

A positive body image can increase self-esteem

Joanne is at a healthy weight and yet she is dissatisfied with the size and shape of her hips and thighs. She feels anxious and depressed about her size, especially when she is with other people she feels are more attractive than herself. Then negative thoughts run through her head ... "I look so awful nobody will think I look nice. I'm too fat. I hate the way I look..."

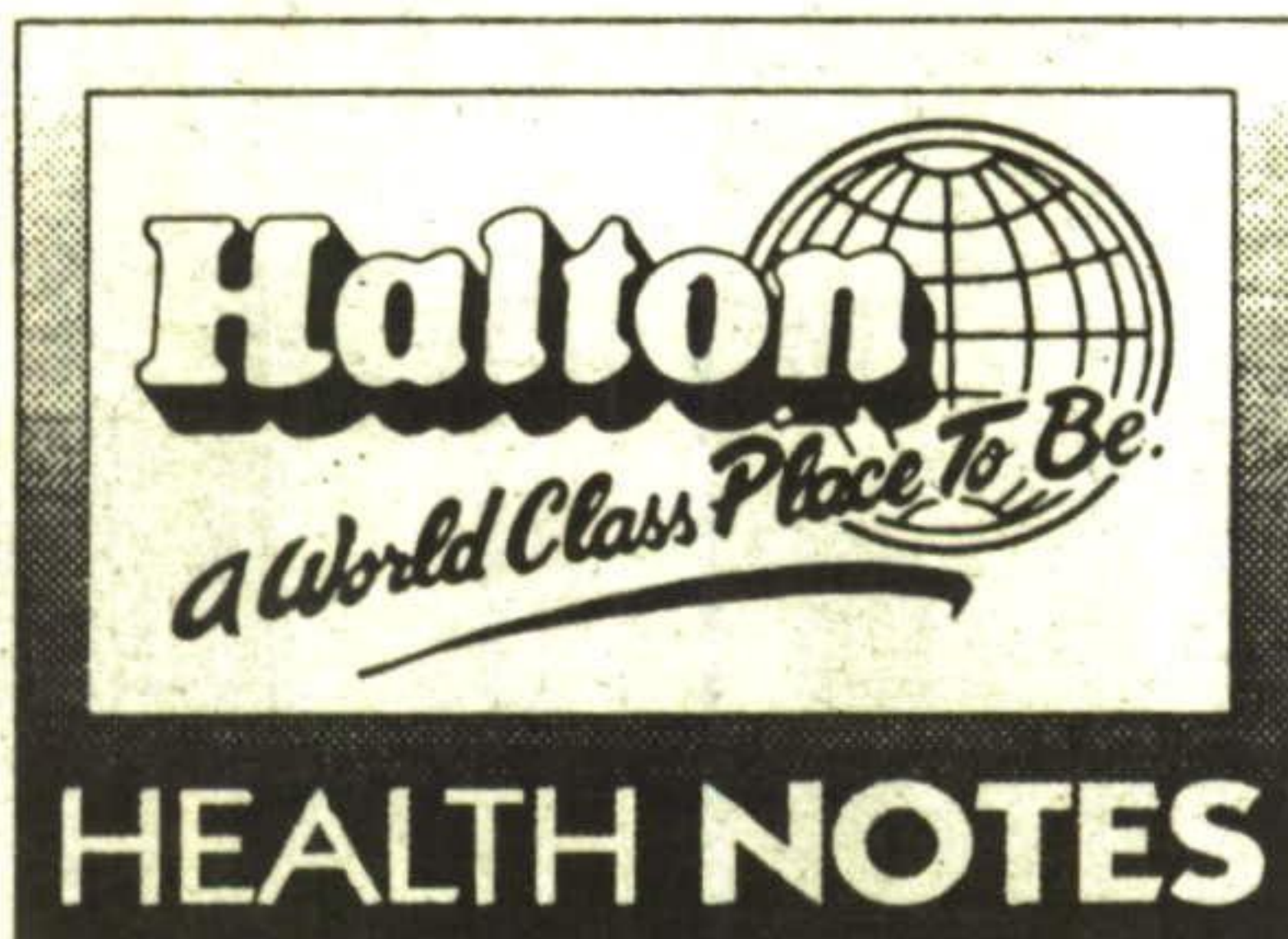
What is body image?
Everyone has a body image. You can find out yours by the way you describe yourself. It is basically the mental picture you have about the way you look and the attitudes and

feelings you have about your appearance.

Most women don't like their bodies, regardless of their size or shape. Rather than appreciating their individuality and viewing their appearance in a favorable way, women worry about their heavy thighs, flat chest or big stomach. Often women attempt to deal with body image problems by altering their bodies to meet society's expectations.

Why do so many women have a poor body image?

Thin is in. Wherever you look you see society's view of how



women should look — TV and movie stars, models and dancers — all thin. Slender women are idolized. At an early age women begin to form a concept of themselves based on society's ideals.

Many women keep trying unhealthy ways to lose weight over and over again. For example, in Halton alone, 70 per cent of women are preoccupied with their weight (53,718 women) and 90 per cent of women are dissatisfied with some aspect of their body (69,066 women).

Body image is closely related to self-esteem. For example, if you have low self-esteem, you are more likely to have negative feelings about your body. Society plays a large part in affecting a women's

self-esteem because our society focuses on beauty. Women may develop low self-esteem because their body does not meet the ideal presented by the media and valued by society.

What can you do about it?
Begin by accepting that thinness isn't the answer — it's what's inside that counts! Work at decreasing the importance of appearance in your life. Easier said than done? Here are some exercises to help you work towards a more positive body image.

- Remind yourself of all the things you are besides a body. "I am ... caring, worthwhile, growing," etc.

- Stop thinking that thinner thighs are the answer to all of life's problems. Deal with and set goals about the real issues in your life - relationships, job, etc.

- Scales belong on a fish. Try to wean yourself off of the scales. Too many people allow the scale to dictate how their life is going to be.

- Begin by doing two things per day that you would have done in the past if only you had been thinner. It may be the same things that you repeat each day for a while, then try riskier activities. Behave like a person who is comfortable with her

body. Watch what happens to the way you walk, eat, relate to people.

- Stop judging your body. If you find yourself critical of fat thighs, counter the thought with "the sky is blue", a neutral thought to break emotional reaction to the negative one.

- Get rid of clothes that don't fit. Wearing tight clothing only emphasizes to yourself how "not right" your body is.

- Find ways to "nourish" yourself. Food is not your only reward - try something else like a breath of fresh air.

For more information, contact Halton Regional Health Department, Nutrition Services, 825-6166 or Mental Health Promotion Program, 639-5141.

Health Notes is a column prepared by staff of Halton Regional Health Department.

Health Happenings
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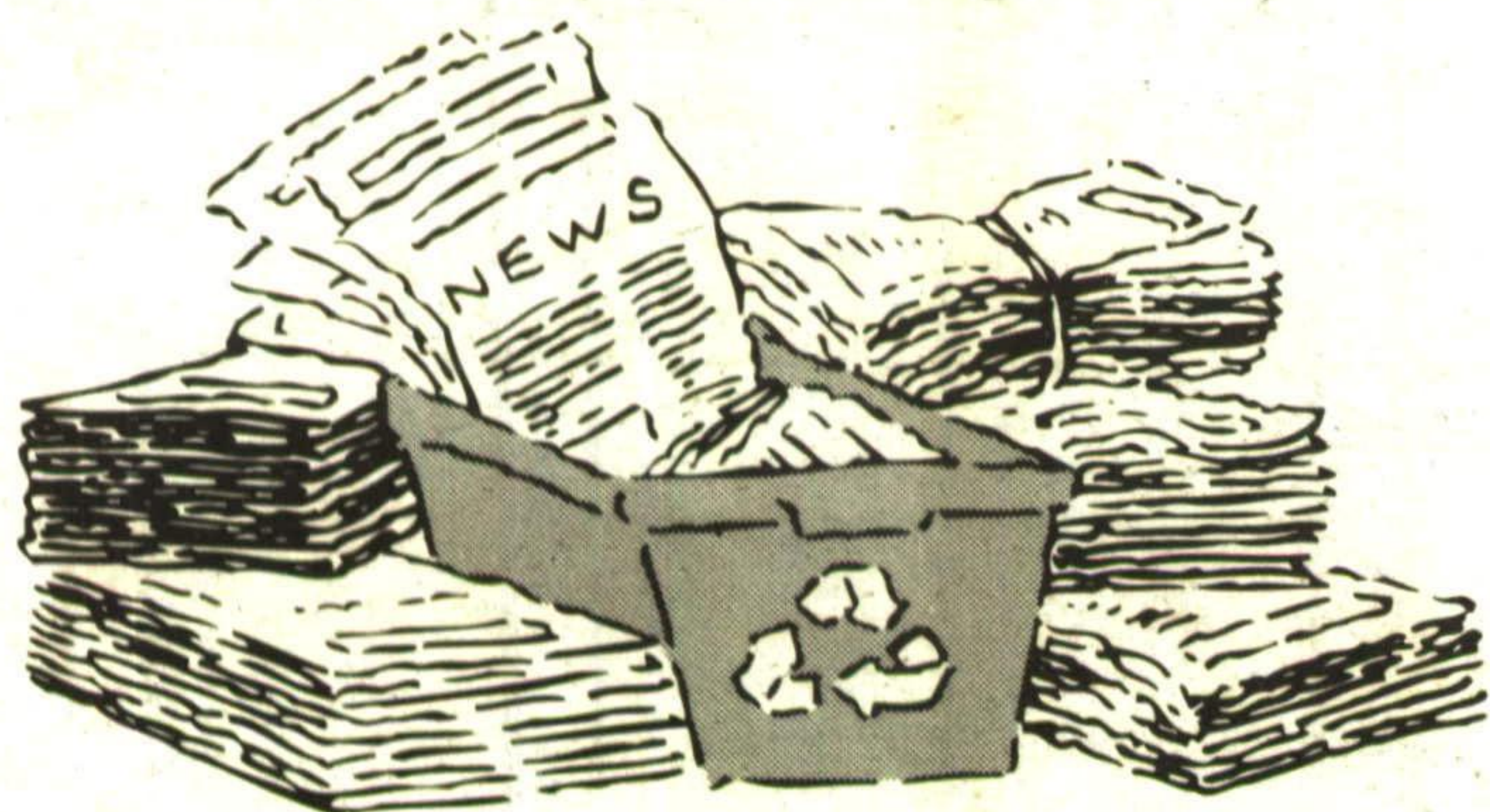


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