

Intro (Rashi): Hello and welcome to The Alternative Story podcast. The Alternative Story, is an organisation that provides emotional wellbeing services to individuals and organisations. We believe that mental health is psychosocial, and in this podcast we'll be exploring the many aspects that shape your mental health through an intersectional lens.

Paras: Hello and welcome to yet another episode of the alternative story podcast. I am Paris co founder and counselling psychologist at the alternative story with me as always is Rashi. Rashi say hi

Rashi: hello

Paras: I said say Hi

Rashi: Damn it. Okay. Anyway, I had a question for everyone, actually. I want all of you to imagine that you have two options in front of you. Almost like the red pill and the blue pill in the matrix. Yeah, this is not that red pill though - the reddit wala.

The idea is in one of them is the ability to have the body that you want, exactly as you imagine it or as you have always wanted it to be. And then the other pill. You will not have any physical changes to your body, but your body satisfaction will be the greatest.

Paras: So what you're saying is that in one option you physically change into the physical appearance and you would like and then the other option is that you stay as it is, but you're happy with what you get...

Rashi: ... what you get. Yeah. And, and that's an interesting question for me. I think one of the first times that I encountered it when I thought about it, I always would pick the one where my satisfaction would be changing or my body remains the same but my body satisfaction changes to become better or become more accommodating of myself. But when I think of the new year's resolutions, I would always pick a resolution that changes my body. I want to lose X number of KGs I want to work better on my health. I want to go for walks everyday and all of this is around the idea of fitting into the ideal body image. None of my resolutions would be I will be kinder to my body or I will feel more grateful to my body. And that got in a lot of conversations, at least in my own head if I have them in my head, are they conversations?

Paras: Yeah. Okay. You know there are people who don't have conversations in their head? I just like came across this idea that there are people who just walk around with

any with or without any thoughts in their head,

Rashi: I saw that... And, and you know, and he was asked this question, I saw this, I Tiktok posted on Twitter. And he was asked, so how do you read books and he just goes like, I look at a page and I just know the meaning of words.

Paras: yeah, that's just weird

Paras: coming back to the question that you asked, I think, whenever I have done this exercise or asked this question, I've almost always had people say the opposite. They've always instinctually jumped to the option of Oh, of course If could get the body that I want without any effort. I'm just gonna get go and go and get that and then they're also the smart ones in the room who'll ask me, like, oh, but is it possible for me to have a third option where I get both? And that's quite interesting, because you do realise when you're given that forced choice, that it's not one or the other most often we want

Rashi: both. I would. I want both.

Paras: And that's what we're here to talk about today.

Rashi: So let's start. That's my number one question, right. What is body image?

Paras: Yeah. So you know, now obviously, there's a lot of research about the idea of body image. But I think if I were to tell you the idea of body image, as it has evolved, because I am a bit of a history buff when it comes to mental health and research. So I think there was this idea of what was called as the looking glass self and I find that a much nicer term and a very old timey literature term of how to look at it, but it's very interesting.

Rashi: It reminds me a little bit of Alice in Wonderland.

Paras: kind of, kind of. So you look at yourself through the looking glass and the idea of it was that body image is not necessarily what you look like, like what your objective physical appearance is. But it's a combination of how your physical appearance is perceived by others. So you could have done nothing but you just happened to look like whatever is considered attractive in that era or in that context, and you could feel good about that. And there is an element of how you feel that others perceive you so you could actually be absolutely fine in terms of your physical appearance you but you may think that others don't think of you as good looking, or you may think that others think of me as good looking and they may feel good. So, what was interesting to me was the

idea that it is always through a lens. It wasn't about me and my perception of my body alone, but it was my perception of how I'm perceived by others.

Rashi: Correct. So it's always through the lens of society.

Paras: There's always an element. Yes.

Rashi: And I would even go and say society at that particular time, culturally and temporally

Paras: is dynamic. Yes, it's, it's a, it's a photograph of that moment in time because you know, as we talk about today, hopefully we have seen these ideas shift from season to season from, from from era to era from decade to decade, generation to generation. So many times, we have had very differing standards of what has been considered as the ideal. But I think it's absolutely correct to say that if, you know, as long as there are people around us, what they think about our bodies is going to be an element of what we think about our bodies as well.

Rashi: so now that we know a little bit about what body image looks like, where do we stand on being happy or unhappy with it?

Paras: So, if we look at body image, I try to look at it in the same way that the concept of self-image is looked at in psychology. There's the concept of self-image, which is an area which has been studied a lot. Now, there is an agreement that it comprises of two main areas. One is called self-esteem, which is how I feel about myself in comparison to others. And the other is called self-efficacy, which means how I rate my ability on different things. So self-esteem, I am performing better than others than my peers. Self-efficacy, I think I'm good at this.

And both of them are important in terms of your self-image. So if I were to say body image, I would say one element of it would be body esteem, which means how do I think I look in comparison to others? I would say body satisfaction, how happy or satisfied am I with my own body irrespective of what others think of me because you always have this element of thinking oh, why are these models, actors, pretty beautiful people feeling sad or negative or depressed about their appearance? What do they have to complain about? And that I think gets explained by the idea of body satisfaction. So there's body esteem and then there's body satisfaction. I think these two things really come together and give us an idea of what our body image is.

Rashi: And that also explains why certain parts of society depending on how you want to dissect it are more vulnerable to body image, for example, but the matter is that everyone has body image issues.

Paras: Everybody has a body image and everybody by virtue of having a body image will have negative elements in that body image and can have body image issues. I would say it's a spectrum.

Rashi: Fair enough

Paras: that everybody has days where they don't like their bodies, or everybody has parts of the body that they don't feel so good about. And how far how often how severe that is, is dependent from person to person, but I completely agree with you that there are groups of people who are much more prone to body dissatisfaction to social comparisons of how does my body look in relation to others or the social standard and as a result have worse or better body image

Rashi: I was reading this somewhere and I can't remember for the life of me where now, but they asked kids as young as three or four, of, what they would like to change in their body. And then they asked this question again, to kids around nine or 10. And kids at three or four, we're talking about adding something to their body more almost like superhero like, like for example I would like to have wings or I would like, like I wish my eyesight was better so I could like do X ray vision or things like that. Whereas even as young as nine, they were able to say I wish I had a better nose or limbs and things like that. And which this is very interesting for me because it's almost like I mean, I would say a nine-year-old is still a child like an extremely young child. And they seem to have developed body image issues at that age already. So it's almost like there's something about socialisation because that brings about this dissatisfaction in body image right. Or in your own bodies. So since we're talking about which populations are vulnerable what is one of the most vulnerable populations, according to you or according to research that we should be looking at first.

Paras: So research has obviously been very sexist when it comes to this. It was just automatically assumed that if we are talking about body image, then it must be women that we need to talk about. So 1950s to late 20th century, almost all the research was entirely dedicated to women. And then when I say women, I'm talking about cis women.

I'm talking about American, Caucasian, European women. So this, this is obviously not a representative sample of people.

In the 1980s and 1990s you start seeing men's body image starting to get talked about a little more. You see a lot of discourse on diet-culture and the side effects of diet-culture. You start hearing a lot more about steroidal abuse, human growth hormone abuse and the side effects of that. You start hearing a lot about plastic surgery and cosmetic surgery and other procedures as they get more and more talked about in the media.

Towards the end of the 1990s early 2000s So the focus is expanded. And of course, we are still talking about people within the gender binary and then being the focus people who are generally still very young adult white population but I would say over the last 20 years at least has been a conscious effort to include people who are not heterosexual people who are not white people who are not from wealthy western countries into these studies. So the research is getting more and more diverse. But I would say just by sheer number of studies that have been done, you would tend to believe that women are the most vulnerable group.

And in many ways women are much more vulnerable, but there is a lot of promising evidence right now which is talking about how children, as you said, are also very vulnerable. There's a lot of evidence pointing to the fact that people who are not cisgendered are very, very vulnerable as well. And within there also there have been some deep cuts to understand of how people who are of different gender identities, how do they get affected by it? So I think if you take the intersectional lens, all the same groups that you find vulnerable for all the same negative mental health outcomes, you see the same happening in the area of body image, but it's not like anybody's immune everybody has the potential to be affected by body image challenges and even eating disorders.

Rashi: Ofcourse. And yeah, I mean, that's actually a good question to go into next - does bad body image or negative body image always lead up to eating disorders?

Paras: Not necessarily because not a lot of it is about eating it can lead to well. Eating is only one of the ways in which we can modify our bodies. So it can take the form of other behaviours as well for example, over-exercising is something which can it can lead to self-harming is something that it can lead to. It can lead to, you know, being obsessed with certain parts of your body and wanting to change them and doing all kinds of cosmetic procedures both you know, both topical product use and actual surgical changes to that so it can be multiple things, it doesn't just necessarily have to be eating

disorder. I think saying eating disorders is also a very misleading thing because eating disorders are rarely just about eating. It's about the entire lifestyle.

Rashi: Fair enough. So basically, negative or bad body image does not always lead to eating disorders.

Paras: It can lead to a lot of disorders.

Rashi: It can lead to a lot of disorders and eating disorders are not always caused by a bad body image.

Paras: Most often they are not actually.

Rashi: Okay. So it is possible that some people use or develop an eating disorder because of bad body image but there's no causation or correlation there.

Paras: There's a correlation, not a causation, I would say because I think people who are going to have eating disorders. I mean, there's a there's a much stronger link with childhood trauma and eating disorders than there is to say body image and eating disorders.

Rashi: Well, okay, got it. Got it. So now that we've kind of spoken about women, and bad body image, you also spoke about men and that's where you're doing your PhD. So why don't you talk a little bit about it.

Paras: So I think it's like people have either done their PhD or they are doing them.

Rashi: Hey there's a bunch of us who are always thinking about it.

Paras: Yeah, when you're in different stages are doing like you do a PhD for a long period of time. That aside, yes, that is the idea of what I'm studying in my doctoral research. And here, instead of looking at good bad, categorising it, I tried to actually look at the acquisition of body image how people acquire or develop the idea of body image. And I've been trying to study how the development of masculine identity goes along hand in hand with that. So some interesting stuff emerging over there. Already. Spoilers.

Rashi: Are you allowed to talk about it?

Paras: Yeah, of course. Of course. I can talk about some parts of it, but I think one of the things that I've seen is that patriarchy seems to be a very good predictor of bad body

image among.

Rashi: So, you mentioned that patriarchy is bad for men's body image. Why would you say that?

Paras: So when I looked at the findings from my doctoral study, which I was still doing, one of the things that I noticed was that the more exposure to traditionally patriarchal institutions that men had, the worse their body image, concerns and adulthood seem to be. For example, if you grew up in a place which was extremely patriarchal, if you grew up in a family, which is extremely conservative, which discouraged you from talking to peers of other genders if you went to a boys' school, if you later on studied in STEM disciplines, lived in a hostel where they were predominantly male students in the entire campus. The fewer opportunities people had to interact with peers, and people of genders different than theirs, the worse they seem to be doing because when I was actually looking at who are the most negative influences when it comes to your body image.

Most people said that same sex siblings, same sex peers, and even relatives and family members of the same sex as them were the ones which had been the most critical and most off hand negative things to say about the body image. And again, this is an interesting part here. Most people will a lot of times they'll say that men have body image issues because of dating and matrimonial apps which expect them to look in a certain way. Interestingly, in my sample, most people said that they've had very, very good experiences actually very affirming experiences.

On dating apps and partner there's a spectrum of the agenda that they met through. Dating apps were extremely appreciative of their physical appearance and their persona. So people are most often pleasantly surprised by this entire experience. Matrimonial apps on the other hand, where family gets involved. People have told me horror stories like people have told me stuff like I was made to stand side by side with the girl I was supposed to marry. The relatives came with a tape measure and looked at my height and yeah, all kinds of things and, and these are the things on the basis of which people have been rejected. Oh your hair is thinning

Rashi: if you really want to be in that house which says "aaccha kal ladki dekhne ja rahe hai, kya kya lekr jaana hai? tape measure"

Paras: yea its like IKEA when you go there na they'll give you they'll give you a note pad,

pencils, tape measure.

Rashi: oh my god. Yeah, that sounds like a really fancy version of

Paras: preview how this will look in your room.

Rashi: Like, I'm just trying to do an AR thing with the "ye shaadi mai aap kaise..." I don't know. I don't have words. But I mean, so what comes to mind is that men seem to do worse when there are other men or masculine, masculine energy.

Paras: No, I wouldn't say men or masculine energy. I would say when there are patriarchal institutions, which are the primary agents of their socialisation when the schools, colleges when the employment that they have is traditionally very patriarchal and very, like, stereotypical masculine job.

Rashi: I mean, I can see this parallelly for women just in terms of like and the instrument of hate or the instrument of concern. It very clearly comes across as patriarchy. It is interesting or even affirming in a way for me personally to know that men seem to be just as victimised by as at least in the areas of body image by patriarchy. Like I'm thinking of one of the most affirming spaces for me, however, has been women's only space, right? And and which now has evolved to be a space where just non cis men are allowed to anyone but cis men for that matter. So it's very interesting how that space is one of the best spaces there has been for my body image but that space seems to be the opposite for men.

Paras: Right, right. Yeah. I mean, I think the more spaces that we have which are not occupied only by cis men, cis het men. I think the weaker the whole patriarchy gets is something that I would like to believe. I'm not saying that cis het men are the only people who are the carriers of patriarchy. Everybody who socialised with patriarchy is affected by patriarchy, and that's what it is. But then why is it...

Rashi: Yeah, that's why we say that most spaces need to be occupied by everyone because the patriarchal idea is that these spaces can be occupied by cis het men only. So when you challenge that and make that the idea or the opposite of that is everyone has space, including cis het men, then the space becomes more varied, and that's the antithesis to patriarchy, of course.

So my question now is imagining, ok, two-fold. But imagine I am a person who is an adult listening to this podcast who has body image issues. What is something that I can do to start making my relationship with my body a little bit better? Okay, so back to the

first part of the podcast that really spoke about the two pills, what do I do where I stopped thinking about what I can do in terms of changing my body, but how do I change the relationship with my body now?

Paras: That's an interesting one. So one of the first things that I would definitely say is that, examine that these ideas are not like some gospel truths These are ideas which have come from what do you think society wants you to look like? One thing that I always ask my clients to think about is that if you didn't have to worry about what society thought of your physical appearance, would you actually be unhappy with the way that you look? Would you actually want to change something about your physical appearance?

And of course that's a very difficult question to answer because you've never lived in a world where people didn't have something to say about your physical appearance. So it's a difficult one to answer but actually speaking, how much of physical change weight loss, changing your hair do, changing your skin and all of that, how much of it is to gain social approval and social acceptance? Versus how much of it is because you feel a certain amount of dissatisfaction with your body so I think one thing that I wanted to bring up out here is that you know, when it comes to the satisfaction rate or the rates of regret, after medical procedures, when it comes to medical procedures, like cosmetic procedures, which are just cosmetic procedures, most of the time people get the procedure done and it doesn't take care of their body esteem issues with regard to that. It does take care of body esteem and body image issues in one area and it does spectacularly which is when it has gender affirmation surgeries.

Rashi: because that's not a body image issue.

Paras: It is a body image issue, but body dysphoria is, but it also gender identity.

Rashi: Exactly.

Paras: Yeah. So that's what I'm trying to say that there's a very clear difference between when you are uncomfortable in your own body, and you want to do something about it versus you are uncomfortable in your body because you think that you should look a certain way because the social expectations.

Rashi: Of course

Paras: so you wanting to look a certain way is something extremely important. Like if you're if you're conscious about a scar or a mole or you know your teeth or something,

whatever it is, and it's going to give you a lot of satisfaction, it's going to give you a lot of confidence most of the time, that's something that is going to make you feel good if you wanted to change.

Rashi: of course

Paras: Right? But if you think that you will feel more confident. Socially, people will like you more you will be more successful as a result of it. You might get some benefits from it but that's going to be limited but most importantly you are going to feel good on the inside. That's that's one thing that is extremely important and pertinent to note. I think the other thing that I would say in terms of increasing your body satisfaction or rather, decreasing body dissatisfaction is that we don't have to go towards the idea of body positivity. We have to be okay with the fact that functionality is what is important.

So am I able to do the things that I want to do with my body? Is my body serving me in a way that I would like to am I able to go about my day am I able to have the experiences that I want to in the body that I am in? That is something that you are okay with you don't have to love your body you don't have to think that you're looking great. You can even aspire to a sense of neutrality serving.

We've moved from body positivity to body neutrality because we're like, even body positivity is too much centering around the body and we will need to make the world less about the body and less about physical appearance. Where it's just it is it's this is how I look. I don't really have much control about how I look and how this body grows and evolves, because it's mostly genetic. And we can't really do much about it. Say for a few things here and there. So let me not center so much of my experience around my relationship with my body and my relationship with food and exercise. Let me center it around the experiences that I'm able to have through my body and with my body. So that is what I would say is the best way to go about it.

And lastly and most importantly as we always say therapy does wonders when it comes to this. So talk to a therapist. Be okay, talking about the fact that you feel uncomfortable or ashamed and I would say seek out a therapist who doesn't say, Okay, you're feeling uncomfortable about it. Let's make a weight loss plan for you. And let's make a reward and whatever contingency plan. Absolutely. Absolutely. So somebody who's not completely like it's not a blind spot for them that the body image issues are a thing and they only just like set up a reward and behaviour modification plan for you. That's just, you know, that's not the way to look about and then that's how all of these apps and startups and wearables and all of them are trying to do this, they are just trying to use

reward punishment, reinforcement all the classic behaviour...

Rashi: also social desirability

Paras: Absolutely, this are just classic behavior modification principles to try and make you behave in a certain way, but they are extremely conformist and at the end of the day, they are good as data points but they shouldn't be telling you how to live your life

Rashi: Of course

Paras: that is what I believe

Rashi: So summarising look at what where the expectations of body image come from for you

Paras: they come from somewhere

Rashi: is that something that you want from within? Or is it something that society tells you that you have to look a certain way or the expectations are set by who, what etc. Second is, leave aside body positivity, body negativity, whichever else strive towards a body neutrality looking at your body as a tool to do so. As a vehicle to do some things. And yeah, that sounds interesting and most importantly, obviously therapy therapy therapy, therapy

Paras: yes, therapy with somebody who understands that body image is not just about the literal idea of how my body looks. I think that is something which is extremely important and it's a deceptively simple idea, but it's also quite confusing if you don't pay attention to it. So that nuance that attention is something that we need to definitely pay. I think there's one last thing I mean, not to crap on anybody, but there are a lot of people who are coaches and activists and fitness enthusiasts cum life coaches, I have nothing against them, but what are they coming from? Where are their motivations and where are.. I'm not, I'm not gonna say qualifications as a way of gatekeeping it.

But I'm saying that where is their engagement coming from over this is their engagement coming from, I used to be this, this really, really high weight and now I have lost this much weight and you can also lose weight under my guidance. Are they looking at I train people for this marathon or this fitness competition or this pageant and you should come from me? Or is it more about I just work with people to help them do whatever they want with their bodies, even if it doesn't mean weight loss or shape change and all of that. So just do your due diligence. And if you're going to be following

somebody, then know who you're following and why are you following them? It doesn't necessarily have to be an influencer or not be an influencer. Just know who you are being influenced by. Yeah, I think that sounds nice. Know who we are being influenced by.

Rashi: yeah and that sounds like an interesting point to stop at for this conversation, because we don't want to be influencers either.

Paras: Nope. I wouldn't. Yeah. I mean, just didn't want to make this into how to have a good body image podcast. Rather, just wanted to talk about my own personal experience of primary research and my own first hand experience of reviewing the literature around body image the world over and just sort of present these facts in a new friendly language to people and make your own choices. Make your own decisions after that. Really.

Rashi: That was fun, I think I've heard you talk about this is a lot.

Paras: But it's interesting that it tells me it reminds me that I need to go continue and hopefully finish the PhD soon.

Rashi: Yes, please. We would love to have Dr. Paras Sharma on the podcast soon.

Paras: I'm sure there is somebody out there by that name. We can call them

Rashi: sure, yeah, this is what you get for having a common surname.

Paras: okay byee

Rashi: If you really liked this podcast, you can listen to other podcasts, read our articles. etc. on our website, which is alternativestory.in. You can also follow us across all social media, which includes Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn. If you would like to book an appointment with one of our therapists, you can go to alternativestory.in/booking and book yourself a slot.

Paras: Yep. And until next time, we will see you soon. Please do share with us your suggestions and thoughts about what you'd like us to talk about next. We will try not to take six months to come up with another episode.