

A photograph of a woman with long brown hair, smiling, sitting on the floor. She is wearing a bright blue, backless swimsuit with thin, crisscrossing straps across her back. The background is a plain, light-colored wall. Large, bold, pink text is overlaid on the image, reading "naked" in a lowercase serif font and "TRUTHS" in an uppercase sans-serif font.

naked TRUTHS

BY LESLIE GOLDMAN, M.P.H.

SPECIAL REPORT

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Do you have body-image issues?

For most women that's a rhetorical question. I found this out firsthand over the past 5 years as I interviewed nearly 100 women, spoke to top body-image experts, and analyzed countless studies while working on my new book, *Locker Room Diaries: The Naked Truth About Women, Body Image, and Re-imagining the "Perfect" Body* (Da Capo, 2006). What I learned was that women of all shapes—from taut twentysomethings to mature women coping with midlife weight gain—are obsessed with achieving a flawless physique. In fact, many women are so determined to achieve an unattainable image that they end up weakening their confidence and then hindering their ability to reach their goals, which in many cases include weight loss. Consider these findings:

- **Overweight people are more likely to lose the weight—and keep it off—if they have a positive body image**, according to a study recently published in *Medicine and Science in Sports and Exercise*.
- **Chronic dieters are much more likely than others to have a poor body image**, according to a study published in the *Journal of the American Dietetic Association*.
- **People who are satisfied with their bodies after a modest weight loss are more likely to keep the weight off**,

according to a University of Pennsylvania School of Medicine study.

Ready to start learning more surprising facts about body image—and maybe even lose weight in the process? In this special report we take an in-depth look at body image by talking to women about their bodies as they experience life during key transitions like marriage and pregnancy. Then we'll take a look at what the research says and offer up advice for how you can build a better body image today.

Marriage & Your Body

“As a young, single girl I always struggled with trying to have a perfect body. My husband saved me from having an unhealthy image of myself by loving and accepting me. I may not have a perfect body, but now I exercise and make food choices that allow me to be healthy and happy.” CARISSA, 30

As you go from “me” to “we,” it's common for your perception of your body—as well as how you care for it—to change. How you look, how you think you should look, how your spouse thinks you should look, and perhaps even how your spouse looks—all combine to form your “married” self-image. And that can be good news: People in stable long-term relationships often have a better body image than singles, according to a study from the

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Social Issues Research Centre, a United Kingdom-based nonprofit research organization. Since you're no longer trying to attract a mate, you may feel less pressure to have a perfect body, says Denver-based family therapist Susan Heitler, Ph.D.

While coupledness may improve your body image, this comfort unfortunately comes with a price tag. Marriage and weight gain tend to go hand in hand. Takeout dinners and evenings spent in front of the television lead women to gain an average of 11.3 pounds after the first few years of marriage, according to a new Weight Watchers U.K. survey. For some marrieds, the added weight can lead to dissatisfaction with their bodies—which may hinder the ability to feel sensual and take a toll on overall self-confidence.

➤ **IMAGE BOOSTER** Doing one small thing each day that makes you feel more sensual—anything from striking a few yoga poses to taking a belly-dancing class—can improve your body image and make you feel sexier in your relationship, says Joy Davidson, Ph.D., certified sex therapist and author of *Fearless Sex* (Fair Winds Press,



Focus on the positive. For every body part you dislike, name two that you're happy to show off.

2004). These mini-boosts of activity will also rev up your sex drive, a critical component of a strong relationship.

If you've put on some postnuptial pounds, use the power of two to make healthy lifestyle changes that can improve your odds of losing weight. Heitler points out that spouses tend to develop shared ideas about what to eat and what role exercise is going to play in their lives. You'll be more likely to eat healthy meals and hit the gym regularly if your spouse is on board.

WHY WORK OUT?

If you've ever felt too fat to join a trendy gym, then you understand how body image can get in the way of reaching your fitness goals. Since exercise is key to a good body image, here's how to make working out boost yours:

- **FIND A GYM WITHOUT MIRRORS**

Research shows that exercising in front of a mirror can put you in a bad mood and make you feel more fatigued.

- **ENLIST A WORKOUT BUDDY** Find a friend you feel comfortable sweating with, and you'll be more likely to stick to your goals.

- **REMEMBER THE PAYOFF** Research shows that people who lose weight (by exercising and cutting calories) feel better about their bodies.

Pregnancy & Your Body

“My second pregnancy did a real number on my body. I'm down to my fighting weight now, but my stomach will never look the same as it did before. Still, pregnancy was the highlight of my life. It caused me to have a much more functional view of my body. Asking, ‘Does my butt look big in these jeans?’ seems so irrelevant after I've created another human being.” LAUREN, 33

During pregnancy your body image gets hit from all angles: You're dealing with a rapidly changing physique, mood swings,

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and food cravings. Pregnancy may be particularly challenging for women who have previously struggled with their weight, says Nada Stotland, M.D., vice president of the American Psychiatric Association. "Some women have been dying to be pregnant their whole lives, but it's still quite a challenge to have your shape change during pregnancy," Dr. Stotland says. Postpregnancy pounds loom large as well. "Some people spring back," she adds. "For others, it's harder. Plus, seeing celebrities swiftly shedding baby weight makes you feel all the more inadequate."

➤ **IMAGE BOOSTER** Move it. One Australian study found that women who worked out regularly during pregnancy responded better to changes in their bodies early in pregnancy than sedentary women did. A bonus? Most research suggests that women who stay physically active are more likely to put on a healthy—rather than an excessive—amount of weight during pregnancy. For example, in a 2005 study published in *The Journal of Reproductive Medicine*, researchers from Boston's Brigham and Women's Hospital stated that moderate exercise during pregnancy may improve overall maternal well-being.

If you're having a hard time getting used to your postpregnancy body, taking some time every day to look at your body can help. If you're uncomfortable viewing yourself in a full-length mirror, try looking at parts of your body in a pocket mirror. Research shows that most people are satisfied with their face since it's the part they look at most often, according to clinical psychologist Ann Kearney-Cooke, Ph.D., author of *Change Your Mind, Change Your Body* (Simon and Schuster, 2004) and director of the Cincinnati Psychotherapy Institute. By looking at, say, your thighs or your stomach more often, you can train yourself to feel more satisfied with those parts as well.

Aging & Your Body

“ I just started dealing with hot flashes. I'm feeling so exhausted, so out of shape. When I was trying on clothes the other day, I didn't even recognize the person I saw in the mirror. I used to be size 2, 4, or 6; now I'm at the upper end of the spectrum, and that blows my mind. ” JANICE, 54

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As women age, bones lose density, skin loses elasticity, weight shifts, and once-dense breast tissue is replaced by fat, all dealing body image a blow. In a study of 307 women ages 35 to 55, published in the *Journal of Sex Research*, about half of those surveyed felt less attractive than they did when they were 10 years younger, reports lead author Patricia Barthalow Koch, Ph.D., associate professor of biobehavioral health and women's studies at Pennsylvania State University. Weight tended to be the most troubling body-image issue, according to Koch. "As the women aged, they developed larger breasts and fat in the upper back and abdomen. It made them feel matronly, more frumpy."

➤ **IMAGE BOOSTER** The news wasn't all bad, however: 16 percent of respondents in Koch's study felt they were *more* attractive than they had been 10 years before. Their secret? Overall, Koch says, these women were less affected by the media's message



Boost your confidence by setting reachable mini-goals. Aim to lose 5 pounds a month—rather than 60 pounds in a year.

that you need to be young and thin to be attractive and sexy than were other women in the study. They seemed "to put their body image in perspective with other things in their lives that they considered more important, such as their relationships."

Another boost? Exercise—especially resistance training (because it increases muscle definition)—can give postmenopausal woman a sense of control over their bodies, reports Janet M. Shaw, Ph.D., an associate professor of exercise and sports science at the University of Utah.

Illness & Your Body

“After breast cancer I had trouble looking at myself. I had always been physically active, and I think that helped me with the pain. I was walking around the hospital 3 days after surgery, wondering if I could walk a mile. You have to move. You just feel better doing something.” MARLENE, 57

A major accident or chronic illness—whether a car crash or diabetes or breast cancer—can have a life-altering effect on your self-image. Having a good body image to begin with is key, as it makes you better able to cope with a serious diagnosis, says Pat Fobair, a licensed certified social worker in the Radiation Oncology Department at Stanford University Medical Center.

In Fobair’s study on body image and

sexual problems in breast-cancer survivors, half of the 549 participants reported having two or more body-image problems (such as feeling embarrassed or feeling less feminine) occasionally. Not surprisingly, those with more body-image problems tended to have more sexual problems, Fobair says.

> IMAGE BOOSTER Exercise improves body image and reduces depression in breast-cancer survivors, according to a study from the Miriam Hospital and Brown Medical School in Providence, Rhode Island. Other body-image boosters include journaling (because it can be cathartic) and participating in programs like the American Cancer Society’s Look Good... Feel Better workshops, which focus on boosting appearance by using makeup, wigs, and other beauty-enhancing techniques. ■