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## Margo Maine on Body Image Distress

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One of the most powerful influences on a daughter's body image is what she learns from her parents, says psychologist Margo Maine. Dad's comments about female appearance and Mom's anxiety over her own "imperfect" body and looks can erode a daughter's healthy body image. In [The Body Myth](#): Adult Women and the Pressure to Be Perfect (John Wiley & Sons, 2005, coauthor Joe Kelly), Maine shows how we can strengthen a girl's body confidence as we rebuild our own. Plus, see our tips on how to help a girl with an eating disorder.



### Body distress around her

There has been a significant increase in body image distress, particularly among women who are middle-aged and older. At one leading eating disorders center, one-third of the residential patients are over 30. Dieting surveys report rising rates among adult women as well as men, who are also experiencing increasing eating disorders such as bulimia and binge-eating.

Our culture tells us that our worth is determined by our dress size, what we weigh, and the shape we're in. Parents of tween and teen daughters, particularly moms, hear this nonstop message at a particularly vulnerable time. As we get older, we are faced with additional pressures: jobs, children, taking care of aging relatives, and other responsibilities. We may feel that we are losing power at our jobs or in our relationships and fear "competition" from younger people. To cope with the feeling that our lives are out of control, we often try to control our bodies. We can turn to chronic dieting, excessive exercise, preoccupation with food, and even plastic surgery to try to deal with difficult issues and feelings.

### Be proactive about her signals

Some girls as young as 4 or 5 worry about having a big belly or express concerns about their diets, saying things like, "I shouldn't eat that because it will make me fat." You might hear older girls seemingly obsessed about dieting or exercising or being upset about how they look in certain clothes. You might find your daughter imitating how you eat, skipping breakfast and lunch, or talking about "good" and "bad" foods. A girl's body attitude can be part of a family overemphasis on body image as a core aspect of self-esteem.

Seeing a daughter imitate their behavior is one of the primary motivators for women to visit a therapist. They're looking for ways to change because they don't want their daughter to suffer in the ways they have.

### Healthy changes for her and you

A lot of parents try to say the right things to a daughter about being happy with her body, but they aren't always conscious about what they say in informal situations. The subtle comments we make in everyday situations can be really devastating. For example, if we're at a restaurant and have two or three pieces of bread, we might say, "Too many carbs—I can't have dessert" or

“I’m going to have to run later.” Or we might look in the mirror and mutter about how big our thighs are. This kind of routine body-bashing makes a lasting impression on girls.

Women often wear clothes that are too tight, and that teaches our daughters that it’s normal to wear clothes that are uncomfortable. Our dietician often tells our patients who feel “too fat” at 80 pounds that if they’re wearing clothes that don’t really fit, they’re guaranteed to feel fat! Sometimes we want to keep wearing clothes from an earlier time in life when we felt sexier and more alive. When we try to hang on to those smaller clothes or that younger, thinner body, we may be trying to hang on to power in a culture that doesn’t give women, especially aging women, much of it. We don’t have to throw away those clothes, but we should try to model for our daughters that we are OK with the passing of time and the changes that naturally happen to our bodies as we get older.

### **Modeling body ease**

We have to teach our daughters that severe dieting when we’re young creates (rather than prevents) long-term weight problems. You can use a simple explanation for a younger girl about why dieting is harmful. Tell her that each time we deprive ourselves of food for a period of time, our metabolic rate decreases; when we start eating more normally, it increases again but at a lower rate. With repeat dieting, we can give our bodies such confusing messages that our normal metabolism won’t return, and then it’s very hard to lose weight. Our bodies don’t know if they’re going to be fed regularly, so they try to hang on to whatever fuel comes their way.

You can use any moment to share a reality check about body habits. It’s a very bad idea for a girl—or anyone—to hold her stomach in, but a girl may well observe her mom or dad habitually sucking in their stomach. Try actually showing her the effects of holding in her stomach: she can’t breathe fully, her voice isn’t as full, she becomes more tense. Remind her that none of her cells—including brain cells—are getting as much oxygen as they need, and that means that she can’t do anything as well as she could when she breathes normally.

Help her see that food is not fat; it’s fuel to help her think clearly, do her best, and have fun. Often food acquires an emotional meaning, because families attach privileges and punishments to certain foods and eating. It’s OK to use food as a reward once in a while, but there’s a whole range of other things we can use for rewards, such as spending one-on-one time with a daughter or taking a walk together.

### **Passing on a healthy heritage**

Spend some time thinking about the ways you learned to view food, exercise, and bodies, and then figure out ways you’d like to change things for your daughter. You might say something like this to her: “When I was growing up, Grandma talked a lot about weight with me and I started to feel uncomfortable with my body. I know sometimes I say the wrong thing to you, too. Let’s work on this together.”

Remember that the younger generation needs extra help to combat the thousands of media images that tell them that their bodies should look a certain way. Adults like to think we aren’t affected by media images, even though we are. Because we’re older, we have a track record of real-life successes and experiences to counter the effects of those images. Kids don’t. We need to

remind them about the harm of trying to live up to media expectations, and we need to repeat that message so they remember it, just as we repeat messages about driving drunk.

We need to discuss honestly the price we pay when we define ourselves by how we look. Disordered body thinking can be debilitating or fatal. I call eating and body image disorders “stealth” diseases: you may think you’re in control, continuing to exercise excessively, or restricting your eating, or taking laxatives or weight-loss pills. Then the damage reaches a danger point, and you can suffer permanent injury or have a heart attack and die.

When we spend so much of our time worrying about our appearance, we don’t have as much energy to develop all our resources for ourselves and for our community. One simple way to gain some perspective about what’s important in life is to consider the epitaph we want on our tombstone. Do we want “She slimmed down to a size 6” or “She used her boundless energy to make the world a better place”? You can start now to create the life that leads to this legacy, both for you and your daughter.

Read more articles about girls and eating disorders on [Daughters.com](http://Daughters.com).