



Step 1: Understand How Your Environment Affects Your Perception of Beauty

“The art of being wise is knowing what to overlook.”

-William James

My approach to helping women, and myself, love their bodies, is to accept total, 100% responsibility for our body loathing. I don't advocate blaming the media, the fashion industry, Hollywood, or the diet industry for our feelings of shame and inadequacy about our bodies. I say this knowing that the media and our society as a whole put terrible pressure on women to look a certain way. And I know that this pressure causes much pain for women, as it did for me.

But, ultimately, the choice to love and accept our bodies is ours, and ours alone.

However.... while I don't believe in blaming our unhappiness on others, I think it's important to be aware of how the media and society frame our perceptions of our bodies. You can't get to where you want to be---self love---unless you can see where you've been: why you've been. You probably know where you've been. Now let's explore the why.

Why is about creating awareness, not blame. Awareness and blame are two totally different things. Blame is putting someone else in the driver's seat. Blame is absolving yourself of any responsibility for your beliefs or your behavior. Blame prevents you from growing, changing, and evolving. It will keep you stuck.

Awareness, by contrast, is recognizing the influences that shape your beliefs and behavior. Awareness puts you in the driver's seat. Awareness is about education, empowerment, and enlightenment. Awareness breeds mindfulness, which begets compassion, which creates acceptance; which fosters true, lasting change.

Before you embark on a path of loving your body, it's helpful to begin by examining the influences that affect your perception of yourself in today's culture.

Here's the truth: Our culture is weight obsessed, neurotic, and eating disordered. When I say eating disordered, I mean that our current ideal female prototype is that of a woman with an eating disorder: a super thin body that for 99.9% of us, is

impossible in our natural state. (Yes, there are some women who are naturally---and beautifully---that thin. They shouldn't feel badly for being who they are, just as a woman whose natural body shape is curvy or muscular---and beautiful at that size ---shouldn't feel badly for being who she is.)

One definition of an eating disorder is striving for a body that is thinner than necessary for health. That is exactly what we're facing and seeing, in magazines, actresses, musicians, celebrities, and athletes. We've faced it for so long, we're so used to these images, that we are unaware of just how screwed up this definition of beauty is. We are desensitized.

The saddest evidence of our culture's absurdity is that pregnant women aren't even allowed to look pregnant anymore---the highest compliment an expectant woman gets is that "she doesn't even look pregnant," as if the ideal maternal shape is one that disguises the growing life within. Then postpartum, as we see celebrities shrink back to their prepregnant size in record time, we feel concerned—like there is something wrong with our bodies, and not the rigid expectation for rapid change---when our weight loss is more prolonged.

This absurdity is not just about body size. As technologies improve and become more rampant, as plastic and cosmetic surgery becomes more popular and "normal," women feel great pressure to stay youthful looking. Looking your age is considered an insult. No wonder women are so hard on themselves.

It's important to be aware of how screwy modern beauty standards have become, because if you don't realize that this beauty ideal is unhealthy and unnatural, you can't have a realistic view of yourself. You'll see yourself through the lens of this absurdity, and then wonder why you feel so lacking. You'll feel like there's something wrong with you when there's nothing wrong with you: there's something wrong with these crazy, impossible beauty standards.

This is why it feels ridiculous when certain celebrities are called "fat," women who are a size 6 vs. a 2. What's absurd is the definition of beauty---calling a woman who isn't as thin as a rail curvy, fat, or large---not the woman herself. It is a case of the emperor's new clothes; we are not talking about real women's bodies. We are talking about women's bodies which are constantly, incessantly manipulated, controlled, contorted, disguised, and operated on to appear a certain way. This isn't even counting the ways

that women's bodies are altered by computers to erase flaws, pounds, lines and "imperfections" in magazines and other media.

When you come down to it, it's actually quite funny. It's ludicrous. But it's not so funny when we buy it. And for the millions of girls and tweens who don't know any better: devastating.

The first step to freedom is to become aware: to understand the absurdity of the beauty ideal. It's important that you recognize the lie: the lies that will have you believe that you aren't beautiful unless you fit an image that is unattainable, and, more importantly, unlasting. We can't fight the impermanence of our bodies: it's a losing battle. A basic truth about our bodies, and life itself, is that change is inevitable. Our appearance doesn't stay the same. Beauty fades. Our bodies age. That, my friends, is perfectly normal, and not something to be feared, to control, or to regret. Our bodies are meant to be used, not preserved. When we die, they return to dust, to the earth. We don't take them with us when we go.

While this may sound morbid, by contrast, recognizing this truth is quite liberating. It frees you from fighting what is; and what is to come. It frees you from bondage to society's insane definitions of beauty (yes, they really are insane, because they are denying reality). I am a beautiful, strong, fit, 140 pound, 33-year-old woman. I do not have to lose 15 pounds and squeeze into a size 4 to be okay. I don't have to look like I did at 18, or 25, to be okay. When I am 50, 60, and 70, I don't have to look like I do now at 33 to be okay. And, I don't have to look like a woman in a magazine to be okay, either.