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
How does physical activity affect your feelings about your body?
- STRONG POSITIVE EFFECT
- SLIGHT POSITIVE EFFECT
- NO EFFECT
- SLIGHT NEGATIVE EFFECT
- STRONG NEGATIVE EFFECT

How often do you engage in vigorous exercise for at least twenty minutes?
- NEVER
- ONCE A MONTH
- ONCE A WEEK
- 2–3 TIMES A WEEK
- ALMOST EVERY DAY

Compared to other women your age, how physically active are you?
- VERY ACTIVE
- FAIRLY ACTIVE
- AVERAGE
- FAIRLY INACTIVE
- VERY INACTIVE

Are you ever so obsessed with exercise that it becomes a compulsion?
- OFTEN
- SOMETIMES
- RARELY
- NEVER
Whenever I feel like exercising, I sit down until the urge passes. Fortunately it always does.

I am exhausted but elated as I leave Vicki Stern’s creative-movement class, where we’ve just marched to Mozart. “In this class you don’t have to strain or strive for perfection,” says Nena, a tall and heavyset woman. “It’s a way to find out what makes your body special and different. I’m just too rebellious for other fitness classes, which are so regimented,” she says. “But Vicki’s is different. I feel at one with my body here, and have learned what it can and can’t do.”

Vicki Stern calls her approach “Working Out from Within,” and her goal is to infuse the body with energy that makes it come alive. She believes we should feel animated all the time—not just when exercising, but as we move throughout the day. “So many people come in here ready to battle against themselves,” she explains. “They approach exercise with an attitude of fierce determination, as though they were going to war. But their tension really stems from insecurity that prevents them from growing stronger mentally and physically. They have to stop looking from an external view and feel the body from the internal core of the self.”

Helping you to experience your body from that “internal core” is one goal of this book. Exercise is a fundamental way of moving toward that goal. Not only does it make you feel better physically but it also makes you feel better about who you are and how you look. It’s another way to transform body image from within.

If you’re able to walk a mile or run a marathon, you feel different about your body because you appreciate its potential for power and pleasure. When the body is energized and dynamic, then body image takes on those qualities, also. It shifts from a static to an active mode, as if a still photo became a motion picture. You can get to know and like your body by moving it in new directions. The message of this chapter is simple: you’ll feel more attractive if you become more active.

**THE EXERCISE EFFECT**

Movement has many benefits, both physical and psychological. Just as mental images can cause your heart to race, exercise can change
your mood and mind-set. Physical arousal leads to emotional arousal, so that "adrenalin makes the heart grow fonder," even of itself. Exercise stimulates the release of substances called endorphins. These seem to produce a "natural high" that decreases anxiety and elevates mood. Let's look at some facts about the effects of physical activity on self-image.²

- People who exercise regularly rate their bodies more positively than those who are inactive. Just six weeks of physical conditioning can produce better feelings about the body.
- College students who consider themselves physically fit have higher self-esteem and are more adventurous.
- Female athletes judge their bodies more accurately and more positively than nonathletes.
- When people who exercise regularly are deprived of activity for a month, they experience poor sleep, greater anxiety, and sexual tension.
- People who care about fitness and health have more positive feelings about their appearance than those who are more concerned about looks.

Take a moment to consider how physical activity influences your own perception of your body. Does it make you feel stronger, younger, more confident? Over 85 percent of those who took the Bodylove Survey felt it had a positive effect.

---

How does physical activity affect your feelings about your body?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percentage</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>56%</td>
<td>STRONG POSITIVE EFFECT</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31%</td>
<td>SLIGHT POSITIVE EFFECT</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11%</td>
<td>NO EFFECT</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2%</td>
<td>SLIGHT NEGATIVE EFFECT</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1%</td>
<td>STRONG NEGATIVE EFFECT</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

I asked Nena to describe how the creative-movement class influenced her. "The most obvious change is hard to put into words," she said. "My body looks the same, but I think I’m much less preoccupied with it, less self-absorbed. Somehow my mind feels quieter and I can focus more attention on other people. I get more deeply involved with them because I’m less concerned with how I
look or how I move.” While some women naturally gravitate to physical activity to feel better about their bodies, others find that social factors can get in the way.

**YOUR BODY AS INSTRUMENT AND ORNAMENT**

You may have some obstacles to overcome in getting your body into motion. As women, we’ve grown up in a culture that encourages us to view ourselves more decoratively than actively. Susan Kano points out that a boy is socialized to see his body as an “instrument,” whereas a girl learns to view her body as an “ornament.”

The instrumental masculine body is stereotyped as a motion machine that conquers and wins. In contrast, the ornamental feminine body is supposed to attract attention and delight the eye. When Kano asked college students to talk about body satisfaction, she found that women usually discussed their appearance, while men discussed their health and athletic activities. It seems that for men, body esteem comes from feeling active, competent, and strong. For women, it comes from feeling well adorned and attractive.

Right from infancy boys are seen as hardy and are handled more roughly, while girls are considered delicate and are held more gently. Daughters receive fashion dolls for Christmas, while sons get action dolls. Gym teachers toss softballs to girls and hardballs to boys. Thus, daily socialization teaches children that “real” boys should be competitive, active, and athletic, while “real” girls should be less active and more attractive.

Actually some girls do pursue an energetic “boyish” life-style, at least temporarily. Can you remember being one of those tomboys who roamed like a tomcat over the rough masculine turf? Over half of adult women recall being tomboys when they were young. However, by college age girls typically give up their tomboy life-style. As one explained, “It was hard to be a jock while on a date. I realized that I was losing my femininity while trying to prove my athletic ability. So I tried to become softer looking and changed the way I dressed.”

At some point during adolescence, most girls exchange the role of tomboy for that of Tom’s girl. Personally, I remember leaving the track team for the cheerleading squad. Cheerleading became my
only high school sport. While it was physically demanding, it also kept me preoccupied with my appearance, for a cheerleader's job is as ornamental as it is instrumental. Many years went by before I got myself "back on track."

Our early experiences with physical activity affect how we later move through life. Kim, another student in the creative-dance class, tells about the time she took her first ballet lessons: "I was only five and, of course, I ran right home to show Daddy what I could do," she confides. "But he only teased me and said that the classes were a waste of money. I was devastated, and from that day on until now I never danced in public again."

Take a moment to consider how childhood experiences shaped your attitudes and feelings toward movement. Think about how your parents encouraged or discouraged physical activity when you were little. Did they stress mastery or competition? Caution or fun? Perhaps you were steered into activities that were highly ornamental, like ballet or gymnastics. Or maybe you were steered away from those that were rough and dangerous. Some old photos may help you remember yourself as an active and playful child. Were your father's feelings about exercise different from your mother's? Were you a tomboy and did your behavior change during adolescence? As you reflect on these questions, try to understand how your past feelings about movement relate to your present activity patterns.

**POWER AND MOVEMENT**

As girls play the role of the fair sex, many start to feel like the weaker sex as well. When college students were asked to name the most powerful person they knew, over half of them mentioned their fathers. In contrast, very few of the men or women named their mothers. Beauty is a form of social power. However, if you're decorated and displayed like a delicate ornament, you're likely to see yourself as vulnerable, and feel internally helpless as well.

It's easy to get pulled into the ornamental tide of the feminine role. And fashions are part of that undertow. Even when clothes create a more powerful look, they can produce a less powerful person. Tight corsets are a good historical example of how clothes cause constriction and dependency. But even today we still find ourselves wearing the narrow skirts that hem us in, or the pretty
pumps that trip us up. These are the ornamental fashions that produce a more vulnerable woman—one who needs help climbing out of cars or into chairs.

One therapist who uses dream work to help people explore their feelings of helplessness found a common theme emerging in the content of her patients’ dreams. Women of all social and economic levels reported being hampered and restricted by the clothes they wear in their dreams. We all experience the interplay between psychological and physical powerlessness, though we’re not always aware of the connection. One of my own clients described an incident typical of the conflicts women face when they want to act strong but are undermined by their outfits:

All week I’d been trying to talk with Jim about the trust fund. Finally, on Saturday night as we drove to the city I managed to say some of the things on my mind. At first he was very defensive, but then he just gave me the angry, silent treatment. After we parked he started walking rapidly ahead of me to the theatre. I was already very upset over Jim’s reaction, but I found myself slipping along the icy sidewalk in a long skirt and heels. I was furious at him for walking so fast that I couldn’t keep up. It was as if he had abandoned me... But I also felt quite helpless and realized how much I need him to lean on.

Take a look at the illustration on page 115. It’s an outline of my bare foot (reduced for reproduction here), with my running shoe and my dressiest pumps superimposed on it. (You can easily make your own version of this drawing.) The shaded part shows the difference between my natural foot and my “ornamental, feminized foot.” The area of constriction and altered balance caused by the high heel is impressive. Equally impressive is the difference in how I move in the two shoes and how I feel about myself when wearing them.

When my shoe misfits, not only is my foot misshapen, but my body image is altered as well. While Imelda Marcos may be the only woman who ever owned 3,000 pairs of shoes, many of us have had to try on that many to find just one pair we can wear, observes Ellen Goodman. “No one yet has designed a shoe that looks like a spike and fits like a sneaker,” she adds.

Now that women have assumed new roles as workers, the conflicts between being a healthy woman and a healthy person are taking new forms. A good example is the beautifully dressed execu-
tive who leaves for work each day in her running shoes. Here is a woman who is as concerned with being a winner as with looking like a lady. She has reclaimed her right to move with speed and comfort. Merely by changing her shoes, she's exchanged the power to attract for the power to act.

Remember Vicki Stern's advice that our bodies should feel alive and active, not just during exercise time but throughout the day. Consider how your everyday outfits influence your capacity to move dynamically. Do they make you feel "at home" in your body and help you function as a strong, capable person? Do they allow you to express pride and strength? Or do they add to your feelings of fatigue and shame?

Feeling powerful and feeling good about your looks and yourself are closely connected. Confidence in your own potency builds ego strength. Susan B. Anthony once warned that women need strong bodies as well as quick minds in their struggle for equality. And exercise provides a power base for gaining a sense of control over your life. Movement puts muscle power into femininity. It can empower you with a "can do" mentality and an able body to go
with it. As body strength grows, your body image will grow stronger, also.

By moving out of the powder room and into the locker room, you’ll develop new forms of inner and outer strength—strength which can then be carried into the boardroom or into the bedroom. You don’t need to try to become as powerful as possible or more powerful than others. Simply use movement to experience your body as a strong instrument, not merely as an ornamental object.

**FIT OR MISFIT**

We all differ in our need for physical exercise and in the pleasures and benefits we get from it. Fitness has many facets, such as strength, stamina, flexibility, and speed. One common measure of fitness is whether you exercise vigorously for twenty minutes at least three times a week. According to a government survey conducted by the Federal Center for Disease Control, only 41 percent of Americans fulfill this standard. About half of the Bodylove sample met this basic requirement.

---

How often do you engage in vigorous exercise for at least twenty minutes?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percentage</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>14%</td>
<td>NEVER</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16%</td>
<td>ONCE A MONTH</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16%</td>
<td>ONCE A WEEK</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>34%</td>
<td>2–3 TIMES A WEEK</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20%</td>
<td>ALMOST EVERY DAY</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Think about your own body. How fit or unfit are you right now? Do you exercise regularly or sporadically? Does your activity program develop strength and flexibility as well as stamina? Let’s look more closely to see how movement can help or hinder your pursuit of bodylove.

**Healthy Uses of Exercise**

There are at least three good reasons for everyone to exercise regularly: to stay fit, to have fun, and to find fulfillment.
1. To develop your body and stay fit. The more you move, the freer you become to move even further. Fitness comes from working against gravity, from increasing your tolerance for fatigue, from learning new skills, and from testing limits and pushing against them. Greater fitness helps in all kinds of stressful situations, both physical and psychological.

2. To enjoy yourself and have fun. The joy of movement comes from social contact, from competing and playing with friends, and from touching other bodies. It comes from aesthetic experiences, like moving gracefully and feeling the sun on your face. It comes from fantasy and regression, as you daydream while splashing in the pool. If you’re not having fun while you exercise, it’s time to find some new games and rekindle the joy of childish play.

3. To nurture yourself and find fulfillment. Moving is a form of self-nurturance. Like eating and sleeping, it meets a basic human need. If you love your dog, you walk it. If you love your body, you move it. A sense of well-being comes from kinesthetic sensations such as lifting, gliding, and floating; from taking risks and discovering new capacities; from releasing anger, practicing self-discipline, or overcoming frustration. When mind and body are united through exercise, you can experience a unique feeling of fulfillment as a total person.

Unhealthy Use of Exercise

While movement should lead to fitness, fun, and fulfillment, like anything else it can be used improperly. If you’re constantly getting injured or feeling oppressed by exercise, perhaps you’re misusing it in ways such as:

1. Focusing mainly on weight loss. Shaping up primarily to shape down can be disappointing. Whether exercise will reduce weight depends on the kind and duration of activity, whether you’re above or below setpoint at the start, and whether your setpoint is easily reset. In reality, building muscle doesn’t guarantee a smaller or lighter body. Those who are preoccupied with the scale miss many of the other positive benefits that movement offers.

2. Focusing mainly on competition. If you find yourself constantly competing either with yourself or with others in your exercise regime, you’re defeating the purpose. Activity that’s merely an
extension of a highly competitive life-style only adds another stress to your day. Of course, there is pleasure in winning or breaking personal records. But movement that’s strictly goal oriented can be oppressive—and even dangerous when you push yourself beyond natural limitations.

Exercise should be done neither as a punishment for looking bad nor as a necessary evil for looking good. It’s a gift you give yourself because you need and deserve it. So start playing to play, instead of to win, and you’ll find yourself in a no-lose situation. Dinah Shore once said, “I’ve never thought of participating in sports just for the sake of exercise, or as a means to lose weight . . . or because it was a social fad. I really enjoy playing. It’s a vital part of my life.”

OVERCOMING RESISTANCE

Even if you appreciate the pleasures and benefits of physical activity, resistance may be holding you back. As we’ve seen all along, it takes thought and concentration to overcome resistance. About 10 percent of the women in our sample rated themselves as inactive, and another 30 percent felt their activity level was about average.

Compared to other women your age, how physically active are you?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percentage</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>27%</td>
<td>VERY ACTIVE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35%</td>
<td>FAIRLY ACTIVE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30%</td>
<td>AVERAGE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8%</td>
<td>FAIRLY INACTIVE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2%</td>
<td>VERY INACTIVE</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Many of these women know that more activity would be good for them, yet they can’t seem to get going or to stick with it. Lois tells me, “You can’t imagine how many times I’ve tried to get involved in some kind of exercise program. I know I should, and I’d probably feel better. But for me it’s harder than dieting.” No doubt that some of the following resistance themes will sound familiar to you:
I'd really like to exercise more but just don't have the time. I've tried, but could never find anything I liked. I have weak ankles, bum knees, a bad back. . . . I hate it, so don't bother me with the exercise bit. I'm just too heavy, too old, too uncoordinated, too self-conscious. . . .

These resistance tactics are irrational, automatic responses that hold you back. Often they're based on faulty logic you've been using and believing for a long time. Once again, the triple-column technique can help correct cognitive errors that prevent you from making a commitment to regular exercise. First, write down your most common exercise excuses. Next, check them against the cognitive errors listed on pages 38–39 to see which types of faulty reasoning you're using. Then, work on some good, rational counterarguments to overcome resistance and help you get your body in motion. Nena explains: "For years I told myself I was too heavy to be seen exercising in public. And too rebellious to accept a rigid fitness program. By challenging these excuses I began to see that remaining inactive was itself a form of rebellion, and that it wasn't doing me much good."

Cindy realized that, "Exercise is the first thing I drop and the last thing I pick up during a work crunch." She challenged this tactic with the counterargument that exercise would help her get through a work crisis and keep her in balance during it.

**MAKING TIME**

In order for movement to become an integral part of your life, you'll have to solve the very real problem of finding time. How, you may ask, can I exercise regularly when I'm already overloaded with family responsibilities or a demanding job? It may not be easy but it is possible.

Besides the usual alternatives of waking up earlier or cutting out something else to make time for exercise, there are some less obvious ways to fit it into your day. For instance, try combining several things at once. Quality time with your family can be spent taking your children or spouse along for a walk or a swim. Maybe you can
all work out together with video tapes. Even toddlers will love to
dance with you or play tag outdoors.

Exercise can sometimes be built into your commute to work. Could you park farther away or get off a stop or two earlier and
walk for a while? Could you exercise during lunch hour and eat a
quick sandwich at your desk afterward? You might negotiate
slightly different working hours that will give you time for an
exercise class two days after work. Some companies have fitness
facilities. Does yours, and have you used them?

Television time is ready-made movement time. While you’re
watching, start riding a stationary bike, running in place, jumping
rope, doing floor exercises, or stretching. Be flexible in varying the
amount of time you spend at movement each day. Five minutes of
gentle yoga when you wake up or a short walk in the snow after
dinner may not improve your stamina, but it can relax or stimulate
you. These brief interludes of movement pleasure will keep your
body image in top fitness form, even on the busiest days.

DO IT YOUR WAY

Another obstacle that got in Nena’s way was perfectionism. In fact,
you don’t need to be a great athlete to get a great kick out of
movement and a great benefit from it. The “I should do things right
or not at all” syndrome is just another one of those automatic
thoughts that inhibit growth.

In her movement class, Vicki Stern reminds us to “do what feels
right for you and don’t push yourself to keep up with the others.
Exercise doesn’t have to be done this way or that way, or even the
right way. Just do the best you can.” She encourages the class “to
let go of the critical judgmental voice inside. Stop focusing on how
well you’re doing, and start focusing on how well you feel about
what you’re doing.” Pushing causes tension, she warns, so concen-
trate on the process more than on the product.

This advice is especially important if you see yourself as too old,
too fat, too awkward, or too self-conscious to attempt a new activ-
ity. As Nena explained, “Not having to do it the right way has freed
me up. Now I can strive to do my best without feeling ashamed of
being fatter or weaker than others. Instead of giving up in despair,
I'm more willing to explore my own limits, and I find that I'm getting stronger as a result."

Remember, too, that fatness does not preclude fitness. Thin people aren't always fit, nor are heavy people necessarily unfit. The great dancer Isadora Duncan was a "big woman," and 200-pound Virginia Zucci of the Russian Ballet was famous for her pirouettes.

Heavy women need to move as much as anyone else. A chain of health clubs called Women at Large has opened branches across the country. They cater to the 30 million American women who wear a size 16 or larger and who want to work out in an exercise class. This successful business was begun by "two heavy housewives" who were frustrated by conventional health clubs, "where the tyranny of the skinny and the tyranny of the fit made them feel unwanted." If you're resisting exercise because you're heavy, you might want to observe a class before you join, or bring along a friend for support.

Keep your special exercise needs in mind, such as advanced age, postmastectomy, postpartum, and other problems. These obstacles are real. It's important to face them and not let them keep you away from the physical activity you need and can enjoy. If you can't find an exercise group that meets your needs, start one yourself. Or try approaching your local Y about offering a safe and supportive program for people with your particular needs.

GETTING PHYSICAL

Once your resistance starts to break down, begin thinking about the kind of exercise that would nurture your self-esteem. Simple movement is rewarding in and of itself; so getting started is the most important step in proving to yourself just how true this is. The biggest mistake you can make is to push too hard, too soon. Start slowly, start gently. In fact, at the beginning it's best not to concentrate on goals or fitness at all. That will come on its own with time.

If you've been inactive, your first step is to make a one-month commitment to know and enjoy your body better through movement. Try to remember the pleasure you felt as a child at play, free of the rigid or competitive qualities you may associate with adult
sports. Forget about weight loss. Forget about doing twenty situps or twenty minutes of jogging. Most classes and exercise tapes are too long and too demanding for beginners. You need time to move at your own pace before trying to keep pace with others.

EXERCISE • Expanding Activities

Take a few minutes to list some activities you’ve enjoyed in the past and some that you’ve always wanted to try. Keep the list short and include at least one activity you can do anytime at your own pace; one that involves other people; and perhaps one that can be done to music. Here are just some of the possibilities:

Walking—strolling, fast walking, race walking, hiking
Running—sprinting, jogging, long distance
Aerobic dancing—low and high impact
Swimming—laps, water ballet, water exercises
Dancing—folk, ballroom, disco, ballet, creative, tap
Racquet sports—tennis, squash, racquetball, badminton
Biking—stationary, cross-country
Skating—roller, ice
Martial arts—judo, karate, tai chi
Exercise machines—weights, treadmills, rowing machines
Team sports—softball, basketball, soccer, volleyball
Gymnastics
Yoga
Floor exercises—audio and video tapes, exercise classes
Skiing—downhill, cross-country, water
Horseback riding

Each activity has certain advantages and disadvantages, rewards and dangers, depending on the individual. You can always change your pattern, building up to more challenging activities as you grow stronger.

If nothing seems particularly appealing, or if you want to begin
with the simplest and safest one, *just start walking*. You can walk alone or with others, indoors or out, slow or fast, in the rain, in a shopping mall. By simply walking in a variety of ways you can achieve the three basic goals of movement: fun, fitness, and fulfillment.

Once you begin to enjoy the basic sensations of simple movement, try stretching it into something more. Do it a little longer, a little faster. Walk a new route or try a pretty place at sunset. Perhaps some music or the company of a friend will add to your pleasure. Warm up before and cool down afterward with slow stretching. You should begin to view movement as a regular "time out from stress"—a gift that you look forward to each day.

Whatever exercise routine you choose, you're not a machine, so don't expect improvement overnight. Don't expect anything. Just see what happens by comparing your mind and body state before and after you exercise. Slowly warm your body up to the kinesthetic sensations it can feel. Hot, sweaty, breathless—these are all natural results of physical arousal. With time you'll learn to tolerate and even enjoy these feelings.

I often walk or run on our local school track. While the scenery is less interesting than the street, for me the track offers other rich experiences. Not having to watch the ground for hazards means I can turn my eyes to the open sky. I enjoy the sun hitting my face or the wind nudging me along from behind. Sometimes I pace myself with a stranger who then becomes a temporary friend. Other times I close my eyes and focus inward.

"I'm most closely in touch with my body when I'm outdoors doing physical things," explained Eileen. "Sometimes on a hike everything just clicks. The most strenuous parts fall into place with ease and my body seems to move effortlessly. It's wonderful when I feel my body responding in just the right way. I become at one with myself."

If you're exercising in the same way all the time, you're probably not getting the most from it. Perhaps you're stuck in a comfortable routine or are afraid to try something new for fear that you'll slack off or gain weight. Try to expand and shake up your exercise pattern. By breaking free of habits and limits, you'll fulfill more of your body's needs. For a few days, give up timing, counting, and the
pressure to conform to a class or an instructor. Stop half-way or skip a day and really listen to what your body wants. Be sure that you’re not abusing yourself by overexercising.

**MOTION MADNESS—FITAHOLICS BEWARE**

As we saw earlier, when exercise is misused it becomes unhealthy. Fitness is now being sold as basic insurance against becoming an ugly misfit. Actually, beauty has been paired with athleticism on and off since ancient Sparta. A hundred years ago, feminists like Elizabeth Cady Stanton were advocating exercise as the best form of makeup and the right road to beauty. Today, health-club ads warn us that “before you primp you’ve got to pump.” More people report that they exercise in search of good looks than in search of good health (with weight loss as the primary motive among women). However, when fitness is peddled as a beauty imperative, it can become as oppressive as a tight girdle.

The multibillion-dollar fitness industry rakes in fat profits from our hunger to look like a lean machine. Whether you’re flipping through a fitness or a fashion magazine, the contents are very much the same. Both are filled with beauty tips that include weight loss and exercise programs that demand self-control. The message of this new kind of enlightened narcissism seems to be based on health, yet it also carries with it a masochistic undertone that evokes guilt and shame.

Some women eagerly buy into the package and find themselves addicted to its contents. You may be one of them. Have you become a “fitaholic” in your search for good looks or good health? Fitaholics find that they just can’t say no to the compulsive urge to run one more mile or take one more aerobics class. Fitness addiction is fairly common, and therefore must be recognized as an obstacle to body-love. In the Bodylove Survey about 20 percent of the women reported problems with overexercising.

Are you ever so obsessed with exercise that it becomes a compulsion?

- 4% OFTEN
- 17% SOMETIMES
- 25% RARELY
- 56% NEVER
Fitaholics endure physical risks including strained and torn muscles, stress, and disrupted menstrual cycles. They refuse to rest and recuperate after an injury. Moreover, the psychological risks are serious. Working out can serve as yet another handy excuse for not working on other problems. Controlling the body seems easier than controlling life. For some fitaholics there’s also a self-destructive element, as they try to whip their bodies into shape. It’s a kind of punishment for feeling ugly or inadequate.

Chronic dieting and compulsive exercising have been referred to as the “twin obsessions,” since they frequently operate together in women who are trying to maintain a weight that’s below their setpoint. Often these women are high achievers who are very demanding of themselves and others. Charlene described her problem this way:

I denied it for months, then finally realized that I was preoccupied and obsessed with more and more exercise. It all started when I tried to get back in shape after pregnancy. I would get down to a certain weight, and then set another goal that was a few pounds lighter. If I wasn’t taking classes at the club, I was working out at home. Somehow it proved to me that I was special. The thought of cutting back was so scary because it meant I’d become average, just like everyone else. Then I’d lose my whole identity.

Think about whether you may be a victim of the current fitness fad. Has movement become a form of punishment as well as pleasure? Here are some symptoms to consider.

- Do you compulsively pursue exercise while neglecting other basic needs for relaxation, laughter, love?
- Do you constantly measure your self-worth on a scale of fitness, like an anorexic measures hers on a scale of weight?
- Are you forever adding a new goal to your fitness program (another mile or another dance class)?
- Do you get upset when your fitness routine is changed? Does missing a few days feel frightening?

If these symptoms sound familiar, you’re probably misusing exercise. It’s important to identify your problems so you can start to work on them. Sometimes it’s as hard for a fitaholic as for an
alcoholic to recognize her difficulties. Admitting an addiction is frightening, especially when there’s an underlying fear of weight gain. And withdrawal from any addictive behavior is a painful challenge. So begin slowly in small steps. Addicts may suffer withdrawal symptoms including anxiety, irritability, and depression if they cut back too fast.

EXERCISE • Gaining Control

Begin by gathering some baseline data to see just how much of your life is now committed to exercise. Record the number of hours a week you spend “getting fit” and how long you pursue each activity. When you miss a class or a session, how do you feel? Keep a record of the times you find yourself getting anxious about your exercise routine, and write down the specific thoughts that trigger your anxiety.

You only need three to four hours a week to achieve the fitness, fun, and fulfillment that movement provides. Try to reduce your exercise time gradually over the next few months, and give yourself at least one day of complete rest each week. Tone down your activity by doing it more leisurely. Stop timing yourself and stop counting. Try to focus more on having fun and less on staying fit. Perhaps you could turn your attention to the social side of movement or to other activities that are purely social or aesthetic.

As you slowly change your habits and attitudes about exercise, the compulsion will begin to fade. You’ll be opening up your body’s natural response to the joy of movement, and that’s what bodylove is all about.

JOY IN MOTION

Humans are social creatures. Much of our time is spent trying to get connected with others, and physical activity can be a natural way of developing “your social body.” Just watch children on a playground to see the rich potential for social movement—the cooperation on the seesaw and the competition to be first down the slide. Adults use movement in similar ways. Think of the nonver-
bal dialogue across a tennis net, or the camaraderie of hikers on a trail. A friend of mine recently built a lovely indoor pool for doing her daily laps. But then she found herself missing the banter in the locker room and the rhythmic flow of other swimmers in the water.

When exercise involves interpersonal contact, body image takes on a social dimension. Movement is a universal language that can bring people together in shared pleasure. If you can learn to use movement as a social instrument, you’ll be less likely to focus exclusively on the ornamental image of yourself.

Music also brings people together while adding life to movement. A strong, steady beat sets off a primitive physical response that’s hard to resist. Look around you at any concert from rock to Rachmaninoff; you’ll see heads bobbing and feet tapping. Moving to music in pairs or in groups extends body boundaries beyond the self and adds yet another social aspect to body image.

You can have more fun and get more emotional satisfaction from exercise by simply adding music. Lightweight, portable music sources make it easy to add rhythm and melody anytime, anywhere. Working out to a beat keeps the pace steady and feels better.

Meredith recalled that, “Once someone brought a radio into the health-club pool. I never swam to music before, but I was immediately aware of how much nicer it was . . . less boring. There was a certain smooth flow to the sensations that was really a new experience.” She went on to explain that, “The only exercise I really love to do is dancing. The rhythm and music keep you going. You do it without thinking that you’re exercising, so it feels natural and painless.”

Music plus movement is the basic equation for dance. You could meet most of your exercise needs simply by dancing at home. Dancing, like walking, builds strength and stamina. It can be done any time of day to any kind of music, for as long as you wish. If you’ve never turned on the radio and started moving as a form of exercise, try it once. You don’t have to know a thing about formal dancing to do it, to like it, and to feel happier in your body. Start by slowly rocking and then expand with whatever comes naturally.

The popularity of aerobic dancing in recent years is evidence that music adds pleasure to movement. Here’s a sport that’s not
traditional. There’s no score, no winners or losers. But it challenges the body to a thorough workout, develops aesthetic grace, and provides the pleasure of social interaction—all at the same time. The aerobic dance class is a good place to explore the delights of your body as both instrument and ornament.

Dance studios offer another advantage. Lined with mirrors, the studio lets you study your own reflection as you move with others. Visual feedback enhances kinesthetic sensations by giving you a new perspective on your body in motion. Mirror-dancing also provides the perfect partner, one who always moves in harmony with you. Try it at home with your newest album.

My favorite form of dance takes place on ice. Tuesday evenings are always saved for the skating rink. No matter how tired I feel at the start, I know that an hour of ice dancing will melt down my stress and warm up my mood. It’s my gift of movement to myself. I keep on skating year after year because ice dancing gives me such a rich mixture of fun, fitness, and fulfillment.

I find it an almost perfect blend of instrumental challenge and ornamental pleasure. There’s the demand for high energy, balance, and technical skill. There’s the sensuality of moving together with a partner as the music shifts our mood from tango to waltz. There’s the fun of dressing up in skating costumes and socializing with friends on the ice. Sometimes there are even those rare magic moments when I feel weightless, gliding through space totally adrift in my fantasies. Make no mistake; I’m not especially good at this sport, but it’s very good for me. I’ve given myself permission to skate like a star (and to see myself as one also). This is what movement can do for body image.

PLAYING WITH EMOTIONS

Another way that movement enhances self-image is by helping you feel and release emotions that are usually inhibited. If you think about it, emotional and physical arousal affect your body similarly, causing changes in temperature, pulse, respiration, and muscle tension. That’s because mind and body are united; emotions are physical as well as mental. Our language is full of expressions that connect emotions to body parts:
He’s hardheaded but kindhearted.

Don’t keep such a stiff upper lip; get things off your chest.

I can’t stomach her; she’s such a pain in the neck.

I had a strong gut reaction, but my feelings got stuck in my throat.

Through movement you can feel emotions as part of your body and work toward “letting them go”—for instance, by jumping for joy or hitting hard. The following exercises will help you explore and express emotions in moving ways.

**EXERCISE • Emotional Release**

1. *Locating emotions.* Warm up your body by walking or jogging in place. While you’re doing this, visualize a scene that evokes a particular emotion, like anger. Imagine someone stealing your parking space, for instance, and try to locate the places where your body feels the anger. Is it in your throat, your fists, your jaw? Tuning in to emotions is like tuning in to hunger. You have to search within for tension, pressure, subtle sensations. Now try to evoke some other emotions, such as grief, fear, or shame. Visualize a frightening scene and scan your body for feelings of fear.

2. *Expressing emotions.* After you’ve practiced arousing and locating your emotions, try to express them in movement. Get your anger going through visual imagery, and translate those feelings into action. Move around like the angriest woman on the block, or the saddest one. You can work with many positive and negative feelings (envy, fear, joy) by arousing them through imagery and releasing them through movement. This process should leave you less emotionally muscle bound and more relaxed.

3. *Incorporating emotions.* As a final step, try to incorporate emotional arousal and release into your everyday exercise routines. Take your feelings into the pool or onto the track. Run with anger or pleasure. Dance with elation or fear. As you move to release negative emotions or connect with positive ones, you’ll also be nurturing your self-esteem.
EXERCISE • Meditation in Motion

Positive self-statements can be energized through movement. In her book *Transforming Body Image*, Marcia Hutchinson calls this “moving affirmations.” During her workshops, she invites participants to move across the room, expressing affirmations such as:6

I am a uniquely beautiful woman, inside and out, and I know it.
I like myself and feel easy in my body.

Other affirmations that I’ve found useful include:

My body is a powerful and beautiful instrument.
I love the child within me and invite her to come out and play.

Recall some of the affirmations you rehearsed in front of the mirror (see page 72). Then try to express them through simple movement. Affirmations can also be carried into your everyday exercise routine, for instance, by repeating one while you’re walking or biking. In this way, an ordinary workout is stretched to enhance its emotional value.

SOMETHING IN THE WAY SHE MOVES

With a little creativity, exercise time can help you achieve much more than mere fitness. Fantasy, music, social contact—these all serve to enhance body image through physical activity. As you move with strength and style, you develop both the instrumental and ornamental aspects of your self-image.

Exercise manuals often stress how long, how hard, or how fast you must work out to build muscles or raise heart rate. But don’t forget about the feelings in your heart and the images in your head as you move your body. Kim, who once gave up dancing because of her father’s ridicule, tells me that her husband gave her a course in creative movement as a birthday present.

It’s turned out to be a gift for both of us because it’s really changed our marriage. I’m so much more open and accepting of my body. The judgmental part that made me feel inhibited is gone. Now I’m
freer to be myself, to give and take from the relationship. We move
and touch with greater intimacy than we ever did before.

As Kim developed awareness of her physicality, she also became
more sensitive to her sexuality. It’s inevitable that the bodylove you
gain through movement will carry over into other parts of your life,
as well.