

keep in touch

Feeling close to your loved ones is a significant part of maintaining healthy, fulfilling relationships, but physical connection isn't always easy. Here's how to break down the barriers and let love in.

by Krissy Brady





When you think about your body, do you home in on your perceived flaws? If yes, it could be a psychologically debilitating habit that, for some women, may be as automatic as brushing their teeth. Throw shade at yourself isn't just a precursor to low self-esteem—you may also not like to be touched, or hugged, or feel intimate in any way. This could interfere with building deep and rewarding relationships even with the people closest to us.

"How a woman feels about her body—and in turn, intimacy—seems to be more about what's going on above the neck than below it," says Karen R. Koenig, a licensed psychotherapist and author of *Outsmarting Overeating*. The more hang-ups you have about your appearance, the harder it might be to put yourself out there. "Because some self-critical women shy away from the mirror, they assume that others might not want to look at their bodies either," Koenig says. Keeping your distance



a smoke-and-mirrors approach to getting personal, says the study's lead author, David Frederick, PhD, assistant professor of psychology at Chapman University. Whether you're a size 6 or 16, it's not your reflection that's preventing you from forging bonds or meeting new people—it's your perception of it.

"I have always felt comfortable with my body, but it's mostly because of my partner. He makes me feel beautiful and sexy even when I don't. He's a positive influence in my life; he helps me to be a better me." —Grace, Florida

(say, by avoiding hugs) may take precedence over love, helping to reinforce the destructive inner dialogue that may be taking a toll on your self-esteem.

It's a cycle many women could fall into: 1 in 5 women are very to extremely dissatisfied with their weight, according to the results of a 2016 survey published in the journal *Body Image*. What's more, those with poor body image may experience substantially less satisfaction in their relationships, romantic or otherwise. They may feel more anxious going to a party and mingling with others, or heading out on a date with a potential romantic prospect. Regardless of weight, some people can fall prey to self-defeating feelings: Everything from being bloated to having poor muscle tone could lead to self-consciousness, not to mention

The way to help bridge the gap between body confidence and intimate moments is by showering yourself with straight-up self-compassion. College-age women who are more accepting of their imperfections tend to have more positive body images regardless of their BMI, according to preliminary research from the University of Waterloo. Another study found that self-compassion can moderate the impact that body-related negativity has on physical appreciation, such as comparing yourself to others or basing your self-worth on how you look.

Anyone can practice self-compassion, at any time. After losing weight, for example, you may still see yourself as heavier and continue to battle the outdated insecurities lingering in your mind. Enter self-compassion: "Acknowledge that you may have a

distorted view of yourself and that your self-perception needs to catch up with reality," Koenig says. Pay attention to your self-talk (especially anything unkind that you're thinking), and consciously choose to say kind things. "Self-compassion isn't being dishonest about your challenges or giving yourself false flattery," Koenig continues. "It's being your own best advocate." And fessing up to others about how you feel could help create more intimacy and closeness in your relationships.

"When you learn to accept your body as is, you lift a burden from yourself," Koenig says. "You're more likely to enjoy greater intimacy because you'll be more present and focused on being your authentic and adorable self, rather than worrying about what your partner—or friend, or even a masseuse—thinks of your body." The benefits might extend to other aspects of your life: Some research suggests that people who are more satisfied with their appearance experience less stress and an uptick in overall life satisfaction in major areas, including family, friends, and finances. That positivity and self-knowledge can be important to bridging connections with others.

Ready to move down a few notches on the self-consciousness spectrum and help boost your body image? Start right now—not 20 pounds from now—by following these simple tips. The results—and the happiness—will be worth it.

1. Accentuate the positive.

Don't want to work out with a friend because of the thought of changing in the locker room? Or are you scared



“Feeling stronger is incredibly empowering. It helped me to be less concerned with how I looked, and more about how I felt.”
—Matilda, Texas

you won't be able to keep up during Zumba class? Instead of thinking about your imperfections or your differences in fitness levels, mentally list the reasons you're exercising. You're connecting with a friend you haven't seen in a while; remember, this person accepts you just the way you are. Exercise is a good way to have fun and improve well-being, so remind yourself that you're decompressing after the workday, and you want to build healthier habits. Research on female college students suggests that those who exercise for reasons unrelated to appearance—such as reducing stress or improving function—may be more likely to appreciate what their bodies can do and develop a better body image. “When you view your body through a lens of function, focusing on all of the incredible things it can do, this can translate into an appreciation for how your body looks, too,” says Jill McDevitt, PhD, a San Diego-based sexuality educator.

2. Put it in writing.

Your friends and family fill you with praise—so why not write down their compliments? Make a list of 10 positive comments about yourself and memo-

rize them. Keep a copy of the list in your phone, on your desk at home, or anywhere you're bound to see it several times a day. “Even when you're not noticing it, your subconscious could pick up the image and register your well-crafted affirmations,” says Nicki Nance, PhD, assistant professor of human services and psychology at Beacon College in Florida.

3. Don't get distracted by your physical appearance.

We love and admire others for who they are and what they've accomplished, not for how they look. So why should we treat ourselves any differently? “Our external appearance is no more important to others than theirs is to us,” says New York-based psychiatrist Carly Snyder, MD. “A person leaves a lasting positive impression based on their strength of character, not on how slim, toned, or blemish-free they are.” Stay in the moment, and think about times when you feel most comfortable in your skin.

4. Dress the part.

When you're deciding what to wear to a party, to meet a friend for dinner, or for a workout class, dress in a way that

makes you happy—not in the way you think you “should.” Choosing outfits with the goal of looking younger, slimmer, or sexier is counterproductive because in doing so, you're allowing what others might think to dictate your sense of self, Snyder points out. Instead, wear what you love and what you feel powerful in. “When you feel amazing in what you're wearing, you automatically look amazing,” she says.

5. Accept compliments from your partner.

You are more than your body, and who knows that better than your mate? Start seeing yourself the way he or she does, by taking the time to listen and hold on to their compliments. “Negative experiences tend to go right into our long-term memory, whereas positive experiences—like compliments—don't, unless we hang onto them for a few minutes,” Nance says. Look in the mirror and recite what your significant other is saying to you. They're not just saying these things because they love you. They believe it and so should you.

6. Take the time to think about intimacy.

How are you supposed to stay connected with your partner when the





"I continue to struggle with my body image. When my boyfriend touches my body, I wonder if he feels my fat. But he is very supportive of me and my weight loss. I'm working on it."

—Tina, Massachusetts



only thoughts occupying your mind are, well, a drag? Work deadlines, errands, and housework aren't exactly a turn-on. Start keeping romance top of mind by, literally, penciling it into your schedule. Cook together, read together, take a yoga class or get involved in a hobby together. Plan a hike, or a date night, or better still, a weekend getaway. Put some effort into your relationship, and it may help you feel even more fulfilled. Think about what being close to someone means to you, and how you want to feel. Then strive to bring that vision to life.

7. Practice adding touch.

Make contact with your partner on a regular basis (think holding hands or cuddling when you're watching a movie or listening to music, or even casual contact in any situation). "Affectionate touch helps reaffirm

that you love your mate, strengthening your bond," says Sanam Hafeez, PsyD, a licensed neuropsychologist in New York.

8. It's not just physical.

Connecting with others on a deeper level could help you love yourself even more. When heading into a social situation, think about the potential ways that you can spend time with others. Find your common (non-physical) touchpoints. Have you seen any of your friends' or family's vacation photos on Facebook? Ask them about it. Heard about a concert coming to town? Strike up a conversation about the upcoming event. Finding out each other's interests opens up all kinds of possibilities and can help you feel even more connected to others. (A word to the wise, however: Don't talk politics.)

"While the level of intimacy hasn't changed, I feel less self-conscious and more in tune with my body, and that helps me enjoy those intimate times more."

—Angie, Pennsylvania



A Bro's Guide to Body Confidence

The struggle with body image and intimacy is real for men, too. Almost 40 percent of guys don't like some aspect of their physical appearance (such as weight or muscle size), according to a 2016 study published in *Psychology of Men & Masculinity*. David Frederick, PhD, lead study author, shares tips on how to help break the body-shaming cycle for good:

→ **Exercise matters.** Men who consistently engage in moderate levels of exercise are more likely to feel better about their bodies. Search for a recreational sports league in your area—think dodgeball or flag football.

→ **Share your feelings.** Communication is key; ask any woman. Opening up to your partner about your perceived body bummer could increase intimacy in your relationship. And the added support may encourage you to feel less self-conscious.

→ **Get your flirt on.** Expressing your attraction to each other by sending flirty texts might help rev up feel-good hormones (desire breeds confidence) while keeping your connection strong. Single? Keep your head up and smile at those around you. Smiles are contagious.

→ **De-stress daily.** Chronic stress may lead to difficulty regulating appetite and weight, helping to further the self-consciousness spiral. To help you feel your best, engage in stress-relieving activities like cooking, watching TV, going shopping, or exercising.

→ **Pay it forward.** If touch makes you uncomfortable, try creating positive associations with it. For example, give your partner a massage and notice how special it makes them feel. Seeing their reaction will make you realize that you want the same thing—and then, don't be afraid to ask for it.