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Do you like your body?

If anything is sacred, the human body is sacred.

– Walt Whitman

A recent poll surveyed a thousand adolescent girls asking them if they “liked their bodies.” Only 14 percent of the girls polled answered “Yes.” All the others said “No.” If the poll is a representative of all teenage girls, that means that 86 percent of young women don’t like their bodies. How unfortunate.

Sadly, I think the survey may have merit. Most of my friends in junior high and high school wished they were either taller or shorter, and wanted to either lose weight, or gain weight. Some with smaller breasts wished their chests were bigger, while those who had developed larger breasts said they wished they were less endowed. Some with curly hair wanted straight hair, while those with straight hair said they’d gladly trade their straight locks for a little natural curl. My issue was my feet. My feet were so big, I told my friends that I’d go

out with a guy only if his shoe size was bigger than mine!

It seemed to me that just about all of us girls had a “wish list” of things we would like to change in one way or another when it came to our bodies. And you know, we were quite sure that practically all the guys we knew wanted to be taller and to have bigger muscles, but not one of them ever admitted it. Never ever did we hear a boy openly complain or express discontent about his body.

Why don't we girls appreciate our bodies more than we do? Could it be that we:

- Compare ourselves to the media image of the supermodel – an extraordinarily tall, rail-thin waif with perfect features and a flawless complexion, glamorous hair impeccably styled in the latest trend, and dressed in the newest fashion – a near-impossible standard to achieve in real life, so we feel inadequate, inferior in comparison?
- Allow the insensitive and critical comments made by a few of our peers to influence the way we see ourselves?

- Don't know how to accentuate or play up our best features while downplaying or offsetting those we don't like as much, especially those that cannot be changed – such as our height or bone structure?
- Don't take care of ourselves – like adhering to a healthy diet and exercising regularly – and so we are not as healthy as we could be?

We girls need to understand the pressures that influence how we see ourselves and make the choice to care for ourselves in healthy ways.

**Pressures influencing how much you like your body:
I've got to be (Barbie doll) perfect**

I remember a game my friends and I played in junior high when we girls were at a slumber party. It was called “Pick a Part,” and we each picked a good “part” belonging to another girl. I wanted Tami's nose; she wanted my legs. Karen wanted Suzee's chest, while Suzee wanted Karen's chest. I always found this “game” insightful: While some of the “owners” didn't especially appreciate or like a certain part, others would have gladly traded with that person because we found the

body part they didn't like desirable – and wouldn't mind having it for ourselves.

What is your standard of “perfect”? If you could describe the “perfect you” what would that be? I have friends who – because they compare themselves to looking like the “perfect model,” as in the retouched photo of a magazine image (often a computerized image) – judge themselves harshly. The model in the magazine is an unrealistic standard. Don't buy into the “one size fits all” ideal when it comes to sizing up your beauty.

While the media may sometimes seem to be saying otherwise – “perfect” is pretty subjective. What is appealing to some people may not be to others. My friend Lena, who is Mexican-American, loves to watch the music videos on Latin American television stations. “Latin Americans are so-o-o beautiful!” she exclaimed to me after watching one particular awards show. “In Latin American communities, round hips and having a little meat on your bones is considered sexy, very appealing – much more acceptable than where I go to school. I'm sure I'm considered ten to fifteen pounds overweight by my classmates, but in my family and in my community,

I'm the perfect size." Lena's comment has merit. Beauty is impossible to stereotype. What one culture finds "most beautiful" is sure to be different from what another finds most appealing.

For the most part, "perfect" is determined by our own reference point. If six-foot, three-inch champion volleyball player Gabrielle Reece's daughter were to start kindergarten and find her female teacher was five foot five, would she see her mother as tall, or her teacher as short? And which would she most likely assume to be the more desirable height? Probably she would consider her mother's height more "beautiful."

If beauty is in the eyes of the beholder, let yourself be that beholder when it comes to your own standard of beauty. It's a real key to feeling good about who you are.

Caring for yourself means not falling victim to comparing your body to someone else's. Believe me, I know how this is easy to say and difficult to practice, especially when teens are constantly bombarded with the message that we must be "beautiful," and then blitzed with the products that will make us "beautiful."

The message seems to imply that if we are the right height and size, and if we acquire the right things – the right makeup, the right clothes, the right accessories and so on – we, too, will look like Barbie. And this media-hyped, image-saturated message comes with the warning that should we fail to do this, we will never get a date, never have friends, never get the job of our dreams. Never... never... never. It's endless.

All these messages can be harmful to our sense of self and to appreciating our own individual brand of beauty. It's not as if we come off an assembly line, all resembling each other. We're all sizes, shapes and colors. You've seen it for yourself: One eighth-grade girl may be five-feet, seven-inches tall, and another four-feet, seven-inches. One girl may have brown eyes; another has green eyes. One may have a large bone structure, the other small and delicate bones. One may have an oval face, another a heart-shaped face. How silly to think there is a "perfect," a standard other than our own.

There are many forms of beauty. The goal is to appreciate yours.

Others will like me better if...

Friends and classmates can be tough critics. There will be those who feel they have the right to criticize or make snippy comments about how you dress, the way you look, your hairstyle, or the size or shape of your body. Don't allow their remarks – no matter how inconsiderate, rude or hurtful – to cause you to stop being your own best friend. I'm not saying that wanting others to think you're cool isn't important, because it is. But it's also important not to do those things that put your health and well-being at risk just to fit someone else's standard of cool.

You sometimes think, "I'll have more friends, or win so-and-so's friendship or be liked more if only I..." Fitting the mold of someone else's ideal is self-defeating. It's erroneous to believe that you will be better liked, more popular, or win the approval of the most popular boy or girl if only you would lose weight, or gain weight, or were taller or shorter, or had a great tan – or whatever. There will always be those who think you would look better if you were more of this or less of that. Trying to please yourself is hard enough without adding the burden of pleasing others.

There's something else you need to consider, too. Our peers may say things just to say things, or to "get to us," and sometimes, just as a way of relating – even flirting. Boys often don't know how to pay a compliment. They get embarrassed and when they mean to say, "You have a pretty smile," they may in fact blurt out, "What's with the big grin?" I had a boy say this to me once, and I remember thinking he thought I had a big mouth. He made similar off-the-wall statements for a full semester. I shied away from him as much as I could. When finally a girlfriend of mine told me she had heard through the grapevine – from the guy's sister (who was one of my friend's best friends) – that this boy was "madly in love" with me, you can only imagine how very surprised I was. Besides not taking everything you hear too seriously, when you start to worry too much about what others think, remind yourself that other than a few good friends, from the moment you get out of high school you will rarely see those people again. On the other hand, the way you've treated your health will stay with you year after year.

Play today, pay tomorrow: health is forever

The most important friend and protector your body can have – and the one who is with your body right up to the end – is you. Don't abuse it by doing things that will put your health in jeopardy. Take good care of yourself.

I'll never forget a comment made by my teacher one day in my health education course. "For better or for worse," she instructed, "the way you take care of yourself catches up with you." It wasn't until shortly after I was out of high school that I understood the meaning of her comment. The more I was around my friends, the more I could see the effects – the wear and tear – of their lifestyles in relationship to how they took care of themselves. For example, "Sam" – short for Samantha – is a friend of mine who works as a counter agent for a major airline. She works a four o'clock to eleven o'clock night shift at the airport, a job she's held for five years. It used to be that when she got off work, she would look up her friends and party until early morning. Then she would catch a couple of hours of sleep and be off to work again by four o'clock. Sam was twenty when I first

met her. No one I knew was as party-hearty as Sam! And it shows. Already she has fine lines around her eyes from years of squinting because she smokes, and her skin looks sallow from it as well. And she has dark circles around her eyes from lack of sleep. She hasn't worked out since her days in high school, and she is out of shape and has gained weight because of it. She looks so much older than her twenty-five years.

The good news is that Sam is changing her ways. "I'm finding that staying out late and partying as often as I do is making it more difficult to function at work," she recently told a group of us girls having lunch. "And I'm beginning to gain weight because I don't eat properly, nor do I get enough exercise. And I really feel it. I just don't have the energy I did even a year ago."

I can understand that. Traveling from time zone to time zone as I sometimes do in my work seems more wearing to me now that I am twenty-five than it did when I was twenty-one! Although I refuse to admit that it's because I'm getting older, I do know that the way I take care of myself catches up with me. It used to be that I could get up early, work all day, stay up late, and

be up early again – all seemingly without hurting my ability to be alert, energetic and conquer my day. Now, I need more sleep if I'm to meet the demands of my schedule. I also need to eat a balanced diet regularly, and I need to get to the gym to work out if I am to keep my body functioning at a high level. I still do my share of late nights and partying, and my work is demanding. But at least I'm more aware of the price my body pays for the strains I inflict on it. So I make an effort to take care of myself.

Even if it's natural to take your youth and good health for granted – don't. Take good care of you.

'Buffing up' begins on the inside

When you were younger your parents saw to it that you ate well and got enough sleep. Their job as parents was to see to it that you had regular dental and medical checkups and that your growth and development were progressing in accordance with those of other kids your age. While your parents still oversee these things, there's no better time than adolescence to tune in to your body and to concern yourself with your own well-being.

Being healthy and fit begins with an attitude that says, “I want to be healthy and fit – so I’m going to take good care of myself.” Taking responsibility for your well-being is a very different attitude from “I want to look great.” There’s an important distinction between the two. I have a good friend, for example, who took the ribbing of her friends in stride when they took up smoking, and she refused to smoke – even though they relentlessly tried to get her to join in. And I know for a fact that two of the girls who are a part of that clique didn’t want to become smokers but allowed themselves to be bullied into smoking, and now both have developed the habit. One girl is up to two packs a day! I know another girl who would do almost anything to be thin. This included taking diet pills, because her friends were, even though these put her health at risk. Don’t ever do those things that are abusive to your body. Feeling great and looking good is important, but never at the expense of your health.

Be good to yourself. Treat your body like it’s your best friend for life.

From nose to toes: the amazing body machine

“My body is constantly changing,” sixteen-year-old Sandi Simon told me in a recent workshop I conducted for teens. “I want to know when the body I see in the mirror is going to be the body I’ll have for good. When will my body be done changing?” As Sandi has discovered, in addition to keeping up with the external demands of their owners, our bodies are also busy with their own agenda.

With precision timing, our bodies carry out a series of tasks (all pre-determined according to a biological time frame) designed to move the body from one stage of development to another. Be it the time to cut your first tooth or time to cut wisdom teeth, be it time for you to start your menstrual cycle or to start menopause, your body is in a continual process of doing those things that move you from a child to a senior. These life cycles are the automatic work of the body. Such is the nature of life.

Your body is an amazing machine. Respect all that it does to run efficiently.

Honoring ‘the temple’

Several girlfriends and I were about to order a quick lunch from a fast-food drive-thru. “Bria, do you want an order of French fries with your chicken salad?” Chelsea asked. Bria was the only one who hadn’t ordered fries.

“No,” she replied. “I never put fries in the temple.”

“The what?” Chelsea asked.

“The temple – my bod,” Bria replied.

Bria has a good point. Given that French fries – as delicious as they are – probably aren’t the world’s best health food for your body, she was wise to opt for not eating them.

Your body is a living organism. As such, it needs adequate food, exercise and rest to go about its business of functioning properly. Sometimes it’s not until we get sick (such as having a cold or the flu) or get hurt (such as spraining a muscle or pulling a ligament) that we realize how much we take our body’s functioning for granted. Remember how much it hurt when you pulled a muscle playing a quick game of tag with your friends? Keep your body in the best condition you can.

Taking care of yourself is about honoring your body and respecting all the demands placed on it. Just think of all that we ask of it. There's the pressure of keeping up with the tasks of daily life: work and play, school, part-time jobs, sports, hanging out with our friends, family life. Regardless of your hectic schedule or the amount of stress and strain you place upon your body, you expect it to go where you want when you want, and to perform with the necessary energy level you desire. These are big expectations. Don't make the body's job tougher than it already is.

Believe me, I know how important it is to look great and feel well when you are with your friends, especially in the teen years when you spend almost your entire time with classmates and friends. It is important to fit in and to feel like one of the group. It's a wonderful feeling to be liked and accepted because you are seen as a part of the "in" crowd. But you must never compromise your health in the process. Always do those things that support your good health and wellness.

Never sell out on you. Remember, your body is yours, and it's beautiful. Good health must never be taken for granted.

Making your health and well-being a priority means eating a balanced diet, getting enough rest and adequate exercise, and having a support system of family and friends to comfort and reassure you when you feel unsure or insecure about the many changes adolescence is sure to bring. These next chapters will show you how to better achieve all these things.