 percent) and hiking (14 percent). Respondents indicate less interest in tennis (11 percent), volleyball (7 percent) and yoga (4 percent). With just 1 percent of the vote, gymnastics barely registers a pulse.

How long do you exercise, and how often?

Apparently, *Shape's* battle cry to exercise for at least 30 to 60 minutes three to four times a week has not fallen on deaf ears.

A vast majority, 83 percent, exercise

at least three days a week; 41 percent work out three times a week, and 42 percent five times a week or more. Sixty-two percent of respondents exercise for 30 to 60 minutes.

A word of caution: Exercising more than five days a week may lead to overtraining; symptoms include fatigue, weakness, lack of appetite, insomnia, muscle soreness and a higher risk of injury. Reduce the risk of overtraining by taking at least one day off a week from exercise.

If you exercise regularly, what prompted you to begin doing so?

In order of importance, respondents say they exercise to develop a better figure (62 percent); achieve fitness (60 percent); boost self-esteem (60 percent); and lose weight (51 percent). Other reasons include building strength (36 percent), enhancing health (31 percent), maintaining weight (30 percent) and attracting a man (11 percent).

This survey, together with other studies, indicates that, despite the women's movement, many women still believe that they have to look good to be worthwhile. On the bright side, the many respondents who cite fitness and self-esteem as major reasons for exercising obviously enjoy a positive self-image.

How do you feel about specific parts and characteristics of your body, including height, muscle tone and development, physical strength, shoulders, arms, breasts, waist, stomach, calves, ankles, buttocks, genitals, skin, body hair, hair, hands, feet and face?

In terms of popularity, the eyes have it. More than a third of *Shape* respondents consider them their best feature. The face in general also scores high.

By contrast, those areas that respondents like least or would like to change include the thighs, hips, buttocks, stomach and waist. Based on these responses, it appears that poor body image is a below-the-belt matter for many *Shape* readers.

Unfortunately, fat deposits in these areas are stimulated by the female hormone estrogen, and are much harder to lose than in other parts of the body. We suspect that many respondents have unrealistic expectations about their bodies and consider anything less than model-thinness to constitute excess weight. We suggest that respondents of normal weight focus on accepting a shapelier figure rather than trying to

diet down to model-thinness.

Have you ever considered plastic surgery?

About 48 percent of our respondents have considered plastic surgery, but only 9 percent have undergone it. Operations respondents are most likely to consider include liposuction, breast surgery and nose operations. Breast augmentation and liposuction are the most common operations performed on respondents.

While only 10 percent of respondents who considered plastic surgery actually decided to get it done, quite a few say they plan to get a face lift, breast augmentation or liposuction sometime in the future. For instance, one respondent is planning a post-pregnancy breast lift.

We predict that liposuction will become increasingly popular because it offers what seems to be—but which may not be—an easy and fast solution to a body-image problem. (For more information on liposuction, see our special section on page 104.)

To sum it all up, respondents believe that a variety of factors contribute to body image, the most important of which are weight, appearance and a regular exercise program. Psychological factors also clearly affect body image. As one respondent writes, “I feel satisfied with myself, not only because of my shape, but in the way I handle myself in everyday situations.”

It's clear that many respondents are still struggling to achieve an ideal body—even if it's an unrealistic goal for their body type—and are resorting to quick-fix diet regimens or compulsive exercising to achieve it.

On the other hand, many others are following a healthful eating and exercise program and accepting the body that results from it. Says one respondent, “I hope we will someday realize that there is no one ideal body or form. We must work with what we've got and be more concerned with our life-ticking heart muscle than our size.” Consider the value of your life and good health from the inside out. ■

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