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What to Do When Body Image Interrupts Sexual Satisfaction

by Kelsey Hamilton

Looking at myself in the mirror, I frown at my appearance. I suck in my cheeks and force my broad shoulders back in an attempt to be more petite. Another glance in the mirror and I recognize how silly I look. These futile attempts to pose have made me look more like a pompous flamingo rather than the slender and flawless Hollywood star I saw on TV tonight.

Feeling defeated, I slump onto my bed. It has been one of those days where my body, despite all the good it does for me, has not been “good enough.” I become more withdrawn as concerns about my appearance crowd my mind.

My husband, unaware of my inner turmoil, approaches me in a loving yet mischievous way that suggests he would like to be more than just cuddly tonight. I dodge his affections like a bullet and go sit alone on the couch. The last thing I want to be is intimate right now! How could I when I have done nothing but hate my body all day? I know I am not alone in this experience.

In a study with a national sample of more than 12,000 adults, they found that while body dissatisfaction is a common occurrence for most people, women are more likely to struggle with body dissatisfaction than men.¹ Further research shows that the women who struggle with body dissatisfaction can develop psychological and emotional problems such as low self-esteem and depression² and can also experience a decrease in sexual satisfaction³ and marital satisfaction.⁴

Here are two prominent ways body image influences sexual satisfaction:

First, mental distraction. When women struggle with negative body image, they can find that being mentally present during sex is interrupted by mental distraction or non-sexual thoughts, such as fears of sexual inadequacy, concerns about appearance, or body self-consciousness.⁵

These women may experience these mental distractions negatively impacting their sexual esteem, sexual satisfaction, and orgasm consistency.⁷

Unfortunately, mental distraction not only impacts the woman but her partner as well. This lack of mental focus during intimacy can decrease sexual responsiveness—a key intimacy-building behavior that includes paying attention and responding to a partner’s needs during sex⁵—and can detract from the emotional connection during this shared, intimate experience.⁶

Second, sexual confidence. Body dissatisfaction can also impact the sexual confidence that is developed through spousal acceptance and positive sexual experiences⁹ and includes confidence in openly communicating with a partner about sexuality⁹ and feeling self-assured in one’s sexual abilities and qualities.⁷ This kind of confidence is crucial to sexuality as women with higher sexual confidence are more likely to engage in frequent sexual activity and have increased closeness with their partner.⁸

On the other hand, studies have shown that women who have low sexual confidence are more likely to avoid sexual encounters with their partners and are less likely to initiate sexual intimacy.⁹

What Can Be Done?

Some may suggest exercise, a change in diet, or even a new wardrobe as solutions for negative body image. While these suggestions may provide a boost, improving one’s *mindset* and *personal perspective* is of greater importance for overall body image. Even women with “ideal” body types and healthy habits can be affected by the mental and emotional aspects of negative body image. So, the solution is not necessarily to lose weight or buy more cosmetics. Here are some suggestions for developing better body image.

Remember that nobody’s perfect, so avoid comparisons. With social media being so accessible and prominent, it is easy to compare one’s appearance to others. However, this habit of comparison (whether digitally or in person) should be avoided. Research has shown that the seemingly “harmless” practice of comparison can actually increase further personal body dissatisfaction¹⁰ and decrease one’s body appreciation and self-esteem.¹¹ Instead of comparing your body to others, remember that humans are very diverse; they come in all shapes and



Image by Nastya Gepp from Pixabay

sizes. Embrace the unique beauty that your body has to offer.¹² Women who expressed high body appreciation experienced greater sexual assertiveness, sexual satisfaction, and less body self-consciousness during sex.¹³ Although this is a mindset that takes time and effort to develop, the benefits that come to one's personal well-being and sexual well-being are worth the effort.

Look for spousal support. Women who have partners that are critical of their spouses' body or are prone to comparing their spouses' body to "ideal" images they have seen in the media are more likely to struggle with body dissatisfaction.¹³ On the other hand, research has found that when one's spouse is aware of one's needs (e.g., to feel loved, desirable, and beautiful), positive consequences, including higher relationship satisfaction,¹⁴ increase. So, when struggling with body image issues, the presence of a supportive and loving spouse can meet emotional and mental

needs and help combat the struggles that come with body dissatisfaction.

Be grateful for your body. An experiment included in *The Journal of Body Image* found that women who engaged in five minutes of gratitude reflection (i.e. thinking of things they were grateful for such as their life, specific body aspects, etc.) after being

“You are worth the joy that can come from these efforts to improve intimacy.”

exposed to images of thin, female models were less likely to experience body dissatisfaction than those who did not engage in gratitude post exposure.¹⁵ This is, in part, due to the positive mood and emotion enhancement that comes from gratitude.¹⁴ Practicing an attitude of gratitude towards one's body and in general has potential to increase one's appreciation of one's physical

gifts and capacities and to help defuse feelings of body dissatisfaction.

At times, my body dissatisfaction has prevented me from being fully intimate with my husband. These have not been easy moments for us as a couple. However, as I have practiced developing body appreciation, I have experienced less mental distraction and gained higher sexual confidence. But developing body appreciation is not just for me. With studies suggesting that about 85% of women struggle with body dissatisfaction,¹⁶ it is crucial for women to start changing the way they view themselves and their bodies through the development of body appreciation.

Although these changes do not happen overnight, they can lead to greater joy and satisfaction in the intimate relationship. You are worth the joy that can come from these efforts to improve intimacy and achieve a greater measure of happiness with your partner in your intimate experiences.

Endnotes

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