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Do I Look Weird? How Girls Can Feel Better about Their Bodies

by Heather Boerner, 10.02.07

You're a teenage girl, and in addition to worrying about doing well in school and whether the person you've got a crush on knows you're alive, you're worried about your body. A lot. You dread someone seeing you naked. You think your breasts are abnormal. You have hair in strange places. You're too skinny, or too fat, or maybe you feel strangely small in some places and strangely big in others. And your vulva? You're pretty sure it's not supposed to look like that.

The only answer is to avoid any and all romantic relationships for the rest of your life — right?

Wrong, says Kathy Kater, author of *Healthy Body Image: Teaching Kids to Eat and Love their Bodies, Too!* and a therapist who treats lots of teens and adults who struggle with body image issues. In lots of cultures, girls don't experience this prolonged and torturous body judgment, Kater says.

But in this one, unfortunately, they do. Many teens — and lots of adults, too — are embarrassed about their bodies in one way or another. And that body shame can have a big effect on your life: A recent report from the American Psychological Association found that girls who focus on their bodies and spend a lot of time worrying about their perceived flaws are more likely to suffer from a variety of health problems ranging from anxiety to poor concentration.

The Question of Sex

So if you feel bad about your body, does that mean you should stay away from sex?

Yes and no. Most sexual health experts agree that you shouldn't have sex until you're ready to talk to your partner about birth control, sexually transmitted infections, and pregnancy. So let's say you feel comfortable communicating with your partner and protecting yourself from pregnancy and infection, but you still don't want anyone to see you naked. What then?

Before You Take it Off

Consider these tips:

- **Realize you don't have to feel bad.** When you hit puberty you may not know where your body begins and ends, says Kater. But after that, body shame and insecurity isn't natural. "In other cultures where girls grow up without the kinds of messages we get about how girls should see their body as an object, and where more attention is paid to helping girls embrace menstruation, the kind of body shame we experience is not inevitable," she says.

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- **Fight the messages.** Turn off TV shows where characters obsess about how they look. Don't read magazines that give you conflicting messages about loving your body and the importance of weight loss. And change the subject when your friends start talking about how fat they are.

- **Talk about it.** If your body shame gets in the way of functioning in your daily life, there are experts and adults who can help. Start with someone you trust, like a parent or an older sibling. You might also try talking with a counselor about your body concerns.

- **Look at your family.** Dig out those old family photo albums and look for family members who share your body type. You may find that what's normal for you actually comes from your genes.

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