

BODY IMAGE AND SEXUALITY



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“I’m overweight so I don’t feel sexual.”

“ If I let him touch me, he’ll feel something disgusting.”

“I feel ugly, uncomfortable, just not very sexy.”

These are some comments by women clients that I’ve heard over the years in my work as a relationship and sex counselor. Statements such as these have led me and others to conclude that a poor body image can be detrimental to a person’s sexual expression.

Body Image is a complex and confusing topic. The confusion stems from the many factors that comprise body image: Our external (objective) body attributes (i.e., how we really look), as well as our personal perceptions, thoughts and feelings about our bodies; also our body sensations. It has been said that some women project negative feelings about themselves on to their bodies. Thus, a poor body image can also reflect a low self-esteem.

Many people are at war with their bodies and want to alter them by some means. A body-image poll conducted by *Marketing & Research Resources, Inc.* showed that women are more dissatisfied with their bodies than men and use body weight as the dominant factor in determining their sense of personal attractiveness. Younger women (especially teenage girls) express the most personal dissatisfaction. Furthermore, research published in the *American Journal of Psychiatry* reveals that the norm for more than 70% of women is body dissatisfaction and desire to lose weight. On the other hand, according to the poll, men commonly rate body satisfaction corresponding to physical conditioning and fitness, rather than on body weight.

Many people diet and exercise in a healthy ways to alter their bodies or use cosmetic surgery to reduce, augment or just reshape “unsatisfactory” body parts. Women seem to complain most about breast size and body fat. Men seem most insecure about penis size, and complain about not having enough hair and muscle mass.

Sometimes people go to unhealthy extremes to change unsatisfactory body images. As a result, eating disorders are very

common today! Other people become addicted to plastic surgery.

This article will take a look at some issues of body image, specifically among women. The focus will be on: **How Poor Body Image Can Affect Sexuality; Tips on How to Creatively Overcome This Situation; and Some Theories of How Poor Body Image Develops.**

How Poor Body Image Can Affect Sexuality--

In the ideal world, nudity should be natural and comfortable. After all, we are all born nudes. However many people, especially women, feel uneasy and even shameful about their bodies. This discomfort often extends into the bedroom.

Robert W. Birch, PhD, a retired Clinical Psychologist, Sex Therapist and Sex Educator in Columbus, Ohio described the situation this way, "If a woman is uncomfortable with her own body, chances are she will be uncomfortable allowing her partner to look at her body. This discomfort will cause some women to place restrictions around sexual activity. (I.e., having to have sex in the dark; hidden beneath covers; or not allowing touch in certain places).

Restrictions can rob couples of spontaneity, narrow their range of (sexual) creativity and stifle their unbridled passion." Furthermore, says Dr. Birch, "If a women is worrying about parts of her body she then becomes a spectator and watches her body during sexual activity. This robs her of her sensations."

A person who feels inhibited about her body may want to avoid being in certain positions that maximize body exposure (like the female superior position). This not only results in a limited sexual repertoire, but also can inhibit sensual and sexual sensations. In extreme situations, orgasm may be inhibited in women (as well as erectile function in men). Body discomfort could also interfere with novelty sex play like dressing up in sexy lingerie or undressing for your partner.

Some women report that their body responds better when "in shape." This can be attributed to liking one's self-better, being more in touch with one's body or simply being less self-conscious. Interestingly, it is generally not the partner who is turned off by body imperfections, or some extra weight, it is the woman herself! She projects her negative body image onto her

partner, thinking her partner finds her not sexy and/or sexually unworthy.

Tips on How to Creatively Overcome This Situation--

One way to overcome this situation is to help people learn to feel better about their bodies. This might include having a person stand in front of a mirror and describe what she sees and how she feels when looking at her reflection. This exercise also helps in attaining a more realistic body concept. I encourage people to concentrate on what they like about their bodies rather than on the negatives. I also suggest that a person “celebrate” parts of the body that she (or he) doesn't like or feels embarrassed about, by having the partner caress or kiss these specific parts and speak of them with affection, even to nick-name them. Once a person believes that the “flaw” might actually be appealing to the partner, the result is usually an improvement in body image. Couples might also do mutual sensual body massages, fully exploring each other's warmth, scent and skin texture. Touching and accepting a partner's entire nude body and expressions of joy and pleasure in seeing and touching the body also helps to gain a positive body image.

If poor body image and sexual problems can not be improved with self-help, it may be wise to consult a professional sex therapist or sex counselor who can assist couples in gaining comfort with their bodies and their sexuality.

Theories on How Poor Body Image Develops In Women--

Many women grow up in families, which send them messages that their bodies are somehow “defective.” Some of the messages they hear (either consciously or subconsciously) are, “don't touch down there” or “it's dirty down there.” Little girls generally are not told by parents that their genitals are as beautiful and as well equipped as a boy's. While most little boys are allowed to handle their penises, and as Dr. Ruth Westheimer says, “make friends with them,” little girls are encouraged to ignore their genitals as if they are in some kind of demilitarized zone. Consequently, many little girls grow up ignorant and uncomfortable about their genitals. A sequela of this can be general discomfort with their body--poor body image. When these young girls become women, they often seriously lag behind their male counterparts sexually.

Certain religious teachings reinforce negative messages about women's genitals. Orthodox concepts that women are "the filthy vessel" and that "menstruation is unclean" are some examples of these reinforcers.

The media also reinforces sexist messages about female bodies. One example of many is the old advertisement for feminine deodorant spray (FDS). It is interesting that there are no counterparts for men discussed publicly, even though male genitals can also be offensive when unwashed.

American society's reverence for female slender bodies probably is the most significant contributor to American women's body image problems! The "thin is in" ethic sets unreachable standards for real women who have real imperfect bodies. Most women can never live up to the airbrushed beauties in magazines or the ultra thin actresses in television or in the movies, even with the help of plastic surgeons. This "failure" to measure up can create havoc with body image if self-esteem already is vulnerable. Even the most curvaceous women may (and do) find fault with part of their bodies under these circumstances.

In closing, many American women are still fettered by the fantasy that a perfect body means personal happiness and/or better sex. However, there are women who are satisfied with their bodies even though their body size deviates from our cultural ideal. These women accept themselves (and are sexually active) despite society's messages. But, if confidence needs "reshaping," therapy can help. If stubborn body bulges or abnormalities are a concern, plastic surgery can also help and is a reasonable option as long as one's expectations are realistic, which means: Perfection is not a goal.

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