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
MAKING UP AND MAKING OVER

Compared to other women, how much do you use cosmetics and other beauty products?
MUCH MORE
SOMewhat MORE
ABOUT THE SAME
SOMewhat LESS
MUCH LESS

How much time and effort do you usually spend getting ready before going out to a social event?
A GREAT DEAL
QUITE A LOT
ABOUT AVERAGE
NOT VERY MUCH

How much money do you spend on beauty products and grooming treatments?
A GREAT DEAL
QUITE A LOT
ABOUT AVERAGE
NOT VERY MUCH
ALMOST NONE
So I pumiced and brushed and sprayed and bleached and trimmed and squirted and rubbed . . . and I discovered a terrifying fact. If I did all the things the magazines told me to do, I’d spend my entire life in the bathroom.

—CARYL RIVERS

Can you remember the first time you wore makeup to a party, or the last time you partied without it? Most of us pass from girlhood into womanhood by detouring through the cosmetic department. There we buy the props and paint that help us become our own fairy godmothers.

Makeup is a basic part of the socialization of females. “When I was little I watched my mother cover her face every day and swore I’d never wear any of that stuff,” recalls Pat. “Mom just looked at me and said, ‘Wait till you’re twelve, you’ll change your mind.’ And of course she was right.” Watching my own daughter struggle through adolescence, I once wrote that a young girl’s body will betray her unless she learns to tame it through cosmetic magic.

Our bodies continue to betray us throughout life. Mine has been turning gray for several years, which creates a cosmetic dilemma for me. Two out of five American women dye their hair, and I’m still among the three who don’t. But I often wish I did, and maybe someday I will. There are times I long to be the dark-haired woman I was once, while at other times I’m content with the silver-streaked woman I am now. Decisions about my hair always feel tentative. They put me in conflict with who I am, who I was, and who I want to be. I’m sure you feel these conflicts, too. None of us escapes them.

Cosmetic problems surface in different ways for each of us. Joyce, for example, uses makeup freely. She loves feeling “beautified” and looking “exotic.” However, she also gets anxious when caught without her face on. Eileen, on the other hand, ignores most cosmetic rituals. While she usually feels okay about her undorned appearance, she also envies the more glamourized women around her.

Sometimes I see women who are perfectly made up and fashionably dressed with hair that’s just been “done.” Then I think that my looks aren’t right. I feel inferior and socially noncompetitive.
They'll be noticed more and admired more. Part of me secretly wishes I could be like that and be more like everyone else. Somehow I won't or can't do it. When I do, I feel it's not me. Like a doll or something.

In Helen's case, it's her breasts that cause the greatest conflict. While her friends envy Helen's deep blue eyes and smooth skin, she's totally focused on her flat chest. "This boyish body doesn't seem normal," she tells me. "I just want to be like other women and feel more feminine." She's considering implants, yet hesitates about going ahead with the surgery.

Whether you like it or not, looks are important. It's true that if others see you as prettier, they may treat you better. Therefore, cosmetic transformations can have effects far beyond face value. Moreover, changing the outside can help you feel better inside. For these reasons, bodylove sometimes means making over to conform to social norms.

Most of us have some feature that causes embarrassment or shame: freckles, a birthmark, a body part that's too large or too small. When does it pay to transform your outer self in order to improve your inner image? When is making over a positive act of self-enhancement, and when is it a negative act of self-rejection? These are the questions we'll be facing in this chapter. The answers are neither simple nor clear, which is what makes cosmetic conflicts so confusing.

We'll explore the motives and fears behind such conflicts and weigh them against the costs and gains of makeovers. With new understanding, your beauty rituals can help you transform your body image and make you lovelier in your own eyes. The surface you project will then reflect the bodylove you feel.

THINKING OVER MAKING OVER

To understand your own cosmetic conflicts it's important to examine the underlying motives. As you read this list of common motives for cosmetic transformations, see if you can find an example of each one that relates to your own beauty routines.

Social conformity. To be like others and to be liked by them: "If I didn't wear makeup I'd feel odd. I want to fit in."
Fear. Of rejection, loneliness, looking ugly: “You wouldn’t ask why I wear it if you ever saw me without it.”

Status. To convey social class and power: “I move in sophisticated circles and have a certain image to uphold.”

Lust and longing. To attract attention, affection, sexual pleasure: “How do you like my new hairdo? I want to knock him dead tonight.”

Pride. To display assets and show confidence: “I’m doing great and I’ve never looked better, so why shouldn’t I flaunt it?”

Shame and insecurity. To hide “flaws” or conceal age: “Having the hair removed from my lip made me feel normal looking.”

Aesthetic pleasure. To enjoy looking elegant, unique, or outrageous: “I love color and feel like an artist when I make up.”

Femininity. To confirm and display gender role: “Cosmetics help me feel glamorous and feminine. It’s as simple as that.”

Comfort. To relieve pain or annoyance: “After my breast reduction I could play tennis without dragging all that weight around.”

Pleasing others. To conform to the expressed wishes of a loved one: “My husband loves me as a blond and I like to make him happy.”

That’s a long list of motives, which is why cosmetic rituals remain so popular. None of these reasons is necessarily good or bad. All have the potential to promote body love or to cause body loathing, depending on the circumstances. However, there is a common theme that ties these many motives together—and that’s the need for social approval. For a woman, gaining social approval usually means packaging oneself in whatever feminine image is currently fashionable.

**SOCIAL PACKAGING**

Cosmetic adornment varies the world over. In one place a woman stretches her lips with bone, in another she implants her breasts
with silicone. Do these changes really make her look more attractive? Perspectives differ, yet her goal is the same in each case: to transform into the popular standard of feminine beauty, and therefore to feel more socially acceptable.

Our personal cosmetic motives and conflicts reflect the way society has taught us to look at beauty, and at our own bodies. With a quick rinse I can wash away my gray and package myself as a younger woman. Then, perhaps, I’ll fit better into the cult of youth that I’ve learned to admire. For Helen, fitting in means filling out her bust size. “With bigger breasts, I’d be more appealing to men,” she says, “and I’m sure my love life would improve.” Thus, by making over our anatomy we hope to remake our social destiny as well.

Cosmetic packaging can change us from being merely female to being marvelously female. Fabricating a super-feminine façade isn’t easy. How do we do it? Faces are peeled and painted with powder and blush. Ears are pierced. Brows are shaped. Lashes are darkened. Lids are lined. Lips are glossed. Noses are bobbed. Nails are polished. Hair is curled, rinsed, straightened, teased, sprayed. Breasts are reduced, lifted, padded. Rumps are plumped. Tummies are tucked, etc., etc.

Of course, none of us does all these things, yet few of us do none of them. We pick and choose what we think is needed to change from a “misfit” into someone who fits nicely into the social scene. “I won’t even go to the mailbox without my lipstick on,” says Irma. “Who knows what might happen?”

A little tube of color can become a pocket hand grenade of feminine power. It shows how much we depend on cosmetic packaging. Bella Abzug once quipped that women are trained to speak softly . . . and carry a lip-stick.

In a scene from a novel, a young woman is standing with her parents in a concentration camp lineup. Finding a lipstick in her pocket, she turns to quickly paint her mother’s mouth, hoping to help her look young enough to be chosen to live. Recounting the planned suicide of her own mother after a long fight with cancer, Betty Rollin writes that her mother’s final act before swallowing the fatal pills was to put on makeup. “My mother always liked to look her best,” Rollin tells us. How else would a proud woman prepare for an important event?1

By taking charge of our lips or lashes, we try to take charge of our lives. It’s a kind of fairy-tale mentality in which body transformations are used to solve problems and grant wishes. So the ladies
room becomes the powder room, as well as the power room, where the magic rites of femininity are performed.

The power of cosmetic packaging can be a double-edged sword, however. We saw earlier the inherent tension in trying to be both a healthy woman and a healthy person. There may be a gain in power if you package yourself in the feminine image, but there can be a corresponding loss of power if you no longer resemble a healthy person.

Thus, beauty rituals can elevate a woman to a pedestal, even while they prove that she’s “merely a woman after all.” For example, in the nineteenth century, tight corsets were fashionable. The smaller her waist, the more attractive a woman was thought to be. But those same women who were so admired for their tiny waists were also considered stupid for wearing such ridiculous undergarments, and therefore not worthy of higher education. Even today, flashy blonds are stereotyped as beautiful but dumb, while large-breasted women are also viewed as less intelligent. This kind of cosmetic tension creates conflicts in the two major arenas of life—work and love.

PACKAGING FOR SUCCESS—IN WORK AND IN LOVE

Society is still uncertain about a woman’s legitimate place in the work force and unsure about what she should look like once she gets there. Proper social packaging is confusing when the ornamental feminine image tries to merge with the instrumental corporate image. One career counselor finds that whenever she talks to women’s groups, the question session always includes, “How should I dress?” Think for a moment about the image you present at work. How much making over must you do to “look your best” for bosses, clients, customers? What does “best” really mean in terms of career growth? It may vary from day to day depending on whom you’re trying to impress.

We’re told that, “a man should keep his nose to the grindstone, but a woman had better stop now and then to powder hers.” It’s not always clear, however, how much powder you need as on-the-job ammunition. Studies show that looking too pretty can be a problem for a woman who seeks a top managerial position. If she’s seen as
too attractive or too feminine, she’s likely to be stereotyped as lacking the leadership and competitive qualities managers need.

The controversy between beauty and brains continues, and cosmetics can trigger it. For example, in one study, different photos were attached to job applications, with the candidates wearing either no makeup, moderate amounts, or heavy makeup applied by a cosmetician. For an accounting position, the applications were rated similarly regardless of the amount of makeup. However, for a secretarial job, the less makeup worn, the higher the rating of a potential candidate. Why? Because a “very attractive” (highly made up) secretary may be quickly stereotyped as more decorative than competent, while a “less attractive” (unmade up) one is assumed to have something on the ball.2

When you look “made up,” you may threaten your credibility as a competent worker. Yet if you ignore the ornamental role and concentrate strictly on business, your achievements may go unnoticed. Take Lucy’s case. At thirty-two, she’s a successful marketing executive who describes herself as rather plain looking. She believes her success is due in part to a change in looks.

When I was growing up, my sister was the pretty one, while I was the musician. In high school I lost the lead in a musical to a prettier girl who had much less talent. I’ve never forgotten that rejection. When I’d been working at the agency for a few years, and a friend told me that my image was keeping me from getting ahead, I took her advice seriously. I remembered the school show and didn’t want to miss out again.

Impulsively, Lucy rinsed her hair to a strawberry blond. Contact lenses and more stylish clothes changed her appearance quite dramatically. Before long she got a promotion she well deserved, however her feelings about this are mixed. “I enjoy the extra attention, but feel a bit resentful. Inside I’m still the same person. I know that a man with my ability and an average face wouldn’t need to remodel himself each day in order for his talents to be recognized.” While Lucy’s makeover paid off, her cosmetic conflicts persist, in spite of success. This, too, is part of looksism.

Even those women who reach the highest levels of achievement are still judged heavily by how they look. When Sandra Day
O’Connor was sworn to the Supreme Court, Chief Justice Warren Berger remarked to photographers, “You’ve never seen me with a better looking Justice, have you?” The Washington Post described her as, “an achieving woman who is good looking without being alienatingly beautiful.” So we see that packaging for success in the workplace is complicated and fraught with cosmetic conflicts. Packaging for success in love is not any easier.

Cosmetics are a potent signal of sexuality as well as sociability. At one time or another, we’ve all used feminine packaging as a sexual lure. “Does she or doesn’t she” was a powerful cosmetic ad because of its suggestive double meaning. With makeup you can create a look of childish innocence coupled with seductive allure. A pretty Cinderella is both sweet and provocative. She sends mixed messages: she looks ready to be turned on, then bolts before midnight (before it’s too late).

Women walk a fine line between looking attractive and looking seductive, between wearing too little makeup and wearing too much. Though we may gain power on one side of the line, we may lose it on the other. A painted face can arouse the ambivalent feelings we all have about our own sexuality. Remember that, at one time, paint was the sign of a harlot or a loose woman.

Although men certainly enjoy cosmetic signals of sensuality, they also fear the power of the madeup woman to seduce or corrupt them. This ambivalence explains why most men say they prefer a woman who looks natural and wears very little makeup. (That’s also why it takes us twice as long to touch up a face and make it look untouched.) Even the Bible warns, “Though you clothe yourself in crimson . . . and though you enlarge your eyes with paint, in vain shall you make yourself fair: your lovers will despise you.”

For her seventy-fifth birthday, my mother was given a “day of beautification” at a local spa. While there, she had her nails brightly polished for the first time ever. My father looked amazed when he saw her return, and insisted that she “take off the paint immediately.” (She managed to hold out for three full days.) Thus, the use of cosmetics to attract or assure relationships can be tricky. Whether you’re seen as tastefully well done or tastelessly overdone depends on who’s watching. Given all these mixed feelings, it’s not surprising that women wind up with a variety of cosmetic motives and conflicts that are hard to resolve. As one
writer observed, there are three kinds of women in the world: those who wear makeup, those who don’t, and those who try to look like they don’t but do.

FOR APPEARANCE SAKE

Does making up and making over really work and what does it accomplish? Close your eyes for a moment and imagine yourself at a party, first with makeup on, then without it. How would you feel in each case? Most women report feeling more confident when visualizing themselves made up. Research shows that makeup has several consistent effects. First, women are seen as better looking with it on. Independent observers rate them as more attractive and more feminine when wearing cosmetics. Second, most women also feel better about their appearance with it on. Makeup can heighten a sense of confidence and sociability. For many women it seems to give a quick lift to the spirits (although its long-term effect on body image is less certain).4

Do those women who use more makeup differ from those who use less? Psychologist Thomas Cash, a pioneer in research on physical attractiveness, found that heavier users tend to be more self-conscious about their appearance and less satisfied with body parts. They also score higher in tests of feminine identity, which may be one of their motives for cosmetic use. However, wearing makeup apparently does not reduce self-consciousness on a long-term basis. This isn’t surprising, since making up requires more mirror time, and mirrors tend to heighten self-awareness.5

Cash also suggests that heavier users may be trying to “correct or balance a flawed self-image.” Do you consider yourself a light or heavy user of beauty products? Most of the women in the Bodylove Survey rated their cosmetic use as quite low. Perhaps they’re reluctant to recognize or to admit their reliance on it. Barely 8 percent said they use more beauty products than average, while nearly 60 percent report using less than average. Either we are underestimating our own use or overestimating what other women are doing. In either case, the defensive denial seems quite common. Few of us are willing to acknowledge the extent of our “cosmetic habit.”
Compared to other women, how much do you use cosmetics and other beauty products?

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Although few women label themselves as heavy users, their comments reveal strong feelings about wearing makeup. “It’s part of being dressed right, and putting on the finishing touches,” says Elizabeth. “I wouldn’t be noticed if I didn’t wear it.” On the other hand, Eileen experiences conflict. “Somehow I feel undressed without lipstick. Philosophically I say this is crazy. Why do I need it? But I do.” Colleen believes that makeup is closely linked to her own inner strength. “I diet and use makeup for myself, not for men. It’s my buffer against the world. It helps me gear up for the day and project an image of power.” In contrast, Penny feels that not wearing any makeup says a lot about her strength of character. “I’ve never had any interest whatever in makeup. And always felt kind of smug about not wearing it. My husband doesn’t care for it at all, which is great.” Beth recalls that, “My ex-husband hated me to wear any makeup. He worried what his parents would think if I wore too much. It would look as if he didn’t have much control over me.”

The feelings we had as children when we watched our mothers make up their faces, and the feelings we had as adolescents when

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we first used makeup to announce our passage into womanhood, linger on as part of our cosmetic mentality. Penny explains, “When I was little I used to call the beauty parlor the ugly parlor, because the process of becoming pretty had a stage of being ugly first.” Jamie, age thirteen, received a cosmetic makeover at a salon for a birthday gift. “I think it’s a great present,” she says. “I can learn to put on shadow and eyeliner the right way. It’s not pretty when you just go it all on. When girls put on too much shadow, they look plastic.”

We’re constantly faced with the challenge of updating our attitudes as cosmetic fashions change and as our faces change with age. Just as hemlines and necklines rise and fall, cosmetic standards also shift. Brows go from pencil thin to shaggy thick. Lips go from glossy bright to ghostly white. Our strong need to fit in socially requires a constant update in self-presentation and a corresponding change in body image. Think about your own cosmetic evolution. How does your makeup use today compare with the makeup you used as a teenager? Or a decade ago? If there are big differences, do these reflect the changes in you, or changes that have occurred in cosmetic fashion? If you’re still doing the same old things cosmetically, are you stuck in a rut that puts you behind the times? Of course, there is tremendous commercial pressure on you to constantly revise your cosmetic routines and experiment with new products.

NICE GIRLS SHOULD

Beauty products are big business and they get a big sell. Advertisers know a good market when they see one, and they carefully tune in to our motives to transform into the feminine ideal. “With makeup, a plain woman can be pretty, a pretty woman can be beautiful, and a beautiful woman can become a legend,” we’re told.

Actually our love affair with paint goes back a long way. In ancient Mycenae, women freely exposed their nipples and colored them red, much as we color our lips today. The Roman poet Ovid recommended crocodile dung for a glowing complexion. (No, I don’t know if it works.) At one time, women ate a pinch of arsenic with breakfast to get the pale complexion that was so fashionable (and some died from it). During the Victorian era, paint was a sign of promiscuity. Cosmetics gradually became more socially acceptable,
however, and by 1900, fashionable ladies were seen powdering their noses in public.

It was then that advertisers began to “democratize” beauty by spreading it around. Our view of cosmetic use slowly shifted—from nice girls don’t, to nice girls can, and then to nice girls should. While ads promise beauty to all, they set standards that only a few can reach. This commercial campaign in effect triggers envy, self-consciousness, and body loathing because the magic is really in the ad, not in the bottle.

“Don’t hate me because I’m beautiful,” says the model. But the silent afterthought can also be heard, “Just hate yourself because you’re not.” Before and after shots with accompanying testimonials prove that nature needs only a nudge. There’s a subtle message that “You owe it to yourself to try,” otherwise “you have only yourself to blame.” In this way, guilt is added to the stigma of looking plain or fat or gray.

How do you honestly feel about your appearance when you see such ads? Do they build self-confidence, or do they arouse new conflicts? In fact, people rate their own physical attractiveness as lower after exposure to pictures of beautiful models. Their self-evaluations drop in comparison to others who look so much better. As much as 50 cents of your cosmetic dollar pays for the ads that plant the seeds of doubt that ultimately grows into a desire to buy a lash enhancer. Not only must you want lovelier lashes, you must feel less lovable without them.

**THE HIGH COST OF LOOKING GOOD**

The term “cosmetics” comes from a Greek word meaning “the art of adorning.” Cosmetics are supposed to adorn your body, not alter it. Since cosmetics aren’t drugs, their effectiveness and safety don’t have to be proven before they’re sold. The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) can only protect you after a product is a proven health hazard. Worthless products are constantly being peddled, such as creams guaranteed to increase bust size “up to three inches in just eight days,” or rubberized stockings “to trim thighs by making them sweat.” Most cosmetic products are safe. Yet adverse reactions do occur more often than you would suppose. The most frequent problems are caused by deodorants, depilatories, moisturizers, hair spray, mascara, bubble bath, hair dyes, face creams, and nail polish.
Sometimes the side effects are not so pretty. Mascara and eye shadow can cause serious eye infections, even blindness, if they contain bacteria. Tanning creams and sunlamp devices may damage the eyes or skin and lead to cancer. Face makeup often causes acne, and then it’s used to cover the very problem it creates. Perfumes and makeup produce a wide range of allergic reactions such as headaches and rashes. Dyes in lipstick and hair rinses may be carcinogenic. (See the resource section on cosmetics and surgery.)

I’ve included this brief discussion to alert you to some potential dangers, even though I know that very few women pay much attention to health warnings about cosmetic products. Our motives for making over are so strong that we’re generally willing to take the risk and pay the price in the name of beauty. We tend to agree with the woman who declared, “I’d rather die young than not dye at all.” It’s easy to rationalize that nothing can happen to us. Paying the price seems like part of the beauty game—part of the discomfort and inconvenience of looking and feeling more attractive.

All too often, beauty rituals do involve physical pain. Curling, bleaching, piercing, dieting, waxing, plucking, girdling all hurt, so that feeling bad becomes a prerequisite to looking good. When Cinderella’s stepsisters each try to squeeze their foot into the glass slipper, their mother urges them to slice off a heel or toe. “Once you’re queen you won’t need to walk anymore,” she shouts. The fairy-tale message is simple: beauty is worth it at any price, even a pound of flesh.

Here’s where masochism enters the picture. It’s strange but true that pain can feel pleasant when it proves your commitment to looking good. Self-sacrifice shows that you really do care about your image and about what others think of it. It’s a signal that you’re willing to make the effort and pay the price. Helen rationalizes:

I know there’s risk involved in breast surgery. But I’m so miserable when I look at my body. If I don’t do something to improve it means that I don’t care. My grandmother used to say, “If you really want to feel pretty you have to suffer.” It’s true. Let’s face it. Some things may be uncomfortable, but they really look so much better. Why not sacrifice an hour or two, or sacrifice your comfort, to really look good. Sometimes I wear jeans that are so tight I can’t breathe in them. But I do wear them, just as an exception. I don’t mind how they feel.
Masochism has been called an “inherent feminine trait.” However, I would agree with those who argue that the masochistic need to suffer for beauty is a by-product of women’s dependent role. Like Helen, we choose to pay the price quite simply because we feel we can’t afford not to. After all, having beauty is like having an American Express card. It can be cashed in for goodies anytime, and that’s why we’re afraid to leave home without it. That’s why we’re so willing to suffer in its pursuit.

Pain is only part of the high cost of looking good. Cosmetic rituals also require expenditures of time, effort, and money. These costs are probably greater than most of us realize. In the Bodylove Survey, the majority of women rated their investments as rather small.

How much time and effort do you usually spend getting ready before going out to a social event?

- 2% A GREAT DEAL
- 10% QUITE A LOT
- 66% ABOUT AVERAGE
- 23% NOT VERY MUCH

How much money do you spend on beauty products and grooming treatments?

- 3% A GREAT DEAL
- 8% QUITE A LOT
- 41% ABOUT AVERAGE
- 42% NOT VERY MUCH
- 8% ALMOST NONE

Only 11 percent of the sample felt they spent more than an average amount on cosmetic products, while half the group felt they spent less than average. These, of course, are subjective reports. What does average really mean? Americans reportedly spent about $10 billion on cosmetic products in one recent year. Where are all the women who are buying and using these beauty products? Is it that we just don’t realize how much we invest in personal adornment? The amount of floor space devoted to cosmetic display in any large department store is impressive proof that business is brisk and profits are high. Yet the strong defensive denial found in the responses to these questions suggests that there may be some embar-
rassment or even shame attached to making up and making over. Apparently we do it, but don’t like to admit it, even to ourselves. Therefore it’s important to take a closer look at our everyday cosmetic behavior.

EXERCISE • Cosmetic Assessments

1. Taking inventory. Gather some baseline data to find out how much you’re really investing in the beauty game. What does “average” or “almost none” mean in your life? Take inventory of the beauty products you own. Gather together all the lipsticks, sprays, perfumes, conditioners, moisturizers, styling combs, pencils, brushes, mirrors, dryers, curlers, and polishes that fill your purse and bathroom shelves. Try to guess the cost of the whole pile, then roughly figure out the total. Sylvia admits, “It was a real eye-opener to see it all piled up on the table. ‘Average’ turned out to be more than I expected. . . . I guess fifteen lipsticks might be a bit much.” Don’t forget to add in the cost of professional beauty services that you are currently buying.

Now take inventory of your cosmetic activities. Start keeping track of the time you spend washing, combing, drying, dressing, shaving, putting on your face and taking it off. Add in the weekly or monthly manicures, facials, hair appointments, and shopping sprees for cosmetics. Then figure out the minutes per day and hours per week it takes you to create the ornamental feminine image.

Ask yourself some questions. Does this collection of cosmetics—and the time, money, and effort you spend—seem like a healthy “average” to you? Do you think your use of cosmetics makes you more or less self-conscious about your looks? Most important, does it pay off in terms of bodylove? Think about whether you might want to reinvest some of these resources in other self-nurturing ways—ways that are less ornamental but more nourishing for your body image, such as playing, touching, moving. On the other hand, would a greater investment in beauty routines give a valuable boost to your self-esteem?

2. Exploring conflicts. After you’ve taken stock of some of your cosmetic habits, choose one particular routine that’s causing you some conflict. It may be something you’re doing reluctantly or com-
pulsively. Perhaps it’s something you’re considering but can’t quite decide on. For me it’s whether to stay gray. For Helen it’s whether to stay flat-chested.

Now think about your motives for that particular makeover. Why do you do it, or want to do it? Use the list of motives on pages 191–192 to help assess your feelings. Are you driven by fear, shame, or longing? A desire for comfort? For conformity? Helen is ashamed of her breasts and afraid that men won’t find her attractive. She wants to feel more feminine, and also to find a husband.

After you’ve decided on the most obvious motivation behind your desire for this makeover, think about it further to see if you can discover additional motives that are more subtle and perhaps harder to admit. Why is this cosmetic change causing conflict? Is it more painful or less socially acceptable than your other beauty rituals?

Perhaps there are factors in your life history that are troubling you. When I think about my hair, for example, I recall that my mother turned gray at thirty-five and has lived happily with it ever since. But do I need to follow her example? I know I don’t feel as content with my gray as she did with hers. And maybe I’m not quite ready to look like her yet. For Helen, breast surgery is connected with the memory of her aunt’s mastectomy. She’s afraid that implants might make it harder to detect breast cancer some day. Consider the role that masochism may play in your conflicts. Inflicting pain, or some other discomfort, is sometimes a way of punishing your body for betraying you. How much do you really want to suffer in order to look good?

3. *Catching cognitive errors*. As we’ve seen in other chapters, the way you think about your body has a greater influence on body image than how you actually look. Cognitive errors can add to your cosmetic conflicts. Examine your motives once more to see if they may be based on automatic irrational thoughts. The list of cognitive errors on pages 38–39 will remind you of some of your entrenched tendencies to exaggerate or personalize.

For example, when Helen says, “I’ll always be ashamed of my flat chest. . . . I need bigger breasts to feel like a real woman,” she’s jumping to conclusions. Her shame comes from taking things personally. After all, breast size is genetically determined. We may not like a particular trait and we may want to alter it, but we aren’t responsible for it. You can use the triple-column technique to chal-
lenge irrational thoughts about cosmetic change and to correct the faulty thinking that may be causing cosmetic conflicts.

**WINNING THE BEAUTY GAME**

We saw earlier that cosmetic use can sometimes create a more attractive image as well as boost self-esteem. There is, therefore, a cosmetic route to bodylove. Makeup can help you achieve a better body image, while having fun in the process.

**EXERCISE • The Creative Use of Makeup**

This exercise taps into your motives for novelty and aesthetic change. It will help you step back from your critical mirror and step up to a friendlier one. For a moment try to forget the compulsive use of makeup for correcting or perfecting. Instead, experiment with using cosmetics less fearfully and more joyfully.

1. Begin by putting aside half an hour at home alone. This is a time for fun, fantasy, and regression—a time to indulge your imagination in healthy narcissism as you turn your body into an "ambulatory art form." You'll be using props and paint to create someone special. First set the mood with music. Then start to think up a new image for yourself. At first you may find it hard to give yourself permission to let go, to allow your looks to express parts of your personality that rarely show. If you practice a few times, this exercise will get easier and more spontaneous.

2. Now dress up and make yourself over to look girlish, clownish, vampish—as silly or sultry as the mood inspires. Cheap makeup in strong colors and other props such as hats, body paints, and costume jewelry will help you create the image you want (so start to gather them in advance). Be creative and above all have fun. Paint a flower on your cheek, a heart on your breast. Wear one long earring and make up differently on each side of your face. Put on war paint or a silly clown's smile. Take enough time to really become this new character and to live in the role for a little while.

3. Finish the exercise by standing quietly in front of the mirror. Study your reflection and let the made-up vision sink into your
body image as you take a mental photo of it. Now look into your eyes and repeat a mirror affirmation such as, “I can create and enjoy all the different images waiting within me.” By playfully making over your image, you may find new uses of props and paint that can carry over into “real” life. For example, one woman found that she could be more flexible in using cosmetics—wearing almost none to work on some days and a great deal on other days, depending on her mood. As you try to creatively expand this exercise, just remember that the overall goal is to play with cosmetic transformations so they enhance body image.

EXERCISE • The Sensual Side of Makeup

Your daily beauty routines can become rituals of nurturance and sensuality. It’s easy to add a bit of self-indulgence as you groom, by paying attention not only to the mirror image but to the body image within. For example, I end each day over a bowl of hot water. I find it relaxing to press warm washcloths onto my face, to feel the contours of my features and visualize them while smoothing away the wrinkles. When my skin is flushed from the heat, I enjoy seeing a glowing face in my mirror. Here are a few suggestions for ways to expand the meaning of your cosmetic routines.

1. Before putting on lipstick, close your eyes and run your tongue over your lips to feel their texture and shape. When grooming your nails, study your hands not just as ornaments but as instruments of touch and creativity. When you make up your face, visualize the tiny muscles beneath the skin and the many emotions they communicate. Occasionally take an extra moment in the shower or bath to imagine yourself floating in a pond or standing under a waterfall. Afterward, put on body lotion and fantasize that a loving partner is caressing your skin.

2. Try using makeup for self-seduction. Play out a sensuous fantasy by putting on the trappings of a seductive woman. What would it mean to be visually provocative to yourself?

By taking the time to let your body come alive during your cosmetic routines, you can enhance your body image on a daily basis. And don’t forget the power of self-praise through mirror affirmations. While you work on your appearance, also work on giving yourself compliments from your praise list.
EXERCISE • The Social Side of Makeup

As mentioned in Chapter 6, grooming rituals can be used for social contact and to get more touch into your life. By manicuring, shampooing, or making up with a friend or loved one, you can experience your body through another person’s hands (or experience someone’s body through yours). Mutual grooming reshapes body image by the touch of real flesh. It changes the process of making up from a lonely competitive routine to a ritual of social connection. Eva tells me, “My neighbor Georgette comes over every few weeks and we play ‘toilette’ together. She tweezes my eyebrows because I can’t see well enough to do it on my own. Sometimes we paint toenails or color our hair. She’s not my closest friend, but she’s my special cosmetic friend. It becomes a kind of game—we giggle a lot, like teenagers.”

THE CHISELED PROFILE

As new cosmetic technologies are perfected, the surgical route to beauty becomes more and more tempting. Surgery does offer many advantages that previously were unavailable. However, it’s an option that also creates greater conflicts because of its permanence and because of its dangers.

If you’re hungry for a cosmetic fix, doctors offer a full menu that includes breast remodeling, tummy tucks, face-lifts, chin implants, dermabrasion, collagen injections, eyelid tucks, permanent eyelid lining (tattoo), nose jobs, chemical peels, hair transplants, surgical body contouring, and, last but not least, fat suction—the newest and most popular form of cosmetic surgery performed today.

Surgeons seem as adept at publicizing their operations as at performing them. “Nature makes mistakes,” says one. “We can do better.” They make it look so simple. However, these operations aren’t always as safe or predictable as the promotions claim. Of course, there are risks.

Complications and even deaths occur in all forms of cosmetic surgery. The list of potential hazards includes infection, nerve damage, anesthesia reactions, unusual scarring, blood clots, asymmetry. For example, face-lifts can leave some patients with crooked smiles or difficulty closing their eyes. Ann Scheiner published the following diary entries after a face-lift at the age of fifty-four.
Day 2—My face feels like broken glass, like frostbite. . . . eyes are blurry. Will I be able to see clearly again?

Day 15—My smile seems frozen . . . spontaneity is gone. And my eyes are still swollen . . . the lids feel glued.

Day 19—Before the operation I rationalized that I wanted my face-lift so my exterior would match my interior. Now I am more out of sync than ever before. I realize I was lying to myself. I just wanted to look younger and prettier.

Day 42—Finally I can work again . . . I tally the score. On the plus side, a smoother cheek and neck line . . . fewer lines. On the minus side, serious eye problems, hideous swelling . . . numb face and neck. Loss of identity. Loss of work. No exercise for weeks. The results will last only four to eight years. After that, it’s sags and bags again.

The average age of face-lift patients has reportedly dropped from sixty to fifty, with many forty-year-olds now facing the knife. In the Bodylove Survey, 22 percent of the women said they would consider having a face-lift and 1 percent already had; 2 percent had undergone breast implant surgery and 5 percent said they would consider it; 1 percent had undergone breast reduction surgery and 6 percent would consider it.

In fact, the bust-alteration business is booming. In one recent year 150,000 breasts were lifted, implanted, or reduced, for the sole purpose of “enhancing their aesthetic appeal” (at a cost of $2,000 to $4,000 each). Clearly, the cultured bosom is inflated with meaning that nature never intended. In the 1970s, a wave of feminism swept in the small-breasted look of an athlete. Now, with “family values” back in vogue, fuller breasts are spilling over strapless gowns.

“What are breasts for anyway,” asks Geraldo Rivera on a talk show about men’s view of bosoms. “Tits are mostly for tots,” I explain. They’re designed to feed babies and provide erotic sensation for women, neither of which is related to bust size. Sometimes the ornamental bosom loses its instrumental role, however. “I knew that if I had a breast reduction I might lose nipple sensitivity and not be able to breastfeed,” says Michelle. “Those things didn’t seem important compared to what I suffered every day.”

The problems and self-consciousness surrounding breast size can be very real, as Michelle explains. “Life isn’t easy if you’re five feet tall with 34DD breasts. I suffered constant pain in my shoulders and back. I was humiliated by hoots and whistles everywhere I
went. There were times at work when all eyes were glued on my bust and whatever I was saying was totally lost.”

For Helen, the sense of humiliation was just the opposite. “My breasts just never developed. As a teenager I prayed every day for God to turn me into a real woman. I felt ashamed whenever I looked in the mirror. My boyfriend didn’t push me into having the implants, but I knew he wasn’t happy with my shape.”

Helen finally decided to go ahead with the surgery and, a year later, is basically pleased with the results. “It was more painful than I expected,” she says, “but my figure looks so nice now. I love to put on a bathing suit and parade on the beach. It didn’t make much difference to my boyfriend, though. We broke up anyway. And my breasts don’t feel as natural as they look. I’m inhibited about being touched, so I’m having some trouble sexually. Yes, I’m glad I did it. The best part is that I just don’t think about my breasts so much anymore.”

Today, there’s much less stigma attached to cosmetic surgery than there was a decade ago. It’s even considered a quick form of psychotherapy, a useful way to get rid of an annoying problem and to get on with other things. Research shows that a woman like Helen who seeks breast surgery is just as psychologically stable as other women. The only difference is her negative view of her body and her greater preoccupation with looking attractive. In other words, she’s a mentally healthy woman who suffers from heightened self-consciousness about her appearance.

According to Thomas Cash, many people who seek surgery have an “exaggerated sense of how bad they look.” Their basic problem is often one of poor body image, he concludes, which may or not be tied to objective reality. Self-perception is the underlying problem and improvement hinges on a change of self-perception after surgery. When someone thinks she’s unattractive, it affects her behavior. If surgery can correct the self-stigmatizing belief, the patient may feel better as well as look better.

Does cosmetic surgery work? Yes, generally it does work in the same way that makeup works. First, most patients are pleased with the results—even more so than the surgeons! They do look better after surgery, as judged by themselves and by others. Follow-up studies consistently show a high rate of satisfaction for most forms of cosmetic surgery. Second, patients not only look better but they’re seen as more socially desirable in other ways. Remember that looksism produces positive stereotypes. When before and after
photographs are judged, patients are seen as more likable, happier, and potentially more successful in the "after" shots. Clearly, these benefits can reduce self-consciousness and improve body image.

Cosmetic surgery can accomplish some things but not everything. It isn't magic. It won't radically transform your personality or instantly deliver new love. If you expect miracles you're likely to be disappointed. It can enhance appearance and help you like yourself better—sometimes. However, the surgical route is not the only way to accomplish these goals, as I've tried to show throughout this book. The potential costs and risks of surgery are relatively high, compared to other methods for achieving bodylove.

**SHOULD I OR SHOULDN'T I?**

Having cosmetic surgery is "neither a salvation nor a sellout." If you're considering surgery, the following questions will serve as a helpful guide:

- What do you want to accomplish? Be specific. Identify precisely what's wrong with your body and what you hope to look like afterward.
- Is it possible to achieve the results you want? If so, will the changes last, or will the operation need to be repeated?
- What are your motives? Go over the list on pages 191–192 to see which ones are creating this conflict. Consider whether your motives are rational or are based on cognitive errors.
- Why are you seeking surgery right now? Did something trigger your current need, such as a change of job or loss of mate? Are you in a good emotional state to make this decision, or are your feelings likely to change over time? Perhaps you should wait and see.
- What are the overall costs in terms of time, money, stress? How much pain can you expect and how long must you give up work, exercise, driving, sex?
- What complications sometimes occur, and what are the risks for someone in your physical condition?

Above all, make sure you have enough information to be an informed consumer and avoid making an impulsive decision. Con-
sider whether there are other ways to accomplish your goals that are less costly or less risky. If you decide to go ahead, you should give at least as much care to picking a surgeon as you do to picking a hairdresser. The mark of good surgeons may not be the cases they do, but the ones they turn away. One doctor describes the ideal candidate as someone in good health, highly motivated, with realistic expectations about recuperation and final results. Her goals should be based on the reality of her own body, not on some arbitrary ideal.

In fact, one of the best reasons for considering cosmetic surgery is to correct a major flaw or "abnormality." By eliminating an obvious cosmetic problem such as a birthmark, scar, or other disfigurement, you may indeed find a real improvement in how others see and treat you.

So give yourself a chance to reconsider your assets and liabilities. Are there obvious problems that dominate your appearance or your self-image, such as facial hair, dental defects, complexion problems? Is improvement possible, and at what cost? By doing nothing about them, you may be suffering a social handicap unnecessarily. It's a disadvantage to be so unattractive that your looks distract others from getting to know who you are. Looksism is real. Small changes can sometimes produce big gains if they fix a flaw that dominates your image. You don't have to be beautiful. But trying to look average (for your age) is a worthwhile goal.

When is a feature truly abnormal or unsightly? That's not always clear. Just because Helen was obsessed with her small breasts doesn't mean they needed fixing. The overall impression you make is often much more important than any single feature. If you're in doubt about how you really look to others, get an opinion from a therapist or from a few honest friends. Your outward appearance may be less of a problem than you suppose.

Beware that you don't destroy your individuality in search of normality. When Sylvia was asked which cosmetic decisions helped define her personal image, she said, "I decided not to get a nose job." Bette Midler's bust or Barbra Streisand's nose make them memorable because of the "flaws" that remain unfixed. Although beauty norms are narrow, they can be stretched when you confidently accept and display a distinctive feature. Like Helen, Rhoda is also small-breasted. Unlike Helen, she pokes fun at herself and wears sexy blouses to flaunt what she doesn't have. She proves that liking your looks matters as much as what you look like.
FINDING A BALANCE

Social pressures are strong. Few of us can confidently get away without any makeup at all and still feel attractive. That’s why it’s valuable both psychologically and socially for you to spend some effort at self-adornment—but not too much. Some transformations are worth it, up to a point. After all, there’s no end to the makeovers that could make you prettier. As in the opening quote of this chapter, if you tried to do everything that “nice girls should,” you might never get out of your bathroom. Struggling for perfection can be a tormenting waste of time. For you to be reasonably well groomed and attractive shouldn’t require pain, preoccupation, or self-sacrifice on the altar of beauty.

In fact, facial expression is a key factor in whether you’re seen as attractive. Try putting on your face by looking alive, interested, turned on by those around you. When you radiate these qualities, you’ll immediately be seen as a lovelier woman, regardless of the size of your breasts or the color of your hair.12

How about Helen? Do you think she made a good decision? She’s happier about her breasts and less obsessed with them. However, socially she’s still lonely and sexually she’s more inhibited. Was hers an act of self-enhancement or one of self-rejection? Probably both.

In one sense she was motivated by healthy narcissism. She wanted to feel more feminine and enjoy her body more fully. Yet she was also trapped by unhealthy masochism; by the mistaken belief that her breasts were unfeminine and needed correction at any cost. Her body loathing was due in part to a culture that neurotically worships busts out of all proportion to their importance. This led to her cognitive errors and to her feelings of shame. Helen’s decision isn’t clearly right or wrong. It does show, however, that a reasonably attractive woman may not gain as much as she expects from a cosmetic transformation.

Making over can sometimes create as many problems as it corrects. And the mere possibility of change adds stress to your life. “Does she or doesn’t she” translates for each of us into “should I or shouldn’t I?” Why or why not? When and how much? Before the days of implants, Helen might have felt unhappy with her breasts, but not conflicted over seeking a surgical solution. One important effect of makeovers is that they raise beauty standards. When more
and more people wash away their gray, for example, it becomes harder and harder for me to feel content with mine.

As you can see, making healthy cosmetic decisions that promote bodylove is complicated. Sometimes beauty transformations are worth it, other times they’re not. In facing your own conflicts about making over, remember these points:

1. **Assess your motives carefully.** Why does a change seem so important right now? Consider the underlying factors that may be influencing you. Perhaps you’re seeking a cosmetic solution to problems that could best be handled in other ways.

2. **Take small steps in revising your beauty routines.** Make them more fun, more flexible, and more sensuous. Look for alternatives that are less painful or less costly. Try to use the process of adornment to nurture and enhance your body image as well as your mirror image.

3. **Consider the long-term effects of a cosmetic change.** Will it help you accept and appreciate yourself? Will it improve body image in the long run, or is it merely a short-term distraction?

4. **Recognize and resist the commercial messages.** There is constant pressure on you to buy beauty at any price. But you alone will profit when you make over body image from the inside out.