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
CONFRONTING IMAGES: PAST AND PRESENT

What were your mother’s attitudes toward your appearance when you were growing up?

- VERY POSITIVE AND ACCEPTING
- GENERALLY POSITIVE
- MIXED
- GENERALLY NEGATIVE AND CRITICAL
- VERY NEGATIVE
- I DON’T KNOW

What were your father’s attitudes toward your appearance while you were growing up?

- VERY POSITIVE AND ACCEPTING
- GENERALLY POSITIVE
- MIXED
- GENERALLY NEGATIVE
- VERY NEGATIVE
- I DON’T KNOW

How do you feel when someone compliments you about your appearance?

- VERY DELIGHTED
- SOMewhat PLEASED
- MIXED FEELINGS
- SELF-CONSCIOUS
- VERY UNCOMFORTABLE

When you take a long look at your nude body in a full-length mirror, how do you feel?

- PROUD
- CONTENT
- MIXED FEELINGS
- ANXIOUS OR DEPRESSED
- REPULSED
It seemed as impossible for me to know how I looked as it was important. Some people said I looked exactly like my mother, the most beautiful woman in the world; Others said I resembled my father, who though very wise, was not particularly comely.

—ALIX KATES SHULMAN

Your family history is a crucial part of how you see your body today, for body image is conceived and confounded in childhood. It grows out of your earliest experiences, as part of the socialization process. Most little girls are praised for being sweet, neat, and cute. Like them, you probably were encouraged to look critically at your body and to look to others for approval. But do these habits of self-scrutiny help you now? It isn’t easy to separate the values that please others from the values that please yourself. To do so you need to question the many “shoulds” that influence body image, including the ultimate: you should please people by looking pretty.

Trying too hard to please can be harmful if you never stop to define who you want to be or what you want to look like. On the road toward bodylove most of us must shed some of the ill-fitting parental and social values we internalized long ago. In addition we must also break free of feminine stereotypes that hold us in the grip of looksism.

This chapter explores your album of childhood memories. Uncovering lost images from the past can show you how your conflicts with your body began. You’ll be using visual imagery to help sort out family values, and using mirrors to help create a more compassionate reflection of yourself. In the end, you’ll understand why it’s so important to become your own loving parent—one who accepts and appreciates you as you are.

I collect antique photo albums. Carefully preserved, these albums display a whole family of strangers. Turning the pages, I try to guess which daughter belongs to which mother, and I wonder how they liked their faces.

In my own family album there’s a six-year-old with a missing tooth who sits patiently while her hair is braided. When I ask about that picture my mother smiles. “Even when you were born, you had
a head full of thick brown hair," she recalls. "And, oh, how Dad loved your beautiful long braids." And, oh, how I've struggled to untangle my feelings about my hair! Here's a personal body-image problem that I'll share in this chapter—the long and short of how I grew and cut and used my hair to bond with men or to break away from them. It's a problem that I never outgrew and which still makes me self-conscious.

If you have photos from childhood, take them out. If not, try to find some of these pictures. Perhaps they're packed away or still with your parents. Photographs can be an important window onto the past, revealing the history of body-image conflicts. Through photos you may find the lovely child hidden somewhere inside your head. Choose a favorite snapshot of yourself before age ten, one that immediately makes you smile. Place it near the phone, and while you're chatting with others, try to make friends with this little girl. She's still a part of who you are today.

LEARNING SOCIAL VALUES

You began life as an extension of your mother's body and she provided your first lessons in body image. Like a mirror she reflected your sounds and smiles. In her eyes you saw pride or shame. As an infant you learned that your body had its own boundaries apart from hers, and these early lessons in body awareness helped you develop a separate sense of self.

Social interactions also taught you that certain physical features are admired while others are not. Cultural values, including the stereotypes of looksism, are passed down from one generation to the next. Of course, we live in many social systems at once. Family, community, ethnic, racial, and religious groups all pull us in different directions. You got to know your own childlike body through these many social filters, and gradually developed strong feelings about dark skin, fat hips, long hair, and so forth.

Think about the values that were important to your family. Did your parents worship neatness or thinness? Did your father hug and hold you when you looked pretty? Did your mother nag and scold you when you got messy? Were you taught to sit straight, eat right, bathe often? Were you ever caught playing doctor, or "playing with
yourself”? These are the shadows that may still haunt your body image today, causing self-consciousness and anxiety.

They were the shadows that Jane saw and which she brought to my office. An ambitious college student, Jane was socially withdrawn and rarely dated. Her major complaint was a preoccupation with her complexion. “I know most people don’t see these blotches but I think they look awful,” she explained. “Sometimes they seem to fade away, and then they come back. It makes me nervous, so I stay home a lot. Then I don’t have to worry.”

Jane brought in some photo albums and together we turned the pages. An only child, she had been constantly photographed, dressed up like a princess, and shown off like a prize possession. One picture, taken when she was six, showed Jane’s handsome father escorting her at an Easter parade while her mother seems hidden in the background. “Dad called me his ‘perfect little doll,’” she recalled. “My mother always told me how lucky I was to be blond like him instead of dark like her. She thought I’d have all the dates she never had, because I was pretty.” For Jane, it wasn’t parental rejection of her appearance that caused problems, but parental overinvestment in it. Being “Daddy’s doll” was a burden she could no longer carry easily.

**PARENTAL PRAISE**

Parental praise is a crucial part of the socialization process. It can build self-esteem, but sometimes it backfires. This happens when praise inflates the value of physical attractiveness or gives excessive meaning to certain features. Jane’s baby-doll looks were a source of parental pride and pleasure, as were my own thick braids. However, too much investment in the body as a showpiece taught Jane that love is contingent on looks. Over time she internalized her parents’ attitudes. For her, self-love became dependent on looking perfect. For me, long hair became an important feminine tool for pleasing others, especially men.

Perhaps you know from your own experiences that self-consciousness and hypersensitivity about your looks can come from praise as well as criticism. Two out of three women in the Bodylove Survey felt that their parents were generally accepting of their appearance when they were growing up, while one out of four reported parental feelings that were mixed or negative. Think about
whether your parents generally were proud or critical of your looks. Which features did they fuss over and which did they want to help you “correct”?  

What were your mother’s attitudes toward your appearance when you were growing up? What were your father’s attitudes?

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Carolann recalls a childhood full of criticism. “My mother always told me to go comb my hair, stand up straight, do something. Those comments stay with you for a lifetime. Even when you think you look good, you’re on such a tentative basis. You can never overcome what you feel inside,” she explained. “My mother was pretty on the outside, but not on the inside. So I could never use her as a model of attractiveness.”

Martha, the mother of a grown daughter, described how hard she had tried to give Trisha good feelings about her body. “I always told her ‘Oh, you look so darling.’ She really did look beautiful to me from the day she was born and I wanted her to know it. But when she was in college she told me she didn’t like those comments because they made her feel self-conscious, as if she had to look special all the time. It never dawned on me that compliments could be a negative thing. Now I see that it’s hard to balance out.”

During childhood, Ellen’s father teased her about her weight. Consequently, she sees herself as much heavier than she really is. This is how parental praise or criticism leads to cognitive errors and to the automatic thoughts that follow from them. Ellen constantly thinks in extremes with respect to weight. Just because she isn’t thin, she labels herself as “much too fat.”

These examples illustrate the importance of family interaction in setting the foundation for body image. Among other things, socialization teaches you that beauty is a valuable trait for pleasing others, especially if you’re a girl.
GROWING INTO THE FAIR SEX

Why are females so much more likely than males to believe that their future is bound up in their looks? Why do so many young women like Jane feel unhappy with their skin or weight, while young men generally feel more satisfied with their bodies? These gender differences are learned in childhood and continue to affect us years later in the form of pride or shame.

While baby boys and girls are similar in most ways, they’re seen and expected to turn out differently right from birth. When parents were asked what kind of person they wanted their child to become, “being attractive” was mentioned as an important quality far more often for daughters than for sons. These parents also rated their newborn daughters as delicate and cute, while they saw their sons as hardy and active (despite the fact that there were no measurable differences between the babies).1

Girls are quickly wrapped up in a pretty pink world of ruffles and roses. Throughout childhood, they’re given more clothing and get more compliments about their appearance than boys. All too often I catch myself telling my niece Sally how pretty she looks. These comments seem to automatically pour out from the same well of compliments that my Dad gave me when I wore my braids like a crown on my head.

In fact fathers sex-type their children even more than mothers do. Husbands urge their wives to keep their daughters’ hair long and to dress them up. Sally’s father describes her as “coy and sexy” and calls her “a cute little vamp.” Most fathers enjoy this kind of flirtation with their daughters, especially during the so-called Oedipal stage, ages three to five. One of my earliest memories is having dessert each night on my father’s lap while he played with my hair, both of us enjoying these warm strokes that brought us closer. Jane’s father took her to visit his folks every Sunday, and loved to see her “dressed up for Grandma.”

Studies show that preschoolers judge appearance in much the same way that adults do and are already guilty of looksism. They can accurately rate the attractiveness of classmates, and they prefer to play with kids who are better looking.2 When I asked first-graders how girls and boys differed, they told me: “Girls play at being pretty, but boys play cars.” “Girls are cute and they don’t get
as muddy as boys." "Girls have more clothes, but boys are stronger." Slowly but surely, Sally learns to view her body as an object of attraction while her brother learns to view his as an instrument of power.

Learning the rules of gender begins early in life. By age three, Sally confidently declares, "I'm a girl, not a boy!" Polishing her nails, she starts to act out the ornamental feminine role, and enjoys doing it. Her books, clothes, and toys teach her the subtleties of looking feminine. Television becomes her babysitter, transmitting endless hours of cultural values about beauty.

Perhaps you grew up like Sally, playing with Barbie and with your very own makeup sets. These cosmetic "toys" are advertised as "the fun way for a girl to learn beauty secrets." Sally also learns that her pretty face needs improvement, and this message plants a seed of doubt in her head. So she begins to greet her own reflection with new thoughts: "Am I pretty enough? Should I be prettier?" These are the same uncertainties that Jane expressed, and which trace back to her early childhood experiences. Even young children sometimes feel deeply ashamed about their "flaws."

"Of course I need to wear a top. How else do you expect me to keep an aura of mystery?"

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SHAME ON YOU

Shame is a feeling of inadequacy mixed with the fear that some defect may be exposed to others. Shame can come from having a body that develops too soon or skin that’s “off color.” As Joyce recalls,

I was very little when I became terribly self-conscious about my complexion. My relatives from India would visit and say “My God, this girl is getting darker every year—it’s such a shame. Look how light her mother is.” I got the message that they thought I’d never get married because of my color. I fantasized about an electrical bar of soap that I’d plug into a wall. This magical soap would wash away all the dirty skin and I wouldn’t have to be ashamed any more.

The residue of these early experiences doesn’t wash away so easily. Some analysts believe that males are more likely to feel guilty about what they’ve done, whereas females are more likely to feel ashamed about who they are. Women’s shame is rooted deep in ancient myths connecting the female body to evil and contamination. Eve corrupted paradise by opening her mouth to the apple, while Pandora polluted the world by exposing the contents of her ‘box.’ Historically, women are depicted as beautiful, but also are seen as frightening and shameful because their bodies go out of control.

Aristotle called the female body “a deformity which occurs in the ordinary course of nature.” Darwin concluded that males had reached a higher stage of development than females. In our own century, Freud described the “inadequate” genitals of a little girl and her envy and longing for a penis she can never have. Such myths still echo through history and in fairy tales. They fill our children’s heads with shame that distorts their body images.

Though worshiped as beauty objects, females are still regarded as inferior. Children learn early that the cosmetic makeovers that transform females into members of the “fair sex” are in part a way to cover the shameful inadequacies of being the “other sex.” As a ten-year-old boy explained, “If I’d been born a girl, I would have to be pretty and no one would be interested in my brains.”
ADOLESCENT IMAGES

By the time she had reached adolescence, Jane had become more and more anxious about her looks. Perhaps puberty was a painful time for you, also. It is for most girls. One of the striking sex differences that emerges at adolescence is a greater self-consciousness in females. A survey of eight- to fifteen-year-olds showed that at every age level, girls worry more about their appearance than boys. Twice as many high school girls as boys want to change their looks, and they are dissatisfied with a greater number of body parts than boys. Largely as a result of the values they learn during childhood, girls enter puberty with a stronger need to feel attractive than boys do. Therefore they suffer greater insecurity when their developing bodies feel awkward and out of control.3

Media images only make matters worse. Advertisers know that talking to a girl in her teens can make her a customer forever. Teenage girls are bombarded with one essential message about their purpose in life: learning the art of body adornment through clothing, cosmetics, jewelry, hair products, perfumes. As a result, the natural adolescent search for a personal identity gets distorted into a search for a packaged image. A growing girl is more or less directed to her mirror to discover who she is.

Can you recall your own self-conscious feelings during puberty? Try looking at some teenage photos to remind yourself of how you looked and felt during that vulnerable stage. Some of your current body-image conflicts probably trace back to it. Do you remember any specific events that made bodylove more difficult during that stage?

Like many women, Jane says she felt worse about her body after puberty than before it. She carries in her wallet a sixth-grade graduation picture that she describes as “the last photo I really like of myself.” Joyce recalls, “I truly believed that my dark skin was a punishment for something I’d done wrong. Very early I came to the conclusion that I’d never be pretty, so I’d better be good at other things. I was just beginning to gain some self-confidence when my periods began, and I felt dirty all over again.”

Conflicts about body image that begin in childhood tend to surface in more dramatic form during adolescence. For instance, some girls become ambivalent about the role of beauty object even
before they reach puberty. Eileen, who is now in her forties, recalls the parental values that led to her strong anti-make-up attitudes:

When I was very little, my mother often said she'd be ready to go “as soon as she put on her face.” I couldn't understand what she meant because she seemed to have a face already. My father and uncles made comments about how women were always shopping for clothes, as if it were female foolishness to be concerned with looks and makeup. Sometime in Junior high school I bought that message from my Dad. I decided, if this is so silly, I won't have any part of it. I didn’t want to be just one of those foolish women. My mother encouraged me to look more stylish and wear more makeup, but I wouldn't shop with her and said I had enough to wear.

Many a mother tries to act out her unrealized dreams through her daughter. She may see her child as an extension of herself, and try to control the girl's looks as if she were managing her own body. In reaction, a daughter may rebel against the pressure in one way or another. The mother-daughter tug-of-war over beauty takes many forms. To get psychologically separated, a girl may concentrate on how not to look or be like her mother. At the same time, mothers are caught between wanting their girls to grow up into lovely women and hating to grow older themselves.

Mothers send mixed messages. There is pride mixed with envy, encouragement mixed with fear. Jane explains that, “Mom tells me how pretty I am and nags me to go out more. But then she criticizes the guys I date and the clothes and makeup that I wear.” Jane has trouble gaining control of how she wants to be seen, while her mother has trouble letting go.

Fathers also send double messages: be a sexy knockout but stay my little girl. One day a man may suddenly see his own child as seductive. Feeling anxious over this sexual attraction he may withdraw or reject her. Other fathers are guilty of sexually abusing their daughters or stepdaughters, which leaves deep scars of shame on the self-image of these girls. (This type of body shame is discussed more fully in Chapter 6.)

Most men feel the loss when a teenage daughter transfers her affection from Father to Prince Charming. Your own father's reactions to the sexuality of your adolescent body may still affect you
today. Did you get the message that it was safe to be sexual? Were you taught that sex was dangerous or sinful? The desire to be sexually attractive and the confusion over sexual urges can create body-image distortions that persist over a lifetime.

Perhaps you used conflicts over makeup or clothing as a way to rebel and separate from your parents. A friend of mine refused to permit her daughter to have several holes pierced in her ears. The seventh-grader defiantly took a needle and bravely did it herself, thus asserting the right to display her body as she wished.

My own first adolescent rebellion over appearance took place on a spring day in my eleventh year. My breasts were budding into puberty and my pigtails had been pulled once too often. For weeks I’d been pleading and arguing. “How long do you expect me to wear these stupid braids?” With scissors in hand, I gave my mother an ultimatum: “Either you cut them off right now, or I’ll do it myself!” Poor Mom, caught between the passions of father and daughter. As the scissors passed from my hands to hers, we became cosmetic allies (as we would many times in the future). Together we performed the ritual and watched the floor gather up my curls.

That evening I faced my father, felt his shock, and survived his anger. Without the braids that had bound me to him as Daddy’s little girl, I was free to grow up and away from him into womanhood. Only recently did I come to realize the full impact of that event on our relationship, as I’ll describe later. Yet, by age fifteen I had rediscovered long hair as a seductive lure. Like the other cheerleaders, I tied a white bow in my ponytail and searched the faces of the football players for the adoring look I used to see in my father’s eyes.

**PICTURE THIS**

In this section, you’ll travel back in time to explore parental values and your reactions to them. Through a process called visualization you can re-experience your childhood body within the safety of your own imagination. Stepping back into the past will help you move beyond it into a healthier body image.

Earlier you saw how cognitive errors can trigger negative feelings. Mental images also arouse feelings. Think of what it’s like to awaken from a nightmare, trembling over a picture in the mind’s eye. The power of mental imagery is now being used in novel
ways—for instance, to control pain or to improve athletic performance. A skater may first imagine herself doing a perfect spin and then try to imitate the image.

Visualization is the conscious production of mental imagery. Thoughts can control and change the images you see in your mind. To understand how visualization works, close your eyes and repeat the word “apple.” An apple image probably appeared. Although intangible, this apple really exists in your mind. By concentrating you can change its color or make it spin in the air. Try it. Body image is also intangible but real. Like the apple, it can be brought to mind and altered by consciously imagining it differently. Therefore you can transform your body image by learning to visualize it more accurately and more attractively.

The next exercise uses guided imagery to evoke certain childhood scenes. The instructions help guide you to visualize specific events or conflicts you felt long ago. These may be history now, yet they can cause fresh problems every time you look in the mirror or climb on the scale. Visualizing scenes from childhood can give you a new perspective on the past and help you change the way you think about yourself.

As you recover lost memories through guided imagery, strong feelings may emerge. Try not to block or retreat from these emotions, but hang on to them if you can. Stay open to the feelings as long as possible, even if there’s pain or sadness. If you become too anxious, open your eyes to end the scene and try to go back to it later. It may take some practice, but by reliving childhood scenes through visualization, you can stir up the ghosts that inhabit your body image—and perhaps lay some of them to rest.

Of course, it’s impossible to read and visualize at the same time, so I suggest the following procedure. First read through the exercise to get a sense of it. Then set aside enough time (about ten minutes) to practice the visualization without interruption from people or phone calls. Review the guided instructions once more just before you start. You may find it helpful to record the instructions. Just read them slowly onto a tape, leaving pauses where appropriate. You can then visualize along with the tape and repeat the process until the images are clear. These exercises focus first on your mother because most likely she taught you your earliest lessons in body awareness and was your primary social model for a long time. (Use the person who served as the primary mother figure in your life as the mother in each of the scenes.)
EXERCISE • Album Update

1. *Practice in visualization*. Begin all visualization exercises by sitting or lying down. Get comfortable, close your eyes, and take time to clear your mind. Then let your imagination begin to search through your memory album. Drift back to adolescence and visualize yourself as a high school senior standing outside the school talking with friends. Notice the details of your hair and clothing, your posture, and your expressions. Concentrate until you see yourself clearly in that setting, looking just as you did then. Can you control the image by making it smile, laugh, or move around?

Now turn back the pages of your album still further. This time visualize yourself in the playground of your elementary school. In this scene you are younger, smaller, more childlike. Bring the details into focus as your eyes travel up and down that young body. What did you look like then? Were you sturdy, healthy, pretty? Feel how real this image is as you focus in on the details. Now try to shift back and forth from the high school to the grade school scene. Use your thoughts to control the images you see. What parts of your body image change in each scene and what parts stay the same? Repeat this exercise a few times, adding new details as you learn to control your visualizations.

2. *The dependent baby*. This time, imagine yourself as a toddler with your mother. Think of how the two of you looked, walking together in the park. You are a very small and helpless child; she is a young woman. Visualize her face as it was then, and your own little body. You start running after a ball, but suddenly trip and fall hard on the pavement. Feel the pain of this accident, see the bruise on your knee and the expression on your face. What is your response? Do you cry loudly or silently? Your mother runs to you. Does she react with fear, sympathy, or anger? Does she say that you "should" be more careful, "should" hug and kiss her to feel better, "should" be brave and not cry, or "shouldn't" run so fast? Notice how small and dependent you are. What do you need from your mother at that moment? What do you want to say to her?

Jane saw her mother as confused and frightened. "When I visualized the park scene, my mother looked upset and didn't know what to do. She was afraid that I'd have a scar on my knee and felt guilty because she didn't hold my hand. Now that I think about it, maybe my mother was always worried about protecting me, keeping me safe and perfect." Slowly Jane began to understand a connec-
tion between her current anxiety about her skin and her mother’s concerns about protecting her as a child.

3. The adorable princess. Visualize yourself growing from a toddler into a child of about six. At this age you’ve already learned to enjoy and display yourself as a pretty object. Imagine yourself getting ready for a birthday party or some special holiday that you remember well. You’re dressing up in your prettiest party outfit, with petticoats, patent-leather shoes, hair ribbons. See the “little girl you” standing before a mirror and looking like a princess. How does she feel about her reflection? Now visualize your mother coming into the room. What does she say, and what do her eyes tell you? That you should brush your hair again, shouldn’t spoil the dress, should show Daddy how nice you look? Does she want you to stay little and lovely forever? What do you want to say to her at that moment?

Jane recalls those dress-up times as fun. “I got a lot of attention from my relatives and loved all the compliments. I remember that Mom was very proud and really got a big kick out of showing me off.” As we talked about this further, Jane considered whether her strong desire to keep on making her mother proud of how she looked was preventing her from moving into a more adult role.

4. The active child. Turn your album to age ten. See how much bigger and stronger you’ve grown. You can climb trees and jump rope. You’re in control of your body and of the environment. Visualize yourself mastering some difficult activity, like diving off a high board or riding a horse. Now you call out, “Hey, Mom, look what I can do.” How do you feel about your active body as your mother watches you? How does your mother respond? Does she cheer you on or does she caution or criticize? Do you end up thinking you should do better, or shouldn’t be doing this at all?

While visualizing this scene, Jane got in touch with her mother’s overprotectedness again. “Mom got worried as she saw me going off for a long bike ride. She would always say ‘Don’t get hurt’ and ‘I’ll be glad when you’re home.’” Today Jane uses the same stay-at-home defense against getting hurt when she feels afraid of moving out into the social world.

Here are some follow-up questions:

- Can you find one word to describe how your body looks in each scene?
• What other important values did your mother teach you about how your body “should” be used or displayed?
• Do these “shoulds” serve you well today? Or would you be better off replacing them with values that are tailored to your own personal needs and to the body you live in now?

While you practice visualizing these scenes over the next few days, try some spontaneous imagery. Use your imagination to go beyond the guidelines of the instructions and search for real childhood memories to relive. Become your own guide as the imagery unfolds. You might want to repeat the sequence of images just given, substituting your father, grandmother, or siblings. Be sure to take enough time to explore your reactions and feelings to each of the visualizations.

Who are the special people who influenced your feelings about your body during childhood? Perhaps you had a favorite aunt who took you shopping for a birthday dress. Or a grandmother whose unconditional love boosted your self-esteem. Don’t forget the dance teacher, the coach at school, or the counselor at camp. And don’t forget the men who have touched your life and your body in important ways over the years—boyfriends, uncles, brothers. Now look over your list. Was there one person in particular whom you associate with body loathing or bodylove? If so, keep that person in mind as you work on the remaining exercises in this chapter.

Chances are that some of your current beauty conflicts probably took shape in adolescence, as mine did. This is the stage when eating disorders are triggered, when complexion problems surface, when makeup is used as a rite of passage into womanhood. There is competition for boyfriends, greater peer pressure, and a strong desire to fit in. Visualizing your teenage body can give you insight into these conflicts and help you resolve them.

EXERCISE • Revisiting Your Teenage Body

1. Relax, close your eyes, and take a few deep breaths to clear your mind. Focus inward and drift back to age fifteen, about the time when you started high school. You’re almost fully grown and your body is fairly well developed. See yourself at home in the morning, stepping out of the shower. Notice your wet skin and the contours of your young figure. Try to move inside this image as you stand fresh and clean before the mirror. Now let your eyes travel
up and down the imaginary reflection. Notice your hair as you wore it then, your complexion, your expression.

2. Stop for a moment to admire those parts of your body that you liked most. Enjoy seeing them as they looked then. Once you have a clear image, focus on the parts of your body that you disliked. What was wrong with those body parts and how did you feel about them? Did they make you embarrassed, disgusted, ashamed? Were you a late maturer? Was weight a problem for you then? Which parts of you felt too fat or too thin? When you lived in that young body, were you longing to be someone else—someone taller, thinner, fairer?

3. Now visualize yourself getting dressed for school. Do you feel as attractive as your friends? Are you self-conscious about your looks in front of them? Stay in the same time frame and bring your mother (or mother figure) into the scene. Try to recall what she looked like when you were fifteen. Notice the clothes she wore and the look on her face. Was she pretty? In what ways did you resemble her and how were you different?

4. Imagine your mother looking you over before you leave for school. She’s checking your outfit, your hair, your makeup. What is she thinking? Do her eyes tell you that you’re getting too heavy? That you look more like her every day? That you’re becoming a beautiful woman? Let the scene develop. What does she say to you? Hear the sound of her voice and see the look on her face. Is there something you want to say to her in reply?

Here are some follow-up questions:

- Can you find one word that best describes your adolescent body?
- How did your mother influence your feelings about your body then? Does her voice still echo in your mind when you look in the mirror?
- What were your mother’s attitudes about her own appearance, and do you feel the same way about your body now as she felt about hers then?

Jane recalls her feelings at fifteen. “The best word to describe how I looked is ‘sweet.’ Sometimes I felt grown up and sexy, but
I still tried to be a sweet little girl for my father. Mom wanted me to be popular, but she got angry when I started hanging around with older guys. At twenty I don’t feel so sweet or naive anymore. I’m just not sure what I should be instead."

You might want to repeat this exercise several times until you become more at ease with your teenage self. Try to recall and relive several specific events when you remember having real tension with your parents over beauty issues. Some women can identify special points in their history during or after adolescence, when their body image shifted dramatically: “The day my braces came off,” “The year I grew taller than my mother,” “When I stopped wearing a bikini because of all the stretch marks after pregnancy.” For me, there was another rebellious haircut that altered my self-image and pushed me into a new phase of personal growth.

At thirty-three, I wore my hair long and loose, like a flag of femininity. My life was overloaded with a career, two children, an unfinished dissertation, and a floundering marriage. One day I impulsively separated from my long hair and soon afterward from the husband who loved it. As I had many years before, I again used my body to proclaim my right to independence. By first renouncing my role as an attractive object, I felt freer to move on toward a new identity. At the time, I wasn’t aware of the meaning behind that haircut. Now, looking through my memory album, I see its connection to the little girl with the long hair that Mommy braided and that Daddy loved.

**CONFLICTING VALUES**

Parental values continue to influence body image long after adolescence. Eileen, who had rebelled against her mother by wearing no makeup for years, explains her current conflict:

Here I am at forty-eight, and not only my mother but also my father were putting pressure on me to get rid of the gray streaks in my hair. I would hear from one and then from the other, “You really ought to do something about that gray.” For a while I just screened out their remarks, but deep down it bothered me. Then I saw some pictures of myself after a vacation and I realized how gray I’d become. Somehow, my self-image had lagged behind the
real changes. Those photos plus my parents’ prodding had an im-
pact. As you can see, the gray is gone—for a while.

As in adolescence, Eileen is still torn between personal feelings, parental values, and the social pressure to conform.

**EXERCISE • Confronting Outworn Feelings and Values**

By now, I hope you’ve been able to identify some of the family and social values that shaped your body image during childhood. It’s time to confront and challenge the ones that don’t serve you well anymore—those that underlie your body loathing and obstruct your bodylove.

1. **Visual confrontation.** Try to return to some of the scenes you’ve just practiced and carry them through to a new conclusion. What did you want to say as a teenager when you heard your mother’s critical remarks or saw her judgmental look? What did you want to say as a child when you were told not to eat so much because you’d get fat?

In the safety of your visual fantasy, bring back those moments and express your frustration, sadness, or anger. Berate your brother for teasing you about your large breasts, or confront the uncle who touched you in ways that made you ashamed. Tell them how they hurt you, how they made you feel awkward and self-conscious. By expressing the negative feelings that you’ve harbored for so long you can start to gain control of them. Facing these confrontations through visualization will help you resolve the conflicts you still feel. It may also help you deal more effectively with family influ-
ences as they continue in your life today.

2. **Cognitive confrontations.** Start by making a list of the family values you’ve uncovered through the exercises in this chapter. Be sure to put them down on paper so you can clearly identify and express them. Jane’s list included such things as:

   It’s important to show off your looks in front of relatives.
   If you’re pretty you’ll be popular.
   Be careful so nothing happens to your body.
Consider the parental values on your own list. Which ones feel alien to your current value system? Which ones get in the way of how you want to see yourself today?

Now construct some counterarguments that refute the "truth" of these attitudes you’ve collected along the way. Work on your counterarguments until they really make good sense to you. Rehearse them out loud until they feel comfortable and automatic. You might want to have an imaginary dialogue or argument with parents, for example, to persuade them that there are many different ways to view one's body and many different yardsticks against which to measure attractiveness.

As you confront and break free of old values, think about people within or outside your family who have different values about appearance—values that you admire. Why not adopt them as new role models, and examine what makes them attractive in your eyes? You'll probably find that these models radiate self-esteem because they've learned to minimize self-criticism and maximize self-praise. Let's look at how that's done.

*From Downers to Uppers*

Some people are real pros when it comes to punishing themselves. It's as if they've taken over the role of the critical parent who constantly judges. Socialized by years of experience, they've mastered the art of the powerful put-down. Jane began one of her therapy sessions with an especially vicious attack: "Look at these blotches. They're so disgusting I can't stand myself." When I hear this kind of assault, I instinctively want to cry out, "Stop! You're beating up my patient. Would you abuse anyone else this way? Come on, give her a break."

If you, too, are a master at putting down your appearance, isn't it about time to catch yourself and stop? Of course, you're the only one who can give yourself a break from the critical attacks that wound your self-esteem. But breaking free of years of habitual body loathing isn't easy.

Before going any further, why not find out how often you're a victim of your own verbal assaults? Gather some baseline data. On a note pad, keep track of the self-critical downers that you fire at
yourself over the next few days. Then reverse the process and start to count the times you give self-compliments, or uppers. If you find that the list of downers is even half as long as the list of uppers, you’ll certainly benefit from the following exercises.

EXERCISE • Raising Praise Levels

Here are some simple behavioral techniques to reduce self-criticism and increase self-praise. Behavior therapy stresses the use of reinforcements to change actions and thoughts. The trick is to catch yourself when you’re feeling good about your looks, then reinforce this feeling with praise.

1. Put up some reminder notes around the house. For example, “Have you said something nice about your body today?” Or, “Give yourself a break, think an upper.” These will remind you to be more generous in handing out verbal rewards to yourself.

2. Self-praise doesn’t come naturally to everyone. Can you spontaneously write down at least twenty meaningful compliments about your body or your general appearance? This may not be easy, so take a few minutes to actually put them on paper. Make sure you include only things you truly believe. Ask yourself what you like about your body. Go over it from head to foot and then as a whole. Check to see if your list is loaded with stereotypes that equate attractiveness with being thin or having perfect features. Perhaps you’re still giving yourself the same praise that you heard from parents or from others. With a little creativity you can expand self-praise into less conventional areas. Here are some items from Eileen’s list:

I have an air of confidence about me.

My hair is great for sports.

Without makeup I look more natural.

My hips are curvy and feminine.

The praise list you construct will confirm that you are worthy of your own admiration. Work on developing your praise list with a loved one or a friend, to get a new perspective on the beautiful parts of your appearance that you tend to overlook.
3. This praise list is a valuable defensive weapon against body loathing. Next time you hear your own internal voice attacking your appearance, shout "Stop" (shout out loud if you’re alone). Then refute the negative voice by using the items on your praise list. Argue back with conviction until you drown out the downers with a massive dose of uppers. One woman described her use of self-praise this way: “So when I say I’m gorgeous it’s partly a ploy and partly I really mean it. I have enough nerve to bring it off, but I certainly have my own insecurities. Yet at some pretty profound level, I really do mean it.”

EXERCISE • Say It Nicely

Remember that the way you talk to yourself about your body affects how you feel about it. Lynn slowly learned to catch her critical downers and rephrase them into more neutral or even positive statements (a process called reframing cognitions). For example:

**DOWNER**

“My skin looks disgusting.”

“I’ve never looked worse.”

“I hate my fat hips.”

**REPHRASED TO**

“I’m disturbed about my skin.”

“I usually look better than this.”

“My hips are the biggest part of me.”

Reframing critical statements helps you correct cognitive errors such as personalizing, exaggerating, and thinking in extremes. Keep track of which characteristics are the target of most of your negative attacks. Is there something in your past history that explains why you’re so down on your weight or your skin?

Handling Compliments

There’s no doubt that praise from others has a strong impact on body image. Praise is healthy if it enhances self-esteem without dictating what you “should” look like. When my niece visits, I try hard to compliment her in ways that go beyond looking pretty. For instance, I tell Sally that her eyes are shining with excitement, that her legs look strong, that the sound of her voice makes me happy. Most of the women in the Bodylove Survey felt good about being
told they looked good. What about you? Are compliments from certain people especially important to you?

How do you feel when someone compliments you about your appearance?

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percentage</th>
<th>Response</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>46%</td>
<td>VERY DELIGHTED</td>
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<tr>
<td>44%</td>
<td>SOMEWHAT PLEASED</td>
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<tr>
<td>5%</td>
<td>MIXED FEELINGS</td>
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<tr>
<td>5%</td>
<td>SELF-CONSCIOUS</td>
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<tr>
<td>2%</td>
<td>VERY UNCOMFORTABLE</td>
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Handling praise is a fine art. First you must recognize praise. It can be subtle, for instance, when it comes in the form of a quick glance or in the hidden flattery of imitation. Do you automatically dismiss compliments or tune them out? By picking up on compliments and accepting them graciously you can build the self-esteem that leads to bodylove.

A good receiver gets the most out of praise by warmly accepting it with pleasure in her voice and face. This encourages follow-up comments that give an extra boost. A bad receiver reacts with embarrassment or false modesty. She ignores or rejects praise, and thus she gets little benefit from it, even as she discourages the giver from offering future compliments. When Claudia’s friend called her for advice on what to wear to an interview “because you always look just right,” Claudia automatically rejected the remark by replying “not always.” The best response to any compliment is a thank-you, followed by some additional expression of your appreciation.

Instead of waiting for compliments to drift your way, you can learn to actively elicit the attention and admiration you need. Try to:

- **Prompt with questions.** “How do you like my new . . . (jewelry, haircut)?”
- **Express pleasure.** “I feel so great . . . (since I began exercising).”
- **Share good news.** “I’ve found the perfect . . . (dress for the wedding).”
- **Give out more compliments.** You’re likely to get some back in
return. Admiring others will help you to overcome envy and truly enjoy the beauty of another person.

As we saw earlier, praise can have negative as well as positive effects. It causes problems when it invades your privacy, makes you self-conscious, or constantly compares you to others. This is why we sometimes react to it with mixed feelings. In Jane’s case, constant compliments about her looks during childhood left her feeling insecure about measuring up to her parents standards. She learned through therapy to stop listening for their compliments and to start using her own self-praise instead. Jane was able to reduce the impact of parental praise by ignoring it or changing the subject. She thereby stopped playing the game of being “Daddy’s little doll.” Once she got herself out of this old role, her self-praise took on new meaning.

Making Mirrors Work for You

Compliments and self-praise can be good for your self-esteem and therefore good for your body image. They resocialize your attitudes about your appearance and help you bury old, worn-out images from the past. But you’ll have to go a step further to actually view your reflection less critically. Surprisingly, you can turn to your mirror for support. Although mirrors do tend to make us more critical and self-conscious, they can be useful tools for transforming body image when constructively combined with the power of visualization.

First, how do you react when seeing your nude body in a full-
length mirror? Nearly half the women in our sample had mixed feelings (which shows how two-faced mirrors can be).

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<tr>
<td>When you take a long look at your nude body in a full-length mirror, how do you feel?</td>
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<td>8%</td>
<td>PROUD</td>
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<td>30%</td>
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<td>47%</td>
<td>MIXED FEELINGS</td>
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<td>14%</td>
<td>ANXIOUS OR DEPRESSED</td>
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<tr>
<td>2%</td>
<td>REPULSED</td>
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**EXERCISE • Measuring Mirror Distress**

You can assess your anxiety about your own reflection by scaling it. *Scaling* is a behavioral technique for evaluating feelings and monitoring progress against a certain standard. While facing a well-lit mirror, look over your nude body. Don’t focus on a particular feature, but scan your body as a whole. Gaze at yourself for about half a minute. Now rate your level of anxiety on a scale from 0 to 100:

\[
\begin{array}{cccccccccccccccccccc}
\text{No Anxiety} & 0 & 10 & 20 & 30 & 40 & 50 & 60 & 70 & 80 & 90 & 100 & \text{High Anxiety}
\end{array}
\]

This number serves as your baseline *mirror distress level*. Write it down so you can refer to it later. Your distress level will vary somewhat depending on your health, mood, and other daily factors. When the level goes down and stays down with some consistency, it means you’re making progress toward bodylove.

**EXERCISE • Creating a Compassionate Ideal**

You’ll need a well-lit full-length mirror and complete privacy for at least ten minutes. It’s best to do this exercise while nude, but wear a leotard or underwear if you prefer.

1. Stand comfortably before the mirror and slowly scan your whole body as if you were seeing it for the first time. Slowly let your eyes move from your feet upward, and ask yourself how you feel about what you’re seeing.

2. Choose an area of your body that you like because you think it’s quite attractive. Focus on it and admire this lovely feature. Try
to think of one word that best describes that part of your body (i.e., smooth, solid, muscular, feminine). Then close your eyes and visualize that part, just as it looks in the mirror. Concentrate on the word you chose and slowly transform the image in your mind to make it more like the word (smoother, more graceful). Use your power of visualization to make that feature as lovely as possible.

3. Open your eyes and study that feature again. Try to superimpose the idealized image that you visualized onto the real image that you see in the mirror. Look compassionately at yourself while you bring the real and the ideal images as close together as you can. You’re trying to create a compassionate ideal that blends reality with visual fantasy. Let this compassionate ideal sink into your body image so they are fused.

4. Once again, scan your nude reflection as a whole, but this time focus in on a body part that you feel is unattractive, perhaps the one that you would most like to change. Focus your attention on that problem area for a full minute. Now find a word that describes the way you want to change what you see (i.e., firmer, smaller). Close your eyes and, using your power of visualization, get a clear picture of it in your mind. Keep thinking of the word you’ve chosen to improve this part and try to transform the image in your mind until it’s slightly more “attractive.” Keep the idealized image in your mind and enjoy viewing it. Now open your eyes and look compassionately at that body part in the mirror. Try to bring the compassionate ideal and the real image closer together. Concentrate until you can see the body part as you just imagined it, in a more positive way.

Repeat this exercise using various body parts and alternating between features you like more and ones you like less. With practice, this mirror exercise can help you experience your nude reflection more positively and less stressfully. Each week or so, go back to the scaling technique and reassess your mirror distress level. Then compare it with your baseline number to see if your anxiety is going down.

Try to look at your reflection through the eyes of an adoring companion or a nurturing parent, one who understands your limitations and compassionately forgives you for them. Remember, the overall goal is to achieve bodylove by accepting and appreciating your body as it is.
EXERCISE • Mirror Affirmations

Another way to use your mirror as a therapeutic ally is by practicing mirror affirmations. An affirmation is a declaration about yourself. Often it’s a commitment to growth and change. A good example is Erma Bombeck’s daily declaration: “I’m me and I’m wonderful. Because God doesn’t make junk.” By repeating an affirmation over and over with conviction, as you would a ritual prayer, you establish healthier ways of thinking about yourself.

1. Mirror affirmations are practiced by standing quietly before the mirror and gazing into your eyes. Just repeat your affirmation several times out loud. For example:

I, Rita, can look feminine whatever the length of my hair.
I, Jane, don’t need perfect skin to be pretty.
I, ______, accept my body with all its womanly fullness.

Let the mirror echo your affirmations back to you while you maintain eye contact with the compassionate person within you. Your affirmations should reflect your own values and desires, not those of your parents, your mate, or the voices from your past.

2. Go a step further with your mirror. Choose an item from your praise list and silently rehearse it each time you approach a mirror. For instance, you might repeat “My eyes are a great color” every time you turn to the mirror to dress or make up this week. Be sure to repeat one statement for several days so it really becomes a habit. Then replace it with another item from the praise list. If you get used to approaching your mirror with active self-praise, the mirror eventually becomes a “positive stimulus cue.” It will trigger good thoughts and feelings and thus serve as a reliable source of compliments for you.

PARENTING YOURSELF

The exercises in this chapter are laden with emotion. Therefore you may feel a good deal of resistance to working on them. Jane resisted by rationalizing and avoiding. “I’m trying to make Dean’s List this term, so I really don’t have time to work with my mirror. Besides, it won’t help my social life anyway, because the guys at school are
all creeps.” For her, as for all of us, it seems easier to avoid than to work on problems.

Giving yourself a break means breaking through resistance, breaking free from cognitive errors, breaking loose from the stereotypes of looksism and objectification. It also means breaking out of the constricting values learned in childhood. Ask yourself if you really want to stay stuck in the status quo of old habits that haven’t worked well for you in the past.

Although family and culture have certainly contributed to your body-image conflicts, it’s all too easy to get stuck blaming others. Or blaming your body or yourself for things beyond your control. Remember that “blaming” is only another resistance tactic. It’s time to move beyond blame; to forgive others for their errors and to forgive your body for its flaws. It’s time to take responsibility for reshaping your own body image.

Start by questioning parental “shoulds,” re-examining your adolescent rebellions, and reconsidering feminine stereotypes. A young lawyer remarked that, “My mother’s bathroom looks like a cosmetic department. She owns at least ten of everything. I’m trying to separate her fear of not looking glamorous enough from the sensuality that I really enjoy. I’d like to combine the good parts of my mother’s approach with what I really want for myself.”

It may be hard to see yourself outside the framework of family expectations. But you are a unique individual. No one has a body or a childhood history that’s just like yours. That’s why you can’t fit comfortably into a mold shaped by others.

Remember that body image is a screen between you and your mirror. It can enhance and protect you as well as torment you. It’s a screen made of past dreams and future longings. It echoes with the sound of your mother’s voice and the faces of a thousand cover girls who have left a mark on your memory. You must decide which of the values from your past are helpful to you and which are harmful. Decide which of the cultural pressures—for glamour, fitness, thinness, youthfulness, sexiness—prevent you from loving your body. Here are some major points to remember as you work with your images from the past:

1. **Body-image develops in childhood.** Your feelings and attitudes about your body today trace back to early childhood. Through praise and criticism you were socialized to see yourself through the eyes of your family and culture.
2. Social and familial relationships affect body-image. As a small child you learned to use your looks to please others and to hide the shame of being "just a girl."

3. Adolescence aggravates body-image conflicts. During adolescence appearance is used to rebel from parents, to establish an identity, and to mature into an adult sexual role. Such changes can lead to vulnerability and insecurity, which increase body-image conflicts.

4. Visualization leads to insight. Visualization can help you explore childhood experiences and confront feelings and values that inhibit bodylove.

5. You can reinforce good feelings about your looks with self-praise. Try to get more praise in your life by giving it to yourself and by eliciting it from others. Mirrors can help you affirm your beauty and find a more compassionate ideal in your own reflection.

As you start to break free of constraining values you'll be able to grow into your own nurturing parent. Eileen, for example, describes a shift in attitudes as she adjusts to middle age: "It's strange, but I'm becoming fashion conscious for the first time in my life. Somehow it makes me feel more secure to dress fashionably and to get rid of the gray streaks in my hair. For me, I think it's a sign of self-acceptance to stop rebelling and to fit in better. I seem to want that now, more than ever before." As Eileen re-socializes her body, she acts like a good parent who is forgiving and generous with healthy praise. The energy that was previously directed against her body becomes available to care for it and to bury the ghosts of a childhood past.

Those ghosts can surface unexpectedly, as I discovered one day while having lunch with my father. He sat across from me, aging but as astute and active as ever. I was past forty, and my hair had a touch of gray. We met to resolve a conflict and wound up sharing a moment of intimacy. As we discussed our problem he said, "You know, everything changed between us when you cut your hair. . . . We never seemed as close after that." I stared back in confusion. What was he talking about? My hair had been short for years.

Then Dad recalled in detail my act of adolescent rebellion. Although I thought I'd forgotten that event, I instantly remembered it as he described, for the first time in thirty years, what happened. I relived the pain, the sorrow, and the anger he felt when he saw
me without my braids. Only then did I realize its impact on him and on me. Only then did I start to understand my lifelong love-hate relationship with my hair. Love and hair were braided together in my childhood to form a knot that I’m still trying to untangle. I know that if I face it and break free of it, I’ll see myself differently and enjoy a fuller sense of bodylove.