

Feeling Good About Your Body

Your body image is not the same as your physical body. It is the way you see it and experience your body, not necessarily how the world sees it—although how others experience your body can be very strongly influenced by the verbal and non-verbal messages you communicate about and through your body.

—Marcia Hutchinson, Ed.D., *Transforming Body Image*

A lifetime of experience goes into the creation of feelings about an individual's own body. . . .

—Lenore Tiefer, Ph.D., *Human Sexuality: Feelings and Function*

- ◆ Do you feel good about your body now?
- ◆ Did your parents touch your body in a loving, appropriate way while you were growing up?
- ◆ Do you think your parents felt good about your body when you were growing up?
- ◆ Do you think your parents felt good about their own bodies?
- ◆ As a child, were you put in charge of your body and all of its functions, at the appropriate time?
- ◆ Did you think your appearance was acceptable as an adolescent?
- ◆ Did your parents take major concerns you had with your looks seriously?

- ◆ Do you think other people will find your body attractive?
- ◆ Do you have the ability to feel pleasure in your body?
- ◆ Do you feel good about your ability to feel pleasure in your body?

Sexual feelings are body feelings. A sexual sensation can be a flush, a tingle, a warm surge, a rush. Whether or not you are open to these feelings and comfortable with them, experience them at all, or define them as pleasurable, depends on how you feel about your body.

Body image is a hefty part of self-esteem. It determines whether or not you feel good about yourself, whether you think others will be attracted to you, and whether or not you have the courage to approach the people to whom you are attracted. In short, your body image mediates your sexuality.

As you grew, your body image developed, contributing to feelings of sexual pride or sexual shame. How you have come to feel about your body as an adult was created by a myriad of influences. These include:

- how you were touched and held during your early years
- whether your parents continued to touch you affectionately and appropriately as you grew
- how well or poorly your body has performed for you in doing the necessary tasks and actions of living
- the continuing, often unasked for, assessments of your body by your parents, siblings, peers, and culture

To unravel and change your body image, you'll need to review all of these different influences.

While it is easy to criticize North American culture for the prevailing, mindless, focus on physical beauty, if you want to change your sexual self-esteem, you cannot afford to trivialize whatever assaults to your body image have occurred. You must work through them.

Being Sexy

Being sexy is, in large part, a state of mind. If you feel that you're sexy, you'll dress and act like you're sexy, and other people will respond to your sexiness.

Velda, a beautiful, heavy set heterosexual woman, was struggling with her own feelings about her weight and her lack of appeal to men. She was working on changing her sense of attractiveness. One morning, almost as an experiment, instead of wearing the loose-fitting, flowing clothes in which she usually dressed, she put on sexy clothes: Donning a short black skirt, black tights, high heels, and a V-neck top, she went out to run her errands one Saturday. Velda was amazed, several times that day, to find herself the recipient of appreciative looks from men.

Feelings of body freedom and sexiness are catching, too! One night, a group of friends went to a nightclub in the Boston area frequented by Russian émigrés. All of the women were easily fifty pounds and thirty years over the prevailing American "standard" for female beauty and erotic attractiveness. But no one had told them. They were wearing low-cut, sequined gowns (which many Americans would have said were "inappropriate" for "overweight" women), ecstatically happy in their own sense of their sexy bodies, entwined, and dancing up a storm, with their husbands and boy-friends. They made everyone watching them want to get up and dance, right then, and to go home and make love, later.

Since the mind is the primary sex organ, your negative feelings about your body constrain your bodily enjoyment. Sexual arousal is an individualized experience. Factors like the amount and distribution of the body hair you have, your height, your weight, or the size and shape of your breasts or penis do not determine how sexually responsive you are. But any negative feelings you have about your bodily characteristics put a damper on your ability to be uninhibited.

For instance, if you don't feel you are attractive, you might not allow yourself to get highly aroused sexually, because you won't like to imagine what you look like when you are "out of control."

Annika has an irrational fear of being too heavy. She has trouble enjoying sex unless she is a size six. She always wants to lose five pounds.

She would like to go to Weight Watchers to lose the "extra" weight, but they won't let her join. To join Weight Watchers, you must be at least five pounds over the lowest appropriate weight on the standardized height and weight table. Annika is petite—and so thin already she is almost off the chart.

Annika is a size eight now, and she still complains of being too heavy. "My stomach is flabby, and my butt is too big. I just can't enjoy sex at this weight. I'm too self-conscious."

A focus on real or imagined flaws will affect whether you are relaxed and can "go with the flow" in a sexual situation:

I feel self-conscious because my breasts are different sizes. I don't even like to turn sideways when I am with a man, sexually, because I think from that angle the defect is too noticeable.

—Genny, 34

I always make love with my clothes on at first. I wouldn't even consider taking off my pants before I had a full erection. My penis is so small when it isn't erect that I would never let a woman see me that way.

—Graham, 65

Body Image

Noted sexologist Leonore Tiefer, Ph.D., has emphasized the importance of early childhood experiences in forming body image. According to Tiefer (1979), in the first year, the infant gradually comes to recognize that he or she has a body, and that that body is separate from the world surrounding it. The infant also begins to form an emotional reaction to his own body, one which is very important to later sexuality. Mostly as a response to the baby-minder's response to the baby's body, the baby begins to feel very good or very bad about it.

Dr. Tiefer comments, "As the child continues to move around, feedback about the body continues to add to the developing body image. Is the toddler praised for efforts at coordination and grace, or is nothing ever good enough? Does the young child develop a feeling of being clean or dirty?" (pp. 36–37).

There is a huge variation in how American parents react to children's naïve freedom in talking about bodies and sexual parts. One three-year-old boy may look lovingly at his mother, as she gets out of the bathtub, and say "You're my breasty-girl" and get a motherly hug, while another kid might say, "Mommy, look at how big Tommy's wee-wee is," and get a slap.

Extremely chaste parents teach us that there is something not right about showing the body, talking about the body, or even acknowledging that we have a body—an inhibiting message that is difficult to break.

Some families are so emotionally cold and unaffectionate, or so focused on being cerebral or intellectual, that they act as if the child has no body. If you aren't taught to notice body sensations, you may just tune them out. If

your parents didn't treat you as if your body was important, or valued, or even noticed, you won't be very attached to it, either.

Tracy's parents were very undemonstrative during her childhood. There was no touching, no hugging, and no compliments. Tracy had no sense of her body as a source of pleasure, no sense of being physically attractive, and naturally, she wasn't able to enjoy being sexual with her husband. As she said, "John loves my body, and other men seem to be attracted to me, but I just can't seem to feel much of anything about my body."

Parents Who Hit

While growing up with an occasional spanking as punishment for a real misbehavior would not affect your body image, some families are out of control in the way they touch their children. Family violence, whether made up of child abuse or spousal abuse, sends a negative message about the body. Associations to touch are changed; touch no longer means safety and comfort, it means betrayal and danger. Nonsexual family violence makes such a huge impact on adult sexuality that it is dealt with in its own section of this book (see chapter 11).

Parents Who Tease and Criticize

When I was a teenager, I was really gawky. My father used to tease me and call me "eleven legs." I can't believe anyone would want to marry me. I always felt ugly. Too skinny, legs too skinny, nose too big, skin too pale.

—Alice, 28

As we grow, parents have an important and ongoing influence on our body image. Parents who tease, and those who are overly anxious or critical about their children's bodies have a destructive and long-lasting impact.

Sometimes parents have their own problems with body image, which they project onto their children:

Chris is sensitive about his build and height. He reports that his father is obsessed and has been making an issue out of Chris's height for as long as Chris can remember.

Chris's dad is enamored with sports and the "macho" ideal.

When Chris's mom was pregnant, Chris's dad had hoped for his own model boy: a strapping son. But first son Chris was always somewhat slight. After Chris, his sister was born, and then, four years later, another child, Bart, a son who was closer to Chris's father's ideal.

Chris turned out to be a responsible father and husband, and a steady wage-earner. Bart lived a life verging on criminality, flirting with drugs. Even so, throughout Chris's life, and even now, Chris's dad always comments on Bart's size and height: "Now your brother, Bart, you know how *tall* he is." But Chris's dad never comments on any of Chris's attributes.

Sandy thinks it is interesting that she feels so little pleasure having her breasts touched. Sandy's mother was a little overweight. As soon as Sandy began to develop, her mother told her to be careful not to gain weight, because it would show up in her breasts, and "Men hate big breasts." Now, every time Sandy gains a pound or two, she gets self-conscious about her body.

Other times, parents say cruel things comments which are never forgotten.

Rita has a port wine-colored birthmark on a portion of her chin. It's not very noticeable, but, despite her positive attributes (she's funny, pretty, has dark, curly hair and an attractive, lithe body), it has changed her whole life, and her self-concept. She became a set designer, rather than the career she aspired to as an actress, because of a cruel comment her father made when she was fourteen. Rita's father said to her, "With that mark on your face, no man will ever marry you."

Siblings Who Are Permitted to Tease

Siblings have an important role to play in the development of body image, as well, and part of parents' role is to prevent some of the "innocent teasing" that isn't so innocuous after all.

Thelma never felt cute after about age six. That's when she remembers her bothers starting to call her "big nose."

Josh has very full lips and feels hideously ugly. He can't imagine feeling any other way. Josh's two older brothers began teasing him about his lips when he was about seven or eight. They called him "potato lips" and "turd face." He felt helpless to get them to stop. His parents laughed his upset feelings off.

Now, eighteen, Josh can't understand why his girlfriend likes him. He discounts her sentiment that he is good-looking. His girlfriend adores kissing him, but Josh is so worried about the fleshiness of his lips that he really can't get into it.

Thelma and Josh's parents probably had no idea how much harm the "innocent teasing" caused to their children's body image and sense of sexual attractiveness. A lot of parents have heeded advice that siblings should "work out conflicts for themselves." It doesn't matter now, anyway, because as adults Thelma and Josh need to take responsibility for fixing the damage that was done to their sexuality. Even if their siblings apologized in adulthood, it wouldn't be sufficient to take away the hurt and the shame. Thelma and Josh now have critical voices inside themselves, voices which are activated when they are flirting, courting, or being sexual. Exercises at the end of this chapter should be helpful in combatting the internal critic and increasing sexual self-esteem and pleasure.

Parents Who Fail to Praise

Some parents, based on their ideas about the importance of pride and humility, believe that it is damaging to comment on a child's good looks. Since looks are "God given," these parents believe that it is wrong for the child to take pleasure in them.

Such dangers are overrated. None of us wants to produce a child who has a "swelled head" and who thinks that the only thing that matters about him or her is appearance, but the solution is not to refuse to say nice things about the child's physical attractiveness. Parents should balance their favorable comments between the child's physical attractiveness and the child's appealing character traits.

Greta only focuses on her perceived body flaws: her neck is too long, eyes too small, feet too big. When questioned about why she doesn't feel good about how she looks, she recalls her mother's voice: "Mother never felt it was okay to be proud of how her girls looked. She always said, 'My girls are attractive, not beautiful.'"

Greta grew up feeling it was not okay to feel pleased about her looks.

Parents who don't comment on a child's physical attractiveness are misguided. We all have what is called a reflected image. Our self-image comes partly from ourselves, and partly from the view of ourselves we see reflected back to us. If no one in the child's world ever comments on the child's cute body, beautiful eyes, beautiful hair, physical strength or gracefulness, or other charming physical attributes, the child grows up to feel invisible, or not very appealing.

Parents Who Neglect

Another way parents can hurt a child's body image is by not filling the role of caretaker of their child's physical body. Parents who do not address real problems affecting children's looks and physical functioning, whether out of ignorance or apathy, can damage their child's body image for life.

Sara, a woman in her forties, is one of several daughters from a lower middle class family in East Boston. Her father was emotionally cold and not very giving. Her mother drank. As an adult, she now knows that she has polycystic ovarian disease, which causes severe endocrinological problems.

Sara has been overweight since adolescence. She is very overweight now, with facial hair which needs to be shaved and, she says, hair on her belly. She feels incredibly ugly.

Sara's parents did not take her to a doctor when she did not get her menstrual period, as an adolescent.

Now, as an adult, she has finally received the medical care she needs. Even though some of her symptoms are now under control, Sara's sexuality has been damaged by feelings of self-disgust formed in adolescence. When she has a chance for a pleasant sexual experience, she can't let herself relax. She is too busy thinking about how revolting her body looks.

Additionally, parents need to teach their children about good physical hygiene. In *The Anatomy of Love* (1992), Dr. Helen Fisher describes how Americans, the Japanese, and many other groups find certain odors offensive. Children who aren't taught to properly wash their body and to brush their teeth can grow into adults who repel others simply on the basis of their smell.

Disabled Children

Children who have major physical disabilities or childhood illnesses may experience their body as so faulty, defective, or frustrating that life-long problems ensue. Or, some parents are so worried, or so taxed by the extra time and health-care demands that they tie the child too closely to them, hampering the child's wishes to socialize with peers. In the best case scenario, however, parents do everything in their power to enhance the child's developing sense of physical prowess, as well as to encourage the child's integration into the world of able-bodied and healthy kids.

Measuring Up

Children are acutely aware of their own body changes and constantly compare their own development with that of their friends, whether or not adults want to acknowledge such issues. Body image also plays a big role in how well or poorly children expect to be accepted by their peers, starting as early as age six, seven, or eight.

By early adolescence, children are very concerned with how they are measuring up to their peers. Cruel comments about other adolescents' bodies are common, among boys, among girls, and between boys and girls (see chapter 10).

Certain physical traits are very highly valued in American society, and not "measuring up" can lead to sexual problems. For boys, being tall and having a large penis are highly valued. For girls, the pressure is to be as thin and as beautiful as the models in the media.

I developed earlier than my peers in many ways. I got my period first, I grew breasts first, and I was fully a head taller than everyone else. School and sleep-away camp were both really tough. It was embarrassing to be the only person in my bunk who had to worry about sanitary napkins.

In retrospect, maybe these girls were jealous, but they made my life hell. I always heard people whispering things about me. It made me very shy and awkward.

Of course, now as an adult, everyone has caught up to me. I'm tall and thin, and that's really the cultural ideal, ironically. But somehow, when a guy indicates that he thinks I'm attractive, I don't believe it. I'm scared. I get this feeling that the situation is dangerous, that if I am a sucker and

believe that he likes me or is attracted, that later on somehow I'll get attacked.

—Violet, 37

Height

Grant began sex therapy for premature ejaculation—he had always had a terrible time with it. The first time he actually "made out" with a girl in high school, he ejaculated inside his pants right away and had to pretend he hadn't.

Grant's problem persisted throughout adulthood. His marriage floundered partly because he wasn't able to hold off sexually; he got so excited when he entered his wife that he came immediately. Eventually he and his wife separated.

In therapy, Grant explored his body image and the possible connection between his height and his sexual dysfunction. Beginning in adolescence, he clearly didn't feel attractive to girls and historically, when he had sex, he seemed amazed that a woman actually would have him, and the physical excitement was often too much to control.

As a child, he had a lot of very tall friends. When he thought about instances in which he felt small, he thought of a few. In one, at about age seven, he and a friend were arguing about trucks. This friend was as big for his age as Grant was small for his. Johnnie, the other kid, got so mad at him that he just picked him up and hurled him into a sandbox, onto a bunch of trucks. Grant landed on a big backhoe truck and got bruised. Getting tossed through the air like that made him feel totally helpless.

There was another similar episode, later, where he got thrown around on a soccer field, "... as if I were a puff of air. ... Again, I felt helpless."

He was only four feet eleven inches and one hundred and ten pounds entering high school. Grant looked very young; he didn't even get any muscular definition until he got to college. He wanted to play football, but he wasn't even tall enough to get on the team. All of these experiences left him with the belief, "My small size makes me inferior."

When Grant finally got into lifting weights, and had reached his full height (five feet seven inches), the girls began to take note. But this was after college. During college, he said, "I was just this

pesky small kid buzzing around, trying to get everyone's attention."

Currently, actually, women are attracted to him. Grant is bright, ambitious, funny, and cute. But in his mind, he was stuck in the past.

Society's emphasis on height made Grant feel insecure in his adolescence. He didn't date much, partly because he was short, and adolescent girls actually did reject him. As this pattern continued, he became nervous around women. Even after girls began responding to him, his overwhelming anxiety about whether he would be seen as "good enough" and "manly enough" with women caused sexual problems. Thankfully, the standard exercises to control premature ejaculation are behavioral, and they are often helpful no matter what the underlying problem may be. Grant was able to cure his premature ejaculation, even though he continued to feel somewhat self-conscious about his height.

Dr. Alvin Poussaint, M.D., professor of Psychiatry at Harvard Medical School and senior associate at Judge Baker Children's Center, in an interview by Steinbaum (1994) noted that in the United States' pluralistic society, whole groups of shorter Mexican American and Asian American boys can feel insecure, when they compare their height to that of typical white boys.

Penis Size

Unfortunately, male concern with penis size may begin in early adolescence and continue through adulthood. Dr. June Reinisch, of the Kinsey Institute, reports that questions about penis size, shape, and appearance are, in fact, men's second most frequently asked question of the Institute. (Men's most commonly asked question is about getting and keeping erections.)

A national sex survey undertaken by *Mademoiselle* and *Details* magazines and reported on in *Details* (June 1993) asked a question about men's satisfaction with their penis size, and found a large amount of dissatisfaction among men with what the survey authors called their "magic wands." To the question, "Is your penis long enough?" many wished that their penis was either a little (39 percent) or much (6 percent) longer.

Some boys have unwarranted concerns about the size of their penis beginning when they are young children. If they cannot talk to adults and get

reassurance (or medical treatment, in the very unlikely instance that something is physically amiss) their anxiety can lead to later sexual problems.

At age five or six, Solly decided his penis was too small. His obsession began when he began spending a month at a time at his relative's cabin in New Hampshire, and noticed that his penis was smaller than those of his same-aged cousins, Brad and Gregg. Showering, he looked over and was disturbed to see how far out his cousins' penises protruded. He later saw his uncle's penis and became further concerned.

Solly was alienated from his harsh father and too shy to talk to his mother, so he kept his worries to himself. The fears built and built. He felt ugly, unattractive, and sexually undesirable. As an adolescent, he was afraid to ask girls out, for fear that they would make fun of him. When he finally began having intercourse, he had problems with premature ejaculation, which made him feel even worse about himself.

Even though he is married now, he still feels inadequate. He has retreated from his anxiety into a fantasy world. He is obsessed with sexual thoughts all of the time, and secretly undresses (in his mind) all of the women he sees.

Boys' locker room competitions about penis size are probably the biggest source of anxiety about adequacy of penis size.

I always dread communal showers. I am very ashamed of my small penis. I remember, when I was in junior high, I decided to go on a bicycle outing in Colorado, sponsored by the YMCA. It was a rugged ride, through the Rockies, up steep mountain passes. We went long distances, and slept outside and at youth hostels. At the hostels, we had to take group showers.

One horrible evening, as we were taking group showers, one of the other participants, also a teenager, looked over at my penis, and said, 'Geez, Bob, you'll never get up this next mountain with that thing!' I never forgot it.

—Bob, 38

For men, the concerns with height and penis size are elevated by open verbal competition and hostile remarks, on the playing field or in the locker room. Because the adult men of today have been socialized to be secretive about their vulnerable feelings, particularly about sexuality, each of the many adult men whose self-image was wounded in adolescence believes that only *he* has had this harrowing experience.

Pornographic movies also leave some boys and men feeling insecure. They forget that the actors are hired precisely because their penis size is extraordinary, and that the movies are shot from an angle that exaggerates the size of the actor's penis.

Sometimes, girls and women's sexual ignorance and cruel comments leave a boy or a man with tremendous anxiety about his body image. Women who falsely believe, "the bigger the man, the bigger the penis," occasionally seduce tall men into bed.

I have seen several tall men in my practice for body-imagery problems caused by encounters with exploitative and uneducated women who lured them into bed out of sheer sexual curiosity—and then could not conceal their disappointment.

One girl told Jeff, "I thought that you would be really big, you know, but actually, you're smaller than some of the other men I have known who are shorter than you."

Jeff found it hard to get her comment out of his mind. He said, "I'd like to run away somewhere. I feel inadequate, useless."

The time that Jeff actually had a serious, committed relationship with a young woman, they had a wonderful sexual relationship. She thought Jeff was perfect. But when he broke up with her, he found that his anxiety about what other girls might say to him when they became sexual made it really difficult to begin dating again.

Breast Size

For girls, who develop physically before boys, there are concerns with being at the "right" level of development at the right time—getting your period neither noticeably before nor after your peers, and development of breasts of the right size at the right time.

As I walked down the hall, the boys would call out, "Hey, are those things REAL??" These breasts have been a pain all my life. I can't get clothes to fit. I still feel scared when I walk by a group of men. And I have to say, I really don't feel much pleasure when my breasts are touched.

—Anna, 32

Being Thin

In case you hadn't noticed, the media images of female beauty are getting thinner and thinner (Steinbaum 1994). The body measurements of *Playboy* centerfolds has fallen so much that the average *Playboy* centerfold is now 15 percent less than normal weight, which also happens to be the clinical definition of anorexia. From 1959 to 1979, the weight of contestants in the Miss America Pageant shrunk substantially, and it has stayed down.

So the "ideal" American woman now is one with an eating disorder! And, with the constant pressure of these body types on television screens, on billboards, and in magazines and newspapers, we probably see more "perfect" people in a day than normal ones.

American girls have started dieting earlier and earlier. A 1994 study by Jennifer Read, M.Ed. (Department of Psychiatry, Beth Israel Hospital, Boston) presented to the American Psychological Association Annual Meeting found that a mere 30 percent of eighth grade girls were content with the size and shape of their bodies (Steinbaum 1994, 21).

Being Pretty

Even when the problem isn't weight, despite feminism, the pressure on girls to be "pretty enough" is formidable. Many girls carry into adult sexual encounters the feelings of rejection they received during adolescence.

After years of nagging by my family, I finally have focused a lot of energy on looking good . . . But there is a down side. . . . Men seem to be attracted to me now, but I just can't trust it. . . . I thought the highlighted hair, the contact lenses, the makeup, and the working out would fix it, but it just can't. . . . I can't relax. I feel intimidated, and I expect rejection.

Sometimes I just hate men. . . . Inside the new, attractive me, lies the sixteen-year-old who didn't get invited to the junior prom, and the seventeen-year-old who had to import her own prom escort, a distant cousin from another state. . . . If I get close to a man and want to become sexual, I actually find myself picturing taking off my clothes and him laughing at my stretch marks. I don't think there are any exterior changes I could make which would make me REALLY feel good enough, pretty enough, inside.

—Estelle, 26

The “rule” that women be thin and pretty is so resolute that some men, evidently, feel that it is their right to harass women who don’t fit it. Over the years, several of my overweight female clients have reported their repeated experiences with verbal attacks by strangers while in public places. For instance, while on a subway or in a crowd, a perfect stranger will approach them, saying something like, “I just had to tell you how completely disgusting-looking (or ugly, or fat, or hideous) you are.” Needless to say, these women are very frightened of social situations, and would never dream of approaching a person to whom they were attracted.

In a survey of women readers quoted in *Family Circle* magazine (February 1, 1994) money was rated the number-one stress, “weight problems” ranked as number two, and “body image” as a separate category came in at number six.

Every era has its “look,” especially for women. In America during the 1920s, for instance, the idealized shape of a “flapper” included small breasts, and many women bound their breasts tightly to achieve that look. In the 1940s, a more voluptuous look was popular so for the next years, women wore bras that were constructed to push the breasts up and out.

Soon after, surgical techniques for breast augmentation became more available. Now the current fashionable shape seems to be one that appears quite infrequently in nature: a lean, athletic body with well-rounded breasts. Currently, an estimated 72,000 women yearly choose to surgically increase their breasts.

Further, at least in the United States, *youthful* beauty is equated with sexuality. Don’t believe for a minute that to *feel* sexy in your body, you must look like the idealized beauty standard currently popular.

Cultural Standards

Body image is based in part on the culture in which you were raised. Some religious cultures distrust bodily pleasures. They forbid even nonsexual activities—such as dancing—which might evoke sensual delight. Growing up in a subculture like this, it’s hard to feel really comfortable with your own body, not because it isn’t sufficiently beautiful to qualify as being sexual, but because it is alive, and thus, is *too sexual*.

When I was growing up, in the Pentecostal Church, I played the organ. I got a lot of attention for being a good musician. Everyone praised me for being so good, such a good Christian. At the same time, I developed early, and began to get in touch with sexual desires (to masturbate) when I was

eight or nine. But these desires were forbidden, and I wanted to be a good Christian. I was literally at war with my body.

Even now, as an adult in a marriage, I still feel uneasy when I get swept up in sexual feelings. Sometimes, right in the middle of being passionate, I want to put on the brakes. I feel bad. I have to consciously step in and tell myself, “Tim, these feelings are okay. These feelings are natural.” My wife, who wasn’t raised in the same kind of church, doesn’t understand. She is incredibly frustrated with me.

—Tim, 49

Looking Good

Most of us are average looking. When average-looking people walk down the street, no one turns around to look at them, one way or the other. Average-looking people have some nice features, and some not-so-great features, but overall, their looks are clearly “acceptable.” People who have exceptionally attractive appearances are not statistically the norm—nor are the equally small number of people who have unusually poor looks, for a variety of reasons—genetics, a medical condition, bad luck, fire or accident, and so forth. This is a serious problem, sexually, that no one talks about much. What should you do if you really do have unusually bad looks?

There is no doubt: having terrible looks will make it harder to attract friends and lovers throughout life. As Dr. Rita Freeman says (1988), “looks-ism” is rampant in our country. Freeman documents study after study showing that good-looking people get special treatment, and poor-looking people are discriminated against, whether it be in romance or when trying to get a mortgage. For average-looking people, the trick to managing body image is to accentuate the positive in your looks. As one of my friends said to herself in the mirror, “Well, you don’t look like Michelle Pfeiffer, but for me, you look pretty good.”

If you are especially plain or unusually bad-looking, you still deserve love and eroticism—everyone does—and you might need some special tips to get up the nerve and energy to get what you want. One problem you may have faced over your life is that no one, including your family, was willing to discuss the fact that you were, in fact, being rejected by others solely on the basis of your looks. The denial of your reality may have left you feeling more isolated.

Children and adolescents are really amazingly cruel. You may have suffered from such viciousness when you were younger so that you now freeze up in sexual situations.

... When he touches me, even though I know he loves me, I just freeze up. I can't feel anything in my body. I think I mostly feel fear. All those years of getting taunted by those kids, hearing those voices: "fatty, fatty, two-by-four, can't fit your body through the door."

—Martha, 26

At the most extreme, your experiences in childhood and adolescence may have been so dreadful that you developed social phobia: you are so frightened by rejection or humiliation that you avoid contact with others as much as possible. If so, you have to tackle your social phobia first.

If you reacted in a less strong way and don't have to tackle full-fledged social phobia, what should you do? Well, you have to do the best you can at playing the hand that you're dealt. While your family and close friends may have been denying the reality that people reject you based on your looks, and that that creates difficulties in attracting a partner, you yourself may be overemphasizing the hopelessness of the task.

You have to examine the way you are thinking about things and assess whether you are overemphasizing the negative. Consider these truths: While it is true that, in general, you are being discriminated against for your looks, it is *also* true that just as there have always been looks-snobs, there have always been people who look *below* the surface at people's inner beauty. So, cultivate your other personal potentials. Once you work on your self-esteem and strengths as a person, then force yourself to be social, to go out in the world and meet other people.

In addition, never underestimate the power of conversation skills—often what starts out as a friendly attraction, *can* become sexual attraction. Remember the brain *is* the largest sex organ. Fortunately, with such modern conveniences as the Internet, the possibilities of attracting other people on the basis of your other interests and traits are becoming increasingly strong.

Be the Best You Can Be

Growing up in American culture, each and every one of us has been bombarded with unrealistic images of what it takes to be "sexy." There is major pressure to try to become a perfect, thin, young, sexy, beautiful

woman, or an equally gorgeous, tall, muscular man with an enormous penis (capable of instantaneous, consecutive erections).

It becomes clear, then, just how important having had a supportive family environment can be to developing a healthy body image—a contentment in having your own, normal-looking face and body. Our family experience can provide the antidote to these ridiculous stereotypes of what kind of body it takes to be lovable, and what kind of body can feel sensual and sexual pleasure.

If we're lucky, families provide the touch that makes us know, from the skin inward, that we deserve love, and that our bodies are sources of pleasure. Families can make us aware that we are our bodies, and that that is good. They can give us compliments about our physical strength, abilities, and appeal at different ages.

At best, families can provide an environment in which we can get shelter from the cruel comments of others. An adolescent who can talk to his or her parents about other kids' cruel barbs can get the empathy, inner strength, and comfort needed to weather the years until adulthood. And families can provide the emotional and financial resources to change or repair our bodies, when genetic flaws cause us to be so uncomfortable living in our God-given bodies that our feelings of social confidence are diminished.

As adults, of course, each of us is in charge of how well we do with the bodies we have. Use the resources at the end of this book to get started on doing the best you can with what you have been given.

Exercises

Identify Bad Messages

Close your eyes and imagine a sexual encounter with a loved person. Remembering that the mind is the most important sexual organ, identify any negative messages that you give yourself about your body, or any harsh comments that you believe your partner might have about your body.

Trace the source of your bad feelings by making a list of the first, or worst, time you had issues with any part of your body

This Problem Began with:

	My own feelings	My family environment	My peers	Culture
Feeling I am unattractive in general				
Hair				
Height				
Weight				
Breasts				
Penis				
Other aspect of general appearance				
Feelings about touching genitals				
_____ (other)				
_____ (other)				
_____ (other)				

Assess Reasonable Goals

Look at the previous list and mark with a "C" (for "change") those items about your body, or your feelings about your body, that you could healthfully change, and an "A" (for "accept") next to those things you cannot. For instance, while your height is probably not changeable, your feelings about your height are. (If you are insecure enough about some changeable aspect

of your body such as your teeth, it is okay for you to reparent yourself and spend some money on correcting the problem.)

Then write here your ideas for ways you might accept the "A"s on your list.

Remembering that you don't have to be physically perfect to feel sexual pleasure or to continue to grow sexually, pick two areas marked "C" and state what your goals are for changing.

1. _____
2. _____

Rework the Past

List here significant critical incidents from your past where others have wounded your body image. (Use more paper if necessary.)

Then write letters to yourself, your peers, parents, siblings, or media moguls saying what positive message about your body you wish you had received.
