

ARC

Insta vs Reality: Body Image in the Online World



Created by ARC and local teens to spark honest conversations and build stronger self-worth in the social media age.

Why this matters

Social media is part of everyday life – but what we see online isn’t always real. Filters, face edits, gym selfies, “what I eat in a day” videos, and body trends can make it feel like everyone else is better looking, more confident, and more “put together.”

It’s no surprise that young people are comparing themselves to impossible standards. Many teens have told us they feel pressure to look “perfect” online. But we want to say this clearly: what you see isn’t always reality. And your value is never based on likes, shape, or aesthetics.

This guide is here to help you:

- Spot how social media distorts body image
- Understand how online trends affect self-worth
- Learn what to do when comparison kicks in
- Remind yourself that you are more than how you look



The Filter Effect

Apps like Snapchat, TikTok, and Instagram offer beauty filters that change your face in subtle – and not-so-subtle – ways. Smooth skin, bigger lips, smaller noses, lifted eyes... even “natural” filters can shift your appearance.

🔍 **The problem?** Many teens begin to feel insecure without a filter. Studies have linked filter use to:

- Lower self-esteem
- Increased body dissatisfaction
- A desire for cosmetic procedures

🧠 **Remember:** That person you’re comparing yourself to? They might be using a filter, good lighting, 20 takes, and editing apps.

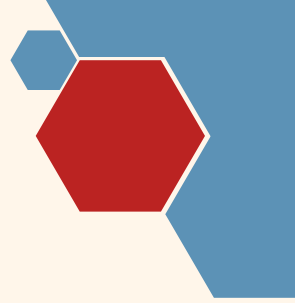
💡 And it goes further than filters – many people online use editing apps that can slim waists, reshape faces, whiten teeth, and even change body proportions with a swipe. These images look convincing – but they aren’t real. You’re comparing yourself to something that doesn’t even exist in real life.

📺 **The result?** You might look in the mirror and feel like you’re not enough – when actually, the mirror is the real you. The more we see filtered faces, the more we expect ourselves to look that way. But no one – not even influencers – wakes up looking like their Instagram photos.

“Those who mind
don’t matter and
those who matter
don’t mind.”
Bernard Baruch



Trends Change, and Hurt!



Social media pushes body trends just like fashion trends. One year it's the "slim thick" look, the next it's ultra-flat stomachs and "heroin chic." These unrealistic and ever-changing ideals can harm self-esteem – especially when promoted by influencers or celebrities.

What makes it even harder? Many of these looks are not just filtered – they're bought.

✨ Common enhancements that often go unspoken:

- Hair extensions, lash extensions, and false nails
- Lip fillers, botox, or jawline shaping
- Cosmetic surgery – including nose jobs, BBLs (Brazilian Butt Lifts), implants
- Laser hair removal, skin bleaching, tanning injections

💰 These procedures can cost hundreds or even thousands of pounds – and they're often shown without any mention of cost, pain, or risk.

🗣️ This is not what everyday "normal" looks like – and nor should we want it to be.

Common examples:

- "Glow ups" that focus on weight loss or surgeries
- "What I eat in a day" videos that promote restriction
- "Gymtok" accounts that push intense fitness routines
- "Hot girl summer" pressure to look a certain way

🗣️ **Your body isn't a trend. You don't need to change to be worthy.**

💡 The very idea of "perfect" changes all the time. A century ago, people wanted curves. Then it was stick thin. Then muscular. If perfection changes every decade, is it even real?

Try this

Reflect:

Write down three things you like about your body that have nothing to do with size or appearance. Maybe it's your strength, flexibility, speed, or the fact that your arms hug the people you love.

Say “No” to Filters:

Next time you take a selfie, try one with no filter. Save it. Don't post it – just look at it. Get used to seeing yourself as you really are, not through a digital lens. The more you do this, the less scary it feels.

Write It Out:

Write a letter to your body.

Say sorry for the times you've been unkind. Thank it for everything it's carried you through – illness, long days, hard feelings. Promise to speak more gently next time.

Mirror Moments:

Stand in front of the mirror for one minute and pick out one thing you're grateful for. Your eyes that help you see. Your legs that move you. Your skin that keeps you safe. Start with gratitude – not criticism.

Keep it real:

Go on your feed and find someone who makes you feel like you're not enough. Mute or unfollow. Then follow someone real – someone who posts their acne, their bloating, their rest days. Fill your feed with reality, not pressure.



Comparison Culture

Social media creates a constant highlight reel of everyone's best moments. That can make your everyday life – spots, stretch marks, mood dips and all – feel worse by comparison.

If you've ever thought:

- "I'm not pretty enough"
- "Everyone else is so confident"
- "I wish I looked like them"

You're not alone. But you're also not seeing the full picture.

💡 **Tip:** When you find yourself comparing, ask: Would I say this to a friend? If not, don't say it to yourself either.

🧠 **The 'Compare and Despair' Trap:** In counselling, we often talk about the "compare and despair" cycle. It works like this:

1. You scroll and see someone else's highlight.
2. You compare it to your unfiltered, everyday reality.
3. You feel worse – even though their post isn't the full story.

This cycle repeats itself. The more we compare, the more we despair. And the harder it becomes to feel good about ourselves.

💬 **Ask yourself regularly:**

- Is this inspiring me – or making me feel not good enough?
- Am I comparing someone else's "edited" life to my real one?

You are more than an algorithm.

Choose what you consume.



Body Image in Real Life

Body image isn't just about appearance – it's about how you feel in your own skin. It's shaped by your environment, your culture, and your online world.

And this isn't just a "girl problem."

- Boys feel pressure to be tall, muscular, lean.
- Some boys develop muscle dysmorphia (also called "bigorexia") – an obsession with becoming more muscular.
- Many feel they can't talk about body image without being teased or judged.
- LGBTQ+ teens may face additional pressure to fit gendered beauty ideals.

Body image struggles can also be influenced by:

- Comments from friends or family
- PE changing rooms
- School uniforms
- Sports performance expectations

💡 You might compare yourself not just to people online, but also to siblings, friends, or celebrities. And those comparisons can stick – even if no one meant harm.

- ♦ It's okay to have bad body image days.
- ♦ It's okay to take breaks from people or platforms that make you feel worse.
- ♦ It's okay to unfollow, mute, or change your feed.
- ♦ It's okay to be kind to yourself even if you don't feel confident that day.

🌍 **Imagine this:**

What if everyone looked the same?

How boring would that be?

Your uniqueness isn't a flaw – it's your power.





Did You Know?

- 77% of UK young people aged 12–21 say they’re unhappy with how they look.
- 40% of teens (26% of boys and 54% of girls) say images on social media have made them worry about their body image.
- 35% of teens have restricted their eating due to body image concerns, and 31% say they’ve felt ashamed of their body.
- 66% of children under 18 feel negative or very negative about their body image most of the time.
- 68% of boys say friends are a source of pressure to look good – and many feel they can’t talk about it.
- Nearly 1 in 4 boys aged 8–18 believe in a “perfect male body” ideal, and many change their diets to try to achieve it.
- 10% of secondary school boys say they would consider taking steroids to achieve their ideal physique.
- 45% of 12–21-year-olds say they’ve been bullied or trolled about their appearance, often by people they know.
- 46% of young people aged 16–21 say they would prefer a world without the internet, with 70% feeling worse about themselves after using social media.
- Over 1 in 3 teens say they’ve used a filter on every selfie they post.
- The most common edited features? Skin, jawline, stomach, and eyes.*

What Can Help?


- ✓ **Curate your feed.** Follow people who promote body positivity and reality – not perfection.
- ✓ **Unfollow in silence.** If someone makes you feel worse about yourself, you don't owe them a view.
- ✓ **Talk to someone.** Friends, family, a counsellor – sharing how you feel makes a difference.
- ✓ **Take breaks.** A few hours or days off can clear your mind and reset your perspective.
- ✓ **Say kind things to your body.** It's listening.
- ✓ **Check your screen-time.** If you're spending hours on apps that make you feel bad, try setting a time limit or turning off notifications.
- ✓ **Remember that your feed is curated.** Algorithms show you what gets clicks – not what's real or healthy.
- ✓ **Do things that make you feel strong.** This could be dancing, walking, swimming, climbing, stretching – whatever helps you connect to what your body can do.
- ✓ **Celebrate progress, not perfection.**
Feeling better about your body is a journey, not a switch. Every step counts.








Build Your Body Image


If you're looking for practical ways to strengthen your body confidence, try building a toolkit – a mix of habits, strategies and truths you can turn to when you're feeling low.

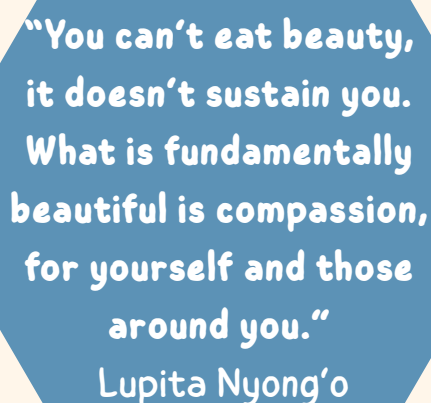
 **Start a self-kindness journal:** Each day, write one thing your body did for you. Not how it looked, but what it did. Example: “My legs got me through PE. My voice helped me ask a question in class.”

 **Create a ‘feel good’ playlist:** Songs that make you feel empowered, calm, or joyful. Listen to it instead of doomscrolling.

 **List your values, not your looks:** Write down five things that make you you – your loyalty, humour, creativity, empathy. None of them will be about your appearance. And that’s the point.

 **Try body-neutral mantras:** Say things like “I don’t have to love my body today – but I will respect it.” Or “My worth is not based on how I look.” Put these on your mirror.

 **Follow accounts that show all bodies.** Bodies in motion. Disabled bodies. Trans bodies. Real bodies. Let your algorithm see, and celebrate – individuality.



“You can’t eat beauty,
it doesn’t sustain you.
What is fundamentally
beautiful is compassion,
for yourself and those
around you.”
Lupita Nyong’o





Celebrate Uniqueness

It's easy to forget this online, but your individuality is what makes you powerful. We're all different – and that's something to be proud of.

🧠 Every freckle, curl, birthmark, scar, skin tone, and smile is part of your story. You weren't meant to look like anyone else. That's not a flaw – it's your fingerprint.

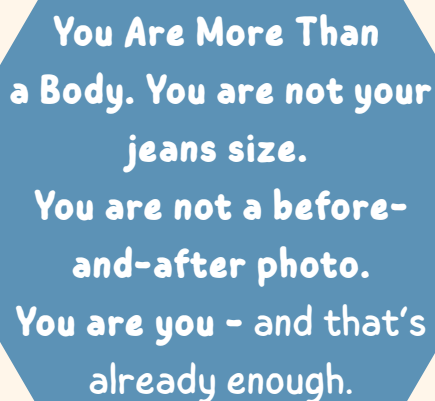
🎯 Try this:

Ask a trusted friend or family member: “What makes me unique?” You might be surprised how often they name things that have nothing to do with looks – and everything to do with who you are.

✚ Truth check:

- The world needs all kinds of beauty – not just one version.
- If everyone followed the same “trend,” the world would be boring.
- You don't have to shrink, sculpt or smooth yourself to fit in. The right people love you for exactly who you are.

🌟 Be bold. Be kind to yourself. Be you.



**You Are More Than
a Body. You are not your
jeans size.
You are not a before-
and-after photo.
You are you - and that's
already enough.**





Get in touch



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ARC offers one-to-one counselling to Adults and Young People across Wokingham and the surrounding areas. We provide confidential counselling at our main site in Wokingham, Oakwood in Woodley, schools and GP surgeries across the area.

ARC provides an important role within the community, with referrals coming from other agencies as well as self-referrals.

In addition to counselling, we also offer important support for 16 – 25 year olds through our Youth Access program. This program provides information to young people on where and how to access support, from housing, to work and mental health.

Our counselling services are free to young people under the age of 21 years and low cost for adults. We believe that counselling should be accessible for all and that cost should never be a barrier to better mental health.

We are a charity with over 25 years offering support within the Wokingham area.