Bodylove

Learning to Like Our Looks and Ourselves

A PRACTICAL GUIDE FOR WOMEN

Rita Freedman, Ph.D.

"An insightful guide.... Any woman who has ever looked in the mirror and sighed should find it helpful."
—Mary Ellen Donovan, coauthor of Women and Self-esteem
BODYLOVE
FROM BODY LOATHING TO BODYLOVE
YES, I DO THINK I’m attractive,” she says confidently into the microphone. “Other people might not agree but this is me, and I like how I look.” There’s a round of applause as Phil Donahue moves on through the audience.

From the stage I look carefully at the woman who has just spoken. She’s quite plain—some might even say homely. Her large jaw and broad hips stand out as she faces the camera. She isn’t young or tall, like the professional models seated near me. She doesn’t have the kind of face that smiles from magazine covers. Yet she’s just told millions of viewers that she considers herself attractive.

I silently applaud her healthy self-image, while my thoughts turn to a client I saw the day before, Susan—a young teacher who examines her face with a magnifying mirror, frets over every flaw, and thinks she’ll never marry because she isn’t pretty enough. Susan has a recurring dream that on her wedding day the groom will lift the veil from her face and turn away in disgust. Her nightmare is like a fairy tale in reverse.

A plain-looking woman declares herself attractive on national television because she views her body with loving eyes, while Susan suffers shame and doubt over imperfections that are only imagined. “I always try hard to do my best,” she explains. “Then, when I look in the mirror, I feel like I’ve failed because I don’t look as good as I should.” It isn’t the reflection in the mirror that’s her problem; it’s the image she sees in her mind’s eye. Although her looks are lovely, her thoughts about her body are not.

Perhaps you know someone like Susan. Or maybe you identify with her yourself. Does the state of your face often dictate the state of your mood? Do you feel too heavy to really enjoy a meal? Does your body seem like an obstacle to be overcome? If so, you owe it to yourself to explore a new relationship with your body. After all, you opened this book for a reason. What you’ll find here is a group
of simple exercises to help you gain confidence in your appearance and in yourself.

As a psychologist I've worked with many women like Susan who are unhappy with their lives and especially with their looks. I feel their pain as I hear their problems—with weight, age, or sexuality. I watch as these conflicts drain their energy and spill over into their relationships at home and at work. Their struggles are personal and difficult, but not really so unusual. These same problems were expressed again and again by the women I interviewed for this book. I'm sure you experience them, too. We all do in one form or another. In fact, when Eleanor Roosevelt was asked if she had any regrets about her life, she replied, "Just one. I wish I'd been prettier." That is certainly Susan's wish, and it may be yours as well.

This book grew out of my deep concern about women—about how we are seen and especially how we see ourselves. Our preoccupation with appearance goes much deeper than the outer image. It's a basic part of who we are, and it affects the choices we make and the goals we pursue. For beauty is not only a personal and psychological issue, but a social one as well. In this new era of female liberation, are we any freer to accept the naturally feminine bodies we inherited at birth? Are we any happier with our chronic diets than the women who laced themselves into an hourglass figure a century ago? More than ever, it seems we are constricted by beauty standards that are not very liberating.

I don't think we were born wanting to suffer and sacrifice in order to look attractive. Yet we continue to remodel our flesh, much as our grandmothers did, to fit the popular beauty ideal—tweezing, squeezing, dieting, coloring, covering, and uncovering our flesh in order to feel lovely and lovable. Maybe these efforts would be worth it, if we also felt better about ourselves in the end. But often that just isn't the case. "No matter how hard I work at it, I can't seem to get the right look," Susan complains.

One woman in two is dieting most of her life; two out of three has mixed feelings or is depressed when she sees her nude body in the mirror. The majority of ten-year-old girls are already afraid of becoming too fat. A friend is considering a face-lift, while another owns over $1,000 worth of cosmetics. Along with Susan, these women share a similar problem: body loathing. Body loathing is a feeling of preoccupation and dissatisfaction with appearance. It
creates anxiety about body parts. It causes guilt and shame over flaws that are real or imagined. It arouses self-consciousness and envy.

Body loathing surfaces in many familiar ways. For example, Lynn feels tense each morning just trying to decide what to wear. And Martha views every new wrinkle as a frightening enemy. These women suffer from body loathing, while they long for bodylove.

WHAT IS BODYLOVE?

Bodylove is a mixture of emotions, attitudes, and actions that allow you to enjoy the way your body looks and the way it feels. Bodylove enhances self-confidence and heightens physical pleasure. Like other loving relationships, bodylove involves caring and concern. There is joy in personal contact as well as tolerance of flaws. There is a unity that overcomes the separateness between mind and body. We all have the potential to love our bodies. Like any loving relationship, it takes work to realize that potential.

You can work on bodylove in many ways, as we’ll see in the chapters ahead. Three steps are essential, however. The first is paying attention to physical needs. If you listen with respect instead of mistrust—to pain, pleasure, hunger, fatigue—your body will tell you how to nurture it. The second step is appreciation of the pleasures your body can inherently provide—aesthetic, athletic, sensory, and sexual. Finally, there is acceptance. By accepting your flaws and limitations you’ll be freer to enjoy the lovely parts of yourself; to experience what is and to stop longing for what isn’t. Bodylove doesn’t mean creating a perfect body; rather, it means living happily in an imperfect one. After all, an imperfect body is the only one you’ll ever have.

Although Susan is quite attractive, bodylove eludes her. When she first described her problems to me she sounded very much like a character in a novel by Judith Rossner. “The only time I ever think I’m beautiful,” observes Sascha, “is when some man is staring into my face in broad daylight and telling me I’m beautiful. And then as soon as he turns away for a minute I think he’s changed his mind. And if he doesn’t turn away or change his mind, I start thinking he’s
one of those idiots with no taste." In the same way, Susan’s self-esteem could be built up or broken down by a single glance. Looking good doesn’t solve the problem of feeling bad about your looks; it doesn’t give you bodylove.

Experts and advertisements are forever telling you to firm up your thighs, restyle your hair, revamp your nose, remodel your clothes—in order to look better. Maybe it’s time to reconsider their messages. Time to rediscover the sense of joy that you felt about your body as a child. Consider all the time, effort, and money you’ve spent over the years to make over your looks. Why not balance these efforts with a different kind of beauty routine—one that nurtures your ego and pampers your pride?

This is not an anti-beauty book. It doesn’t criticize you for wanting and trying to look your best. I’m not advising you to throw away your makeup or forget about your appearance. After all, we do live in a world where beauty counts. Good looks are basic to femininity and a real source of women’s social power: the power to attract attention, to influence others, and to get things accomplished. While beauty may be only skin deep, it often makes the first impression.

There’s a difference, however, between pursuing beauty joyfully and pursuing it desperately. Looking attractive is part of the game of living. But playing with your image should feel like fun, not like a contest in which you always wind up on the losing side. For some women like Susan the body has become a battleground. They speak of fighting fat, defeating age, or feeling trapped and frightened. They sound like victims under siege, and they are. Body loathing wounds both mind and body. You can end the costly battle with your body by investing in a new vision of yourself. Bodylove is a powerful tool that can help you get on with other parts of your life.

**USING THIS BOOK TO CARE FOR YOUR LOOKS AND YOURSELF**

I wish I could become your fairy godmother, wave my wand, and make you “lovely ever after.” Unfortunately, there is no quick fix. It took many years of experience to shape your body image. You
can’t remake it instantly. Change may not be easy, but it is possible. The chapters ahead affirm your basic right to love your body and show you how to do it.

I’ve translated new research on physical attractiveness into exercises that help you move from body loathing to bodylove. These exercises aren’t hard. They’re based on methods of cognitive and behavioral therapy that work with everyday problems. First you explore what you’re thinking and doing in a certain situation. Then you learn to substitute new thoughts and behaviors that can serve you better. If it sounds simple, it is. The techniques are grounded in common sense. They’ve proven useful with women like Susan, and I’m sure they can help you, too.

Some of the exercises are designed to explore and clarify your attitudes about your body. Others train you to behave less destructively and more compassionately toward it. We’ll be using relaxation to overcome resistance, visualization to explore the values you developed as a child, movement to express emotions, and mirrors to rehearse praise. Let your mind and body work together as you progress through the book. And don’t be afraid to share your efforts toward change with the people who care about you. Loved ones can help you clarify your problems and work on them.

The exercises will teach you to turn away from the mirror and step off the scale when you’re evaluating yourself. You’ll start to make better sense of our social nonsense, as we explore the role of society in misshaping your body image. By tuning in to body messages, you’ll develop the self-awareness and the self-control to treat your body with respect. Working toward bodylove will free you from chronic self-consciousness and help you more fully enjoy both your body and your life.

You may gain insight and even feel better about yourself simply by reading through the chapters. To benefit most, however, you have to act—that is, actively engage in the exercises. You wouldn’t expect to be in great shape after skimming through a fitness book or thinner after reading a diet book. Only by “doing” will you discover which exercises are most valuable for you. Keep a pencil handy to jot down thoughts and responses to questions. Clip a photo of yourself to the inside cover of this book or on your bathroom mirror as a reminder of the body you’re trying to befriend.

_bodylove_ is directed mainly toward women, in part because physi-
cal attractiveness is so central to the feminine role. It’s not that men aren’t troubled by their looks. They are. Balding heads and bulging bellies cause them plenty of anxiety. Men can certainly benefit from reading this book, too. It will sensitize them to their own body-image problems and help them understand the women in their lives. Yet men’s problems are somewhat different because they relate to their bodies from a masculine perspective. As Phil Donahue quipped, “Men may do some silly things, but you won’t catch them walking in a snowstorm with a cute little hole at the end of their shoe.”

**HOW OTHERS THINK AND FEEL**

At the beginning of each chapter you’ll find some questions taken from a body-image survey I developed for this book. For example:

- Are you self-conscious about your appearance?
  - CONSTANTLY
  - OFTEN
  - SOMETIMES
  - RARELY
  - NEVER

- How do your current feelings about your body compare with your feelings five years ago?
  - MUCH BETTER
  - SOMewhat BETTER
  - THE SAME
  - SOMEWHAT WORSE
  - MUCH WORSE

Just try to answer these questions thoughtfully. Gathering information about yourself can help you recognize problems and measure your progress.

I used this Bodylove Survey with 200 women to find out how they felt about their bodies. Although my sample wasn’t scientifically selected and therefore isn’t fully representative of the general population, it did include women of all ages, from all walks of life. As you can see from the following summary, they were single,
married, mothers, students, homemakers, and working women from all parts of the country and from various racial, economic, and religious backgrounds. Their responses provide a useful scale against which to compare your own feelings. (The Appendix includes the complete Bodylove Survey and results.)

Along with the survey results, each chapter presents case studies to illustrate common problems. You’ll meet Lynn, who struggled with chronic self-consciousness; Ellen, who has been obsessed with her weight all her life; and Kim, who used dance to discover her sexuality. I’m sure you’ll recognize your own body-image conflicts through their experiences. You’ll also find that the basic problem, which recurs over and over, is one of poor body image.

LOOKING AT BODY IMAGE

Each of us carries around with us an inner view of our outer self. This is your body image: “a picture of the body seen through the mind’s eye.” While this image is built on physical characteristics, it’s also separate and distinct from them. It goes beyond the simple fact of being blond or thin, for it’s a product of your imagination. Although it’s imaginary, body image can feel as real as the body itself. It can be a constant source of strength or a chronic cause of pain.

Body image has many aspects. It’s visual—what you see when you look at yourself. It’s mental—how you think about your appearance. It’s emotional—how you feel about your weight or height. It’s kinesthetic—how you sense and control your body parts. It’s also historical—shaped by a lifetime of experience that includes pleasure and pain, praise and criticism.

Your body image is always changing, as the body itself changes with age or illness, with hunger or fatigue. When you’re puffed up with pride, it inflates. When you’re beaten down by failure, it shrinks. Of course, it’s also reshaped by the whims of fashion.

Above all, body image is a social affair. It may be housed in your head, but it’s grounded in the everyday experiences that surround you. How you see yourself depends on how you think you’re seen by others. Your body image can be jolted by the judgment of a loved one or the whistle of a stranger. Susan is surprised at how quickly a wave of self-consciousness can wash over her when someone new.
**CHARACTERISTICS OF SUBJECTS IN THE BODYLOVE SAMPLE**

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<th>1. Age Range</th>
<th>18–74</th>
<th>WORKING FULL \ OR PART TIME</th>
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<td>OVER 45</td>
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<td>SOUTH</td>
<td>30%</td>
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<td>WEST</td>
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<td>MIDWEST</td>
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<td>OTHER</td>
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<td>HOMEMAKER AND/OR MOTHER</td>
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<td>STUDENT</td>
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<td>6. Ethnic or Racial Background</td>
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<td>HISPANIC AND OTHER</td>
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<td>7. Religious Background</td>
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<td>JEISH</td>
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<tr>
<td>PROTESTANT</td>
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<td>NONE OR OTHER</td>
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<td>8. Economic Level</td>
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<td>FAIRLY PROSPEROUS</td>
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<tr>
<td>AFFLUENT</td>
<td>11%</td>
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<td>9. Educational Background</td>
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<tr>
<td>COLLEGE GRADUATE</td>
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<td>SOME GRADUATE SCHOOL</td>
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<tr>
<td>GRADUATE DEGREE</td>
<td>25%</td>
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*Note: In some cases totals do not equal 100 percent because of incomplete or multiple responses.*

enters the room. "It's as if I suddenly see myself through their eyes," she says. We all know how a casual comment about our appearance can transform our feelings, for either better or worse.

As you can see, body image is a complex combination of attitudes, feelings, and values. In some ways, it's a bit like intelligence, a trait we know exists but can't easily define or measure. Psychologists use all kinds of techniques to measure body image, including analysis of figure drawings, inkblot tests, and multiple-choice surveys in which body parts are rated in terms of satisfac-
tion. But of all the body-image tests, the one shown below is my favorite.

How accurate is your body image? Probably not very. Like the figure in the cartoon, most of us are rather poor judges of our own appearance. When self-ratings of attractiveness are compared to ratings made by outside observers, little correlation is found. We simply don’t see ourselves as others see us.²

The mind’s eye distorts the body’s image, sometimes in a positive direction, sometimes in a negative one. While the outer world may rate you a terrific 10, your inner eye sees only a terrible 2. Or the reverse can be equally true. The direction of distortion is as important as the extent of it. Seeing yourself as more attractive than you really are may boost self-esteem, whereas seeing yourself as less attractive than you are may undermine it, as in Susan’s case.

If you’re like other women, you probably distort your body image in two particular ways: either by seeing a certain body part as abnormal or by seeing yourself as having the wrong size or shape.

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**TEST YOUR BODY IMAGE**

1. Does the size of your nose change with your moods?  
   - [ ] Yes  
   - [ ] No

2. Have you ever tried to hide your thighs from your lover during sex?  
   - [ ] Yes  
   - [ ] No

3. Do you hate your hips more than nuclear war?  
   - [ ] Yes  
   - [ ] No

4. As a child, did you believe you’d grow up to look like Barbie?  
   - [ ] Yes  
   - [ ] No

If you answered YES to any of these questions, I am truly sorry. Cheer up! None of this will seem so important when you are 80.

From *Do You Hate Your Hips More Than Nuclear War* by Libby Reid. Copyright © 1987 Libby Reid. All rights reserved. Reprinted by permission of Viking Penguin Inc.
Perhaps you're preoccupied with your "thunder thighs" or "saddlebag hips." You then generalize from this single feature to your whole appearance, ignoring the parts that are attractive, to both yourself and others. These distortions transform body image into a kind of caricature.

**EXPLORING FEELINGS AND GOALS**

To understand body image more fully, try examining your own feelings by answering a few simple questions:

- Are you frequently self-conscious about your appearance?
- Do certain body parts tend to dominate your thoughts? If so, which ones?
- Do you often compare your looks to those of other women, or to media models?
- Do some body parts seem dramatically different from one day to the next?
- Do people say you look better than you think you do?

A *yes* answer to these questions suggests that your body image may be distorted in a negative direction, and you could benefit from reevaluating your image and learning to care for it in a new way.

In working with Susan, my first step was to help her clarify her goals. You'll also want to give some thought to setting goals for yourself. Jot down a few thoughts about how you would like to feel about your body. Don't focus on how you want to look, but on how you want to feel about your looks. The following list gives you an idea of the goals that other women have chosen and that are covered in the chapters ahead:

- Feel less self-conscious around others.
- End the constant battle with my weight.
- Feel less critical of my appearance.
- Become less preoccupied with mirrors, scales, dress size.
- Free myself from my family values of how I "should" look.
Have more fun decorating and displaying myself. Enjoy my sexuality more fully.
Stop demanding perfection.
Enjoy exercise and become more physically fit.
Stop abusing my body with compulsive exercise.
Spend less time and effort on making over.
Spend more time and effort on making over.
Accept my age and worry less about looking older.
Make healthy decisions about changing my looks.
Treat my body with respect.
Reduce shame and guilt about how I’ve used my body.
Define my looks in my own terms.
Stop using my looks as an excuse for other problems.

These are just some of the many goals that might be important to you. In choosing goals for yourself, try to keep your list short and manageable. Set priorities by deciding what is most important to you right now, and work on just a few things at a time. Susan decided to concentrate on her perfectionism and on becoming less critical of her image. She discovered that these were the same problems that got in her way at work.

RESISTING CHANGE
AND CHANGING RESISTANCE

To succeed at bodylove you must first admit that you need to change your relationship with your body. Then you have to learn techniques to help you change and muster the courage to use them. In addition, you also need to deal with resistance. If change is the ultimate goal, resistance is the ultimate stumbling block. Since resistance is such a big problem for everyone, I want to warn you about it from the start.

Why do we resist the very changes we say we want to make? First, old habits are like old slippers—hard to throw out because they’re so comfortable. You go round and round in the same old
groove because it brings you back to a familiar spot. It’s easier just to keep doing what you’ve always done. Second, you’re likely to resist change because it creates conflicts and confusion. Known problems seem less threatening than unknown ones. So you stay put on the safe ground of the familiar and cling to your old body-image conflicts.

In order to progress toward bodylove, you’ll have to recognize resistance and work to overcome it. You can spot resistance if you start looking for it more honestly. Check yourself against these common resistance tactics. Which ones are your favorite hiding places?

- **Delay.** Do you procrastinate or forget things you really wanted to do?
  “I don’t have time to exercise. I’ll start next week, next fall, someday.”

- **Denial.** Do you see problems in others but not in yourself?
  “My sister really hates her body. She needs this book more than I do.”

- **Blame.** Do you reject the possibility of change by blaming either yourself or others for keeping you stuck?
  “I’ll always be obsessed with dieting because my mother pushed food on me.”

- **Rationalizing.** Do you manufacture “good” reasons instead of admitting the real reasons?
  “I need to have cosmetic surgery because looks are crucial in my business.”

- **Fear.** Do you scare yourself into a state of inactivity?
  “I’d become enormous if I ever stopped taking diet pills.”

- **Avoidance.** Do you arrive late, get sick, lose things ... in order to dodge confrontations that feel threatening?
  “Too bad I left that body-image book on the train and never got to the chapter on sexuality.”

Think about whether you’re a blamer, a rationalizer, an avoider. Once you figure out your usual resistance tactics, it will be easier to catch yourself in the act of resisting. The first step in overcoming resistance is to admit that you’re doing it. We all do. Then try to:
• **Break the problem down into small parts.** If you work on them one by one, change will seem less threatening and your resistance will diminish.

• **Set modest goals.** Then you’ll be likely to achieve them. Expect success and concentrate more on progress than on setbacks.

• **Begin to act.** Start by doing something tangible. You might avoid mirrors for one day or register for an exercise class. Resistance keeps you stuck, but action serves as a catalyst for further change. Action makes you feel less helpless about your body-image problems.

I’ll explain these steps in greater detail as we go along. These techniques for overcoming resistance are part of the behavioral approach that we’ll be using in the exercises that follow.

Susan resisted by avoiding situations that made her feel anxious. Thus her progress was slow as she tried to reduce her critical demands for a perfect image. We worked with her dream of being rejected when the groom lifted the bridal veil. While remaining deeply relaxed, Susan visualized her wedding day and saw herself walking down the aisle on her father’s arm. She learned to stay calm while revising the end of the dream. Through imagery and relaxation Susan gained confidence that she could be attractive and lovable even when she didn’t look perfect.

With time and effort, I saw her slowly grow from a self-rejecting to a self-respecting young woman. Her body did not change very much during this time, but her vision of it was altered. As she developed greater self-acceptance, Susan began to feel more attractive and to view herself from an inner-directed perspective.

Like Susan, you’ll be moving at your own pace as you go through these chapters. People vary in their response to self-help exercises. Some experience rapid relief when they break free of a destructive habit. Others slowly gain a general sense of well-being. Start with those exercises that feel most useful to you, and keep practicing. Don’t be discouraged if you fall back into old habits. Go back and review earlier sections when you need to. Remember, there are no foolproof formulas for learning to love your body. Problems tend to persist even as they start to diminish.

It’s true that beauty resides as much in the eyes of the beholder as in the face of the beheld. Therefore you can create a lovelier body by teaching your mind’s eye to look more lovingly at the mirror’s
image. In large part you are what you think you are. You are what you see in the looking-glass self.

This book challenges you to make over your mind about the nature of your body. Here’s an invitation to start a new romance with yourself. Your body can be a loyal friend and a strong ally. Trust it enough to pay attention to its messages. Trust yourself enough to accept the challenge of change so that you can say to yourself—and perhaps even proclaim on some talk show—“Yes I do think I’m an attractive woman. This is me and I like the way I look.”