

WOMEN, FOOD, BODY IMAGE & LIBIDO

How often do you think about food? Shame and self-loathing are often part of the relationship with food. Do you think about what you want to eat that you shouldn't, because it might make you fat? Do you bargain with yourself, adding up calories in your head, then repenting with the promise of a salad? Moreover, how often do you think about your body? And, truth be told, how often do you think about your body positively? The vast majority of American women have a poor body image. And the positive view of the rest is hard earned and sometimes only sporadic.

We all have fat days and skinny days; that's why we own fat jeans and skinny jeans. Hormones play their part in that fluctuation, but what I'm really talking about is that deep self-loathing we'd rather deny. So we medicate that self-rejection with food, which in turn keeps us in the shame loop. But it's not about the food we put in our mouths. How much you can hate yourself is not contingent on how many doughnuts you eat. *Women turn to food when we are hungry for something that we can't identify.*

Women may turn to the familiar comfort of food when we want to feel loved ("I don't have a beloved, but this ice cream will do for now"), or to medicate the hurt of not feeling heard or seen or wanted – sometimes since childhood. Women turn to food when we feel unworthy, or unsafe. Many women who are significantly overweight have unconsciously created a barrier of protection against the world, or men. But it's only an illusion of protection. Boundaries protect you, not food.

Counting calories and exercising out of self rejection ("I'll be more lovable with a firm butt") rather than self love (because exercise makes us happy) has more to do with pain than with health. It has to do with a history of neglect, sexual or physical abuse, unreleased anger, grief. A nurse friend of mine who works for a plastic surgeon tells of women who shrink away from their 'before' pictures, and of the disconnect between the cutting, cauterizing, muscle separating, pain, the ultimate temporariness of breast implants, the scarring of tummy tucks - and the illusion that we will be loved for how we look. I'm finding that one of the best kept secrets of aging is that it correlates closely with self-acceptance.

Weight is the symptom, not the problem. When we overeat consistently, feeling out of control, or when we starve ourselves, it's abusive; we do it because it's the best we know to do. We deserve better.

The path to moving beyond all this is identifying what the pain is, and acknowledging it. Freedom from self-loathing and shame comes from identifying our faulty beliefs, that are ultimately about the fear of a lack of connection, to Self and others. When we don't feel loved or worthy, we feel alienated, and that's what we create.

But once we can grieve, be compassionate with ourselves, and stop defining ourselves by our cellulite or the number on the scale, you can be more present with ourselves, rather than hurting about the past or torturing ourselves about the future. If we feel out of control with food, it is making decisions for us, and our focus on it consumes and distracts us. The antidote to shame is empathy, for our having the unattainable expectations of who we think we are supposed to be. We must try being gentle and kind to ourselves.

When we don't feel good about our bodies, it's hard to let ourselves show up (our Self – not just our body), to be fully seen in a romantic relationship, emotionally and physically. That is intimacy – 'into-me-you-see'. It's not just the sexy bits. When we're stuffing feelings we're generally suppressing sexual feelings too. Many couples' sexual issues around desire tie into one of both partners not feeling good about their body. I'm talking about people who insist on having sex in the dark so that their body won't be visible, who rush through the event as quickly as possible to get it over with because it's so uncomfortable to have their partner so physically close. Others just avoid the whole thing, claiming some ailment, or do their best to criticize their mate in the hope that they will back off.

And then there's having an orgasm with our eyes open and really letting ourselves be seen. That is available to us, regardless of the shape and size of our body. To have a sense of love and belonging we have to believe we are worthy of it.

We have to stretch into self-acceptance, we have to have the courage to be imperfect, to go out into the world with all our flaws and embrace them, as well as those of others. We have to surround ourselves with people who love us unconditionally. We need to get physical exercise, to get out of our head and into our body, and to love that body.

Ladies, have compassion for one another, as well as yourselves. Be authentic, not who you think you should be; that is the path to heartfelt connection. And connection is what we all want. The inner critic is you. The good news is that you, and only you, have the power to change that critical voice. *Embrace your vulnerability – that is your greatest beauty!*