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
MINDING YOUR BODY

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

Is physical attractiveness important in the daily lives of most people?
- VERY IMPORTANT
- SOMewhat IMPORTANT
- NOT SURE
- UNIMPORTANT
- VERY UNIMPORTANT

Do you agree that "good-looking people are usually happier and more successful than less attractive people?"
- STRONGLY AGREE
- AGREE
- NOT SURE
- DISAGREE
- STRONGLY DISAGREE

During the course of the day, how often do you check yourself in a mirror?
- CONSTANTLY
- OFTEN
- SOMETIMES
- RARELY
- NEVER

If you could change one thing about your body, what would it be?

THIGHS (HIPS)
Clara turns toward the mirror, then steps closer. Something is wrong. Her hand sweeps across her forehead as if to smooth away a wrinkle. Those watching her are fascinated, for Clara has just revealed a remarkable fact. This clever chimpanzee clearly recognizes the hairy face in the mirror as her own. “That’s me, and I look strange,” her actions proclaim as she tries to rub off the red mark they’ve put on her forehead. By placing a mirror in Clara’s cage, researchers produce a self-conscious chimpanzee with a complexion problem. Remove the mirror and she is happy once again.

At two, my little niece looks in the mirror and is surprised by the dab of lipstick I’ve secretly put on her nose. Sally reaches up to touch it, just like Clara the chimp. Clowning around a year later, we paint our cheeks with Revlon’s latest shade, Scarlet Fantasy. Then, with serious concentration, the smart toddler tries to color her lips alone. Our game is over for this is no joke. The mirror has lured Sally into a makeover routine that will last a lifetime.

My client Lynn also has a special relationship with mirrors. During her first appointment she describes how self-conscious she feels about her appearance. “The worst part is being so concerned with what other people are thinking when they see me,” she says. “What do you think when you see yourself?” I ask. Lynn’s silence tells me how hard this question is for her. We go over to a mirrored wall and I offer to tell her what I see as we face her reflection together.

“You’re a woman of medium height,” I begin. “Your body seems strong and solid. You have warm brown eyes that match your hair. Your mouth ... your skin. ...” As I describe her features one by one, she studies them. Suddenly Lynn turns away from the mirror, her eyes filled with tears. “I wish I could see that woman, too,” she whispers, “but I can’t.” And so begins our work together.

Lynn finds it hard to accept her appearance: “Sometimes I change clothes five times in the morning, because I’m so unsure about what looks right on me. I keep getting more anxious and then wind up
wearing what I had on in the first place. I also seem to be checking myself in the mirror all the time, just to make sure I still look okay.”

Some of Lynn’s problems may sound familiar. Are there days when you can’t find anything to wear? Are you drawn to your mirror for reassurance only to discover some new flaw? In this chapter we’ll examine the social and personal stereotypes that influence your perception of your body and yourself. The exercises at the end will teach you how to make peace with your mirror and how to build self-confidence by handling negative thoughts that undermine body image.

Seeing yourself as an attractive woman doesn’t always depend on becoming more attractive. For Lynn, for my niece Sally, and for you also, it’s not the image in the looking glass that matters most, but how that image reflects back into the mind’s eye. To behold your image literally means to “be held” by your own thoughts. You can hold your image roughly or tenderly, with body loathing or with bodylove. In the end you’ll discover that the most important person minding your body is you.

When Lynn first came to see me she had experienced a recent shift in self-image caused by several major life changes: a move that separated her from family and friends, a new job where she was highly visible to the public, and a gain in weight resulting from birth-control pills. The pressure of these events caused a surge of body loathing that distorted her body image.

Despite a great many assets and talents, Lynn frequently feels insecure: “Ever since we moved last year, I worry a lot about whether I can handle this new job. When I have to face a special client, I have even more trouble getting ready for work. My body feels huge and out of control, which is how my life feels, also.”

During one therapy session, I had Lynn visualize various body parts, letting her mind’s eye travel from head to toe. When I asked if she had trouble seeing any parts clearly, she responded, “My nose. I see it differently all the time. It doesn’t seem to fit my face, or the face I’d like to have. When I get preoccupied with it, nothing else looks attractive.” I asked Lynn to estimate the length and width of her nose and then to draw it life size. Comparing her estimates to the actual size of that feature, we found that she overestimated. In fact, most of us overestimate the size of our body parts. Our body image is truly larger than life.

Lynn seems to have what so many of my patients want: a solid marriage to a man she loves, a well-paying job with a bank, good
health, and good looks. Despite all this, she remains anxious and depressed, longing for beauty she already has but can’t see. Like many women, Lynn clings to the notion that if only she were prettier she’d also be happier and more confident. In fact, she’s using her appearance as a scapegoat for other fears and frustrations that seem harder to face. So she ends up running back to the mirror when things go wrong. By blaming her appearance she tries to gain a sense of potential control over her problems.

She isn’t unusual. One of my clients canceled a cruise after three frustrating days of looking for a bathing suit. Another can’t enjoy a new friend because, “That woman looks so great I’m wiped out when I stand next to her.” A colleague turned down a chance to appear in an important documentary because she felt too old to be seen on camera.

Perhaps you’ve been using your looks as an excuse for not taking greater responsibility for your life. Doris goes to a singles party but leaves after half an hour of standing on the sidelines. “It’s hopeless unless you’re gorgeous,” she tells me. And Samantha blames her lack of friends on the fact that she’s middle-aged and overweight. These women feel sorry for themselves and get stuck in self-pity. Appearance is a handy excuse for maintaining a victim’s mentality. It protects them from taking risks, changing jobs, or finding new friends.

Poor body image can have many consequences, both in your head and in your body. It contributes to depression and eating disorders. It undermines self-confidence and inhibits sexual expression. People who feel unattractive have been found to be more fearful of negative evaluations from others. Shame over weight, for example, can cause a general “disowning of the body” and a disrespect for its needs, which then leads to chronic dieting or compulsive exercising.

What are the effects of poor body image in your life? Are you intimidated by more attractive people? Do you hesitate to pursue new goals because you don’t want to be looked over too closely? These consequences are all too real. That’s why it’s important to acknowledge and explore the problem.

UNDERSTANDING THE PROBLEM

Like many women, you may find that you often wind up looking good but not feeling very good about your looks. That’s because
poor body image has very little to do with how you actually look. Think of the most beautiful woman you know—a celebrity, friend, or relative. What features make her so lovely? Now imagine how that woman must feel about her own body. Here's an interesting fact. Beautiful women have the same insecurities as anyone else.

It's surprising but true that there's hardly any connection between a woman's actual physical attractiveness (as rated by others) and her satisfaction with body image. Studies show that pretty women are as likely as plain ones to be unhappy with their looks. Furthermore, there's very little connection between physical attractiveness and feelings of self-worth. When both attractive and unattractive people filled out a self-esteem survey, their scores turned out to be very similar. There is a strong relationship, however, between body image and self-esteem. Regardless of appearance, people who view their bodies favorably also tend to have higher self-esteem. In contrast, those who view their bodies unfavorably tend to have lower self-esteem. In other words, the better your body image, the greater your feelings of self-worth. The diagram below shows the relationships among physical attractiveness, body image, and self-esteem.

What does this diagram tell us? First, that body image is quite independent of physical characteristics. You can feel plain or even homely when really you're lovely. You can feel beautiful when others think you're not. Even when body image is quite inaccurate, it does serve as "subjective reality." If Lynn sees her nose as huge,
this becomes truth to her. Mind dominates matter when it comes to body image.

Second, the weak connection between physical attractiveness and self-esteem means that changing your looks may or may not improve your self-confidence. Looking better doesn’t necessarily make you feel better about your looks or yourself. On the other hand, improving your body image is quite likely to improve your self-esteem—so, working on self-esteem will usually improve your body image, also. Body loathing leads to self-loathing, while body-love leads to self-love. Which is why your feelings about your looks have so much impact on other aspects of your life!

Finally, the diagram shows that body image and self-esteem are highly interdependent. Distortion of one affects the other, and it’s hard to determine the direction of influence between them. Lack of self-esteem may stem from an underlying body loathing, while body loathing may be a product of low self-esteem. In other words, when you’re down on yourself, you probably are down on your body as well. Lynn’s self-esteem was shaken by a move and a new job. As her insecurities grew, she became more self-conscious about her looks. Then, because she felt less attractive, her self-confidence diminished even further. In fact, self-consciousness is a common symptom of poor body image.

**THE SELF-CONSCIOUS SELF**

One important goal of this book is to help you become less self-conscious about your looks. Self-consciousness is an underlying factor in such problems as age anxiety, weight obsession, and compulsive exercising.

When you’re self-conscious you’re preoccupied with yourself as a social object. The eyes and thoughts of others seem to invade your personal space, making you ill at ease. If you think about it, “ill at ease” translates to “dis-ease.” Self-consciousness is therefore a kind of disease that disrupts your psychological well-being. Lynn describes feeling “a wave of anxiety when I’m with people—at a meeting or in a restaurant. It’s as if all eyes are focused on me, judging how I look.” She mistakenly assumes that others are minding her body as closely as she is minding it herself.

How often do you feel self-conscious about your appearance? In a 1984 *Glamour* magazine poll, 46 percent of the sample said they felt self-conscious “around almost everyone.” Of the women in the
Bodylove Survey (as shown below), only 16 percent said they rarely or never felt it. Think for a moment about when and where you feel most self-conscious. How does it affect your relationships with others?

Are you self-conscious about your appearance?

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<td>21%</td>
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<td>14%</td>
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Those who feel highly self-conscious as well as unattractive may suffer an acute sense of vulnerability. At those times, Lynn says she wants to hide or fix herself up. The restroom serves as her safe retreat. Feelings of self-consciousness keep driving her back to the mirror to confirm that she looks okay, or to "repair" her image as best she can.

Women who are highly self-conscious tend to exaggerate the importance of physical attractiveness. They assume that others are as obsessed with everyone's appearance as they are themselves, which isn't always true. When you're preoccupied with your looks you can't give very much of yourself to others. You may become so shy or awkward that you try to avoid social contacts. Self-consciousness thus becomes a constricting corset that keeps you from moving freely in your social life.

Lynn feels as if she's always competing with a critical inner voice that compares her to other women. When the voice tells her she doesn't measure up, her self-consciousness increases. One woman described this sense of competition:⁵

Here I am at a table of women . . . and the first thing I do to assess my coworkers . . . is look around to see who is prettier than I. I can always count on being the second prettiest woman in any situation . . . in class, on buses, anywhere. But I always want to be the prettiest.

Other women admit their envy, even hatred, of loved ones and strangers who "make" them feel so uncomfortable. "My sister comes to visit twice a year and always wants me to go shopping
with her in Manhattan,” explains Gretchen. “But she’s thin and pretty. Every time I have to go into a dressing room with her, I’m filled with jealousy.”

**PLAYING THE BEAUTY GAME**

Most of us get caught up in the beauty game because beauty is a major source of female power. Beauty counts. It buys attention, affection, promotions. But what is this thing called beauty that we all want so badly? How would you define it? Webster says that “beauty gives pleasure to the senses” and that a pretty woman is “pleasing to the eye.” Lynn describes beauty as “the cover-girl look.” The women I interviewed all had their own thoughts about it:

“Beauty is a quality that attracts attention. You have to look twice at someone who’s beautiful.”

“I used to think that being beautiful meant being thin. But now I realize my thin friends don’t feel that much prettier than I do.”

“It’s just an illusion. You can’t put your finger on it because it’s really created in your head.”

“Who knows what beauty is? But I sure spend a lot of time chasing after it.”

Beauty isn’t easy to define. We’re as likely to see it in an innocent girl as in a sexy siren. We proclaim it a natural quality even while we promote it as a packaged illusion. One day we dismiss good looks as trivial, the next day we crown and worship a new Miss America. We hide the fact of our face-lifts, yet flaunt our remade faces. Precise definitions of beauty dissolve in such contradictions.

Although we have trouble defining beauty, we seem to know it when we see it. People tend to agree on who is attractive. In a given culture at a given time, ratings of appearance show great consistency, regardless of the age, sex, or background of the judge. And people also seem to agree that appearance counts. When asked whether physical attractiveness is significant in everyday life, a full 95 percent of the Bodylove Survey said it was somewhat or very important.
Is physical attractiveness important in the daily lives of most people?

39% VERY IMPORTANT
56% SOMEWHAT IMPORTANT
3% NOT SURE
1% UNIMPORTANT
1% VERY UNIMPORTANT

Beauty standards are often confusing. They vary from place to place and from day to day. Yet an inherent tension is constantly built into the notion of feminine beauty. Erotic sophistication is sometimes paired with naïve innocence. Other times a delicate grace is required alongside muscular athleticism. These conflicting demands pull us in opposite directions, making the beauty game highly stressful. Lynn complains, “It’s harder to dress now that I have this executive job. If I put on something pretty and feminine, I feel self-conscious about not looking businesslike. I just can’t seem to win.”

These contradictions make it especially difficult for women to love their bodies. Compared to men, women are judged more critically for their appearance. And they judge themselves with the same critical eye. Poor body image has been described as a universal fact of female experience. We may be called “the fair sex,” but we tend to see ourselves unfairly. Just consider the following facts:

- The majority of ten-year-old girls in one study rated themselves as least attractive in the whole class.
- Half the teenagers in one survey reported that they frequently feel ugly. By college age, only 45 percent of college women felt good about their overall looks, as compared to 75 percent of college men.
- Appearance has become more and more important over the past two decades, yet women feel less and less satisfied with their bodies.
- Most adult women see themselves as heavier than they really are, and heavier than the ideal they think men prefer. The majority describe their bodies as too fat. Women also check their mirrors more often than do men.
- Less than half the females in a national sample agreed with the statement, “I like my looks the way they are.” Nearly half said they would consider cosmetic surgery to look better.
No matter how long and how hard we work at it, some parts never seem quite good enough.

**LOOKING GOOD CAN DRIVE YOU CRAZY**

Whether you’re seven or seventy, putting on the feminine role can be hazardous to your mental health. In a well-known study, therapists were asked to rate personality traits they thought were healthy for a normal male, for a normal female, and for a normal adult. While males and adults were judged to be alike, females were rated differently. Normal women were considered more emotional, more submissive, and more dependent than healthy adults. In addition, "preoccupation with appearance" was judged as normal for a healthy woman but not normal for a healthy person.⁸

Sometimes it’s hard to feel like a normal woman and a normal person at the same time. The demands of both roles often are incompatible, especially when it comes to physical attractiveness. I know, for instance, that high heels are uncomfortable. Yet sometimes I think I should wear them to look right. The healthy person within me says, "Take them off, they feel awful." But the healthy woman within me says, "Leave them on, they look terrific." So I’m caught in a bind. Do I reject the feminine role and put on sensible shoes? Or do I opt for the pretty pumps that are painful but sometimes make me look and feel more attractive?

This is the kind of no-win situation that leads each of us to our own body-image problems. These are the conflicts that create body loathing and that drive us all a bit crazy. Lynn’s clothes never seem right. A dress that looks fine at home in the morning doesn’t feel "professional" enough when she gets to the bank. We all face such dilemmas again and again because they’re a natural by-product of the feminine role. Of course, we weren’t born believing that high heels or long hair look pretty. We were taught these "truths" through the process of socialization (discussed further in Chapter 3).

**OBJECTIFICATION**

As a woman, you’re expected to be pretty and to flaunt it. Throughout history, females have been denied many roles in society, but the role of beauty object has been actively promoted. Most girls are
encouraged to dress up and show off—to please parents, boyfriends, and especially themselves. After all, girl watching is a national pastime. Women get so used to watching and being watched that it feels like a natural part of daily life. Few of us are consciously aware of this objectification... or very concerned about it. After all, it’s nicer to be looked at than overlooked.

The game of girl watching leads to a kind of self-objectification that further distorts body image and erodes self-esteem. Piece by piece, we start to pick our own bodies apart and then remodel them. One flaw, real or imagined, can dominate the whole image—as with Lynn’s nose.

Objectification encourages you to see yourself in terms of parts, and to transform those parts to gain attention. Making over body parts is central to the feminine role—which explains why coloring your lips or cutting your hair can take on so much meaning. You’ve learned that what’s on your head may be considered as important as what’s in it. This, too, is another aspect of the normal-woman versus normal-person conflict.

The Bodylove Survey asked: If you could change one thing about your body, what would it be? Not a single woman in 200 said she would leave her body alone and change nothing! Each one wanted to change something. And every inch of the body was targeted for overhaul by someone. What did they long for? Wider eyes, fewer freckles, longer legs, smaller feet, better posture, firmer thighs, thinner ankles, thicker hair, longer nails, bigger breasts... (Psychoanalysts should note that genitals were never mentioned.)

Above all else, they wanted to lose weight. Fully two-thirds of the women in the sample were longing for less of themselves, especially in the region between their waist and their knees. “Remove the saddle bags... get rid of my hips... have a smaller rear... melt away this potbelly... less cellulite... lose the flab,” they wrote. Weight obsession is the norm among females today, and it’s a major cause of body loathing.

Confused about being a healthy person or a healthy woman and objectified by ourselves and others, it’s no wonder we’re so self-conscious about our bodies. When society sets impossible standards for feminine beauty, disappointment and failure become inevitable. What can one say about a culture that requires an ideal weight that is dangerously thin? Or that demands an ideal face that looks forever young? Or that worships a foot as small as a doll’s or one that’s propped up on a three-inch heel? Once a certain look becomes
sacred, it redefines normal appearance, even when the demands of society are quite abnormal. These "neurotic" social norms distort body image and erode self-esteem.

**THE PROBLEM OF LOOKSIM**

To achieve bodylove you have to take a hard look at how society molds body image. You might think that caring for your image is a purely personal matter. In reality, you must cope not only with the face in your own mirror but with the mirror of society as well. And that mirror is distorted with stereotypes.

A stereotype is a widely held belief that members of a certain group are all alike. (Blonds are sexy; southerners are friendly). First, someone is labeled according to a particular trait (blond); then she is judged to have other qualities because of that trait (sex appeal). Stereotypes are dangerous because they make assumptions and ignore individual differences. They're also powerful precisely because so many people believe them to be true.

*Looksim* is a stereotype that links certain qualities to attractive people and other qualities to unattractive people. Like racism and ageism, looksim influences how we see ourselves and how we're seen by others. Equally important, looksim affects behavior. It leads to discrimination either toward or against those who have a certain look. For example, studies show that:

- Cute babies are held and cuddled more than other babies.
- Good-looking children get more attention from their teachers.
- Pretty women date more often and tend to marry earlier than their plainer sisters.
- Attractive women are more readily hired for jobs that are "appropriate" for females (pink-collar jobs).

There's a tendency to associate good looks with good deeds, and this is where the power of beauty comes in. Attractive people are seen as more sensitive, interesting, sincere, poised, and leading more successful lives than less attractive people. If the package is wrapped well, we assume the contents are also wonderful. Beauty stereotypes aren't all positive, however. Attractive people are also prejudged to be conceited, selfish, vain, snobbish, arrogant, fickle, and sexually demanding. Beauty is nice, but it's not always better.
For instance, good looks can be an obstacle for a woman seeking an executive job, where a highly feminine look may be stereotyped as unprofessional. (Which is one reason Lynn has so much trouble finding the right outfit for work.)

Can you think of times in your own life when looksism worked either for or against you? Were you given special attention as a child because you were so cute? Were you passed over for the cheerleading squad because you weren’t cute enough? Sometimes we’re unaware of the subtle effects of looksism on us. For example, males were asked to call unknown females who had been described to them as either attractive or unattractive. The women didn’t know this information had been given to the callers. Somehow the men unconsciously encouraged the “pretty” women to respond in a friendlier way, whereas the “unattractive” women became less effective on the phone.\textsuperscript{11}

It’s hard for us to admit or accept that something as “superficial” as looks can push one person ahead and hold another back. So we give lip service to “higher” moral values. We preach that beauty is only skin deep, yet deep down we know how much we value it and how much we fear its loss. We know full well that we do judge books by their covers. We do take others at “face value.” Most of us get caught up playing the beauty game, even though the odds are fixed so that only a few can win.

While the women in the Bodylove Survey were sure that physical attractiveness was quite important in daily life, they weren’t so sure about its effects on success and happiness. Just as many of them agreed as disagreed with the statement, “Good-looking people are usually happier and more successful than less attractive people.”

Do you agree that “good-looking people are usually happier and more successful than less attractive people?”

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<td>11%</td>
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<td>37%</td>
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You can hear their mixed reactions in these comments:
Myrna. “Basically I think a person’s success depends on motivation and how much they’re in control of their life. But appearance does play a part, because society’s attitudes center on it. Those who fit the norm can initially get what they want, but looks can’t carry through entirely. What’s underneath also carries a lot of weight.”

Isabelle. “If you’re beautiful to begin with, people give you the benefit of the doubt. They want to include you. If you’re not so attractive, then you have to come across with other things.”

Looksism is not a figment of the imagination but a reality that affects your life. How you look influences whether you’re looked at. And this in turn changes your body image. While beauty counts, many factors determine whether blond curls or big breasts are an advantage or not in a certain situation. Because appearance communicates, we study the social code and try to send the “right” kinds of body messages. As the cartoon on page 31 shows, looksism prompts us to send false messages, knowing full well that a different person lives behind the façade.

**TAKING A LOOK AT LOOKSISM**

Stereotypes don’t disappear overnight just because we name or expose them. Even so, by looking closely at looksism you can become more aware of how this stereotype influences your own body image. Greater awareness will help you reduce its harmful effects.

**EXERCISE • Challenging Looksism in Yourself**

All of us carry around our own personal brand of looksism. Try to explore yours by completing the following sentences on paper. Respond rapidly so that your true feelings show.

Because of my looks . . .
Pretty women . . .
I think my body . . .
I wish my body . . .
When I look good . . .
Unattractive women . . .
Now check your responses. Do you find any recurring themes? For instance, Charlene wrote that, “Pretty women are lucky women,” and “Because of my looks I’ve had a hard time.” Both statements imply that beauty makes life easy. But does it really? Or is that belief a product of looksism?

You’ll probably find that at least some of your sentence completions are based on stereotypical attitudes about appearance. Try to challenge each of the responses you made by giving a counterargument that makes good sense. Counterarguments are rational statements that refute some belief you automatically assume is true. They are an important technique that we’ll be using later on. In this case, counterarguments can help you understand the hidden influence of looksism on your body image.

The best counterarguments are realistic and persuasive. They offer a fresh perspective that can move you beyond the constrictions of a stereotype. Let’s take Charlene’s responses as an example. She wrote “Pretty women are lucky women.”

Counterargument: Pretty women don’t always feel lucky. They complain that people won’t take them seriously. They worry that they are liked for their looks but not for who they are. They may get hassled and exploited as sex objects, and they feel anxious about losing their beauty as they age.
Charlene also wrote: “Because of my looks I’ve had a hard time.”

Counterargument: In fact, I’ve been successful sometimes and unsuccessful other times, even though my looks haven’t changed. As I’ve gotten older, I’m not any better looking. Yet my looks seem to have less influence on my life.

As you try to challenge your responses to the sentences you completed above, remember that stereotypes are powerful because we cling to them as truth.

EXERCISE • Discussing and Recognizing Looksism

Another valuable exercise is to explore the meaning of looksism with family or friends. You can start an interesting discussion by comparing looksism to racism, ageism, or sexism. Ask people if they agree with any of the following statements, and examine your own attitudes during the process.

• You are what you look like.
• Attractive people are happier and more successful than less attractive people.
• Women have to suffer in order to look good.
• Beauty is in the eye of the beholder.

As a final activity, take time to consider how looksism is hidden in media messages that connect good looks with the good life. Open any woman’s magazine. Notice how much space is given to depicting, defining, and displaying the female body. Notice how much advertising space is devoted to beauty products.

Flip through the pages and count the number of cosmetic ads that promise to produce a lovelier you. It’s interesting to jot down a list of the powerful terms used in these ads to connect beauty with success and happiness. In the ads of just one issue of one magazine I found all of these terms: pure, gentle, sensational, unforgettable, refreshing, clean, healthy, renewed, pumped-up, fresh, bold, outrageous, firm, advanced, glowing, incredible, genuine, natural, alive, unique, creative, sensual, upbeat, luscious. Notice the wide range of characteristics that are connected with being attractive. This is how looksism gets perpetuated. Who wouldn’t want luscious lips if they guaranteed a luscious life?
When you use media models as your personal role models, you may be headed for trouble. One study found that exposure to photos of pretty models has a depressing effect. Women tend to rate their own appearance as less attractive after viewing pictures of beautiful models. And men judged women as less attractive after watching just one episode of a TV show featuring a bevy of gorgeous lady cops.12

Ads foster looksism by compressing beauty into a few variations of "the right look." Consequently, minority members try to buy straighter hair or rounder eyes, searching for the equality that democracy promises but rarely delivers. The media serve as a kind of magic mirror that reflects an idealized world. In a way, they present today's version of classical myths. Let's look at one ancient myth for insight into the power of reflected beauty.

**MIRROR BONDAGE**

Imagine a deep forest with a limpid pool. Enter Narcissus, a Greek hunter who is irresistibly handsome. Narcissus has never beheld his own face, so he can't understand what all the fuss is about. While kneeling for a drink, he becomes intoxicated by an image on the surface of the water. Again and again he tries to embrace this vision of beauty, only to see it dissolve in his arms. As he reaches for a kiss, Narcissus falls into the pool, swallowed up by his hungry longing for a lovely face.

The myth of Narcissus depicts an ancient Greek superstition that seeing your own reflection is bad luck. Freud used the term narcissism to describe a morbid preoccupation with oneself or one's body. Indeed, reflections can throw you off balance. Like Narcissus, you may be drowning in the vain pursuit of a perfect image.

It's not surprising that mirrors play such an important role in shaping body image. One author explains that mirrors are to image what scales are to weight—a measure of our acceptability or even of our reality. We often turn to them for reassurance, asking the mirror to tell us that we're "still fair enough." But as the anxious queen in Snow White discovered, mirrors may only confirm our worst fears.

Katherine tells me that she lives in a house that's heavily mirrored. "Some days are good. When I look I can see good things. Other days I think 'it's just not fair.' I'm not sure what makes a bad day. But I'm very objective and I call it the way I see it. On bad days
I try to avoid being seen by anyone who’s important.”

“Some mirrors are friendlier than others,” Charlene observes. “Some are really hateful and show you everything you don’t want to see. I can’t stand the ones with the fluorescent lights that make every wrinkle scream out.” Who hasn’t felt the “triple threat” of the three-way mirrors in fitting rooms, where from every angle you’re forced to admit that your body just doesn’t fit the ideal.

What really happens when you turn toward your mirror? Studies show that mirrors have three important effects. First, they make you more self-conscious. Mirrors are intrusive and hard to ignore. Reflections demand attention and they heighten awareness of “me.” Put a chimp like Clara or a toddler like Sally in front of a mirror, and they become absorbed with themselves.

Second, mirrors make you more critical. Self-reflection is a setup for self-rejection. Anxiety increases when personal awareness is heightened in some way, whether by mirrors, tape recordings, or the presence of observers. Mirrors can trigger negative thoughts about the body and arouse guilt or shame over inadequacies. “I start my day in front of the mirror, frustrated by all the things I can’t change,” says Lynn.

Third, mirrors make you more conforming. They sensitize you to looksism and motivate compliance with popular beauty standards. From the mirror comes a voice telling you to adopt the “right” image and adapt to society.

Today we have more image feedback than ever before—more mirrors, photos, and media models against which to compare ourselves. Narcissus grew up unaware of his good looks. Today, by the time a youngster like Sally starts school, she’s already spent hours inspecting herself in the mirror or watching herself on video tape. Already she wonders, “Do I look okay?” “Am I pretty like Mommy?” Primping before her reflection, she too becomes more self-conscious, critical, and conforming.

**The Danger Zone of Mirrors**

If mirrors threaten self-esteem, why do we enter that danger zone so often? Because mirrors are quite seductive and sometimes helpful. We turn to them for the narcissistic pleasure of seeing a bright smile. We look out of curiosity, to watch a familiar face gradually change. We look with fear or shame, to see what we want no one else to see. We look with a deep need to inspect and control our bodies.
Lynn was increasingly drawn to her mirror for a "fix" of self-reflection. The process of checking up and making over had become automatic. It briefly reassured her she could "do something" about her looks (and perhaps her life). For her, the mirror was a fickle friend, sometimes kind and sometimes cruel.

Mirrors are a bit like slot machines. We’re drawn to them and take the gamble because there’s an occasional big payoff, even though we often come away unrewarded. In fact, mirrors can be addictive, just like gambling. Some women become obsessed with the smallest details of their appearance and compulsively turn to the mirror for a dose of self-reflection. As with other addictions, the result is both satisfying and destructive. One of these mirror-junkies remarked, "I enjoy the game, but feel like an observer watching a stranger move through the day." Research shows that attractive women spend more time at their mirrors than less attractive women, probably because they get a bigger payoff.

**Mind Over Mirror**

Mirrors have the power to turn a healthy woman into a cosmetic hypochondriac by making her a "beauty object" in her own eyes. It’s part of the objectification we saw earlier. Self-scrutiny leads to preoccupation with trivia—with hairs, spots, wrinkles. Mirrors can turn moles into mountains and scars into craters. Normal changes get magnified into abnormalities. That’s why it’s better to tone down the mirror’s message. Better to keep your distance, literally and figuratively. Adopting a distanced attitude serves as a defense against self-consciousness.

A frequent need to check your appearance puts you in bondage to your mirror. How can you loosen that bond and move beyond the looking glass? Here are some exercises to help you relate more sensibly to the mirrors in your life. The techniques we’ll be using derive from cognitive and behavior therapy. They’re based on the assumption that thinking, feeling, and doing are interconnected. Changing one alters the other two, as well. What you do with your mirror therefore affects how you think and feel about your looks.

**EXERCISE • Assessing Mirror Use**

You may be more absorbed with your reflection than you realize. Start by finding out how you really use mirrors during the course of the day. This is called gathering baseline data. Baseline data can give
you an accurate sense of what you’re really doing. It’s an actual count of some form of behavior. Baseline data serves as a starting point from which to evaluate yourself and to measure progress. (You’ll find this technique mentioned in the chapters ahead.)

1. Begin by guessing what the answer to these questions will be:

- How many mirrors are you intimately involved with—at home, at work, in your purse, in your car, for brief encounters?
- How many specialty mirrors do you keep for specific purposes—magnifying mirrors, makeup mirrors, rearview types?
- How many doses of reflection are you hooked on each day?
- How much time do you spend during each mirror-encounter?

2. Now start to observe yourself and keep some notes. Find out how accurate your guesses were by counting your mirror interactions for a few days. Try not to change any behavior at this time; just gather baseline data. After several days, add up the total and figure out your average daily mirror time. Was it higher or lower than you expected? Only you can decide how much time is too much, but consider whether the time was well spent in helping you achieve bodylove.

3. Take a moment to ask yourself some questions about mirror use and answer them as honestly as you can:

- When I face the mirror, what am I looking at? (hair, complexion, clothing, size . . . ?)
- What am I looking for? (problems, information, evidence that I’m lovely, proof that I’m not . . . ?)
- What am I expecting (hoping) the mirror will tell me?

Yes, I’m really as pretty as I thought.
No, I’m not any different from yesterday.
It’s still there. Keep trying.
I love you, you gorgeous thing.
How did a nice person like me get stuck in a body like that?
You’re okay, stop worrying.
You’re not okay, start worrying.

If your mirror habits seem excessive or compulsive, think about cutting back slowly. Remove or cover over a mirror you
think you can live without. Give yourself a time quota that is slightly less than baseline for several weeks. Make each mirror-encounter a bit shorter. Cutting down even a few minutes a day adds up over the weeks. Equally important, it’s an active step toward becoming less self-conscious, less critical, and less preoccupied with your appearance. To motivate yourself, just imagine how liberating a world without mirrors might feel. Imagine all the time you’d gain for living instead of just for looking. Narcissus might have lead a long and happy life if he hadn’t glanced once too often at his own image.

Next time you’re in a busy ladies room, stop to watch other women as they watch themselves. How close to the mirror do they stand? Which parts do they fuss over? How many women use the bathroom without also using the mirror? Compare your own behavior to theirs. It’s funny how the “rest” room becomes the “powder” room where we do so much serious work. On your next trip to the restroom, give yourself a real rest. Try a mirror boycott and break the connection between bathrooming and beautifying.

LOOKING AND FEELING BETTER BY THINKING BETTER

Because we’re so preoccupied with our mirrors, we lose sight of our many other virtues. We make the mistake of equating who we are with how we look. But, in the end, an enduring sense of personal attractiveness can’t be based on externals alone. It doesn’t come directly from good looks or even from good deeds, but from good thoughts—thoughts that are rational, realistic, and self-enhancing.

In this section, I’ll show how you can feel better about your body by thinking better about it. If you often feel self-conscious or depressed about your looks, these feelings may stem from faulty thoughts about body image. Your feelings are real, but they’re not based on absolute truth about your appearance. And they aren’t the only way to feel.

A basic premise of cognitive therapy is that your thoughts influence how you feel. Feelings don’t float in thin air. They’re anchored in cognitive processes (which is just another term for thoughts). Lynn says she sometimes feels worse when she looks in the mirror. However, it’s not really the act of looking but the act of thinking that creates her bad feelings.¹⁴
Cognitive Errors

As you probably know, two people can interpret a similar event quite differently. And one person’s explanations may be more accurate or more useful than another’s. Faulty interpretations of experiences are called cognitive errors. They are errors because they are illogical, unproven, exaggerated, or just plain wrong. Once a cognitive error becomes a habit, you may cling to it even when faced with contrary evidence.

Cognitive errors can have a big impact on body image. Recall for instance that, in the previous chapter, Susan believed she was unlovable unless she looked perfect. Her faulty conclusions weren’t based on fact, yet they frightened and depressed her. Likewise, Lynn’s self-consciousness comes from the cognitive error that people are highly focused on her looks when in reality they’re not.

We make cognitive errors all the time. Here’s a list of the common types of errors that can lead to body-image problems for many women. See if any of these bad mental habits seems familiar to you.

*Extreme thinking.* Splitting things into all-or-none categories, then judging them as extremely good or bad. If you don’t rate yourself in the good category you quickly label yourself as a total failure. Examples:

“Because of this awful nose, I’ll never look decent.”

“I can’t be as pretty as my sister so I might as well give up.”

*Rejecting positives.* Ignoring or dismissing evidence that you’re really okay. Therefore you can go on believing that you’re not okay and never will be. Examples:

“Yes, he said I looked nice, but he was only being polite.”

“I know I wear a size 8, but I’m still too big.”
Thinking in "shoulds." Making unreasonable demands on yourself and on others. These "shoulds" only lead to feelings of guilt, anger, and frustration. Examples:

"My waist should be as small as it was before the baby was born."

"People should always look their best."

Personalizing. Taking things personally and feeling responsible for things that are actually beyond your control. Personalizing leads you to constantly compare yourself with others. Examples:

"They're talking about diets because they think I'm too heavy."

"If she can look that good, then why can't I?"

Jumping to conclusions. Using one small fact as absolute proof of a bigger issue. Therefore, you don't have to think things through. Examples:

"I would have gotten the job if only I weren't so heavy."

"He wants a divorce because I'm getting older."

Emotional reasoning. Using your inner feelings to explain what's happening in the outside world. You assume that your emotions are an accurate reflection of what's really going on. Examples:

"I hate the way I look today, so everyone else must think I look awful."

"If I feel this lonely, it means he doesn't really care about me."

Exaggerating. Magnifying the importance of something. This lets you justify a big emotional reaction to a small event. Examples:

"I'm totally depressed because my hair looks so dreadful."

"I could have died when he caught me without my makeup on."

Automatic Irrational Thoughts

The seven types of cognitive errors just described lead to automatic irrational thoughts—thoughts that distort body image and produce bad feelings. For example, Lynn sees an unusual short hairstyle on the cover of a fashion magazine and asks her beautician to give her the haircut shown in the photo. She's not pleased with the results, and the following automatic thoughts and feelings are triggered by her cognitive errors.
### AUTOMATIC IRRATIONAL THOUGHTS

- "I look hideous. This is a disaster."
- "I always make a mess of everything."
- "I'm too ashamed to go out tonight. Everyone will laugh."
- "I can't possibly go. I'll die if anyone sees me like this."

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>COGNITIVE ERRORS</th>
<th>FEELINGS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Exaggerating</td>
<td>Anxious, afraid</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personalizing</td>
<td>Angry at self, stupid</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional reasoning</td>
<td>Self-conscious, intimidated</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jumping to conclusions</td>
<td>Depressed, lonely, rejected</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

You don’t have to greet your image with negative, self-defeating thoughts that make you feel worse. Instead, as so many average-looking women do, you can welcome it with self-enhancing thoughts that make you feel good. Here’s how someone with a positive body image and greater self-esteem might respond to exactly the same situation. Because her thoughts are more rational and constructive, her feelings about herself are better.

### RATIONAL THOUGHTS

- "This haircut is awful. I’m sorry I chose it."
- "It’s not at all like the photo."
- "There’s nothing I can do I guess it will grow back eventually."
- "How can I look decent for the party tonight?"
- "I’ll wear my fabulous African jewelry, and say it’s the new primitive look."

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>FEELINGS</th>
<th></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Regret, disappointment</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Angry at hairdresser</td>
<td>Acceptance, resignation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uncertain</td>
<td>Relieved, amused</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Consider both women’s responses. Which one interprets reality more accurately and constructively? Who feels better in the end? Notice how automatic thoughts trap Lynn in a cycle of self-rejection and body loathing. Notice how the other woman’s efforts to be realistic and optimistic preserve her self-esteem. It wasn’t the bad haircut in itself that caused Lynn’s unhappiness. It was her cognitive errors and automatic self-criticism. One such incident isn’t important in and of itself. But cognitive errors can lead to negative interpretations over and over again. And this does have a serious effect on self-esteem and on body image.
THE TRIPLE-COLUMN TECHNIQUE

One way to improve your body image is to correct the cognitive errors that keep you thinking negatively about your looks. The goal is to examine your thoughts, find your mistakes, and learn to think differently. To do this you can use the triple-column technique, an approach developed by psychiatrist Aaron Beck.\(^\text{15}\)

Here's how this technique worked with Lynn. First, we listed all her automatic thoughts about the "hideous haircut" and put these in column 1. Next, we analyzed the type of cognitive errors she was making and placed these in column 2. Finally, we developed rational counterarguments that could refute the automatic thoughts. These went into column 3. The completed exercise looked like this:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>AUTOMATIC THOUGHT</th>
<th>TYPE OF COGNITIVE ERROR</th>
<th>RATIONAL COUNTERARGUMENT</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>&quot;I look hideous. This is a disaster.&quot;</td>
<td>Exaggerating</td>
<td>&quot;It's not great, but it's not hideous. Looking scalped isn't really earthshaking.&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;I always make such a mess of everything.&quot;</td>
<td>Personalizing</td>
<td>&quot;I wanted a new look and this is really different. It didn't turn out as I expected this time. But that doesn't mean I mess up all the time.&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;I'm ashamed to go out. Everyone will laugh.&quot;</td>
<td>Emotional reasoning</td>
<td>&quot;I'm entitled to make a mistake. Some people may laugh, others will sympathize. Most won't care.&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;I can't go. I'll die if anyone sees me.&quot;</td>
<td>Jumping to conclusions; exaggeration</td>
<td>&quot;I can decide to go or not to go. Either way I won't die. At home I'll be safe, but lonely. If I go, I'll have more to risk but also more to gain.&quot;</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Developing good counterarguments is a crucial step. The arguments must be accurate and realistic enough so you can “buy into them.” The more persuasive the argument, the more effectively it refutes the automatic thought. Lynn’s irrational thoughts are negative and self-defeating. They’re put-downs. The rational counterarguments are positive and self-defensive. They’re buildups that refute the put-downs. You’ll find that if you identify the type of cognitive error that lies beneath the automatic thought, it will help you develop better counterarguments.

In using the triple-column technique, try to read your responses aloud, so you can hear the cognitive errors and make better counterarguments. In Lynn’s case I played the part of her automatic thoughts, reading them out to her while she argued back against them. You can do this by yourself or with a friend. You’ll find that working with a partner reduces your feelings of isolation and adds an element of fun. This exercise not only helped Lynn feel better about her hair but taught her a valuable skill to use with other body-image problems.

A Triple-Column Attack on Self-Consciousness

Self-consciousness about appearance is often triggered by automatic thoughts that come from cognitive errors. The triple-column technique can help you attack and reduce self-conscious feelings.

1. Begin by gathering some baseline data. For one week, keep track of self-conscious feelings whenever they occur—at work, while socializing, or on the street. Where, when, and how often do you feel self-conscious about your looks? Try to catch hold of the feeling while it’s happening. Carry a pad and paper to jot down the automatic thoughts that occur just before you experience that uneasy sense of being watched or judged by others. Note that the “others” who are judging you may not actually be there, but may be present only in your imagination.

2. List your automatic thoughts as fully as possible in column 1. Then consider which type of cognitive errors you’re making, and write the category in column 2. Finally, spend some time constructing good counterarguments that challenge your faulty thinking. Make the arguments short and persuasive. These serve as your defensive weapons the next time you’re feeling self-conscious in a similar situation. Here’s how the completed exercise might look.
AUTOMATIC
THOUGHT
"Everyone's staring at
me, thinking how
plain I look."

COGNITIVE
ERROR
Extreme
thinking

RATIONAL
COUNTERARGUMENT
"When one person
looks my way it
doesn't mean
everyone is staring. I
don't really know
what they're
thinking even if they
do look."

"I should look better
than I do today."

Thinking in
"shoulds"

"I'm tired and
premenstrual. No
one can look their
best all the time."

"I'm not dressed right
so I'll never get the
job. I might as well
leave now."

Jumping to
conclusions

"I have a great resumé.
They're more
concerned with what
I'm saying than
what I'm wearing."

"If I feel so tense it
must mean he finds
me ugly."

Emotional
reasoning

"I'm tense because I'm
shy. It has nothing
to do with how he
views me."

"They're talking about
diets because they
know I've gained
weight."

Personalizing

"They always talk
about diets no
matter what I weigh.
I don't look any
heavier than I did
last week."

3. It's important to actually work through your responses on paper. The written word has special impact. It forces you to put vague feelings into precise phrases and to decide exactly what you mean. On paper you can see which kinds of cognitive errors you make repeatedly. It's an active step toward overcoming resistance. Do you exaggerate, personalize, or jump to conclusions all the time? Once your counterarguments are on paper, read them out loud, restate them in different ways, rehearse them until they flow easily.

Analyzing and correcting cognitive errors will help you gradu-
ally gain control of automatic thoughts and of the self-conscious feelings they evoke. Eventually you'll be able to short-circuit bad feelings by catching your automatic thoughts as soon as they occur and refuting them immediately. With practice, cognitive errors will
slowly give way to more rational patterns of thought that then become good habits.

Lynn found that she was most self-conscious in business settings where she had to deal with male executives. One of her constant automatic thoughts was, "I don't look professional enough. He's thinking about how I look, not what I'm saying." She rehearsed counterarguments that stressed her competence in the field and was able to short-circuit self-consciousness before it took hold.

To summarize the triple-column technique for handling cognitive errors about body image:

- Tune in to negative feelings about your body or your looks.
- Write down the thoughts that occurred just before the feelings began.
- Consider which of the seven types of cognitive errors you're making. (Check the list.)
- Develop rational responses to use as counterarguments.
- Write them down and rehearse them out loud.
- Challenge automatic thoughts about your appearance as soon as they occur.

**FACING THE CHALLENGE**

This chapter sets the stage for understanding body-image conflicts and introduces you to some basic cognitive and behavioral techniques for change. You may want to take time to read it again, and to repeat the exercises during the weeks ahead. Go at a comfortable pace and be assured that you can improve your body image.

Here are the major points we've covered so far:

1. *Self-esteem is closely tied to your body image.* Your actual physical appearance has less to do with body image than you might think. If you feel good about your looks, you'll probably feel better about yourself and vice versa, regardless of what you look like.

2. *Our culture sets up difficult standards that objectify women.* These lead to heightened self-consciousness that make body loathing a universal problem for healthy women.

3. *Looksism is a form of stereotyping.* It links certain (favorable or unfavorable) traits with appearance. If you become more sensi-
tive to looksism, you’ll realize how it affects and prejudices your view of yourself and others.

4. Mirrors are a danger zone. They can make you more critical and more conforming. Reducing your mirror time is a useful step toward bodylove.

5. You can feel better about your looks and yourself if you think more constructively. Learn to challenge cognitive errors with good counterarguments and thus short-circuit the automatic thoughts that make you unhappy about your body.

As you see, working on bodylove is a real challenge. You’re trying to change patterns that are firmly entrenched. Remember that your body image has grown out of a lifetime of experience. That’s why it can’t be transformed overnight. People vary in their response to self-help exercises. Some feel rapid relief when they break free of a destructive habit, such as mirror addiction. For others, small steps slowly lead to a general sense of well-being. Small steps can be highly significant if they prove to you that change is possible.

In order to achieve bodylove you’ll need to work as hard at minding the inside as you do at minding the outside of your body. A beautiful body image isn’t found in the mirror; it’s reflected in the mind’s eye. To get a clearer view of what’s going on in your mind, let’s look back into childhood, for the seeds of body loathing and bodylove are planted early in life. You’ll see how outworn values from the past can be replaced by healthy praise in the present.