

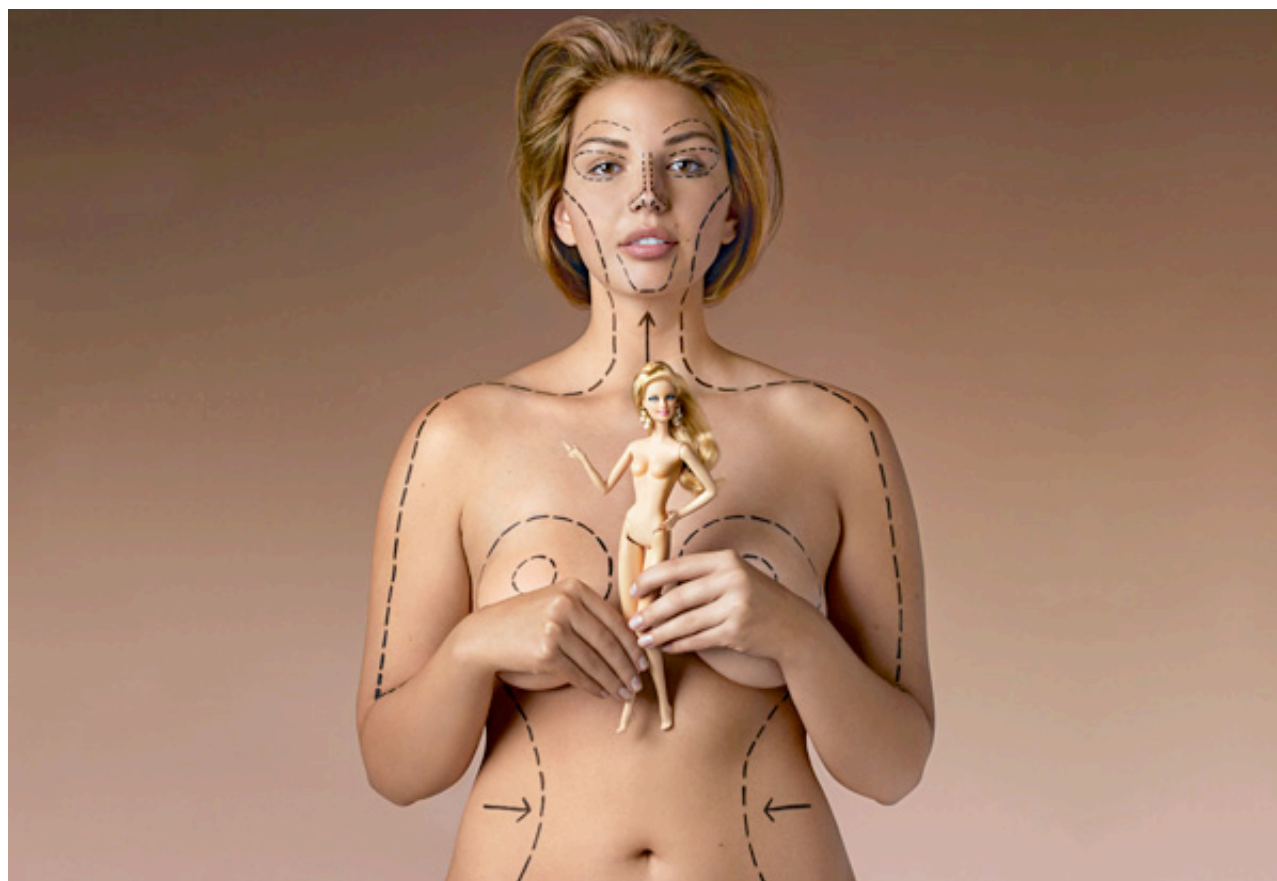


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Dear Every Woman I Know, Including Me

By Amy Bloom

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There's never a better time to start loving yourself than right now. Author Amy Bloom tells women everywhere how.

A few years ago, I was at a lunch for the launch of a TV show called *How to Look Good Naked*. (Do I need to say that the host was a slim gay man and the soon-to-be-almost-naked were all women? Can we even imagine a show in which men try to improve their appearance before the big reveal in the boudoir?) The middle-aged woman sitting next to me almost spat out her white wine. "How to look good naked?" she said. "Wear clothes!"

I wish that helped. But after 58 years of being female, I've come to the conclusion that a healthy, positive body image is hard to find, and neither caftans nor liposuction nor photoshopping is the answer.

This seems to be one of those puzzles you can tackle from any angle, a Rubik's cube of bad feelings, unhealthy attitudes, and unforeseen consequences. (It's great that we shifted away from the preceding centuries' proscription against women exercising and getting sweaty. But who knew we'd wind up in a world in which we're

expected to weight train ourselves back into "bikini ready" shape six weeks after giving birth?)

This is not a tirade against the tabloids or the beauty industry. The tabloids produce crap, but people (mostly women) buy it: pictures of the overweight (they've let themselves go!), the enhanced and shapely (you, too, can look like this if you eat garlic and grapefruit!), and the shame-on-her-for-getting-too-skinny (as if no tabloid editor can imagine how a six-foot starlet came to think 130 pounds is obese). The beauty industry sees opportunity and shoots for it. The question is, how do we keep ourselves from being the opportunity, from seeing the mirror—and food, and other women—as the enemy? And how do we make all this stuff less terrible for our daughters, our nieces, the 19-year-old who feels her life will be ruined without breast implants?

I don't expect little girls and teenagers to fend for themselves in this matter; we have to save them and—just as if we're on a plunging airplane—we have to start by saving ourselves. We need to make friends with the mirror. Even if it's DIY aversive therapy, in which you look at yourself in the mirror for one minute one day, then two the next, then three, you have to be able to bear the sight of yourself. (Must you bend over a compact and closely examine the drooping underside of your chin? No.) You cannot be a healthy person, let alone hope for healthy children, if you sigh and moan every time you encounter your own image, eat a cookie, or see an airbrushed supermodel on a billboard. Even if it amounts to wholesale pretending—go pretend. Walk around pretending to be a woman who likes her body. Pretend you think your thighs are not disgusting appurtenances but normal, flesh-covered limbs that help you get from place to place. Likewise your not-so-taut arms and not-so-flat tummy. Because every step toward self-love you take, and every inch of confidence you give someone's daughter, makes the world a better place.

So stop. Stop talking to the girls in your life about "healthy eating" if what you actually mean is, "Your 11-year-old stomach isn't flat and it freaks me out." They will hear what you mean; they will not believe a dinner of four grilled shrimp and a spoonful of blueberries is really healthy. (Psychology research shows that even 5-year-old girls know a diet when they see it.) Stop criticizing other women's bodies for sport or to soothe yourself.

And start. Start admiring aloud the things you really do admire. Show what you love and value. If you think Marta of Brazil is fantastic, put up her poster and get a group together to watch women's soccer. If Ruth Bader Ginsburg or Hillary Clinton or Aung San Suu Kyi is your hero, say so.

I take these small steps myself—most days—not out of virtue, but out of vanity. My hobby is watching people, and what I see is that even the most Botoxed, lipo'd, lifted woman cannot conceal herself. If you hate yourself, it shows through every cream and cure there is. Until we stop trying to exorcise our own imperfect selves, driving out normal physical traits as if they were signs of pathology, there will always be some misery in the eyes that nothing can hide.

You are imperfect, permanently and inevitably flawed. And you are beautiful.

Amy Bloom is the author, most recently, of [Where the God of Love Hangs Out](#) (Random House).

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