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
TIMELY MATTERS

At what age do most women reach their peak of physical attractiveness?

At what age do most women feel best about their bodies?

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

What do you think your feelings about your body will be five years from now?
   MUCH BETTER
   SOMEWHAT BETTER
   THE SAME
   SOMEWHAT WORSE
   MUCH WORSE
I have good and bad news for you on the topic of aging. First, be reassured that there is life after youth. Not only life, but beauty, sensuality, and self-esteem, for time is on your side when it comes to bodylove. Growing older can mean feeling better about your body image.

The bad news is that life after youth isn’t easy. As Bette Davis put it, “old age is no place for sissies.” Lookism and ageism combine with a cult of youth that causes trouble. You’ll find this mixed bag of news in the pages ahead, along with myths and facts about “older women.”

This chapter isn’t just for those of you who are past your prime, whenever that may be. It’s for anyone who is facing a “big” birthday with trepidation. It’s for those who are busy enjoying youth and who never give a thought to age. It’s for women of every age, for we all must learn to live in a changing body. And we can learn to love it, even when it wrinkles.

I know that loving an aging body isn’t always easy. It’s hard to watch youth slip away in the mirror and realize that you’re no longer growing up but growing old. Eventually the aging process forces you to give up an idealized forever-young image of yourself. How you feel about your aging image certainly influences your behavior and your self-esteem. “Dying is one thing, but looking awful for the next thirty years is even worse,” declared one anxious candidate for middle age. Her anxiety may disrupt her relationships, inhibit her sexual expression, and limit the goals she sets for herself.

Self-acceptance must include the future self as well as the present one. If you can’t imagine yourself growing gray, or if the thought of middle-age spread fills you with body loathing, then you’re hiding from reality. By exploring the causes of age anxiety and learning some coping strategies, you can gain enough confidence to age more beautifully.

As Judith Viorst describes so insightfully in her book Necessary Losses, we grow by leaving parts of our life behind and letting go of them. Our losses feel threatening as we face an uncertain future. But
the losses of life are generally balanced by some gains. For instance, by giving up the tomboy role, you can then move on to the pleasures of adolescence. Or by letting go of your parents, you can explore the freedom of adulthood. A youthful body image is one of the prized possessions we have to give up in life, explains Viorst. Yet despite the loss of youthful beauty, bodylove can not only endure but help us move on to the next stage of growth.¹

A WRINKLE IN TIME

After forty, wrote Camus, we become responsible for our own faces. What does this mean? How responsible are you for the necessary losses that age inflicts on beauty?

*Peggy:* "I always thought that forty was over the hill. Now that I *am* forty, the landscape seems to have shifted."

*Miriam:* "If I ever get to forty, I’ll be so old I can get away with everything. Get fat, wear purple socks and feathered hats. I can look outrageous and no one will care."

*Katha Pollitt:* "The funny thing about getting older is that I like it just fine. I’m happier now than I’ve ever been in my life; and all my younger-older-middle-age-elderly-mature friends feel exactly the same way."²

*Ruth at 70:* "To me, forty is like springtime. A woman has years of good life ahead of her. To me a woman of forty is still a baby."

*Gretchen:* "I’m almost forty and it’s scary. I still look okay, but I’m afraid of being rejected or ignored. I’d hate to wake up one day and feel that I don’t count anymore."

"My husband gave me a full-length mirror for my fortieth birthday to remind me I’d better keep an eye on my looks," says Elizabeth. How should you (do you) eye your looks after youth? With a watchful eye . . . a critical eye? When will you (did you) start to feel anxious about looking older?

Sometimes age anxiety begins quite early. Teen magazines warn girls that, "You’re never too young to start worrying about preserving your looks." And they do worry. When I asked some fifteen-year-olds why they felt they absolutely had to wear makeup to class
each day, one explained, “Because of these awful bags under my eyes ... and to cover up all the little lines.” These girls were already eyeing their faces for signs of wrinkles.

You’ve probably noticed that wrinkles are more than just skin deep. They bring us face to face with reality—the reality that some men do leave older wives for unwrinkled replacements, and the reality that some bosses do want pretty young secretaries. Therefore, like responsible housekeepers, we try to iron away the creases or cover them with makeup that gives the illusion of permanent press. “I always expected to grow old gracefully,” says Lillian, “but now I’m busy fighting it as hard as I can.”

Chronologically, we all age at the same rate of one birthday per year. But aging is also social, psychological, and biological. It’s a state of mind as well as a state of matter. Two forty-year-olds may differ in physical age: Lois is vigorous and healthy while Sue is tired and out of shape. They may differ in appearance age: Lois easily passes for thirty while Sue is mistaken for fifty. They may differ in life stage: Lois is recently married and expecting her first child while Sue is already a grandmother. They may differ in psychological age: Lois feels like a young woman while Sue feels like she’s getting old. Appearance is only one of many factors that influence body image as you age. But it is an important one.

While time is abstract, its effect on your body is all too concrete. Hair gradually loses its color. Skin becomes less elastic and weight increases as metabolism slows down. These changes force you to revise your body image, whether or not you’re ready.

Often, body image lags behind the physical changes that occur. One day I saw a middle-aged woman reflected in a store window. She seemed to be walking alongside me when I suddenly realized, “Hey, that must be me.” And another time I awoke from a dream, startled by the dream image of myself with reading glasses. After three years of wearing them, my glasses had finally become part of my unconscious state, signaling a shift in body image.

Ingrid Bergman once remarked, “You know, one looks at herself in the mirror every morning, and she doesn’t see the difference. She doesn’t realize that she is aging. But then she finds a friend who was young with her, and the friend isn’t young anymore, and all of a sudden, like a slap on her eyes, she remembers that she, too, isn’t young anymore.”

As is true of any loving relationship, bodylove has to evolve to
survive the aging process. This means readjusting your relationship with your own changing body. As time passes you’re forced to revise your ideal about proper weight, about the kind of fashions you choose, about the way you decorate and display yourself. Betty explains, “I used to wear short skirts and high heels to show off my great legs. But now there’s less to show off. So I’m wearing longer styles and darker stockings. I don’t expect my legs to be noticed anymore, and that’s starting to feel okay.” Unless you revise, body-love can turn into body loathing.

Remaking your body image over and over is a life-long challenge. Viorst describes it as accepting the necessary loss of one’s own younger self, “the self that thought it would be unwrinkled and invulnerable and immortal.” If you cultivate the skill of re-adjusting while you’re “younger,” it comes more easily when you’re “older.”

**AGE LABELS**

What exactly do terms like “older” and “younger,” really mean? Where are the boundaries between youth and middle age? That depends on whom you ask. One popular definition of an older woman is someone who’s at least ten years older than you are right now. While beginning work on this chapter I accidentally typed “muddle” age and then laughed at the irony of the error. Indeed, age labels are muddled and messy.

There’s no denying, however, that age labels do exist and are also quite important. What you call yourself does affect how you see yourself. Here’s an exercise to help you become more aware of how you use age labels to identify yourself and others. First review these age-related terms:

Girl, young woman, adult, woman in the prime of life
Lady, middle-aged woman, woman of a certain age
Older woman, mature woman, aging woman
Senior citizen, old lady, Miss, Mrs., Ms.

Now consider what each of these words or titles means to you. What are the age boundaries that define each one, in your opinion?
Which of these labels fits you comfortably right now and which ones don’t seem to fit at all? To see how you feel about these terms, try using each one in a phrase such as:

I am a . . .
I look like a . . .

You can further examine your attitudes and anxieties by completing the following sentences spontaneously and rapidly:

In terms of appearance, younger women . . .
In terms of appearance, older women . . .
In general, women are most attractive around the age of . . . because . . .
After “a certain age,” most women become . . .

Jeanne found this exercise to be an eye-opener. “Without thinking, I wrote, ‘In terms of appearance, young women look cute and girlish.’ But you know, I always object when grown women are called girls. Especially when mature men talk about the girls they date. At thirty-six, I don’t want to be one of the girls. Yet my response showed me I’m not finished with that term. I’ve always been called cute. Now I wonder what will happen when I’m too old to look cute anymore.”

Vivian wrote: “After a certain age women become a little frantic about their looks.” When I asked her why, she replied, “My best friend had her eyelids fixed last summer. She’s not even forty, and I thought she was crazy when she told me she was going to do it. But when I saw how great she looked afterward it made me nervous. I felt like calling the surgeon myself. I guess I’m just not ready for middle age, so I try not to think about it. But when I do, I get a little frantic.”

Our ideas about age labels come in part from our experiences with family members and from the attitudes of our friends. Check with your mother or other relatives of her generation to see how they feel about being “older women.” Ask your children when they think middle age begins or ask your husband when the prime of life ends. As you compare your own feelings with theirs, think about how looksism and ageism combine to create the stereotypes that underlie these age labels.
"Some women to see you, Anne."

Drawing by Handelsman; © 1978 The New Yorker Magazine, Inc.

THE CULT OF YOUTH, THE CURSE OF AGE

Our ideas about the look of age are also shaped by media images. It's clear who counts most in commercial messages: those who look thin, pretty, sexy, and young. The first Miss America was only sixteen. And most beauty contestants today are in their early twenties, which reinforces the belief that female beauty peaks at that age.

Our culture equates looking good with looking young. When judges rated photographs of various kinds of people, they consistently picked white, teenage, female faces as the most attractive. Whether we like it or not, we're all judged against that ideal. Susan Sontag observes that, "Only one standard of female beauty is sanctioned: the girl . . . thus, women are trained to want to continue looking like girls forever."

And so we apply cosmetic magic to impersonate the full, red lips
of an infant, the pink cheeks of a toddler, and the wide eyes of a schoolgirl. Advertisers ask, “Can you compete with your little girl’s looks?” and “Which are the mother’s hands, which are the daughter’s?” The message is clear: don’t grow up. But of course we do. Geneen Roth observes that:

Once upon a time, I was beautiful. My hair was thick and dark and glossy. My skin was smooth and soft as a ripe peach... my mouth was dark pink and my teeth white and even. My eyes were large and clear, a deep blue-green. Beautiful. Unfortunately, I was four years old at the time. It’s been downhill ever since.

Actually, the pleasure of being admired as a youthful beauty only sets us up for the pain of being rejected as an aging ugly.

The cult of youth artificially divides life into younger and older stages. These oversimplified categories feed the stereotypes of looksism and ageism. Young equals pretty equals good, while old equals ugly equals bad. Recall that thinking in extremes was one of the cognitive errors we discussed earlier. Splitting life into just two opposite extremes puts great pressure on you to remain in the younger half (or at least to pretend you’re still there).

In addition to the child-woman, a second image has recently been added to the youth cult. This is the mature model who’s frozen in time—the Jane Fonda, Joan Collins, Elizabeth Taylor, Raquel Welch version of middle-aged beauty that lasts indefinitely. Journalist Ellen Goodman labels this the cult of mid-life beauty. “The central notion of the middle-aged show and sell routine is that if she can look that good at fifty, so can you,” writes Goodman.

But do these mid-life wonder women really make you feel better about yourself? Or do they only pressure you to preserve a girlish image? Miriam confides, “I’m exactly as old as Elizabeth Taylor. I have to admit I was secretly delighted a few years ago when she gained all that weight. But now she’s thin and gorgeous again and I feel ashamed that I’ve given up so soon.”

There’s an insidious mixed message beneath this new middle-aged model. You’re given permission to get older but not to look it, to live but not to change. When Gloria Steinem announced, “This is what fifty looks like,” Ellen Goodman responded, “not necessarily.”

The commercial implications of the youth cult are obvious. The greater your anxiety about looking older, the greater your desire for
products to keep you looking younger. But the social and political implications of the youth cult are more subtle. When you’re packaged in an adolescent image, you’re less likely to be taken seriously, and you’re also denied the vision of your own maturity. Remember that aging is determined by social as well as physical factors. The cult of youth further concentrates women’s social power in the ornamental role. Yet it’s only during and after middle age that most women are free to move beyond the constraints of child rearing, and to explore the full power of their potential. Because of the youth cult, women are less likely to embrace the possibility of feeling powerful in the second half of their life.*

When our sample was asked to pick the age when women reach their peak of attractiveness, the average age given by the group was thirty-three. This number reflects the cult of youth, but it also shows that prime time today lasts at least into the early thirties. Moreover, there was a distinct age trend in the responses to this question that is quite important. Whereas younger women picked twenty-six as the age of peak attractiveness, older women chose thirty-nine—a highly significant thirteen-year difference. Only 3 percent of the younger group felt that women reached their peak of attractiveness after the age of forty, whereas 44 percent of the older group felt this was true. These findings suggest that the cult of youth may diminish as the general population grows older.

How do your own feelings about the prime age of physical attractiveness for women compare with the sample? And where do you fit into this equation in terms of your present age?

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At what age do most women reach their peak of physical attractiveness?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Age</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Younger Group (under 30)</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle Group (30–45)</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Older Group (over 45)</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Sample Average</td>
<td>33</td>
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</table>

*In order to analyze the survey questions by age, I divided the subjects into three parts: (1) younger women under 30, (2) middle group ages 30–45, and (3) older women over 45. I use the terms younger, middle, and older to refer to these three groups when presenting the research. However, I don’t consider them definitive labels. Many women of 35 see themselves as young women. And 50-year-olds don’t really belong in the same older category as their mothers of 70.
Another interesting age trend emerged from the Bodylove Survey. Although our sample believed that beauty peaks in the thirties, they thought that women feel best about their bodies at a somewhat younger age—during the late twenties. Here again the older the age of the sample, the older the age of their responses.

At what age do most women feel best about their bodies?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Age</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Younger Group</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle Group</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Older Group</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Sample</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

If you, too, believe that women feel best about their bodies before age thirty, please remind yourself that this is part of the cult of youth, which assumes that being young equals being pretty equals feeling good about your looks. In fact, older women report feeling just as satisfied with their appearance as do younger women.

**THE BRIGHT SIDE OF AGING**

The surprising good news is that body image can withstand the test of time. Studies show that you’ll probably be as satisfied with your looks in five years as you are right now. And that’s a new wrinkle on the beauty horizon. Here are some myths and facts about age and appearance that show the bright side of aging.5

**MYTH:** As time passes we become increasingly unhappy with our physical appearance.

**FACT:** Ratings of the body as a whole and of specific parts remain fairly consistent over time. When people in their twenties, thirties, and forties were asked how they felt about their bodies, no differences were found. All age groups seemed equally critical of their body image.

**MYTH:** With age, we’re more likely to want to make over our features.
FACT: The desire to remodel one’s looks declines with age. When asked which features they would like to remodel, young women chose a greater number of features than did older women.

MYTH: With age we become more self-conscious about our looks.

FACT: Self-consciousness tends to decline progressively with age. The older the woman, the less self-conscious she feels about her appearance.

MYTH: One’s level of attractiveness goes up and down periodically over the life span.

FACT: Physical attractiveness does decline with age, as measured by outside observers. But compared to others of the same age, one’s relative attractiveness tends to remain fairly stable. Once pretty, always pretty is the general rule that holds (especially for facial features, less so for body characteristics).

All in all, we seem to become less critical and more accepting of our appearance as we mature into middle age. A sixty-year-old bookkeeper explained, “At my age I don’t worry very much about whether I like my looks. . . . It’s just one of those things that’s part of me, so I simply don’t dwell on it.” Yvonne, at fifty-one, remarked, “I’ve come to realize that some things can’t be changed . . . and really shouldn’t be. Because they make me who I am. My face is no longer my fortune . . . it’s my signature.”

It’s not that appearance stops being important for older women, but they typically gain self-assurance as they mature beyond mid-life. And this, as we’ve seen, is one of the most crucial factors in determining body image. Despite the physical changes older women must face, they usually feel quite good about themselves. Recall that body image and self-esteem are strongly related. Body image is generally positive when self-esteem is high, regardless of a person’s actual appearance. A positive body image seems to be an important component of aging successfully.

The Bodylove Survey confirms the good news about aging and body image. When asked how their feelings about their body today compared with their feelings five years ago, three out of four women said they felt the same or better. A higher percentage of older women reported feeling the same about their body as five years ago, suggesting that body image tends to stabilize as time passes.
How do your current feelings about your body compare with your feelings five years ago?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Younger</th>
<th>Middle</th>
<th>Older</th>
<th>Whole Group</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Much Better</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somewhat Better</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Same</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>37%</td>
<td>57%</td>
<td>42%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somewhat Worse</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Much Worse</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

On the other hand, young women were much more optimistic about their future looks. Nearly half of the younger women in our sample expected to feel somewhat or much better about their bodies five years from now, compared to only 20 percent of the older women. Still, an impressive 84 percent of the older women expected to feel the same or better about their bodies five years from now. And relatively few of them expected to feel much worse.

What do you think your feelings about your body will be five years from now?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Younger</th>
<th>Middle</th>
<th>Older</th>
<th>Whole Group</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Much Better</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somewhat Better</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Same</td>
<td>48%</td>
<td>54%</td>
<td>62%</td>
<td>55%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somewhat Worse</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Much Worse</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>1%</td>
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</table>

Since weight is such an important component of body image, it’s interesting that the younger and older groups were about equally satisfied (or dissatisfied) with their weight. This was true, despite the natural tendency for most women to gradually gain weight with age.
Are you satisfied with your current weight?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>YOUNGER</th>
<th>MIDDLE</th>
<th>OLDER</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>VERY SATISFIED</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SOMEWHAT SATISFIED</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>32%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SOMEWHAT DISSATISFIED</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HIGHLY DISSATISFIED</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>11%</td>
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Overall, the Bodylove Survey supports the conclusion of other researchers that body image is surprisingly resilient over time. For most people, anxiety over loss of looks turns out to be worse than the reality. We can therefore gain an important new perspective on the beauty of aging simply by talking to family and friends who are ahead of us in the life cycle. How do they come to terms with the look of age? How have their ideas about "prime time" evolved over the years? Here are some comments that are typical of those who have adjusted well to their changing looks.

At sixty-five, Theresa had this to say: "When I was younger I was considered more attractive than I am now. I no longer feel as though people look at me and say 'Oh, wow, what a beautiful woman' the way they used to. And I feel sorry for them because really I'm a much more interesting person now than I was then. But that's their problem."  

Elissa Melamed reflects on her own self-image in her book *Mirror, Mirror*: "I realize that I like what my face has become. I could no longer conceive of it without its wrinkles. Anyone who is going to take me on is going to have to take on all of me, I'm afraid—with a full complement of years and the signs of their passage."  

Trudy declares at forty-five: "My life is for me. If anyone says my dress is too short or my jewelry is too flashy I couldn't care less. It's time to look and act the way I want. I've reached a point that I don't give a damn about what other people think."

The sense of assurance that comes with age generally seems to add to a woman's strength and self-image. "One of the advantages of aging," says Marvine at seventy, "is that you can take or leave excitement of any kind. Which means that for the first time in your life you're truly independent, and that adds to your aura."
THE DARK SIDE OF AGING

But not all women are able to age so gracefully. The bad news is that growing older isn’t always easy. Looksism plus ageism create a set of biased attitudes and sober statistics that creep into our lives no matter how good we feel about ourselves. With the loss of youth and beauty, some of us lose our positions in the world as well. The ultimate in a throwaway society is the disposable older woman who has been displaced as a wife, a homemaker, or a worker.

Loss of looks can threaten relationships. “One of your husband’s basic needs is for you to be physically attractive to him,” Mirabel Morgan warns the would-be Total Woman. “The outer shell of you is what the real estate people call ‘curb appeal’—how the house looks from the outside. Is your curb appeal this week what it was five years ago?” asks Morgan. She also implies that you may wind up on the curb unless you quickly spruce up.

Ironically, it’s pretty women who have the most to worry about and the most to lose. When the happiness of middle-aged women was compared with their attractiveness many years earlier, an interesting finding emerged. Those women who had been the prettiest in college suffered more adjustment problems during middle age than those who were plainer looking when young. If you were one of the pretty young things, you may be especially vulnerable to the loss of beauty as you age.

Some pretty women suffer a so-called narcissistic injury as they lose their youthful looks. They grieve over their fading beauty, as they would over the loss of any love object. Take Vivian, for example. “All my life I’ve felt so special wherever I went,” she explains. “It came as a shock one day when I realized that I was no longer the belle of the ball. And that I never would be again.” Vivian discovered that loss of beauty is one of the hazards of having it. Thus, pretty women can get tripped up by the transiency of their own attractiveness.

A young woman who relies heavily on her good looks may fail to cultivate her other talents to the fullest and then find that there’s less to fall back on when beauty fades. Recall how Joyce concluded early in childhood that her dark skin meant she would never be pretty. “I knew I had to be better at everything else,” she explains. “Now I feel I have a lot more going for me because I never expected to use my looks to get ahead.”
Although she had not yet decided what she wanted to do with her life, Peggy's body had already made up its mind.

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DOUBLE STANDARDS—DOUBLE TROUBLE

Additional bad news is that men and women don't age at the same rates. Time hangs more heavily on female faces. Despite a life expectancy that is about eight years longer, middle-aged women are viewed as relatively older than their male contemporaries.

Looksism combines with sexism to create a so-called double standard of aging. This is evident in research comparing the attractiveness of older men and older women. When photos of the same person across the life span are rated, attractiveness is judged to decline more rapidly for women than for men. Moreover, ratings of a man's masculinity remain fairly constant over the years, whereas
ratings of a woman’s femininity are perceived to diminish rapidly between youth and middle age. On her fortieth birthday, Grace Kelly complained that although forty was a terrific age for a man, it was torture for a woman, since it meant “the beginning of the end.” It’s not surprising that a woman may feel tortured at the same age that a man feels terrific. His star is still rising at forty, while hers may feel as if it’s beginning to set.

“My husband is ten years older than I,” observes Diane. “In the past year I’ve seen his tummy pouch and hairline go, but I see, too, that he looks more attractive and, that damn word, ‘distinguished’ as he ages. I keep seeing these lines and puffs on my face, and on me it doesn’t look distinguished. I’m only thirty-two and already buying the propaganda that I’m losing my face.”

The double standard of aging rests partly on social concepts of gender: the masculine role as instrumental and the feminine role as ornamental. Many women say they don’t mind getting older; it’s looking older and being treated older that gets them down.

Ann explains, “It makes me angry and frustrated to see my looks slipping away from me just when I’m beginning to feel like a whole person.” And Cindy complains, “I work free-lance in a business that’s very age conscious. I’m now thirty-nine, but mostly I deal with people younger than myself. Whenever I have to see a new client I worry whether I look young enough. At some point I know I’ll start to lose jobs just because they don’t hire middle-aged women to do this kind of stuff. It doesn’t seem fair because my work really gets better each year.”

These women feel as if they’re being pushed over the hill into no-man’s-land, considered old simply because they no longer look young. Elissa Melamed describes the phenomenon that faces women beyond a certain age: “We are put into another category by the eyes of others. What these eyes tell us is that they will no longer mirror us. The eyes make no contact: they glance and slide off as if they had seen an inanimate object.”

**AGING YOUR BODY IMAGE**

Being overlooked instead of looked over only adds to age anxiety. The silence of feeling unseen can be painful after a lifetime of listening for the compliment that confirms your power to please. You may not realize how much that power means to you until it
starts to wane. "A whole week in Rome and I wasn't pinched once,"
complains a friend.

Vivian recalls a recent family wedding where she felt unseen and
let down:

I found the perfect dress and thought I looked terrific when we left
for the affair. But my fifteen-year-old daughter had also found the
perfect dress. All night relatives kept coming over to tell me how
gorgeous she'd become. Of course I was pleased and proud for her,
but also a bit let down because I didn't get the attention I'm so used
to getting.

Vivian must learn to accept the loss of that kind of attention, and
watch her daughter move into the limelight. She can ease herself
into a new stage of growth by rehearsing it.

The following exercise helps you achieve a clearer view of your
own body growing older. By rehearsing tomorrow's image today,
you can reduce anxiety about it. There's a fundamental sense of self
that transcends the necessary losses of aging. Your body image
today is part of that continuity, and it includes your memories of
the past as well as your expectations of the future. The power of
visualization lets you create a filmstrip in your mind of what you
may look like someday. Through imagery you adapt in advance, so
to speak. This makes the losses that are inherent to the aging process
easier to accept.

EXERCISE • Trying on Older Images

1. Begin by getting comfortable, clearing your mind, and taking
a few deep breaths for relaxation. Imagine that you're facing a blank
wall with a big picture frame on it. Project your current self-portrait
onto this empty frame. See yourself just as you are today.

2. Change the time frame and visualize yourself at age twenty,
perhaps as a student sitting in class. Notice your features, your
weight, the texture of your skin. Try to imagine how that young
woman feels about her body. Does she look grown up or still like
an adolescent?

3. Add a decade of living. At thirty, notice how your appearance
has changed. Are you blooming with life or weighted down by it?
Have you reached your prime of attractiveness at thirty, and are you content with how you look?

4. Move ahead to forty, the midpoint of life. Clearly visualize your features getting older. The lines of maturity are starting to show on your face. Are you past your prime or still moving toward it? Are you as attractive as you were a decade ago?

5. Picture your fiftieth birthday portrait. At the half-century mark you’ve reached middle age. Do you look it? Notice the wrinkles that define you, and the ones that disturb you. Which parts have shifted under the weight of time and which parts are the same as ever?

6. Roll the film ahead another decade and scan your sixty-year-old body from top to toe. How has it changed? Your hair may be thinner and your hips may be broader. Does your skin tell a rich tale and do your eyes still sparkle?

7. Try one final image at seventy. You’re growing old, but may still live another twenty years. Which parts of you look strong, and which look frail? Are the expressions on your face the same ones you’ve worn all your life?

8. Now assemble all these images and project them onto the picture frame, one at a time. Watch as they pass before you in sequence, starting with your youthful face at twenty. After you’ve run them forward through the decades, rewind them going backward in time. Notice the continuity of body image even as it changes. Finally, review the whole montage by lining up the images in a row, like a portrait gallery.

These guided imagery instructions were all too brief. They’re only meant to give you an idea of the exercise. When you practice it, be sure to go slowly enough to let your imagination fill in the details. Study each portrait of yourself until you are really comfortable with it and are able to clearly see the changes in your appearance that time dictates.

Angela, at thirty-five, described her reaction to this exercise: “I was enjoying the different views of myself until I got to age sixty. Then the picture frame just went blank for a while and I couldn’t see myself at all. My mother’s face suddenly flashed into view. She’s
now sixty-eight—an old-fashioned Italian mother who’s rather plain. People always tell me I look a lot like her. And I guess I have trouble with the idea that I’ll wind up like that. Though I have to admit, she doesn’t seem to worry about looking older. I’m sure I’ll have more trouble with it than she does.”

Nancy had a different reaction: “I’m pushing fifty and feeling pretty confident about it. What surprised me was how much better I look today than I did at twenty or thirty. When I visualized those early images I was disappointed with what I saw. My face seemed kind of bland—like part of me wasn’t really there. But I loved the older portraits . . . and I went on to imagine myself at eighty and ninety, to see how much living I could paint on my face. This exercise made me feel that I was really still a young woman compared to what I’ll become someday.”

Review your own responses to the visualization exercise:

- Were certain ages harder to see than others? If so, do you understand why?
- How did you feel as you saw yourself growing older? Do you think these feelings are based on truth or on myths about aging?
- Did you discover any “ancestral ghosts”—images of your mother or other relatives—that are part of your expectations for the future?

Take this exercise one final step and think about the elderly people who inhabit your inner scrapbook of memories. Most of us had no trouble loving the wrinkled faces of our grandparents when we were little. Recalling those warm feelings for our aging relatives can help us see our own future images as equally lovable.

**PROTECTION THROUGH DECEPTION**

As you face the loss of your youthful body, a new form of shame may develop: not sexual shame, not fat shame, but age shame. Few of us escape it unscathed, and some of us start lying to cover it up.

Age deception is part of the feminine mystique that’s learned early in life. We make up our ages as we make up our faces, hoping
to be seen as something we're not. Five-year-olds practice it when they use their makeup sets to pretend they're twelve.

Good girls are taught to please others. One way to please is simply to look pleasing. A pretty face is a pleasure to have around. Conversely, there's shame in looking "unpleasantly" old, shame in watching your role as an ornament slip away. The desire to be the "right age" has a special urgency for a woman it never has for a man, explains Susan Sontag. "Most men experience getting older with regret or apprehension. But most women experience it even more painfully with shame."

Not asking a woman's age, and not telling after a certain point, has become a universal joke. Be honest. Have you ever lied about your age? By mid-life those who do fib only hope they look young enough to pass. "Why should I tell my age when I don't look it?" says Margie. "If I have the choice I don't let on. But I don't exactly lie, either. I say 'I'm older than you think.' I find it intrusive when someone asks my age. It's none of their business." When Molly Yard (who is over sixty) was elected president of the National Organization for Women, she refused to answer questions about her age.

Sometimes, those who do answer honestly are made to feel as if they shouldn't. One actress reported the following after meeting with an agent: "She asked me my age. When I told her forty-nine—I never lie about my age, why should I?—she said in perfect seriousness, 'At forty-nine a comeback is still possible.' I said, 'Comeback! What do you mean comeback? I never left!' "

If you're busy trying to look younger and not be treated older, you can get out of step with yourself. One day I overheard a friend say, "I never thought I'd do it, but I've started to lie about my age. And now I feel as ashamed of lying as I do about looking so old." Another day I overheard myself say, "What a shame. It takes me twice as long to look half as good as I used to." Shame is a powerful motive. And so we find ourselves buying into the cult of youth to protect ourselves from the shame of being seen as "too old." Gradually the distortion becomes part of our self-deception and we start to forget who we really are.

**MODELS OF MATURITY**

It's no wonder that age deception comes so naturally when we hear constant messages that encourage it:
“Are premature signs of age making you look older than you really are?”

“Nature is forcing you to make a decision—gray hair or Loving Care?”

“How is your face in general? Wrinkled? Put your hands to your temples and push up and back. Don’t you look better?”

The media message is simple: pretty women don’t look old. While actors may age into distinguished leading men, actresses often find themselves unemployable once they look sexually implausible. Joanne Woodward complains that husband Paul Newman gets handsomer every year while she only gets older.

An analysis of magazine ads between 1950 and 1980 showed that three-fourths of the women appeared to be under thirty years of age, while only 4 percent looked over forty. And a study of news anchorpersons found that nearly half the men but only 3 percent of the women were over age forty. Media images are seductive. Unless we actively counteract them, they take control of our concepts of how people are supposed to look. We need more realistic exposure to wonderful older faces—models of successful, happy women who can show us what aging beautifully really looks like. These models are needed while we’re still young, to give us a positive view of becoming older.

EXERCISE • Finding Classic Models

1. Browse through the Sunday paper, or through any magazine you generally read, to check the kinds of images that have long influenced your concepts of feminine attractiveness. Simply count the images of women who look over age fifty and those who look under thirty (include the photos in the ads as well as those in the text). What portion of these fall into the younger or older categories? When I tried this with the magazine section of the New York Times, I found a 4-to-1 ratio of younger to older women. The rarity of mature female faces conveys a subtle social message that certainly leaves its mark on body image. It’s as if you’re expected to vanish from polite company on your fiftieth birthday.

2. Now try to balance the media’s influence by coming up with some classic role models who look and are at least middle-aged. They should be women of maturity whom you admire because
they've achieved distinction instrumentally, not ornamentally. Do not include any entertainers, singers, actresses, models, dancers, or TV personalities because their talents are always mixed up in the marketing of their looks. Think of scientists, athletes, writers, public servants, and heroines living or dead who achieved success in the second half of life: women like Margaret Thatcher, Margaret Mead, Lillian Hellman. Give yourself two minutes and see how many come to mind. Is your list impressively long or embarrassingly short? Ask a friend for some fresh ideas.

3. Each month, choose a new model of maturity as your “role-mate” of the month. She might be famous or simply a neighbor, but to you she’s special in some way. Find out more about her. Clip her photo and put it on your refrigerator. Study her body to see what an admirable older woman looks like in the bloom of success. Let her image counterbalance the cult of youth, and make room for a body like hers within your concept of beauty. How do you think she feels about her looks and how much of her energy do you think is poured into personal adornment?

The goal of this exercise is to expand the role models of maturity that are available to you. These centerfolds may not be young or glamorous, but they do have beautiful qualities: wit, warmth, strength, passion, commitment. Fill up your mental file cards with these oldies but goodies. They’ll remind you that aging isn’t the beginning of the end. It’s a process that can propel you to new heights, long after your peak of physical attractiveness has past. My personal choice for rolemate this month is Ruth Rothfarb, who completed the Boston marathon at the age of eighty-five (in just over eight hours).

**REMAINING AN ACTIVE WOMAN**

Movement can enhance body image at every age, but especially during middle-age and beyond. Physical activity promotes good health, and a healthy woman not only feels better but looks better, too. On the other hand, lack of exercise breeds lethargy, stiffness, muscle weakness, and other symptoms associated with aging, which are also products of inactivity. Research shows that people in their sixties and seventies who gradually build up to a strenuous fitness
program can achieve an aerobic capacity that is equal to the average thirty-year-old.

Whether or not you’ve been active in the past, it’s never too late to make a commitment to the fun, fitness, and fulfillment of physical activity. Start slowly, start safely, by simply extending what you’re already able to do: walking, climbing stairs, reaching, bending. As Gloria explains:

I was forty-five and weighed over 200 pounds when I finally decided to get moving. I never liked exercise and it isn’t easy to push this big body around. I found that even though I don’t look terrific in a bathing suit, I’m a pretty good swimmer. Now I’m swimming farther and better all the time. Although my weight hasn’t changed much, swimming gave me a new lease on life. I only hope I can do it for many years.

With age, you’ll need to slow down and pay greater attention to safety. Athletic injury not only puts you out of commission but it in turn leads to body alienation and lowered self-esteem. Even the best athlete must eventually cut back, change her goals, and become less competitive with others or with herself. Old sports can be transferred to new arenas. Try fast walking instead of jogging, cross-country skiing instead of downhill, doubles in tennis instead of singles.

I no longer try to jump on the ice because the risks seem too great. Instead, I’ve turned to ballroom dancing as a replacement. My personal bias is for dance because it has the advantage of adding a social and sensual dimension to body image. Of course, I miss my younger self who could move more freely, yet I’m enjoying the novelty of a new activity. By cultivating a variety of physical activities when you’re younger, you’ll have more flexibility in finding some that can age well with you. Taking on a difficult physical challenge can do wonders for a middle-aged self-image, as Gladys discovered:

I’ve been moderately active all my life, but on my sixtieth birthday I put myself to the test and joined a group for a week-long hike along the Appalachian Trail. Keeping up wasn’t easy while carrying a backpack, but I managed to finish the trip successfully. I can’t describe how terrific I felt about myself for doing it. My husband
was so proud he kept showing the pictures to everyone. I think he saw me differently after that. I know I had a new respect for what my body could do.

REMAINING A SENSUOUS WOMAN

Georgia O’Keeffe is one of my favorite role models for aging beautifully. She inspires me not only as a creative artist who continued to work throughout a very long life but also as a woman who continued to grow in terms of her sensuality. At ninety she was described as more feminine than at any time before. After a long marriage and decades of widowhood, she formed an intimate alliance with a man almost sixty years younger. According to one biographer, “Their relationship consisted of many elements: man-woman, parent-child, artist-artist . . . roles all inspired by sincere respect and genuine affection.” Even when frail and elderly, Georgia O’Keeffe still looked sensually alive.

Remaining a sensuous woman after a certain age is a real challenge. The double standard of sexuality joins with the double standard of aging, and together they create a double bind that inhibits the sex lives of older women. Consequently, we often get caught up in a set of well-entrenched myths. Most of us have been taught to believe, for instance, that:14

Sex is mainly for the young.

Men are more sexually interested and active than women, all through life.

Having sex means having intercourse.

Sexual desire fades after menopause.

Myths like these are real obstacles to bodylove. They have a strong influence on the way you’re seen and the way you see yourself as a sexually attractive older woman. Take a moment to reconsider your beliefs in light of these facts.

First, sex keeps rearing its lovely head all through life. There’s a lot of postmenopausal passion floating around. Although older women may inspire less lust in others, their desire for a lusty life remains high. Someone once remarked that it was sex, not youth, that’s wasted on the young. Not all of it is wasted, however.
“Now that I’ve decided that the rest of my life is for me, I’m shocked at how easy it is to get what I want,” says forty-four-year-old Sharon. “There’s hardly a thing I can think of sexually that I want to experience that I can’t. I’m amazed and wonder why it took me so long not to stop being afraid to ask.” An elderly woman says, “Age puzzles me. I thought it was a quiet time. My seventies were interesting and fairly serene. But my eighties are passionate. I grow more intense as I age.”

Most males experience partial or situational impotence with age. This can cause performance anxiety, which in turn inhibits their sexual desire. Females, in contrast, suffer fewer sexual problems related to the aging process. Some even become orgasmic for the first time after menopause is over.

Aging women generally don’t lose their sexual capacity or interest. What they do lose—all too often—is an available male partner. Beyond mid-life there just aren’t enough men to go around. The ratio of single women to men after age sixty is about 4 to 1. There are fewer men to dress up for and flirt with, fewer men to pursue and make love with. Even those lucky women who still have mates may not be sexually satisfied, for aging husbands sometimes withdraw sexually because of illness, lack of interest, or lack of potency.

Maureen confides, “My body still looks pretty good and I’m just as eager for sex as ever. But my husband died three years ago. There hasn’t been any sex in my life since then. Here I am, single at sixty and still feeling so sexy—well it wasn’t exactly what I expected.”

Women like Maureen may need to broaden their sexual perspective as their circumstances change. Having sex doesn’t necessarily translate into having a husband or into having intercourse. Alternatives include erotic contact with a man that doesn’t focus on penetration, erotic contact with oneself that is sensual and satisfying, or erotic contact with another woman. This, too, is a viable sexual alternative that may feel threatening to many women, but that has proven personally satisfying to some.

Menopause can cause difficulties. Hot flashes are uncomfortable for a time, but they usually pass. Vaginal dryness is annoying, but treatable. For the most part, women are happy to be rid of a whole host of periodic problems. Best of all, they’re finally free of the fear of pregnancy, which means a real gain in sexual freedom.

Menopause isn’t a deficiency disease or a disaster but a natural process. Most women menstruate for about forty years, then live another thirty years after their periods end. That’s a lot of post-
menopausal life to enjoy. Whether it’s ahead or behind you, stop for a moment to consider your attitudes toward menopause and how these influence your body image. If you’re in the process of transition, you might want to consider joining or forming a support group to share experiences and coping strategies. Some groups have created rituals to celebrate this change of life as a rite of passage into new freedom.

Menopause does produce changes in appearances. Hair thins out, breasts become less firm, skin gets dryer. Yet despite all this, there’s more good news about body image. Older women consider their bodies just as sexually appealing as do younger ones! In fact, women in the Bodylove Survey reported no decline at all with age when it comes to feeling sexually appealing. While 33 percent of the young women rated themselves as extremely or quite appealing, 36 percent of the older women rated themselves in those categories. These results were the most surprising of the whole survey. They again confirm the basic theme we’ve seen all along—that body image is more closely tied to self-esteem than to external signs of beauty.

Do you think your body is sexually appealing?

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When Georgia O’Keeffe was asked what stage of life was happiest, she replied, “There is no happiest stage, there are only happy moments.” As a role model, she showed me that those special moments don’t just belong to the young or the beautiful. In order to keep every stage of your life full of potential for happy and sensuous moments, remember the following:

1. Get the facts about aging and sexuality. Misinformation only perpetuates myths. (See the resource section on aging and sexuality.)
2. *Get enough touch in your life.* Use sensate-focus exercises like the ones described in Chapter 6 for reassurance that you’re still sexually responsive. Women are lucky because we have greater freedom to touch our friends, to walk hand in hand, to hug and hold.

3. *Keep sensually stimulated.* You can do this through fantasy, candlelight dinners, exotic lingerie, erotic films and books. You don’t have to be young to walk on the beach at sunset or to listen to music under the stars.

4. *Loosen up your view of proper sexual behavior.* What was right at thirty may not serve you well at sixty, so why not explore the endless variations on a sexual theme. An impotent husband can still be a potent lover if you find new forms of mutual pleasure. And friendships with women can also satisfy your needs for intimacy.

**TIME OUT FOR INSTRUMENTAL AGING**

The cult of youth stems partly from our fear of death. An aging body can feel like an “intimate enemy” as we try to deny our mortality by waging war against wrinkles. Cosmetic science now offers powerful weapons to stop the clock that ticks in your mirror. Some doctors even describe aging as a correctable deformity and a curable disease. Should you or shouldn’t you buy into their cures? There are no simple answers to this question. Decisions about self-preservation become harder as technology makes it easier to look younger. We’ll see in the next chapter how cosmetic makeovers influence self- and body image. One woman observes that:

Sometimes I think of the alternatives to looking older. And I wonder what it would be like to have my face frozen the way it was in my thirties. Then I think—that would be ridiculous! That’s not me. It doesn’t reflect the years I’ve lived and all the things I’ve experienced. I feel that if I dislike my aging looks, I’m denying all the wonderful parts of my life.¹⁶

I know there is real pressure on you to try to freeze your image at some preferred pretty stage. It takes courage to be seen as a full human being, not just as a girl forever; courage to look like a woman with a past. After a certain age film directors avoid closeups. They
keep their cameras at a distance, filtering the effect with the softening lens of space. Stepping back from your mirror is a good defensive strategy. As your eyes grow dimmer, learn to use them differently. Back off a bit. Stop searching so closely with a critical eye, and instead, turn a more kindly eye on your reflection. This will help you look beyond the mirror's surface into yourself, not merely at yourself. Remember, at every age there is much more to you than meets the eye.

Each of us must develop our own personal approach to "aging beautifully." As you work toward bodylove, keep the major points of this chapter in mind:

1. **Develop a flexible beauty ideal.** Your ideal should be one that can grow older, heavier, wrinkled along with you. Remember that a negative body image is not a necessary side effect of getting older. Age can give you the confidence to create your own unique style.

2. **Identify with realistic role models.** Find older, unglamourous role models who are truly magnificent and hold them up as images with whom to identify. Also work hard to counteract your own ageism and looksism by trying to see older women as total women.

3. **Own up to your age.** Age acceptance doesn't mean resigning yourself to the stereotypes of ageism, but redefining those myths as time redesigns your body. If you learn to see yourself in terms of your total assets, not merely in terms of appearance, the loss of youthful beauty can be balanced by the accomplishments of age.

4. **Hang on to your sensuality.** Be daring and indulge your body in all the physical pleasures that you've earned by virtue of having lived this long. Keep enjoying the sensual side of movement and keep challenging your body with physical activity.

5. **Use the wisdom you've acquired over the years.** With maturity comes an understanding of what works well for you cosmetically, sexually, athletically, dietetically. This knowledge can help you nurture your aging body with attention and respect.

One sign of maturity is the ability to forgive oneself and others. Can you forgive your body for the flaws and failures of age? Forgiveness allows you to let go of anger toward your body, to forget what you can't change and to make peace with what you have. Those who age successfully—at every age—learn to compromise and to give up unrealistic demands for perfection. They stop evalu-
ating their body in absolute terms of good or bad, young or old, and accept it with all its relatively imperfect parts. The goal is to work within the aging process and renegotiate a new relationship with your changing body all the time.

Coming of age successfully means integrating an ideal body image with a real body that shows the wear and tear of time. Whether you’re younger or older, today’s body image eventually becomes one of tomorrow’s necessary losses. You can face it with courage or with cowardice, but in the end, time wears us all away. Bodylove can help you wear it well.