Dear Alice,

Many of my friends tell me that I look like a football player, because I have a big body and my body swings side to side when I'm walking. I'm very happy that my friends say that about me even though I rarely play football and never have the fantasy of being a superstar quarterback. Maybe my friends just don't want to say the truth about me? that I am fat. Too fat for my age to be more specific. I am 5'6" tall and weigh 170 pounds. Maybe I do look strong like a football player for I usually work out once in a full moon, or maybe I am just plain old obese. Alice, can you solve this dilemma of mine, am I fat or just big and strong?

Sincerely,
The fat football player

Answer

Dear The fat football player,

"Does this make me look fat?" What's a good friend to say? Opinions of body shape, like looking "fat," change as quickly as the people on the covers of magazines, which, by the way, are frequently digitally altered to "perfection." Despite what social trends may think, remember that people come in all shapes, sizes, and weights, and what may be healthy for one person may not necessarily be healthy for someone else. Check out Is it better to be fit and fat, or unfit and thin? for more information. More objective tools, such as the Body Mass Index (BMI) and waist circumference calculations, are used to indicate body fat distribution, though they can't give you a full picture of your body fat composition or overall health indicators (i.e., blood pressure, cholesterol levels). Your BMI, which is a ratio of weight to height, may be calculated as follows:

1. Divide your weight (in pounds) by your height (in inches)
2. Next, divide this answer by your height (in inches)
3. Then, multiply this answer by 703 to get your BMI

According to this index, a BMI of:

- 18.5 to 24.9 is considered to be in the range of healthy weight
- 25 to 29.9 is considered overweight
- 30 or higher indicates obesity
- 40 or higher indicates extreme obesity
Keep in mind that the BMI may be misleading because someone who is muscular or athletic (such as a football player) may have a higher BMI because muscle is more dense than fat. Another way of calculating body fat distribution is by measuring your waist circumference (in inches) in relation to your BMI. According to this measure, a man with a BMI of 25 or more would aim for a waist circumference of less than 40 inches, while women with a BMI of 25 or more would aim for a waist circumference of less than 35 inches.

Getting back to your friends' comments of your physical shape, a few things to reflect upon:

- How do you feel about being called a football player when you don't see it presently true?
- How would you feel if they called you fat?
- If you were a friend, why would you want or not want to say the truth about a person's size?
- What would you want your friends to refer to you, if anything, related to your physical shape?
- How may your self-esteem contribute to how you see yourself and why may that be?

If you feel uncomfortable from your friends' comments, or lack of comments, you may want to consider discussing this with them and (kindly) asking them to refer to you in the way you prefer. Understand that often times people do not necessarily know the weight of their words or actions. A "just kidding" comment may really hurt, and communicating how you feel when they say, or don't say, certain comments may help further build your relationships with them.

Thinking more internally, perhaps your frustration may stem from your self-esteem, particularly around your body image. How would you want your goal physical shape to be? If you're considering changing your current physical shape, health guidelines suggested from BMI and waist circumference tools may more objectively help define a healthy, balanced physical shape specifically for your body. These may be more realistic body images than striving to look like other people, especially the often unreal images of people in the media.

You may want to consider the health benefits of exercise and healthy eating that go beyond weight reduction or maintenance. You may choose to focus on following a healthy diet that meets dietary recommendations and adopting regular, moderate exercise. This may also help you maintain or achieve a weight with which you feel comfortable. Browse through the Nutrition and Physical Activity archives for creative, helpful ideas. If you're interested, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) website provides guidelines for physical activity for adults.

Working through the discomfort of peers' comments may require much emotional energy in addition to the physical energy of adopting fitness practices. In addition to your friends, family, and mentors, you may speak with counselors on issues that affect your self-esteem and body image. You may also find it helpful to talk to your health care provider about developing an eating and exercise plan to deal with your weight.

Use that calculator to help figure out your body's stats and consider some reflection of your physical as well as emotional health as you tackle on towards your goal(s)!
Related questions

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Resources

Medical Services (Morningside) [14]
Medical Services (CUMC) [15]
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