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*
SENSUALLY SPEAKING

If you were more physically attractive, do you think your sexual life would be (or would have been) more satisfying?

DEFINITELY
PROBABLY
NOT SURE
PROBABLY NOT
DEFINITELY NOT

If you are married or in a coupled relationship, how does your partner’s physical appearance compare with your own?

PARTNER IS MUCH BETTER LOOKING
PARTNER IS SOMEWHAT BETTER LOOKING
WE ARE ABOUT EQUAL
I AM SOMEWHAT BETTER LOOKING
I AM MUCH BETTER LOOKING
I AM NOT COUPLED AT THIS TIME

How important to you is the sexual aspect of your life today?

EXTREMELY IMPORTANT
QUITE IMPORTANT
OCCASIONALLY IMPORTANT
NOT VERY IMPORTANT
NOT AT ALL IMPORTANT

Do you think your body is sexually appealing?

EXTREMELY APPEALING
QUITE APPEALING
SOMEWHAT APPEALING
NOT VERY APPEALING
NOT AT ALL APPEALING

Do your beauty routines involve other people touching your body (i.e.: manicure, shampoo, massage)?

SEVERAL TIMES A WEEK
WEEKLY
EVERY FEW WEEKS
MONTHLY
RARELY
By now you know that this book isn't a sex manual, despite its title. It is, however, a guide to discovering and enjoying the pleasures your body can provide. How you see your body affects how you use it. Feeling ashamed about your appearance can inhibit your sexual expression. In turn, sexual shame may distort your body image.

This chapter explores the house of sensuality in which you live. By uncovering shame and discovering touch, you'll learn that your body isn't a den of iniquity, but really a pleasure palace. As you learn to fill up your senses with lovely feelings and become a more sensuous woman, you'll start to look lovelier in your own eyes.

In Vicki Stern's exercise classes, touch between members of the group is an important part of the dance routines. Participants also give each other a brief back massage to cool down at the end of the dance session. "Through these classes I've discovered that it's okay to touch—even to touch strangers," says Kim. "And I've also learned the joy of being touched in return. It's helped me to see my body differently."

Humans depend on vision more than many animals do. Today's world bombards us with constant imagery—from television, movies, computer screens—which only increases our visual dependency. Thus, we tend to experience our body more in terms of how it looks than how it feels. For women especially, the body becomes an ornament of visual display rather than an instrument of sensual pleasure. But other senses besides vision have an important effect on body image. Touch, in particular, has been called the mother of all senses and the language of love.

At the Vietnam War Memorial in Washington, D.C., where the names of the dead are carved in marble, visitors react in unexpected ways. Most reach out to touch the stone wall as if it were alive. "Perhaps by touching it, they renew their faith in love and in life," observes one writer. Touching creates intimacy. To be intimate is to be close in the literal sense of body contact. The opposite of intimate
is distant. When you distance your body, you fall out of touch and out of love with it.

Love needs physical expression. We may whisper sweet nothings and gaze with adoring eyes, but above all, loving means physical contact. Touching turns strangers into friends and friends into lovers. We tell our friends to keep in touch, and are told to “reach out and touch someone.” That someone can be yourself. Bodylove grows from body touch, for it’s hard to hate a body that you love to touch.

**GETTING IN TOUCH**

From the moment we enter the world, the pleasure of touch is instinctive. "Welcome to motherhood," said the doctor, handing me a little bundle of life. As my newborn cuddled at my breast, her tiny fingers stroked my skin. This is how bodylove begins: with the touch of a hand. That moment felt as good to me as it did to her, for the mutual pleasure was part of nature’s grand design to get us connected. Infants learn to “make love” with their bodies, thus forging the bonds that ensure survival.

My daughter caressed my skin and her fingers curled through my long hair in the same way that a baby monkey clings to its mother’s furry belly or a toddler fondles a security blanket for comfort. In Harry Harlow’s classic study, baby chimps were shown to bond more strongly to an artificial mother that’s covered with terrycloth than to one that gives warm milk but feels hard and cold. It’s not the food, but the soft touch of a sensuous mother that leads to love. The basic trust learned at a mother’s breast lets us trust our own bodies enough to share them later on. In this way, a mother’s hug paves the way for a lover’s caress.

**LOSING TOUCH**

Because the road to intimacy was not well paved for her in childhood, Diane finds herself in a kind of sensual wasteland. “We haven’t made love in months,” she confides during therapy, quickly adding “though I’m not sure I care. Why do people make such a big deal about sex? I guess I’m just different.” These comments come
from a sexy-looking woman dressed in a hot-pink jumpsuit, with lips and nails to match. Artfully made up, she portrays the vision of a sensuous woman, yet under her sexy surface is a well of shame. In truth, Diane is often looked at but rarely touched. Though visually lovely, she’s sensually lonely.

Diane’s mother suffered on and off from depression when Diane was a child. “Mostly, Mom just wanted to be left alone, and I learned pretty early to stay out of her way. Now I’m worried because it’s hard for me to get close to my own kids. Brian is two and constantly climbing all over me. I find myself pushing him away a lot. He messes up my clothes and makes me nervous.” Deprived of good touching as a child, Diane feels threatened with intimacy and pulls back when others reach out to her. People who are comfortable with touching are found to be more satisfied with their body and their appearance. Conversely, those who have a poor body image have more trouble developing intimate contacts. They may sabotage relationships before they start or before they become really important.¹

We’re all born with sensitive, loving bodies, but unfortunately we get partly desensitized as we get civilized. Society trains us to keep our sensuality under cover. From an early age, children are socialized not only to play the masculine or feminine role but also to express intimacy in culturally acceptable ways. Think, for instance, how we put our babies to sleep in cribs, alone and “behind bars.” Only in a “low-touch” culture like ours would we need bumper stickers that ask, “Have you hugged your child today?”

Society disrupts the natural expression of physical love and channels our instincts in the “proper” direction. Good girls should be seen but not heard, looked at but not touched. As Freud described it, the energy from the id, which is our basic drive for sensual gratification, is gradually redirected into activities that are more socially acceptable. After all, we can’t just sit around all day sucking our thumbs and making love.

In analytic terms, the superego emerges to restrain the indulgent impulses of the id. Culture writes the rules and parents convey them. Then, as the child develops, the superego takes over as the internal voice of conscience. It demands self-control. So you learn to hold in, hold back, and behave properly. You learn which parts of the body are private and which bodily functions are naughty, ugly, dirty, and shameful. You learn that your body can’t be trusted because it goes out of control and gets you in trouble. The role of
the ego is to balance the tug-of-war between the pleasuring id and the punishing superego. Bodylove thrives when a strong ego can strike a healthy balance.

As we get properly connected to society, we get partly disconnected from our own bodies—and distanced from those with whom we are most intimate. My son, at the age of eight, is in the tub. Finding the door shut, I knock and start to open it but hear him say for the first time, “Don’t come in.” He’s learned the rules and set a new boundary between us. Am I ready to give up the intimate pleasure of seeing that sweet little body I’ve nurtured for years? I recall how I cut off my braids and ended an intimacy with my father before he was ready to give it up.

Think back to your own childhood and try to remember the ways you were touched and permitted to touch. Was yours a low- or a high-touch household? Was touching mainly affectionate or also punitive? Who in your past has touched you most lovingly and helped you achieve basic trust in your body? Who has touched you aggressively or abusively, leaving behind a sense of mistrust or shame?

The boundaries of intimacy change throughout childhood and especially in adolescence. The baby cries to be held tight, the toddler says “put me down,” and the teenager shouts “leave me alone.” Diane was neither held tight nor left alone. As a heavy child, she became the object of ridicule from classmates who poked fun at her. “They called me Blimp, and I felt so ashamed. I just wished they would all get off my back and give me some peace.” Diane had very few dates until college. Thus she missed out on the kissing and petting that help adolescents move into their sexuality. Her few teenage experiences with boys only left her feeling more rejected and self-conscious. Eventually Diane turned to cosmetics and self-adornment as a way to build self-esteem and to enjoy her body as a beauty object.

**THE SENSUAL AND THE ORNAMENTAL WOMAN**

One way that society causes us to lose touch with our sensuality is through media images that “objectify” women by splitting the mind from the body. We’re all influenced by the provocative soft porn that surrounds us everywhere. As a result, we start to objectify
ourselves through a kind of pornographic self-image. In Diane’s case, for instance, looks dominate her awareness, even when she’s making love. By acting out the ornamental feminine role she becomes a sex object to herself, and paradoxically this cuts her off from her own sensuality.

Kim found that the sensual movement she acquired in her dance class helped reduce her feelings of objectification and close the gap between mind and body. “I used to think ‘I am what I look like.’ Now I try to tune in to how my body feels as well as how it looks. My parents taught me that nice girls shouldn’t like certain things, even if those things felt nice. I’ve learned to touch more freely and have become less embarrassed about sharing my body with David.”

In effect, Kim has moved from an ornamental to a more sensual self-image. What exactly does this mean? Here are some characteristics of both the sensual and the ornamental woman that will help you understand the differences and evaluate yourself.

- A sensual woman sees herself as a whole person; an ornamental woman feels like a collection of parts.
- A sensual woman knows and meets her own needs for pleasure; an ornamental woman exists mainly for the visual pleasure of others.
- A sensual woman defines herself from within; an ornamental woman is defined by the outside viewer.
- A sensual woman is a subject to herself; an ornamental woman is an object on display.

Of course, beauty and body adornment are important to a sensual woman. However, she knows that the primary organ of sexual arousal is the mind. If you see yourself as attractive and desirable, then your body image can turn on your sexual appetite. Thoughts are a potent aphrodisiac, so body image plays a starring role in sexual fantasies. A beautiful body is a turn-on, whether you see it on the screen or project it into your own fantasies.

**DO GOOD LOOKS MEAN GOOD SEX?**

Appearance is certainly important to sexual attractiveness. The body signals we give off are part of the mating game. Like a peacock who spreads his gorgeous tail to seduce a passing hen, we show off
our bodies to get noticed and loved. In cultures where people select their own mates, appearance is all the more important. Today, when women stay single for long periods—before marriage, after divorce, after widowhood—the rivalry to look fairest of all is heightened. Having lost twenty pounds, Sylvia declares, “I’m at the perfect hunting weight.” And Rhoda, who’s thirty-eight and still unmarried, admits, “I spend every extra cent, even go into debt, to look as good as I can for my vacation every summer. It’s the only chance I have to meet men. Believe me, the competition is fierce on the singles scene.”

Darwin explained that fancy feathers or flashy fins evolved through the process of natural selection and the competition for mates. But humans have become experts at creating unnatural lures. The bright red splashes on Diane’s lips and nails grab attention. Her hot colors are seductive, creating the image of someone who’s perpetually in heat. Cosmetic ads try to convince us that the one with the brighter lips gets the better lover . . . and therefore gets more love.

Unlike animals in heat, beautified women like Diane are often sending complicated mixed messages. They look like hot numbers, but actually they may be searching for attention, affection, or influence even more than for sex. Turned on to the ornamental pleasures of body display, many women get turned off to the pleasures of sensual play.

Diane spends hours at the beauty salon and days in Bloomingdale’s, but has little time for intimacy with herself or others. At thirty, she’s more attractive than ever. People who see her assume that she’s as sexually active as she is attractive. In fact, most pretty women are stereotyped as sexually warmer, more permissive, and more responsive than unattractive women. Lookism equates good looks with good sex.2 But are these stereotypes true? Perhaps so, perhaps not.

In one study, good-looking college students were found to be more liberal in their sexual attitudes and to start having intercourse at an earlier age than their less attractive classmates. It may be true that “pretty girls do it sooner.” A self-fulfilling prophecy could well be operating here. If pretty women are expected to be more sexually responsive, they may get more offers and thus engage in more sex. Or perhaps those with a stronger sexual drive work harder at looking good. In another study, young women who liked their bodies were found to be more sexually active than those who didn’t like
their bodies. Here, it’s bodylove rather than beauty that correlates with increased sexuality.³

Over half the women who responded to the Bodylove Survey felt that being attractive was not directly related to sexual satisfaction in their personal lives. As one woman put it, “Being prettier would help me more at work than in bed.”

If you were more physically attractive, do you think your sexual life would be (or would have been) more satisfying?

- 7% DEFINITELY
- 13% PROBABLY
- 26% NOT SURE
- 39% PROBABLY NOT
- 15% DEFINITELY NOT

Take a moment to consider your response to this question and your own motives for pursuing physical attractiveness. Are you trying to attract a mate or arouse the one you have? Are you more concerned with how men react to your appearance or how women see you? Are you seeking affection, attention, or the pure power of looking provocative for its own sake?

It’s true that good looks are important in the market of social exchange. Most people wind up with dates and mates who are equally matched to their own level of physical attractiveness, a fact confirmed by our sample. Half the women rated their partner’s physical attractiveness as about equal to their own.

If you are married or in a coupled relationship, how does your partner’s physical appearance compare with your own?

- 4% PARTNER IS MUCH BETTER LOOKING
- 10% PARTNER IS SOMEWHAT BETTER LOOKING
- 47% WE ARE ABOUT EQUAL
- 13% I AM SOMEWHAT BETTER LOOKING
- 4% I AM MUCH BETTER LOOKING
- 22% I AM NOT COUPLED AT THIS TIME

In terms of the mating game, like seeks like. Yet those who look seductive don’t always act it. Sexually speaking, it’s hard to judge
a book by its cover. Most therapists quickly learn that an innocent face can mask a history of hard-core adventures, that some plain-Janes are Tarzans in bed. Sometimes, looking sexy can actually be a way of disguising and denying a strong fear of sexuality. Diane, for example, hides her anxiety under designer wraps and expresses her sensuality in the safe cosmetic arena. It’s really her lack of sexual confidence that drives her to look as chic as possible.

According to the theories of Robert Brain, our preoccupation with female beauty grows from a fundamental fear and denial of female sexuality. “Beauty rituals are used primarily to make women socially acceptable,” he writes. “A woman turns herself into a lovely lady in order to pursue social, not sexual satisfaction.” Brain believes that cosmetic rituals are really a way of distracting the eye away from erogenous zones and of acting out sexual impulses in a socially acceptable way.4

Sensory Reinforcements

In a culture that encourages the ornamental role so heavily, it’s easy to become addicted to a diet of cosmetic adornment. Unless you open yourself up to the other essential nutrients, you may easily end up suffering, as Diane does, from a kind of sensual anorexia.

Remember that body image is more closely connected to self-esteem than to physical appearance. One way to feel better about your looks is to nurture your body through sensory reinforcements. These are rewards you give yourself simply because you need and deserve them. Sensory reinforcements are inexpensive, noncaloric, and readily available. So once you cultivate an appetite for these goodies, you can afford to feast on them whenever you like. “I try to have one terrific smell every day—I like to give my nose a snack,” explains Lily Tomlin in a recent show. If you’ve been a compulsive dieter, or if you’re frequently self-conscious about your looks, it’s especially important to learn how to dish out nutritious sensory treats.

Start to overcome your sensual anorexia by tuning in to sensory hungers. This means paying close attention to the sensations your body enjoys. You’ll recall that paying attention is a basic ingredient of bodylove. The next exercise shows you how to have fun attending to yourself as you would nurture a baby. You can increase
awareness of sensual hungers by returning to the natural pleasures you felt in infancy, before your restricting superego took over.

EXERCISE • Exploring Primitive Pleasures

1. Rocking. Gentle rhythmic movement soothes the savage beast within. Start this exercise by rocking a bit as you might rock-a-bye your baby. You can use a swing, a rocking chair, a hammock. Try curling up on the floor, hug your knees to your chest, and slowly rock from side to side. Add some “rock” music with a steady beat and breathe in time to the rhythmic motion. Visualize your body gently swaying back and forth, and let the soothing rhythm seep into your body image.

2. Mouthing. Babies use their sensitive mouths to explore the world. (Some even suck their thumbs for comfort before birth!) Lips weren’t designed only for lipstick, nor was your mouth meant only
for eating. It's also sensitive to other kinds of sensory snacks. Try chewing on an orange peel or biting a pencil. Lick your own lips or the palm of your hand. Lick your skin to enjoy the salty taste after you exercise. Suck your thumb or a pacifier to indulge in the early joys of uninhibited sucking. Explore the different satisfactions of licking, sucking, and chewing, and learn how these "infantile" mouthings can give sensual satisfaction.

3. *Relaxing.* Reducing external stimulation is like returning to the womb. Relaxation can help you focus inward to feed your sensory needs. You might want to review the relaxation instructions on page 97. Basically, all you need do is get comfortable, close your eyes, relax your muscles, and breathe deeply. Tuck yourself in for a sensory nap each day and enjoy "the pause that refreshes" by turning off the TV, phone, radio, and people around you. Relaxation time can be as brief as two minutes or as long as you wish. While relaxing, try to focus your mind on a blank page or on a number. When thoughts intrude, just change the number or turn the page. With practice you'll achieve a "relaxation response" throughout your body, and this feeling of deep repose will gradually become part of your body image. Relaxation is a natural tranquilizer for reducing stress.

4. *Playing.* Through child's play you can rediscover how good your body can feel. Remember the fun you once had splashing in the tub? Put water-play back in your life. Try alternating hot and cold showers. Use a shower massage on different body parts and close your eyes to concentrate on the different sensations as you move it around. Take relaxation time into a warm tub and just let yourself luxuriate. (Or take a playmate into the tub with you.) Remember the fun of running naked? When you're home alone, strip down and feel what it's like to function in your baby skin as nature intended. Feel your bare feet on a soft rug or your bare bottom on a tile floor. Get a clear image of your nude body as you clean or dance to a favorite record. Let these visions sink into your head so they, too, become part of your body image.

You can also play with smells. Light a scented candle or incense while you eat. Rub an orange peel on your hands. Buy a new perfume to be used only when you feel like romancing yourself with pleasure. Explore the special smells of your body, also. Gather scent from your ears, your armpits, or your genitals and inhale these rich smells right into your body image so it comes alive. Any of
these exercises in rocking, mouthing, playing can be as sensual or as sexual as you choose to make them. Trust your body to be your guide.

THE SENSUAL SIDE OF SEXUALITY

What’s the difference between sensuality and sexuality? It’s hard to say where the boundary lies. And it’s probably futile to try to draw some arbitrary line between them since that point will vary depending on your background, your mood, your social situation.

In choosing Bodylove for the title of this book, I tried to convey the idea that self-image has sexual overtones. That’s because bodylove and sensuality are part of the broad foundation of healthy sexuality. Sensuality and sexuality both involve physical arousal and the pleasures of seeing, smelling, tasting, and touching. Both can be soothing or passionate. And we each vary in our needs for both, just as we vary in the sensitivity of body parts. Ginny, an athletic woman in her mid-forties, had this to say about sensuality and sexuality:

I get a lot of pleasure from my body, but until recently I never thought I was very sexual. Although I always felt sensual. I love to feel the ground under my feet when I hike. I’ll stop to explore the texture of a leaf or to smell the wet bark on a tree. When I’m playing good tennis, it’s a tactile experience. I really feel the vibrations in my hand and I use my arm like a fine-tuned machine. Men have certainly picked up on the special way I have of exploring through touch. . . . Perhaps I’m actually more sexual than I thought.

An openness to sensuality leads naturally to sexuality. And without sensual awareness, sexuality is less likely to be fulfilling. Remember Diane’s comments that, “Sex isn’t something I think about very often.” She suffers from “inhibited sexual desire,” which is not uncommon among people with a poor body image. In the Bodylove Survey, the majority of women rated sexuality as quite an important part of their lives. Moreover, most of them saw themselves as sexually appealing to some extent; only 15 percent described their bodies as not very appealing.
How important is the sexual aspect of your life today?

14% EXTREMELY IMPORTANT  
43% QUITE IMPORTANT  
25% OCCASIONALLY IMPORTANT  
15% NOT VERY IMPORTANT  
4% NOT AT ALL IMPORTANT  

Do you think your body is sexually appealing?

7% EXTREMELY APPEALING  
30% QUITE APPEALING  
48% SOMewhat APPEALING  
11% NOT VERY APPEALING  
4% NOT AT ALL APPEALING  

Joyce observes that, "Although my dark skin has made me ashamed for most of my life, I still think I’m a sexually appealing woman. Maybe it’s because I wound up marrying someone much lighter than I am and I know he finds me physically attractive."

Diane, on the other hand, doesn’t see herself as sexually desirable despite her successful efforts to look pretty and feminine. Her preoccupation with the ornamental role and her denial of her sexuality leave her feeling emotionally distant. While making love, Diane sometimes experiences a form of “spectatoring.” She sees herself from outside her body, almost like a voyeur. She’s physically there but psychologically absent. This is true even in her erotic fantasies, where she feels as if she’s watching the scene from afar. In Diane’s case, the ornamental woman overpowers the sensuous woman, pushing her off to the sidelines.

**SENSATE FOCUS**

Earlier, we compared the differences between the sensuous and the ornamental woman. How can you become more sensuous? Actually, the answer lies right in the palm of your hand. Self-touch can be used as a vehicle to carry you away from the purely ornamental and toward the more sensual side of yourself.

*Sensate focus* is a technique developed by William Masters and Virginia Johnson to help people overcome their sexual problems. Starting with simple, nonthreatening touch, couples slowly move...
into more intimate erotic contact. Intercourse is forbidden at first, so they feel freer to touch without thinking about penetration, orgasm, or any other goals. Masters and Johnson suggest that for many couples, "The fundamental error is believing that touch is a means to an end. It is not. Touch is an end in itself."  

When you’re sensate focused you concentrate only on experiencing the immediate physical contact—the pure pleasure of kissing, hugging, fondling. You tell each other what feels good, alternate between being a giver or receiver, overcome inhibitions in small steps. Sensate focus can be applied to self-touch as well as to another’s touch, for touch serves as a bridge between mind and body as well as between people.

Following are a set of sensate-focus exercises that will get you in closer touch with your sensuality. They may be especially important if you recognize any of these issues in yourself:

You don’t consider yourself sexually appealing.
You rarely experience sexual desire.
You don’t think of your skin as an organ of pleasure.
You’re reluctant to initiate sex and always depend on your partner to arouse you.

Prepare to take a sensual trip around your body. You’ll need to set aside some private uninterrupted time and create a relaxed atmosphere with soft lighting and quiet music. Wear a loose robe so you can touch your body easily. And keep in mind that sensate focus has no goal except the experience of touch, pure and simple.

EXERCISE • Self-Touch

1. Touch awareness. Begin by gathering several interesting objects—an apple, a hairbrush, a silky fabric. Close your eyes to heighten tactile awareness and explore each object slowly. Start gently with your fingertips, then rub the object on your palm and enclose it in both hands. As you touch each object, try to clearly visualize it. Watch the image change in your mind as your hands move over the object, and notice the different feelings your hands can transmit: sharp, cold, soft, bumpy.

2. Body awareness. Lie comfortably and breathe deeply to relax and focus inward. Begin by placing your hands on the sides of your head and explore the qualities of your own head just as you did the
other objects. Play with your hair, noticing its texture and softness. Now press your palms on each side of your temples and rotate them in a gentle massage. Keep your eyes closed to concentrate. Notice the pressure of your hands against your head and the size of your head in your hands. Next, let your fingers move over your face. Outline your features with your fingertips, and try to visualize each feature in your mind’s eye. Spend as much time as you wish on each part of your face, experiencing its contours in a new way.

3. Body exploration. Choose another part of your body to explore through sensate focus. Start with a place that’s safe: a part that you commonly touch and that feels attractive to you—for instance, your neck or arms. First, close your eyes and clearly visualize that part of the body before you touch it. Now, place your hands gently on it and let the inner image incorporate the feelings from your hands. Does it feel the way you thought it would? Outline the boundaries of that body part with your hands and with your mind, then gently stimulate that body part with your fingertips. How does the skin feel? Notice the differences among muscle, bone, and fat. Try various movements—scratch, tickle, rub, press. Try different speeds and notice the sensations you can arouse with your hands. Be creative in how you touch and focus on the sensations in a way that you’ve never done before. Don’t rush, but take your time and try to stay completely here and now, in the sensation. See if you can integrate the physical feelings into your body image, so that the image itself feels stroked or rubbed.

4. Becoming your body. Try to express affection as you experience your body through your hand—skin to skin. Caress it with a loving, gentle touch and surrender yourself to the good feelings. Can you “become” that body part and identify with it as you focus on the sensations? Think about how that part likes to be stroked and held. Let that part speak to you in its own voice, and listen attentively to its message. Your hand is a delicate bow that can play magical melodies on the instrument of your body. Concentrate on letting go of the critical judgmental voice, and allow your body to give and receive affection as you become the object of your own attention. See if you can shift your awareness back and forth from the hand that is touching to the part being touched. Notice how touching adds intimacy to body image. Areas that aren’t so lovely to look at can feel beautiful to touch.

5. Going further. After exploring some “safe” parts, journey on to a place that has more risk—perhaps your stomach or hips—and
repeat the process of touching, visualizing, and becoming that part. Relax with your eyes closed, and practice sensate focus as the feelings flow from your hand and back into it. Finally, visit a place that’s more exotic and erotic to you—breasts, nipples, thighs.

6. Sensual to sexual. Sensate focus can be sensual, sexual, or both, depending on what you choose to make it. Can you tell where the sensual and erotic feelings blend? You may or may not wish to include genital touching in this exercise. But do realize that genitals are part of your body and therefore part of your body image. Masturbation is commonly practiced and enjoyed by most women as part of their sexual expression. Shyness and inhibition about touching your own body only restrict the full range of sexual pleasures available to you. No part of you need be “untouchable.” No form of self-touch need be shameful. (See the resource section on sensuality for information on self-stimulation.)

Sensate focus can be practiced in the bath, in the dark, when lying in the sun. After repeating it several days in a row, you may notice the changes that come with practice. If you have an intimate partner, try exploring body-touch together. But remember that the purpose of this exercise is not to create intimacy with another, but to become more intimate with yourself. Touching your body as if it were a loving friend will help you see yourself as a lovelier woman—one who is more sensually responsive and more sexually appealing. It may also help you overcome feelings of body shame that often run deep.

FACING SHAME

Although Sylvia is thin and attractive now, she still feels ashamed of how she looked as a child. “My breasts started to develop when I was only nine, and I tried sleeping on my stomach to flatten them out. I did everything to hide them, but of course they showed anyway. For years my brother called me ‘boobs.’ Later he saw some tampons in my room and told me I looked ugly when I had my period. It was awful for me.”

In earlier chapters, you saw the effects of shame on body image. Sexual shame may be one of your biggest obstacles as you strive toward bodylove. Remember that shame is “a feeling of inadequacy
mixed with fear that some defect will be discovered by others.” You can understand how sexual shame develops by looking at the taboos of menstruation. The Bible describes a menstruating woman as unclean, and prohibits her from eating with others or touching them. The menstrual shame of ancient times is still with us today. In a study conducted in 1980, one-third of those surveyed felt that women should hide the fact that they are menstruating from family members. And 12 percent of the men also thought that women “should stay away from other people” during their periods.

In the Bodylove Survey, almost half the women reported feeling worse about their bodies during menstruation. Of course, it’s hard to know what part of these negative feelings is due to physical discomfort and what part comes from menstrual shame.

---

Do you feel different about your body just before or during your menstrual period?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percentage</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0%</td>
<td>MUCH BETTER</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3%</td>
<td>SOMEWHAT BETTER</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>32%</td>
<td>NO DIFFERENT</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>33%</td>
<td>SOMEWHAT WORSE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11%</td>
<td>MUCH WORSE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21%</td>
<td>I DO NOT HAVE MENSTRUAL PERIODS</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

---

To overcome negative feelings about yourself during menstruation, you may find it helpful to bolster your body image with positive affirmations, such as:

I welcome the cycles of my life that can create new life.
My womanly body is fertile and feminine.

Repeat these affirmations in front of the mirror as you dress or while you exercise. The joy of movement can also affirm that you’re not “unwell” or unclean at that time of the month. Are you still keeping your periods hidden from certain family members? Consider why this remains a shameful secret that can’t be shared with them.

There are many other aspects of sexual shame that distort body image. Touching becomes a shameful act when you’ve been touched by the wrong person, at the wrong time, or in the wrong way. Such experiences are usually shrouded in secrecy, and they’re far more common than most people realize. It may come as a surprise to know
that one out of every four American women is estimated to have suffered sexual abuse during childhood. All these victims, especially those who were subjected to incest, are left with painful and shameful memories. If you are one of them, you'll need to work hard to remove these shadows from your body image. Marjorie, who was abused by a stepfather, describes her feelings this way:

I know now that what happened to me was terribly wrong and I'm trying not to blame myself. But you see, I let him touch me for so long and never told. My silence is what makes me most ashamed. Someday I hope I can be physically close to a man. Right now my body still feels too violated. I see it as used, a second-hand body. Even when I touch myself the old feelings of shame come flooding back.

If you've been a victim of sexual or physical abuse, please check the resource section on shame. However, these references are only a start and you'll probably need to explore other sources of professional help as well.

Above all, you should remember one thing: there is no shame in being a victim. Sexual abuse that occurred in childhood isn't your fault. Nor is violent abuse that occurs at any age. Sexual "choices" that you may have made under oppressive circumstances also aren't your fault. So stop blaming yourself and your body for things that were beyond your control, or for mistakes you may have made in the past. Instead, get angry at the abuser and at a shameful social system in which so many women wind up as sexual victims.

Teenage sexuality, adultery, abortion, and rape are all common events that are culturally taboo and therefore cause sexual shame. Rape shame persists when a victim feels that the rape was her own fault, or that her body was permanently defiled. When sexual shame is hidden deep in the unconscious, the body becomes a battleground for acting out these repressed feelings. Some women try to erase or conceal the evidence of their "shameful" past by binging, purging, or making over in order to cover up. What are the sexual traumas in your own life that have left you with shameful feelings that prevent bodylove?

No one is totally free of sexual shame. Donna, for example, was "caught" the very first time she had sex at seventeen: "My folks came home unexpectedly from a vacation. They switched on the lights and found me in bed with my boyfriend. I'll never forget the look on my father's face. I don't think he ever forgave me. It's been
fifteen years, but I still get a rush of shame when I think of that terrible scene. And I still don’t like to make love with the lights on.”

**REDUCING SHAME**

In order to feel more at ease in our bodies, we all need to work on reducing shame. Your superego is the voice of conscience. Does it shout “shame on you” for touching or letting yourself be touched, now or in the past? When the id gets dominated by a punishing superego, it can’t function properly as a source of sensual pleasure.

This is why Diane denies her desires, censors her sexual needs, and withdraws from intimacy into an ultrafeminine façade. “I do spend a lot on expensive jewelry and clothing,” she admits. “Maybe it’s an indulgence, but I feel I deserve to enjoy my looks now, after what I went through as a child.” Diane also deserves to be touched with affection, but shame blocks her from “indulging” in such intimacy.

Visualization is a powerful tool for digging out the ghosts of guilt and shame that haunt your body image. You’ve practiced visualization in earlier chapters, so you should be able to create some spontaneous imagery on your own. Look over the following list to give you an idea of the kind of events that may still weigh heavily on your conscience:

- Early sex play with friends during childhood
- Masturbation
- Attempted rape, actual rape, date or acquaintance rape
- Having an abortion
- Contracting a sexually transmitted disease
- Catching your parents having sex
- Getting caught by your parents
- Group sex, kinky sex, or some form of “unacceptable” sex
- Being a lesbian or having a homosexual experience
- Cheating on a spouse or lover

None of these activities necessarily causes shame, but they often do. And there are many other sexual experiences that will apply to your personal case.
EXERCISE • Uncovering Shame

Choose an issue you want to explore further because you suspect there may be feelings of shame attached to it. Start by relaxing fully and trying out some pleasant images. Then create your own guided imagery to relive a shameful experience. Watch the details clearly and notice how you behaved and the expressions on your face. Try to remain as relaxed as possible as you repeat the visualization several times in a row to gather more detail and to experience the feelings more deeply.

Here are some follow-up questions:

- Where did you learn that this behavior was shameful?
- What precisely is wrong with it?
- Who is (was) hurt by it?
- Do you want to continue feeling ashamed of yourself or of your body?

EXERCISE • Overcoming Shame

1. Challenging automatic thoughts. Once you’ve uncovered, through visualization, some of the shameful issues in your life, you’re ready to work on overcoming them. As you’ve seen, cognitive errors create negative feelings. This is especially true of shame. By challenging the automatic irrational thoughts that keep shame alive, you can gradually reduce its harmful effect on your body image.

Three types of cognitive errors in particular tend to arouse shame: (1) personalizing an event, (2) exaggerating its meaning, and (3) reasoning from your own emotions (see page 39). Use the triple-column technique to challenge the cognitive errors that lead to shame. For several weeks, make a list of the automatic thoughts you may have about your body that make you feel ashamed. Then try to figure out which cognitive errors (personalizing, exaggerating) trap you in these recurrent feelings of shame. Work to challenge your irrational thoughts with good counterarguments. Here are some examples from a woman who has had a venereal disease and felt guilty and ashamed because of it.
2. Sharing secrets. An important antidote to shame is self-disclosure. By speaking the unspeakable, you can conquer its hold on you and reduce your fear of being discovered. Psychotherapy is often effective simply because it provides a safe place to share shameful secrets. But you don’t always need a therapist. This principle works in other safe situations as well. Most women experience a surprising sense of relief once they tell about the parts of the body or the events in their life that cause shame. When sexual secrets get aired and shared, the consequences are rarely as awful as imagined. Take some time to think about the body secrets in your life and use the following questions as a guide.

- What shameful things are you hiding from everyone, or from certain someones?
- Why are these things so shameful? Be specific. Define exactly what you think is wrong with your body or your behavior.
- What do you think would happen if you exposed that reality? Would the consequences really be worse than the shame you’re now carrying around?
- Who can you trust to share these shameful secrets? Who do you need to tell in order to relieve the pressure?
Kathleen confided the following:

I’d been married for nearly two years before I was able to tell my husband that I had an abortion as a teenager. From the time I first met him, I dreaded that he might find out because he has strong feelings about abortion. I was also worried that I might never be able to get pregnant again. Whenever we made love, the guilt and shame of that abortion welled up. I kept punishing myself for it. Finally I confided in a cousin who I really trusted. She urged me to see a particular priest who was tremendously helpful. He gave me the courage to tell my husband. It wasn’t easy—for me or for him. But it’s been a great relief. My body feels clean again, and I think my marriage may even be stronger than it was.

In most large communities, there are numerous support groups for incest survivors, herpes sufferers, rape victims, postabortion trauma, and many other common problems. A clergyman or physician can direct you to such groups. Or call your local mental health association for information about your special problem. These support groups provide a safe haven for sharing secrets and finding answers. By reaching out verbally you’ll discover that friends and loved ones can accept you, despite your hidden secret. Sharing your “shameful” past with them creates a new, intimate bond. And strong social bonds are essential for building self-esteem.

CLOSE ENCOUNTERS

Chimps are social animals like us. They, too, reach toward each other to show affection and to make up after fights. Chimps spend hours at “mutual grooming,” poking and picking over each others’ fur as they create social bonds within the group. Being social means touching physically as well as verbally. As we’ve seen, however, society often inhibits us from touching spontaneously.

It seems as if we humans have “dehumanized” our grooming rituals and lost the social aspects that are so important to other primates. For us, being well-groomed means being neat and tidy, not well-touched by others who are personally connected to us. Few of us use grooming to show affection or to satisfy their need for personal contact. The majority of women in the Bodylove Survey said that their beauty routines rarely involved other people touching their bodies.
Do your beauty routines involve other people touching your body (i.e.: manicure, shampoo, massage)?

1% SEVERAL TIMES A WEEK
5% WEEKLY
21% EVERY FEW WEEKS
14% MONTHLY
59% RARELY

Perhaps we should follow the chimps’ example and use grooming rituals to reach out and draw closer: by washing or coloring each other’s hair, by giving manicures and perms, by playfully making each other over as adolescent girls do. These cosmetic “excuses” for touching would feel especially good to the ill, the elderly, and the handicapped who are so often deprived of human touch and who may view their bodies negatively.

I gave my mother a pedicure machine for her last birthday. We use it to play “beauty shop” together, mutually grooming each other’s feet by rubbing off the wear and tear and rubbing in some soothing lotion. It’s a way for us to keep intimately in touch. Grooming others exposes you to the great variety of human bodies and to the realities of aging. It builds tolerance for how bodies really look as well as acceptance of your own unique features.

Are massages and facials part of your beauty routine? Why not treat yourself to one as a special sensory reinforcement. An hour of touch from a professional masseuse is as nourishing as dining out once a month. It’s a rich sensual dessert that you can buy, or can get free from a friend, lover, spouse, child, or parent. If you find yourself reluctant to ask, try using the excuse of a bad back or a crimp in your neck to “justify” a request for some personal touch. Or offer to give a massage to a loved one. It’s an offer that few people can refuse. Giving touch can feel just as satisfying as getting it.

**STEPPING THROUGH RESISTANCE**

You may find it difficult to get back in touch with your natural sensuality, despite the pleasure it can bring. It’s hard to break free of a controlling superego that won’t allow sensual pleasure; it’s hard
to push out the boundaries of body image beyond the ornamental and to move from beauty bound to pleasure bound. The anxiety and sexual shame that prevents bodylove also causes strong resistance to change.

If you chip away at resistance long enough, however, it does break down, bit by bit. Little bits of change are less frightening because they still allow you to feel in control. Eventually small steps can yield big gains. Leo Buscaglia recommends what he calls a one-inch exercise: learning to love yourself one inch at a time. Think about how your resistance tactics prevent you from enjoying your sensuality. How could you slowly inch around them?

Diane used procrastination and avoidance to keep herself safely stuck. “No time” was her habitual excuse for not getting around to behavioral assignments. Working together, we developed a series of small steps that helped her tap into her sensuality. Beginning with a goal of just five minutes a day, Diane tried to connect sensual time with beauty time, since she already had committed many hours to beautifying. For example, she took a moment to massage her head while washing her hair and she practiced visualization while taking a shower. Diane decided to eliminate one hair appointment per month and substitute a body massage instead. Gradually, her “no time” excuse disappeared as she began to really enjoy her time out for sensuality.

Joyce, on the other hand, found that her resistance dissolved quite unexpectedly one day when she experienced a sudden shift in body image:

The belief that my skin was too dark had really ground its way into my head when I was a child. Then last summer I started walking every day before work. I concentrated on tuning in to my body sensations. I was swinging my arms, enjoying the morning sun, when I got this rush of pleasure, thinking “my God, this arm is a beautiful color.” I reached over to touch my skin in the sunlight and to really accept it as mine. Then I thought, how strange, at forty-one to feel good about something I’d been ashamed of for so long.

This kind of revelation at mid-life is not uncommon. Age is often kind to self-image, as we’ll see in the next chapter. Many women seem to outgrow their shame and find self-acceptance with maturity.
CHECKLIST FOR SENSUAL GROWTH

While you work to become a more sensuous woman by adding sensuality to your body image, here are some key points to remember:

1. Get more touch in your everyday life. Find time to touch children, pets, and friends. Shake hands longer, hug relatives tighter, try mutual grooming and massage. Most of all, use the power of self-touch to touch up your body image.

2. Pay attention to sensual needs. Cultivate a healthy appetite for smelling, tasting, rocking, sucking, and relaxing. Use these sensory rewards to raise your body image out of a visual rut.

3. Lift the barrier between sensuality and sexuality. You need both of them to feel intimate with your own flesh. The more intimately you know your body, the more you can trust it enough to share it with others.

4. Work to reduce body shame and sexual shame. Use visualization to relive the traumas of the past and uncover the origins of shame. Share your “shameful” secrets with others and challenge the automatic thoughts that keep shame alive.

5. Pursue sensual satisfaction as passionately as you pursue beauty. The sensual woman within you can help keep the ornamental woman from dominating your self-image.

In order to receive love from another, you have to respect that person’s choice of you as a worthy and attractive lover. Your body is the vehicle that can carry you down the road to self-love. Don’t be afraid to allow yourself the sensual pleasures that nature intended to nurture body image. You’re entitled to enjoy your body, not merely to display it as a beauty object. So try to worry a bit less about how good your body looks, and concentrate a bit more on how good it can feel.