

TakeCharge

Mirror, Mirror... Body Image and IBD

The Specific Carbohydrate Diet

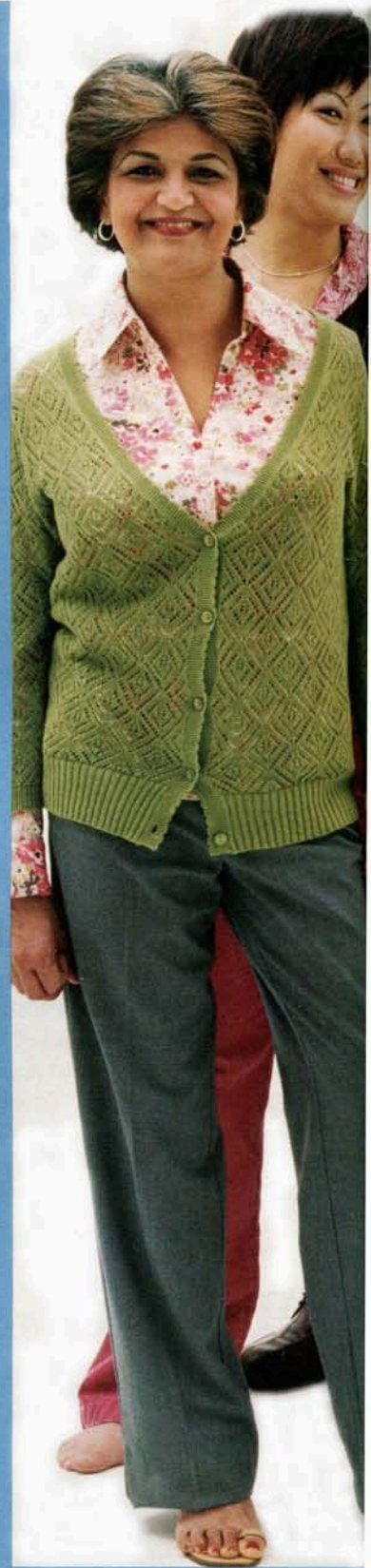
Osteoporosis and You

It's an Inside Job:

How to Feel Good About Your Body

“Here in California, you can't open a newspaper, watch TV, or listen to the radio without being bombarded with ads for tummy tucks, teeth whitening, or tanning beds. It's the land of the beautiful,”

says 37-year-old Mitch, who runs an IBD support group in Orange County and who suffers from Crohn's disease.



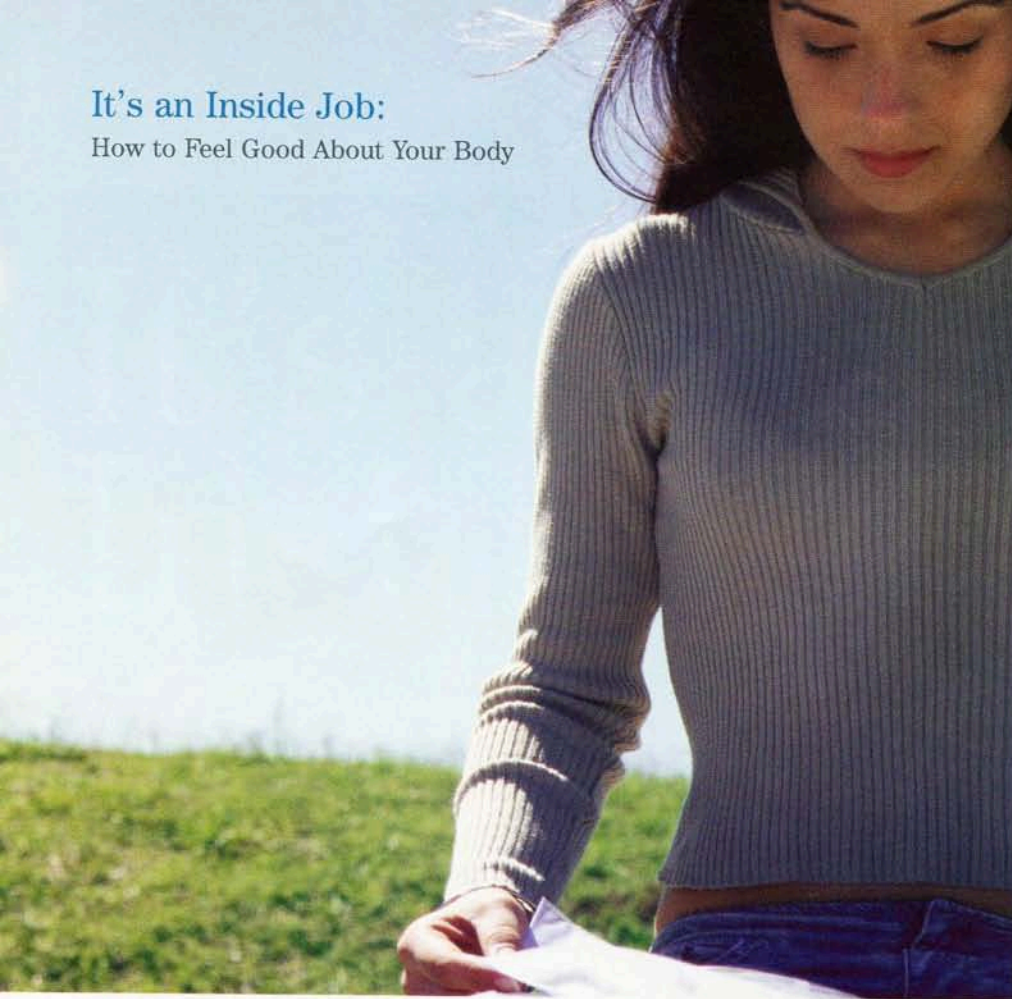


In a society that places a premium on appearances, maintaining a positive body image is no easy feat.

It's even more challenging for individuals with IBD who may be faced with scars from surgery, prescription-drug side-effects like facial puffiness and acne, fatigue, ileostomy or ostomy bags, and the need to make frequent restroom trips. In addition, there may be extreme weight loss from an inability to properly absorb nutrients, or weight gain from certain prescription drugs and from only being able to digest starch.

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IBD comes with an assortment of challenges, including the feeling that you’re not in control of your own body.

“Most people are not conscious about how their body operates. They just assume it will,” says Dr. Steven Gross, a New York City-based psychologist who suffers from Crohn’s disease and who frequently works with individuals with chronic illnesses. “IBD totally shatters this concept. People with IBD are extremely aware of every shift in their body. They’re aware when something is going on in their abdomen. When this happens, they often get preoccupied about whether this shift will lead to a sort of meltdown or whether it’s just a momentary feeling that will allow them to get on with their day.”

Many people attribute the symptoms of IBD to their emotional health —

or lack of it — but the diseases are not caused by emotional issues.

“Oftentimes,” says Dr. Gross, “people seek counseling because they think the only reason they’re feeling bad about themselves is because they have a chronic illness. Chronic illnesses often magnify what was already there. Issues such as low self-esteem may have been there all along.”

A FORMAL AFFAIR

Five members of Mitch’s Orange County support group (including Mitch) have agreed to share their strategies for maintaining a positive body image. They have asked that their names be changed.

Finding ways to feel good about your body is essential under all circumstances and especially when you have IBD. Mitch did just

that when he needed an ostomy bag for seven months after he had surgery for Crohn’s disease. “I was taken by surprise when one of the nurses in the hospital approached me about the topic of ostomy bags and sex. ‘Cummerbunds,’ the nurse said. ‘I recommend the use of a tuxedo cummerbund to conceal the bag.’ My fiancée (now his wife) thought this was hilarious and so did my three older sisters, who sent me cummerbunds in a variety of colors. I liked changing the color scheme to mix things up a bit,” says Mitch, whose favorite pick was red.

Everyone has imperfections, says 42-year-old Arlene, who had surgery for Crohn’s disease when she was 17 years old. “I’m not embarrassed by my scars. It’s a sign that I’m a survivor, and I’m actually proud of that.” However, Arlene is self-conscious when she has a flare-up of acne, a side effect of her medication.

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"I was born and raised in New York, and I don't wear a size zero and I don't have long hair. A size twelve is anything but typical around here," adds Arlene, who maintains a positive body image despite being a California resident.

If you don't buy into pop-culture ideas of perfection, Dr. Gross suggests becoming involved with organizations that challenge our nation's obsession with the quest for a perfect body. "Familiarize yourself with feminist movements or with other groups that counter this perspective." Developing a positive body image starts from within. "It may sound cliché," says Dr. Gross, "but feeling good about yourself — including your body — really is an inside job."

HEAVY ON THE CREAM

Katie, who suffers from Crohn's disease, says that focusing on her needs — and not on everyone else's — helps her maintain a positive body image. Her goal is to put on a few pounds or, at the least, maintain her weight.

"In South Orange Country, it's unheard of for a woman to order pasta Alfredo when every other female in the restaurant is having a salad and something off the heart-healthy menu. I can tolerate pasta Alfredo better than marinara sauce, so that's what I order when I'm out with friends. I'm just trying to find something my body will absorb, while everyone else is obsessed with losing weight. I can't worry about everyone else. I have to do what's right for me."

Katie is astonished at what people would consider doing to lose weight. "A few of my colleagues told me they wished they could get Crohn's disease for a while so they could shed a few pounds. That's sort of like wishing you had a different head of hair and deciding to get chemotherapy so you can re-grow the hair you lost from treatment. I used to get upset about their comments, but now I use it as an opportunity to educate others about IBD," adds Katie, who is a social worker in a hospital where she primarily works with children.

"When you think you're not getting enough attention, focus, or support, that's the perfect time to volunteer and give exactly those things to someone else."



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At 28 years old, she enjoys an active social life and is very resourceful when it comes to people who won't mind their own business. "When I'd go out with friends, people would constantly ask me why I wasn't drinking. I can't drink because of my medication. Now," says Katie, "I buy a beer at the bar and carry it around. Every time I bump into one of my friends, I insist they take a sip. Before I know it, my glass is empty and I don't have to answer a barrage of questions."

Like Katie, 31-year-old Carly is also underweight as a result of IBD, and she takes advantage of her svelte figure by shopping for cute outfits in stylish California boutiques where thin rules. "I feel better about myself when I get a haircut or some great clothes. I try to focus on the positive," says Carly, who says that after an afternoon of shopping, she sometimes heads for the spa for a hot-stone massage. "It works wonders," she adds.

Thinking about your current challenges as if they were in the past can also be very helpful, according to Dr. Gross. "Picture yourself five years from now and talk about your struggles from that vantage point.

"Support groups are a great place to exchange information and to find humor in almost every situation. The group has really helped me feel better about myself."

What strategies helped you get through this tough period? Who offered you the most encouragement? What activities did you engage in? And, what did you learn about yourself as a result of this experience? This exercise can help you get a better perspective about your current difficulties."

MAXIMUM SUPPORT

Support groups are one way to tackle this inside job. Mitch says his group, which meets monthly, is a designed for peers to help peers, and is not a forum for complaining. "It shouldn't be a depressing experience," adds Mitch.

Katie always feels better about herself after one of Mitch's support groups. Among other benefits, she gets tips about how to handle various aspects of IBD, including new medications. "After I share something about myself in a meeting, I look around the room and see people nodding. That's really unusual in my day-to-day life. It's great to be understood."

Twenty-six-year-old Joseph, who suffers from ulcerative colitis, agrees with Katie on this subject. "I really

like being around people who know what I'm going through and who can joke about things like the need to constantly scope out bathrooms. That's something most people can't relate to, but it's something that people with IBD do all the time. It's something we all share. Support groups are a great place to exchange information and to find humor in almost every situation. The group has really helped me feel better about myself."

Arlene agrees that being around the right people is empowering. "I surround myself with friends who believe in me and care about me no matter what I can or can't do. Some people have no patience, and that's okay. I've found out who my true friends are," adds Arlene, who has learned to set boundaries. "If my friends are all going to a party, and I know it wouldn't be a good idea for me to go, I'll respect my needs. I don't feel good if I don't take care of myself."

Aside from family and friends, Mitch seeks support from the medical community. Of course, he looks for doctors who are well trained in treating IBD, but he also wants a physician who is interested in learning about

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his fears and obstacles. "Although a doctor may have been published in all the leading journals, he might not have the time to develop substantial relationships with patients. I want to be able to pull my doctor aside and talk about what's really going on with me," adds Mitch.

It's a given, too, that we all want unconditional acceptance. Says Joseph: "My friends understand when I'm not up to going out. They'll just say, 'We'll go out another night,' or 'Is there something else you'd like to do?' They don't look at me any differently because I have a medical problem."

MODERN ROMANCE

Joseph was willing to go to any length to look after his well-being. He went so far as to break up with his girlfriend, who wanted to dance and drink until the wee hours of the night. "At the time," says Joseph, "all of my energy was being poured into my new business. I was pushing myself to stay out late and I wasn't myself. One night of too many drinks would affect me for days. I was worn out. I finally decided to end the relationship. Actually, it was mutual."

Katie's boyfriend wishes she could maintain a more jam-packed agenda. "My boyfriend would like for me to be able to eat a big meal and then go dancing. I feel fatigued a lot of the time, and that's hard for me to do. Plus, rich foods and dancing aren't a good combination for me," adds Katie, who prior to being diagnosed with Crohn's disease, attended graduate school where she gained nearly sixty pounds before attending Weight Watchers. She lost the weight through the program. Since being diagnosed with Crohn's disease, she's now struggling to gain weight, but despite her struggles she

says her boyfriend "likes me thinner." Relationships are hard. That's a universal truth. Although it may be especially difficult to let your insecurities be known to someone you're dating, it may be just what the relationship needs, according to Dr. Gross. "When you reveal things about yourself, you're enabling the other person to do the same. To a large degree, you're doing the relationship a service by taking a risk. By making yourself vulnerable, you may usher more depth into the relationship. Or, you may realize you're with the wrong person," explains Dr. Gross.

He urges people with IBD to take charge when planning dates. It's important, says Dr. Gross, to pick the times and places when you're at your best. "If you feel better in the early evening or prefer a certain restaurant, let your preferences be known. You have every right to do so."

AN ANCIENT REMEDY

Joseph has found acupuncture to be effective in helping him cope with life's inevitable stressors, including dating. "When I'm having a flare-up, my whole body is affected. Acupuncture has been tremendously helpful," adds Joseph, who emphasizes the importance of taking time to relax. "You need to build relaxation time into your schedule. I have acupuncture Thursdays at five. If I get tied up with something else, I drop whatever I'm doing so I won't miss my appointment. It's important. It's something I do for myself."

GET CREATIVE

Getting involved with some type of movement practice or creative endeavor is a great way to boost your body image, according to

Dr. Gross. "Try tai chi or dance. Or visual arts like painting or drawing, even writing. Figure out what you can do to add more meaning to your life and to feel like you have some degree of control over it."

Dr. Gross suggests reaching out to others when you're feeling depleted. "Think about ways you can help another human being. When you think you're not getting enough attention, focus, or support, that's the perfect time to volunteer and give exactly those things to someone else."

Joseph tested this theory when he raised dogs for the physically-challenged. He attended training classes twice a month to prepare himself for this task. "It was a really fun thing to do, and it was also great therapy," remarks Joseph.

For the most part, all five support-group participants agree that taking care of their physical and emotional well-being has resulted in a better body image. Says Joseph: "If you really listen to your body, you'll know when to stop pushing yourself. And, you'll feel a lot better for it."

Annette Racond

The author is a freelance writer living in New York City whose work has appeared in The New York Times, Business Week, and Travel & Leisure.

