



comfortable
in your own skin

making peace with
your body image



Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., Carol Stream, Illinois



DR. DEBORAH NEWMAN

Comfortable in Your Own Skin

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Acknowledgments

This is a book I needed to write because I have a passion in my heart for the many women and girls who are being seduced by lies. My heart is concerned for future generations because they will be at greater risk of body despair. I pray this book will be a life-changing tool that will equip readers with the truth of God's Word and will serve to inspire women to resist the culture's clutch on their self-esteem.

The Focus on the Family creative team partnered with me in accomplishing this task. I'm grateful to the many people who worked behind the scenes at Focus on the Family on the 2002 project, including Mark Maddox, Kathy Davis, Julie Küss, Liz Duckworth, and Mary Houser. In this updated work, credit is due to Nanci McAlister, Kathy Davis, and the current staff.

Most of all, I want to acknowledge so many of you who gave testimony to the ways God transformed your lives after reading the first book. Your feedback is the main reason we have created this six-week, life-changing Bible study.

My husband, Brian, was my silent partner supplying research assistance, encouragement, grocery shopping, carpooling, and anything else that was needed. You're the greatest! I'm also so blessed to have two wonderful and understanding children, Rachel and Ben. Thanks for doing your part.

I'm grateful that God has allowed me this wonderful privilege to minister to women. "For it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure" (Philippians 2:13, NASB).

INTRODUCTION

An Invitation to Freedom



Marybeth was asked to model in the fashion show the women's ministry in her church was sponsoring to raise money for its spring retreat. Her answer was typical for Marybeth: "I couldn't do that." She said it sweetly and seemed so humble. No one would have suspected that at age 49, as a grandmother-to-be with two grown daughters, Marybeth was a very insecure women. Although she was one of the best-dressed women at church, deep inside she harbored a tremendous vault filled with body hate that bordered on disgust.

Beneath her quick reply, "I couldn't do that," lay this painful thought: *How could you even suggest such a thing! The last thing I would do is walk onto a stage inviting people to look at me. I don't need anyone else to look at every bulge or inspect my latest wrinkle. Believe me, I can do that all by myself.*

Marybeth's dilemma is made all the more significant by the fact that Christine, who took her place, was a 38-year-old, overweight mother of three who was honored to be asked. She thought nothing of

walking her size-18 body down the runway of the church. She enjoyed every minute of it. Christine knows that she needs to lose some weight and recently started a workout program. But just because she doesn't have the perfect body doesn't mean she's not comfortable in it—especially in the company of her friends.



*I've struggled all my life to accept
myself because of my weight.*

Marybeth's and Christine's differences in body perspectives came to mind one day as I sat in my counseling office across from Susan. She was an attractive 16-year-old. Although she was not being pursued by top modeling agencies, she was above average in appearance. Her thick, naturally blonde hair had a slight wave. She was five feet four inches and wore a size 9. Susan was on the drill team at school and took dance lessons twice a week so she could keep ahead of the competition for her coveted spot.

So why was Susan in my counseling office? Because she was depressed, which she admitted to her mom, but she was also in the first stages of bulimia, which she could barely admit to herself.

As Susan told me about her life and her problem with depression, I got a little angry inside. I was not angry at Susan; I was angry about the outrageous pressure to look perfect that Susan faced every day. I was mad because a wonderful creation of God stared at herself in Lycra 10 to 12 hours a week and cringed at her appearance.

It struck me a little more poignantly as I listened to Susan describe her body. She told me that her only positive physical characteristic was her big brown eyes. What she hated most about herself was her height and her midsection. She wanted to be six feet tall and lose a few pounds

and thin out through her stomach, hips, and thighs. I've heard all that before, but the way she talked about her arms got to me. She hated the way her flabby arms waved in the wind!

For two decades as a Christian counselor, I've listened to girls and women describe their body hate. They've focused mainly on their hips, stomach, thighs, and breasts. But in the same week I met with Susan, I also heard two other females, one 40 years old and another teenager, complain about their arms!

When is it going to stop? I despise hearing this same painful story repeated over and over. It begins as predictably as, "Once upon a time," except there is no "happily ever after." There's something about each woman's body that doesn't quite fit with her perception of what's beautiful. Whether she is too short, her thighs are too big, or her breasts are too small or too saggy, a woman's body hate can lead to depression, eating disorders, and unnecessary surgery. This kind of preoccupation with her appearance can even be fatal through suicide, botched surgery, or deadly complications from eating disorders. It is a serious problem.



*It's difficult to have problems with vision
and hearing as I get older.*

The teenage years have always been a period of preoccupation with looks. This fixation is even more serious in the twenty-first century. But it is no longer confined to the teen and young adult years. Some women, like Marybeth, struggle with an unhealthy obsession about their looks all their lives. We can't ignore this problem that is wreaking havoc in the lives of girls, teenagers, and women.

I've got to help fight the body-hating insanity I find all around me. I can help one person at a time in my counseling office, but I feel

compelled to do more—to sound a warning, to challenge women and girls to get together and talk about the problem, to confront the lies, and to support one another in living in the truth. My hope is to help mothers consider this issue in their lives so they are able to help their daughters live in dignity, not self-imposed disgrace. I long for women in the church to reveal to a confused and mixed-up world how God's love, purpose, and acceptance transcend cultural pressure to look good!

That's why I've written this book. That's why I'm glad you are joining with me in fighting for truth, first within yourself, and then by teaching others. Together we can take a stand against negative body stress! In my years of experience I have witnessed how God's Word, taught in the context of supportive relationships, dramatically transforms lives. If the Marybeths, Christines, and Susans will sit down together and discover the truth about their bodies through studying God's Word, they can stop the epidemic of body hate and keep it from devastating their own and others' lives.

Breast cancer has changed almost every part of my body for the worse: My skin is dry, my hair is thinner, my breasts aren't real. But it has also helped me focus on what is really important, and it isn't all that other stuff.

I am thrilled that you are reading this book. I can't wait for you to learn the joy of liking and being at peace with the body you live in. I doubt that you are even aware of how much a negative body image can affect you. God has so much He wants to show you about the meaning of your life and His perspective on your body. In the culture we live in, I believe it is critical for women to think about and discuss this subject.

This is a good book for you to read on your own, but I have pur-

posely written it to be experienced with a group. In my years as a counselor, I have witnessed the healing power of group interaction. Women, in particular, heal through relationship and connection to other women—God designed us to need each other. I encourage you to meet together with other women to share in the discussion questions at the end of each chapter.

I'll never forget the 70-year-old woman who participated in a group that I led over a one-week period. At the end of the week, she said, "In all my years as a Christian, I've never felt the love and support of God in the way I have this week through all of you." It was bittersweet to hear her say those words. I was glad she finally had that beautiful experience in the body of Christ, yet I was sad that it took 70 years before she felt that kind of love and support in Christian community.

My vision for this book is that it will be a tool that will bring women together to support and encourage one another. Women's ministries groups, mothers and daughters, youth groups, and neighborhood Bible studies can use this material to guide them into God's truth about a reality we all deal with. I long to see women thinking about their bodies in light of God's Word and in the context of their relationships with other women.

I feel that God has given me a commission similar to Isaiah's. Isaiah came to the people of Israel to proclaim the good news that their nation didn't have to remain in captivity to other nations. I am coming to women to proclaim that we don't have to remain in captivity to the message that our bodies aren't good enough. In fact, I think Isaiah 61:1–3 describes the beauty that God wants to bring to women:

The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is on me, because the LORD has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the

captives and release from darkness for the prisoners, to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor and the day of vengeance of our God, to comfort all who mourn, and provide for those who grieve in Zion—to bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair. They will be called oaks of righteousness, a planting of the LORD for the display of his splendor.

Isn't that what you want for yourself and the women you know? Don't you want to exchange your ashes for beauty, your mourning for gladness, your spirit of despair for a garment of praise? God wants that also! So let's get started.

If You're Using This Book in a Study Group

You'll get the most out of the study group if you read the assigned chapter before you come to the meeting, but don't skip the meeting if you haven't had time to complete the chapter. You'll still gain valuable insights from the other women.

I recommend that you purchase a spiral notebook or journal to record your responses to the questions that are placed throughout the text. A separate journal lets you keep your personal reflections private, so you can feel free to share this book with a friend without exposing confidential information and private thoughts. Many questions are simply insights from Scripture, but some are more personal in nature. Please take the time to answer each question.

I know how busy women are, and how hard it is to find time to read and study. I've tried to make the chapters short enough that you can read and answer the questions in under an hour. May I suggest that

you try to carve out just 10 to 15 minutes a day to read and work on the questions. That way you'll be finished with the chapter before your weekly group meeting.

The scriptures are provided in the text so that you can keep your book with you and take advantage of small blocks of time you find within your day. Of course you may choose to look up the scriptures in your own Bible so you can underline them or know where they are found. If you work outside the home, you may want to read during your lunch break. If you're a mom, you might bring your book and journal along when you take the kids to the park and study while you watch them play.

You do not need to answer the discussion questions at the end of each chapter before the meeting unless you want to. The questions don't require preparation, and will most likely be the focus of your group meeting.

Following are ground rules for a successful group discussion. Your group may have additional suggestions.

1. Everything said in the group is confidential.
2. Everything said is voluntary. You may pass if you don't want to give an answer.
3. There are no right answers. (Most answers aren't right or wrong; rather, they reflect your feelings or opinions. However, the Bible is the supreme authority.)

During the group meetings the discussion questions at the end of each chapter will be the focus of the sharing time. However, your group might sometimes wish to discuss questions from the text as well. Assume that each participant has read the chapter during the previous week. There's really no need for formal teaching; merely discuss what was read.

Above all, I hope that the study group will provide you with a sense of community. Women need to have deep connections with other

women. The community becomes a place where the transformation from body loathing to body acceptance can take place. Richard Foster gave this advice for a small group he led:

Give encouragement as often as possible; advice, once in a great while; reproof, only when absolutely necessary; and judgment, *never*.¹

That's a good credo to use in your group. The goal of the group is to support each other in the process of allowing God to transform your lives and beliefs about who you are.

A special intimacy develops when you pray for one another. I encourage you to close each discussion time in prayer and have weekly prayer partners or a prayer list so you can pray for each person by name.

Again, let me say how delighted I am that you are participating in this study. I pray that it will lead to a life of freedom in which you are no longer plagued by the destructive power of dislike for your body. I pray that your group and individual study will be prosperous and that your soul will soar as you focus on what is really important and special about you. Always remember that every body is beautiful! Please let me know of your group's success or questions by writing me at:

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Blessings,
Deborah Newman

CHAPTER ONE

More Than Skin Deep



Maylee will never forget the day she came home from the hairdresser when she was nine years old. Her mother had wanted to curl Maylee's straight Asian hair with a perm. Unfortunately this one totally fried her hair. The hairdresser's only recourse was to cut off all the perm, leaving Maylee with a nearly-shaved head. She caught a glimpse of herself in the mirror as she left, and all she could think about was the merciless teasing she would endure.

Maylee looked like a pimply-faced boy. She had gone to the hairdresser with hopes of looking pretty, and she left feeling like a hideous freak. She ran to the car and hid under the dashboard. When she arrived home, she ran to her room, hoping that no other human being would lay eyes on her.

Maylee's mom made Maylee join her in the bathroom. She held her daughter's shoulders and forced her to stand before the mirror. She said, "Look in the mirror, Maylee. See the beautiful girl who stands

there. Look at her strong, lean body. Look at her pretty brown eyes and see her nice round face. That girl is beautiful.”

Maylee opened her eyes and at first saw only her awkward haircut and her blemishes. As her mother directed her, she began to notice that she did have some beauty, if she really looked. Her mother went on to sympathize with the shame and embarrassment she felt about her haircut. She said, “I know that your hair is not what we wanted it to look like. Your hair will grow out fast. I promise that we will never try to perm it again. But in spite of your haircut, you are a beautiful girl. Don’t let anyone tell you anything different.”



*My weight bothers me each and every day;
even every minute of every day.*

Her mom’s words fortified a place deep in Maylee’s soul that day. She remembers that lesson from the mirror more than she remembers the shame and teasing she experienced while her hair grew out. You see, focusing on the truth and getting the right perspective from her mom created deep self-confidence that helps Maylee even today to fight the kind of body disgrace that plagues others.

In the same way, God asks you to stand before the mirror with Him by your side. He wants to show you the beauty that He intended, the beauty you overlook. He wants to acknowledge the parts of you that are unappreciated by the culture you live in. He gives you the same advice Maylee’s mother gave her. He shows you that indeed you are beautiful.

In my experience as a counselor and now as a minister to women, I have discovered that the only true healing for body-image issues is a spiritual healing. This book is intended to present you with God’s words about your body. When His Word pierces your soul (Hebrews

4:12), it inoculates you from the shouts, whispers, and inferences that your body is not good enough.

What is it you most dislike about yourself? I want you to mention only one thing. I know it won't take you long to answer this question: "If you could change one thing about your body, what would it be?" Turn to your journal or notebook and write down your answer. Now I invite you to offer to God that one thing you mentioned for His healing. Pray this prayer as you begin this study:

Dear heavenly Father,

I want to ask you right now to help me receive Your truth about my body. I offer my _____ (body part I most want to change) to You. Help me see the truth about why You gave me this body. I invite You to fill me with Your Holy Spirit. Let Your Word bring healing from a negative body image. Help me become an agent of truth regarding body image in my world.

In Jesus' name. Amen.

Why Don't We Like Ourselves?

We overemphasize how we look. We succumb to expensive and even life-threatening measures to look good. While a man may wear a hair-piece, put shoulder pads in his coat, or wear elevated shoes, women are more likely to have cosmetic surgery, starve, or throw up. Some women literally put their lives at risk for the sake of beauty.

This is not just a twenty-first-century problem. For generations women have been body haters. Think of the corsets women wore in Civil War times. And did you know that during the Elizabethan era some women would actually take a little arsenic to achieve the pale appearance that was considered beautiful at that time?

How did we get this way? Many believe that women have achieved power through the ages because of their beauty and sexual attractiveness. For example, one of the best-known Egyptian queens, Cleopatra, rose to power because of her sensuality, which gave her influence over the men who ruled the world.

Though the problem of women disliking their bodies is nothing new, the number of victims is on the increase. Some blame the media, which plaster perfectly shaped and toned women in our faces constantly. Others say it's the outright sinful preoccupation we have with ourselves. Whatever the reason, we can be certain that negative body image is impoverishing the lives of women and girls across our nation and certain other parts of the world. Let's look at a few statistics:

- Americans had 10.2 million plastic surgery procedures in 2005, up 11 percent from 2004.¹
- More than half of teenage girls are, or think they should be, on diets. They want to lose some or all of the 40 pounds that females naturally gain between ages 8 and 14. About 3 percent of these teens go too far, becoming anorexic or bulimic.²
- The *Medical Journal of Psychiatry* conducted a general population study on men with eating disorders and found that 2 percent of men, compared to 4.8 percent of women, have anorexia or bulimia.³
- The average American woman is five feet four inches tall and weighs 140 pounds, while the average American model is five feet 11 inches tall and weighs 117 pounds. Most fashion models are thinner than 98 percent of American women.⁴
- Eighty percent of American women are dissatisfied with their appearance.⁵
- Female athletes are six times more likely to develop eating disorders than are other women.⁶

- Eighty percent of women say that the images of women on television and in movies, fashion magazines, and advertising make them feel insecure.⁷
- Forty-two percent of girls in first through third grades want to be thinner.⁸
- Eighty-one percent of 10-year-olds are afraid of being fat.⁹
- Without treatment, up to 20 percent of people with serious eating disorders die. With treatment, that number falls to 2 to 3 percent.¹⁰
- The average woman spends two and a half years of her life washing, styling, cutting, coloring, crimping, and straightening her hair at home and in the salon.¹¹

I doubt that you can think of 10 women among your acquaintances who would say they are very satisfied with their appearance.

The Bride of Solomon Was Not Comfortable in Her Own Skin

Even the bride of Solomon had a poor body image. She lamented, “Do not stare at me because I am dark, because I am darkened by the sun. My mother’s sons were angry with me and made me take care of the vineyards; my own vineyard I have neglected” (Song of Songs 1:6).

✎ How did she feel about her body? (Remember to write your answer in your journal.)

She hated her dark skin. Today many Caucasians are literally dying (from skin cancer) to be tan. This raises a fundamental point: Body image is more about what’s in our heads than how we look on the outside. For example, I could look in the mirror and think I look great,

then notice an hour later that I had a piece of lettuce stuck between my teeth. For an hour, I thought I looked great because my feeling was based on subjective information—what I thought I looked like, rather than objective information—what I actually looked like.

Now let's look at Song of Songs 2:1: "I am a rose of Sharon, a lily of the valleys."

✿ How does the bride of Solomon feel about her body now?
What caused the change?

This woman's body image has unmistakably been transformed. She could be the poster child for being comfortable in your own skin. Now she is calling herself a rose of Sharon and a lily of the valleys. Her dark skin didn't change; she didn't have bleaching techniques in those days to get skin the "right" shade. What changed was her thinking: She began to believe she was beautiful.

Yes, she had a man in her life who thought she was absolutely amazing. (You can read chapter 1 of Song of Songs and see why.) But some women reading this book are in relationships with men who constantly put them down for their weight or other body flaws. If that's your situation, you will need extra support and prayers as you begin to see yourself truthfully.

However, most men, like King Solomon, don't notice the body issues women get so stuck on. Most of the men in our lives would love for us to accept ourselves and be free of body loathing. I want to assure you that the spiritual transformation I'm talking about can happen with or without the support of a man.

I'm praying that you will have the same transformation as the bride of Solomon. A cosmetic surgeon will never get these kinds of results. Only God can reach the part of a woman that needs His healing touch.

If you are willing, you can find out what it feels like to be comfortable in your own skin.



*I'm afraid to let anyone
see me without makeup.*

When it comes to changing our body image, we don't rely on objective data. Remember Susan, the 16-year-old who hated her arms? If she could focus on objective data, she would have many reasons to feel attractive. At five feet four inches in a size 9, she is not overweight. She is fit. She has developed muscle mass through her weekly drill-team workouts. She is an example of prime teenage fitness, even though all of that is at risk if she follows through on the self-destructive path of bulimia.

The reason Susan can't look at herself and appreciate these objective realities isn't because her mirror is distorted. Her body image has little to do with how she looks on the outside, but everything to do with what she thinks and feels on the inside.

Let's look at the objective data about Susan:

Age: 16

Height: 5'4"

Weight: 125 pounds

Size: 9

Hair: shoulder length, naturally blonde with a slight wave

Fitness routine: works out 10 hours a week with the
dance/drill team

Would you say:

___ she's just right.

___ she's a little too fat.

- _____ she needs to exercise more.
- _____ she overdoes the exercise, but probably looks nice anyway.
- _____ I can understand why she doesn't feel attractive enough because a size 9 is a little big.

🌸 Why do you think this way?

Read the objective data about Marybeth (the woman who refused to be in the fashion show):

Age: 49

Height: 5'6"

Weight: 150

Size: 12

Hair: short, highlighted, layered

Fitness routine: swims three times a week at the Y

Would you say:

- _____ she's just right.
- _____ she's a little too fat.
- _____ she needs to exercise more.
- _____ she overdoes exercise, but looks good anyway.
- _____ I can understand why she doesn't feel good about herself because size 12 is a little big.

🌸 Why do you think this way?

If you are participating in a discussion group, you will probably find that there are different opinions about Susan's and Marybeth's objective information. Let's consider what influenced you to develop your opinion about your body and others' bodies.

What Is Body Image?

You develop your body image slowly without stopping to think about it. You flip through magazines, watch television, and hear comments about your body from your mother, father, siblings, boyfriend or husband, coaches, and others. As you compare yourself with other women, you are developing your body image. Subtle beliefs get into your mind, such as, *My thighs shouldn't touch, my stomach must be flat, and my arms can't wag!* All these negative thoughts can lead you on a self-destructive path if you don't recognize them as unrealistic and false.

Susan can remember actually liking herself when she was in fourth grade. She was a fast runner and one day she even beat Tim Hill in a race during PE. She loved to get a new Easter dress each year and felt pretty when she joined her family at church. She used to get so many compliments about her naturally curly hair that it was embarrassing.

I wish my nose was symmetrical.



It wasn't until sixth grade that Susan started to worry about her body. That summer at camp, her counselor skipped dessert and ritualistically performed 130 sit-ups every night. Susan's girlfriends at school, who had once avoided boys like the plague, now based their worth and dignity on whether guys liked them.

Susan didn't like boys the same way her friends did, but she felt pressure to have a boyfriend. When the guy she chose, Andrew, told his friend, who told Susan's friend that he liked her back, she felt exhilarated. But when Andrew made fun of her wobbly thighs, she felt crushed. That's the first time Susan remembers disliking her body.

Marybeth had to think hard about when she had ever liked her

body. She couldn't remember a time. It wasn't because she was older and her memory was fading. She literally began hating her body when she was four years old and her stepfather started molesting her. She both hated and loved the man who hurt her, but she only hated the body to which it happened. In her four-year-old mind she reasoned, *There must be something wrong with me for him to treat me this way.*

You would think with that kind of body hate Marybeth would have ignored her body and never tried to look good. Actually, the opposite was true. She spent her time trying to make herself look good enough, but in her mind she never succeeded. She continually kept up with the latest fashions, and although she didn't dress seductively or extravagantly, she was an expert in gaining approval for how she dressed. It's just that the approval was never accepted—it bounced right off her.



*I feel like I would lose everything—my husband,
my friends, my life—if I gained one pound.*

Christine, the woman who took Marybeth's place in the fashion show, has many painful memories from her childhood about being overweight. She dreaded the change of seasons because it meant one thing—shopping for new clothes with Mom. She remembers the embarrassment she felt as her mom dragged her from store to store asking if they carried half sizes.

Christine started her first diet in third grade. She desperately wanted to please her mom, but she never succeeded. In fact, just last year she realized that the yo-yo diets she had been on all her life were attempts to make her mother accept and like her.

Ironically, when Christine turned 30, she and her mom wore the same dress size, and her mother finally accepted Christine and loved

to shop for her. Having her mother's approval wasn't the answer to Christine's self-rejection, though. Her body image changed when she finally let God's opinion of her body be the one that mattered. The new exercise plan she is starting is the first time she has ever done anything positive for her body for the right reason. She is attempting to take care of the body God gave her, rather than trying to get her mom's approval or fit into a size 8.

You may be thinking, *I can see how a negative body image could develop from being subjected to the kind of sexual trauma Marybeth went through, but why would I have cause to hate myself?* That's what I want you to think about in this next exercise—your own life experiences. I'll ask you to write down memories you have of yourself at different life stages. Perhaps you've never consciously thought about why you dislike the reflection in the mirror. It is important that you become conscious of exactly what is driving your dissatisfaction with your body in order to overcome it.

This may be a very difficult exercise for you. Most of us try to avoid these painful memories. You will have to trust me that stirring them up will be good for you in the end. As you write, you may feel pain; you may even cry. On the other hand, if you have hardened yourself, you may not feel anything. In either case, it is important that you attempt to survey memories you have of your body during these life stages. We'll work on how to resolve your feelings (or get in touch with your feelings) in future chapters.

As you answer the following questions, try to picture yourself and how you looked at the time. If you have photos of yourself at each stage, they will aid you in remembering how you felt. Leave some blank space in your journal after each stage of development. As you read this book, you may have more memories that you will want to record in the blank spaces.

I encourage you to ask God to help you remember any painful experiences so that you can receive healing. Now let's get started on the exercise.

Body History Reflection: A Chronological Survey

As you read through the stages below, think back to how you felt about your body, and write down memories you have of those particular stages of development. Pay special attention to recalling specific statements people made about your body or their bodies. For example, "My mom told me that after I was born, she gained 60 pounds." "My father told me he felt sorry for me because my skin was too dark."

I've discovered that sometimes body-image problems are linked to unintentional messages children received while undergoing medical procedures that they didn't understand. I will ask you whether you experienced any unusual medical procedures during your childhood and to consider any negative messages you may have received.

Stage One: Preschool Years, Ages 0–6

- How did your parents react to your body size?
- How did your parents care for your bodily and emotional needs?
- How did you discover that you were different from males? Did you undergo any major medical procedures?
- How much did your parents or caregivers focus on their weight or fitness?
- Do you remember a feeling of being comfortable in your own skin at this stage of life?
- When you think about your body at these ages, what do you remember feeling?

Stage Two: School-Age Years, Grades 1–4

- How did you relate to peers?
- Were you called names or teased?
- Did you have friends?
- How did you feel about your performance at school?
- Did you undergo any major medical procedures?
- How did you feel about the opposite sex?
- Did you experience any physical, sexual, mental, or emotional abuse?
- How did you feel about yourself in a bathing suit?
- How did your mother react to her body?

Stage Three: Puberty Years, Grades 5–8

- How did your friends talk about their bodies or your body?
What did you think of your developing body?
- How did you feel about the onset of menstruation?
- Did you know it's normal for girls to gain 20–40 pounds at this age?
- Did your parents and siblings accept your body?
- Did you undergo any medical procedures that affected the way you felt toward your body?
- What did you like or dislike about your body?

Stage Four: High School Years, Grades 9–12

- Were you the subject of teasing?
- How were you treated by the opposite sex?
- Did you think your body size or looks had an impact on dating?
- How did you handle peer pressure regarding sex, drugs, and drinking?

- Did you feel accepted by a group at school?
- How did your teachers treat you?
- Did you experience any unwanted sexual advances?
- How did you feel about being in a bathing suit?

Stage Five: Young Adult Years, Ages 18–29

- Did you feel your appearance had an impact on your vocation, dating, or marriage?
- How did you think of your body on significant birthdays? How did you feel about yourself in a bathing suit?
- How did you feel about your body on your wedding day? How did you feel about your body during or after pregnancy?
- Were there any life events (divorce, job loss, and so on) that caused you to dislike your body or blame the way you look?

Stage Six: Adult Years, Ages 30–55

- Use some of the questions from above.
- How did you feel about your changing metabolism, gray hair, wrinkles?

Stage Seven: Senior Adult Years, 55+

- Use some of the questions from above.
- Have major health issues affected how you see your body?
- How have you adjusted to changes related to aging?

✦ In doing the exercise above, did you discover any experiences that may have contributed to your poor body image?

We will come back to these memories in later chapters. For now, it is good that you are starting to consider why you feel the way you do

about your body. Keep praying and asking God to reveal any hurt that you are harboring and need His healing for. As other memories come to mind, write them down in this section of your journal.

What Is a Healthy Body Image?

Of the three women we've just talked about, Christine is the one with the healthiest body image. Yet, in the world's view she would be considered the least attractive because she is overweight. Why does she have a healthy body image? Read about what a healthy body image is, and you will better understand.

A healthy body image is characterized by three major components: respect, care, and perspective. A woman with a healthy body image respects her body, takes care of her body, and keeps her body in perspective.

A Healthy Body Image Involves Respect

In Psalm 139:13–16 David is referring to his body:

For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful, I know that full well. My frame was not hidden from you when I was made in the secret place. When I was woven together in the depths of the earth, your eyes saw my unformed body. All the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be.

✎ Why is David in awe of his body?

✎ Have you ever pondered your body in the same way?

✎ Write a psalm to God telling Him why you are in awe of the way you were made.

A healthy body image involves a sense of respect for the miracle your body is. According to Romans 1:20, the reality that there is a God who designed the universe is all around us every day: “For since the creation of the world God’s invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse.” Even if your body has been handicapped, it is still a miraculous testimony of God our Creator.

Do you realize that numerous organs, blood vessels, muscles, and bones are involved when you just move your index finger up and down? A person with a healthy body image respects the reality that God gave her a body as a gift. Others may not think the way you look is “all that,” but God created you, and to Him you are “all that” and more! If you have a healthy body image, you will respect that you are fearfully and wonderfully made by a caring and loving God who has a plan for your life. If you feel ugly and poorly made, you have an unhealthy body image.

✎ Check yourself:

_____ I know I have body flaws, but I recognize God made me the way I am.

_____ I still don’t accept how I look.

A Healthy Body Image Involves Care

Satan knows that we look out for our bodies. In Job 2, after Satan had destroyed all of Job’s material possessions and children, Satan approached God and the two had this conversation:

Then the LORD said to Satan, “Have you considered my servant Job? There is no one on earth like him; he is blameless and upright, a man who fears God and shuns evil. And he still maintains his integrity, though you incited me against him to ruin him without any reason.”

“Skin for skin!” Satan replied. “A man will give all he has for his own life. But stretch out your hand and strike his flesh and bones, and he will surely curse you to your face.” (Job 2:3–5)

✦ What was Satan’s excuse for why Job had not given up on God?

✦ Do you have a natural desire to protect your body from harm?

Satan knows that our natural, healthy instincts are to care for our bodies. When we are thinking of our bodies correctly, we won’t allow harm to come to them. We will eat well, and we will get proper exercise and rest. We won’t overwork ourselves to the point of exhaustion.

Are you doing anything to your body to harm it? Do you care for your body correctly? If you are not taking care of your body, you do not have a healthy body image.

✦ Check yourself:

_____ I eat right, and get some exercise and proper rest. I don’t overwork my body.

_____ I don’t follow the advice I know is best about how to eat and exercise.

A Healthy Body Image Involves Perspective

In 2 Corinthians 10:12, Paul speaks of the futility of comparing ourselves to others: “We do not dare to classify or compare ourselves with some who commend themselves. When they measure themselves by themselves and compare themselves with themselves, they are not wise.”

❧ Is it foolish to compare our physical attributes with others?
Why or why not?

The world measures men and women by their looks, their talents, their money, and their power. God has a completely different appraisal system. We aren't supposed to measure ourselves by other people. We should measure ourselves only by God's Word. The following passage from 1 Corinthians is referring to the work of the kingdom, but it could also apply to our physical attributes.

And in the church God has appointed first of all apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then workers of miracles, also those having gifts of healing, those able to help others, those with gifts of administration, and those speaking in different kinds of tongues. Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? Do all have gifts of healing? Do all speak in tongues? Do all interpret? (1 Corinthians 12:28–30)

❧ How can your physical attributes affect the work God has given you to do in the kingdom?

❧ Do you think you need to have certain physical attributes or personality attributes to serve in the kingdom?

✿ If someone has “nicer” attributes than you, how should you feel about that person? About yourself?

God didn't create all of us to fit the latest concept of beautiful. We define beauty by our specific culture in a specific time. Many famous beauties of past centuries are not considered beautiful today. Marilyn Monroe, a beauty icon of the 1950s, would be considered overweight in our culture. Many beauties of today may not be considered beautiful in the future.

Look at how God created people. He created variety. He made different shades of skin color, a variety of eye and hair colors. People are a rainbow of beauty in the eyes of the Creator. It's our differences that make us beautiful. If you can't see the unique beauty in yourself and others, then you don't have a healthy body image.

✿ Check yourself:

_____ I can see beauty in myself and others. I don't define beauty by comparison to runway models.

_____ I feel jealous when I see others who are more attractive than I am.

One of the most profound quotes I use to explain healthy body image is about spiritual truth, but it applies beautifully to the place where I long for you to arrive. George MacDonald said, “I would rather be what God chose to make me than the most glorious creature that I could think of; for to have been thought about, born in God's thought, and then made by God, is the dearest, grandest and most precious thing in all thinking.”¹² I'm hoping that you will be able to make this same bold proclamation about living in your own skin.

Discussion Questions

1. Have you ever felt uncomfortable with the way you look as the bride of Solomon did in Song of Songs 1:6? Why do you think women obsess over their body flaws rather than enjoy the things that are right with their bodies?
2. What changed for the bride of Solomon so that she felt comfortable enough to call herself a rose of Sharon in Song of Songs 2:1? Did her skin color change?
3. Go around the room and share the most attractive physical characteristic (eyes, height, nose, hair, etc.) of the person on your right.
4. Go around the room and share the most positive character quality (kindness, generosity, thoughtfulness, etc.) of the person on your left.
5. Go around the room and state the physical characteristic you like best about yourself and thank God for it; for example, “Thank You, God, that You gave me big brown eyes.”
6. How do you think God wants us to think about our bodies based on the information in Psalm 139:15–16? (God knows our frame. He oversaw our creation. God knows how long we will live in these bodies while on earth. Before we ever saw ourselves, He knew it all!)

Practical Makeover Tips

It's time for some practical application regarding the issues we've been discussing. I hope this information is a helpful guide as you make important decisions about caring for your body.

Make Over Your Clothes

Beth began to face the facts. She had spent way too much time, money, and effort on her body. She would never have imagined it before, but when she tallied up her receipts for the year, she discovered that she had spent 25 percent of the family income on clothes, most of them for herself. Financial expert Ron Blue recommends that your family budget include 3 to 4 percent for clothing.¹ Something definitely needed to change.

For Beth, clothing was a very significant issue. What about you? You should have the right kind of clothes for the workplace, church activities, and the social gatherings you attend. There may be times that you'll spend extra money on a special outfit. But ultimately, do you worship God or worship your clothes?

My daughter has learned how to get me to buy something for her—she searches the paper for sales. It is important for me to make sure I get a good bargain on the clothes I buy. I think something in the female chromosome makes women love to get a bargain. It is also a way for me to be a good steward of the money God has entrusted to me. I have many friends who like sales but who wouldn't sacrifice quality in

APPENDIX 2

How to Help Others Develop a Healthy Body Image

Do you know a woman or girl who never makes a negative comment about her body? Probably not. The problem of negative body image is epidemic in American culture and the developed world. Christian women who have a healthy body image can be a beacon to others in the way they talk about, treat, and honor their bodies.

I've had opportunities to talk to secular audiences on this subject. Afterward, I am almost always approached by someone who asks if I'm a Christian. That person can see that there is something deeper than just human reason and knowledge that gives me the foundation for the information I share.

You may not teach or speak on this subject, but there are opportunities for you to get involved in making the world a safer place for girls and women. If you are a mother, your realm of influence is great. You need to be thoughtful, not only about the example you set for a healthy body image, but also regarding the words you say about your children's bodies. You can contact advertisers and boycott products that are specifically degrading to women. You also have an influence on the women in your social circles. Let's look at ways you can be challenged to be an agent of change in your world.

APPENDIX 3

Help for Those with Deeper Issues

This study may have made you realize just how much a poor body image has affected your life. As you have probably noticed, it's rare to find anyone who doesn't think that something is unattractive about her body. This is a common problem. But some problems associated with poor body image need more help and attention than this book and a study group can provide. Of course, not everyone has developed addictions and destructive behaviors due to a poor body image, but don't feel discouraged if you have. Do get help for yourself and those you love. Though these are deeper problems, they are not unsolvable problems.

Eating Disorders

Compulsive Overeating

Women who find themselves addicted to food feel that they are moral failures. They have a sense that if they had more self-discipline this problem would instantly go away. They are ashamed to get help and many times don't feel that they deserve help.

Help is available. Maybe you feel that you've tried everything and there is just something different about you. That is not true. Jeremiah 29:11–14 promises that God has a plan for you and that you will find it when you search for Him with all your heart. God does want you to learn how to turn your addiction to food into dependence on Him.

APPENDIX 4

Tips for Group Leaders

If you are leading this group, you probably already have experience leading women's groups, so I'll make only a few remarks specific to this particular topic.

Remember that body image is a painful issue for some women. Many have been deeply wounded by the comments of friends, family members, and even strangers. It is, therefore, extremely important that the women in your group feel a sense of safety and acceptance. No one should ever feel put down. As the leader, you will need to address any inappropriate comments so that spirits aren't wounded further. Make it a ground rule in the first meeting that no one will criticize another's appearance.

The questions in each chapter will be most beneficial if the women answer them in their journals. There isn't space in the book to write their answers, and the introduction suggests that they buy a notebook or journal in which they can keep their personal answers. We decided to publish the book this way so that readers would feel free to be totally honest. It also gives them a chance to share the book with a friend or relative without fearing that personal feelings or opinions are being exposed.

Participants will get the most out of the book if they take the time to read the scriptures (most of which are included right in the text) and write answers in their journals. They do not have to share anything from their journals in group time, but they may want to bring them to the meetings to make notes or to refer to if they do want to share from them.

Notes

Introduction

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Chapter 1

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2. ANRED Anorexia Nervosa and Related Eating Disorders, located at www.anred.com.
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9. Ibid.
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12. Located at <http://www.christianity.co.nz/esteem4.htm>.