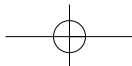
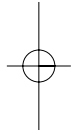
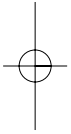
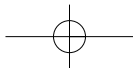
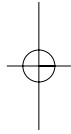
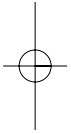


# Mirror, Mirror



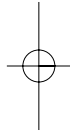
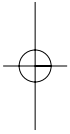




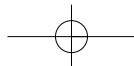
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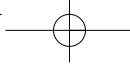
# Mirror, Mirror

**DR LINDA'S BODY  
IMAGE REVOLUTION**



HODDER  
  
MOBIUS





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A Mobius Book

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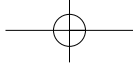
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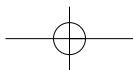
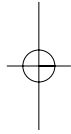
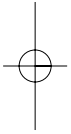
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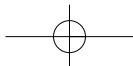
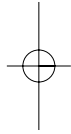
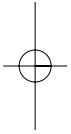
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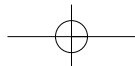
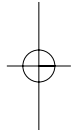
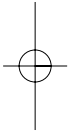
For my adorable little Jessie





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## Acknowledgements

To Emma, Helen and Rowena, my editors, thank you for the support, the helpful feedback and for always being constructive when I'm sure you could have been critical.

To Jaine, one of the most beautiful women I know (even though she claims she can't see this), thank you for insisting I write this book, for fighting my corner and for being a best friend first and a fab agent second.

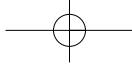
To Amy, for her amazing sense of humour and great writing talent, and to Sabine and Carl, thank you all for all your hard work and for sticking with the research long after you were fed up with the research!

To Trudy and Andreas, my wonderful parents. I really couldn't have done this without you. Thank you for dropping everything and being there for me whenever I needed you, thank you for giving so much so effortlessly. And thank you for giving me the foundations for a great body image. You mean the world to me.

To my wonderful little Jessica, thank you for your smiles and laughter and shouts of 'mommy!' while I was writing. Thank you for making me take breaks when I hadn't planned to and for showing me what beauty really looks like.

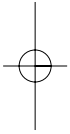
And finally to my partner in all things in life, my husband Teddy. Thank you for pondering the importance of commas



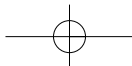


### MIRROR, MIRROR

and paragraph breaks with me, for the notes that you left on my keyboard that made my day, and for looking at me and seeing the woman I always wanted to be. I never feel more beautiful than when you look at me, you are so good for my body image . . .



**x**





## Prologue

‘So, what qualifies you to write about body image?’ my publisher asked when I pitched the idea for this book to her.

She had caught me off guard – but then I remembered how I’d got into the whole area of body image in the first place. In 1985 my cousin developed vitiligo, a progressive skin condition that causes the appearance of white patches all over the body. Almost overnight she went from being a happy, outgoing teenager to being introverted, quiet and sad. It wasn’t that the condition was that extensive or indeed that obvious, but rather that she now saw it as defining her, as making her feel less than everyone else. Thankfully, with the support of her family and her own amazing spirit, she was able to cope with the challenge of an altered appearance and now rarely gives it a second thought. But her experience in those first couple of years stayed with me, and when I was deciding on a topic for my doctoral thesis I knew I wanted to examine what my cousin had gone through.

I began to study how appearance, or more specifically our perception of the way we look, affects behaviour. I also wanted to see if I could reverse some of the negativity associated with poor body image that many people with skin conditions feel. I worked with people with vitiligo and found





## MIRROR, MIRROR

that many experienced embarrassment, low self-esteem, poor quality of life and very poor body image.

To address this, I developed a psychological therapy to help them cope and tested it using a series of experiments. The results were amazing. By changing people's perception of their illness and the way they viewed their bodies, they improved dramatically. Not only did their results show improvements in body image, quality of life and self-esteem, but they began to engage in activities and behaviours that they never had before. A fifty-six-year-old man, who had hated the marks on his arms and legs so much that he had not been able to wear short sleeves since he was nine, was finally able to wear what he wanted. He still writes to me, usually in late autumn, saying that the weather may be getting cooler but he's still wearing shorts and T-shirts because he just loves feeling free enough to 'wear whatever the heck I want to!' A twenty-nine-year-old dancer who had had no intimate relationships because of the negativity she felt towards her body was finally able to overcome this through therapy. In fact she invited me to her wedding last year and when I arrived I was happy to see her strolling around proudly showing off the little bump that was growing inside her.

The work I did with the vitiligo patients was published and received a lot of attention from the psychological community. In my private clinical practice I began to apply what I had learnt from the vitiligo clients with others. It appeared to work with people who had significant disfigurements and with those who just didn't like their bodies. Over the past eight years I have used the techniques I developed in that initial study with hundreds of people – and even on myself when I'm feeling low about my body image.



## PROLOGUE

Which brings me to the second reason that I feel qualified to write this book. As a young woman living in a society that values beauty above anything else, I too have battled with insecurities about my body. The fact that I'm not overweight doesn't mean I'm immune to anxieties about my appearance. A lot of people think that to feel good about your body you need to be a certain size but the reality is, body satisfaction and dissatisfaction come in all shapes and sizes, so whatever your size or shape, you will not necessarily escape body insecurity. I, like countless other women, have spent a lot of money on products that promised to fix something I (or the beauty industry) had decided needed fixing. That's why I wrote this book.

The concept of body image is important in terms of how we see and value ourselves yet is rarely spoken about. When we are feeling low about our appearance we are taught to look outwards for solutions rather than inwards to the thoughts and feelings that are at the core of our problems.

By understanding and developing our body image we can liberate ourselves from the shoulds, and have-tos that prevent us reaching our full potential. Body image has the capacity to affect everything from our confidence and self-esteem to the way we relate to the people around us. Taking the time to explore it and make it work for us will give us the freedom to accept ourselves and embrace life.

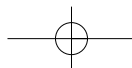
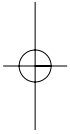
I hope that by reading this book you will learn how your thoughts and beliefs about your body control your feelings about it; and that by examining where those thoughts come from, you can take control of how you feel about the way you look. This book isn't about saying that you should throw away all your makeup and go on chocolate binges because what you look like doesn't matter: it's about



## MIRROR, MIRROR

acknowledging that what you look like is only a part of who you are, and that minimising the essence of you to the size of your bum or the colour of your hair is as ridiculous as it would be to describe your true self as a bad accordion player. Body image is one of the most powerful concepts we have for feeling good about ourselves – and the only way to improve yours is through altering the way you think about your body, not the way you look.

I hope you will enjoy this book, and that from reading it and doing the exercises you will learn to make body image work for you.



## Chapter One

### BODY IMAGE

*W*oke up stressed about what to wear – bum still looks big in everything despite six days of low-carb dieting. Opt for tent-like black dress hoping I will be taken for quirky, Bohemian artsy type and not two-stone-overweight woman obsessed with chocolate. Before work, stop at local Starbucks – they have fruit on display but can't remember if apples are carbs or not so opt for double chocolate muffin instead. Scoff down muffin quickly in the hope that the quicker it gets down my oesophagus, the more likely it is that my fat cells won't notice it.

Get on tube and take a seat. I notice that my left thigh is hanging over borders of my seat's allocated bum cushion and edging dangerously close to that of the heavily pierced punk-type boy sitting next to me. I look around to see if anyone has noticed my unruly saddlebags (am certain everyone standing is thinking awful things about how I should be jogging to work and not taking up so much space on a train – shouldn't have eaten the damn muffin!).

Finally arrive at office where three skinny girls (probably named Trixeee, Trinee and Tilleee) are discussing travel plans for summer holidays – one cracks a joke and the others laugh – am pretty sure they are laughing – not because of their facial expression, as Botox has robbed them of the ability to do anything but stare blankly into space like bored goldfish – but I can tell by the vertical motion of their ribs clearly visible under their stretchy pastel tops.

## MIRROR, MIRROR

*I sit at my desk and begin to stress about the prospect of another summer where I long for ankle-length, baggy bathing-suits to come into fashion. Am awakened from daydream by very cute accounts manager, James Blazen, asking about the Strazzo account. Instead of answering I begin to imagine what he would look like in a thong and subsequently get depressed by the fact that he would never go for me because I'm not pretty or thin enough. It hurts me that he would reject me on the basis of something as superficial as looks, so when I answer I glare at him in disgust. He looks confused and walks away, mumbling.*

*Lunch-time rolls around and I am committed to sticking to my diet (although I have already slipped up with muffin, mocha latte and a small packet of cheese and onion crisps). Go to local sandwich bar, ask for tuna salad, no bread – hairy Italian guy flirts with me (probably because I remind him of his mother). Am now more depressed than ever.*

*Go back to work, look up liposuction clinics on Internet but get discouraged when I come across section that explains exactly how fat is wrenched out of one's bum and how it may return if one doesn't remain disciplined with regard to diet and exercise. Decide to look up recipe for chocolate brownies instead, and wait for five o'clock. Drag myself home, picking up a bottle of Lambrusco and an assortment of pick-and-mix on the way. Spend the rest of the evening in front of the TV with my Lambrusco, stuffing my face and wishing I was a thinner, prettier me.*

Sound familiar? Well, that's probably because whether it's weight, height or frizzy hair most of us spend as much time during the day worrying about our bodies as we do about our jobs, relationships and even world events! I have to admit that even though I have researched and worked with body-image issues for years, on bad days I still catch myself thinking that I need to look a certain way to be happy. I still want to believe that the cure to cellulite resides



## BODY IMAGE

in a plastic bottle and that wearing enough moisturiser will ensure I look twenty-five when I'm sixty. I have queued at Selfridges to buy the latest face creams, bought gym memberships I've never used and still feel weird wearing skirts because I've never liked my legs.

*But* I've come to realise that on good days none of this matters. I like who I am. I even like the way I look. It's not that I look different, just that I have a better perspective on things. All of sudden my legs, or hair or skin, are not at the centre of my universe. I can focus on and like *me* as an individual.

I've used this realisation a lot in my clinical practice. Whether I'm working with a client who has serious burn scarring or a woman who hates herself because she's gained weight, I know that the most important step is to help them see that the way they *think* of themselves will affect the way they *feel*, showing them that progress can only come when they realise that their perception of their bodies affects the way they feel about themselves and the way they react to the world around them.

We live in a world obsessed by beauty and glamour and a negative body image threatens our sense of identity and self-esteem. Who we are becomes inextricably linked with the way we look, and we come to reduce our identity, even our worth, to what we see in the mirror. This means that our perception of ourselves, our body image, significantly affects our thoughts, feelings, behaviour and overall quality of life. Whether it's forgoing a dinner invitation because we've recently gained weight or being late for a movie because we just can't get our hair to look right, our body image is at the core of how we relate to others and, more importantly, to ourselves.





## MIRROR, MIRROR

The ideas in this book come from psychological theories and research relevant to women in real-life situations. Each chapter has a narrative running through it. The stories and characters are based on a combination of cases I have seen over the years as well as my own and my friends' experiences. As you follow the story you may recognise some of your own hopes and fears in the characters of the narrative. I hope you giggle with their experiences but also that you are touched by them too – this may help you to gain insight into your own feelings and thoughts about body image.

The first two chapters focus on the theory behind body image, uncovering the reasons why we see ourselves as we do. The first chapter is an overview of the key concepts I'll be discussing in the book, including a description of the building blocks of body image and self-esteem. The second deals specifically with how body image develops through life and, in particular, how our experiences affect the way we view ourselves. The middle chapters deal with body image in relation to specific areas of life, including relationships, sex, work, dieting and shopping. The final chapter draws together all the ideas that the book puts forward and discusses how you can maintain the progress you will have made by reading it.

Each chapter ends with a *Take Away* – a series of psychological exercises to help you put into practice the book's key messages. They are based on psychological research and have been adapted to address the most common problem areas relating to body image. Make sure that you spend the time and do these exercises properly, to really benefit from them.

Our view of the world is, to a great extent, dictated by how we see our position in it: if we feel confident and secure our worldview is more positive than if we feel bad about





## **BODY IMAGE**

ourselves. The perception we have of ourselves and our bodies is subjective, affected by everything from our mood to the situation we find ourselves in. But just think about it, if you could change your perspective, perhaps those things you don't like about your life will change too. If beauty is in the eye of the beholder then you, as the beholder, have the capacity to define how you see and value yourself . . . so sit back and enjoy the journey to a more healthy, powerful, positive view of you . . .

### **What is Body Image?**

If you ask women to describe how they look, or what they think of their appearance, most churn out a list of negative phrases: 'too fat', 'too skinny', 'too spotty', 'too short'. They aren't necessarily accurate – in fact, they may be totally wrong – but they summarise how they see themselves. For instance, imagine waking up one morning to find that you've developed the world's biggest spot on your nose. You feel its presence every waking moment, it's like another entity, a horrible little monster attaching itself to your face and following you around. You cake it in tea tree oil and cover up, knowing that in five minutes it will rear its ugly head again. But everyone else? Well, they can't even see it. Body image isn't based on fact, it's not a tangible concept – it's based on a group of thoughts and feelings we have about ourselves.

Psychologists define body image as 'a person's thoughts, perceptions and feelings about their body'. This means that what we see in the mirror is not our actual appearance as judged by others but, rather, our subjective judgement about how we look.





## MIRROR, MIRROR

We start to create our body image as soon as we become aware of ourselves as individuals at around the age of eighteen months. This is when children recognise themselves in a mirror, and when the word ‘I’ enters their vocabulary. This new awareness of ourselves will serve as the foundation of our body image. Body image is an abstract concept, what psychologists call a *mental representation*. Mental representations are important because they allow us to make sense of our world, and we have them about everything we see and experience – from what a dog is to what love means. The way we interact with the world depends on this knowledge.

There can be a vast difference between the way we see ourselves and the way others see us. Our view of ourselves doesn’t only depend on what we see in the mirror because it isn’t only our eyes that construct our perception. What you see when you look in the mirror is affected by everything from your mood at the time to things your mother said to you in childhood. For instance, if before you look in the mirror you (a) have a flashback of your mother telling you how pretty your brown eyes are; (b) have walked past a group of men (preferably not working on a building site) who stared at you in awe; or (c) have had another woman ask where you get your hair done, you will see a very different you from the one you may encounter if (a) you recall your mother saying, ‘Honey, you’re not wearing your hair like that, are you? It makes your eyes look even smaller than they really are’; (b) the workmen on a building site ignored you as you walked by; or (c) you were advised by an old woman with a blue rinse on how to deal with split ends.

There is no such thing as just looking in the mirror:





## BODY IMAGE

the judgements of others, illness, disability, the way we were brought up, the family we were born into all play a part in painting the picture we see when we look into the mirror.

Different cultures place different emphasis on the size or shape the body should be. Think big bottoms in Latin America, or small feet in China. In eighteenth-century China we might have asked 'Do my feet look big in this?' as easily as 'Does my bum look big in this?' in twenty-first century Britain. Poorer cultures see thinness as a sign of poverty, malnutrition or illness while plumpness is a sign of prosperity and health; in wealthier cultures we associate health and prosperity with slimness, and being overweight with laziness and unhealthiness.

There is great variation in the way different cultures value skin colour too: in certain parts of Asia pale skin is valued to the point that women use hydroquinone, a potentially harmful chemical, to lighten their skin; in the West, women bask in harmful UV rays to get the deep golden-brown skin indicative of beauty in our culture.

In some cultures, especially those where women hold the economic power, the stringent prescriptive indicators of beauty are placed on men instead of women. In the Nigerian Wodaabe tribe, men compete in beauty contests judged by women and spend hours on their makeup and clothes to make themselves attractive to females.

Culture plays a huge role in shaping the values by which we live, no matter how ludicrous. Next time you pick up a copy of *National Geographic* and are staring with amazement at the tribes who stretch their bottom lips or elongate their necks with rings, think of how all our face-painting, stiletto-wearing, fat-sucking and boob-implanting practices





## MIRROR, MIRROR

look to them! Even more importantly, ask yourself why such practices seem so natural to us.

Not only does culture play a significant role but other experiences such as sexual or racial harassment may also impact on our body image. In our culture today certain racial features are valued above others, therefore your cultural identity and its impact on your life will inevitably be relevant to your body image. This is particularly significant as so many of us live amongst cultures and communities that are different from the ones that we were born into. If you are an African European child growing up in a predominantly white neighbourhood, where all your friends, neighbours and toys look different from you then your body ideals and, consequently, your body image will be affected. Likewise, if you work in an office where your breasts get as much attention as your memos you are bound to develop a body image that has at its core the way your breasts look! You see, our body image is not something we are born with, like eye colour, or skin tone, it is something we acquire through interaction with our environment and others. Knowingly or not, we revisit it several times a day. Whether it's flicking through a magazine, gawping at Jennifer Lopez's bottom, or agonising for hours in front of the full-length mirror that *must* be lying to us, our body image is a backdrop to all our thoughts, feelings and behaviour.

### Liking What's on the Inside

Our self-esteem is integral to our body image. If you don't like yourself as a person, it's unlikely that you will like





## BODY IMAGE

your body, and surprise surprise, if you don't like your body, chances are, you won't be crazy about yourself as a person. Like body image, self-esteem is determined by the judgments a person makes and maintains about themselves. Unlike body image, self-esteem doesn't relate specifically to appearance but is broader, and includes intelligence, physical mastery, emotionality – in fact, anything that has the potential to make us feel adequate or inadequate.

Self-esteem is not static or one-dimensional. We actually divide it into categories, which allows us to feel more positive about certain aspects of our lives. For example, 'It doesn't matter that I'm too unattractive and overweight to be in a relationship, at least I'm the best damn accountant this office has ever seen!' See where the problem lies? By doing this we highlight and reinforce those parts of our lives where our self-esteem is low. To increase it, we need to work on it as a global concept, not give up on certain parts. It's true that at times we feel more or less confident about different aspects of our lives and situations, but general self-esteem is more vulnerable to change than each individual section. Even if you are convinced that your accountancy skills are better than anyone else's, unless you work on your self-concept as a whole you will never achieve high self-esteem.

In many ways, self-esteem is about believing in yourself – in your abilities and seeing yourself as worthy of happiness. It is linked to what we feel we deserve. This is an important idea, since many of us believe that meeting our own needs should come second to meeting the needs of others. The fact of the matter is that until you can believe that you are worth making time, worth making the effort, and worth taking risks for, then your self-esteem is not going to shift.





## MIRROR, MIRROR

### **The Relationship Between Body Image and Self-esteem**

How do body image and self-esteem work together to convince you that because you have gained four pounds over Christmas life isn't worth living and that the only meaningful relationship you will ever have is with something made of chocolate?

Self-esteem, like body image, is affected by the fact that we always see what we expect to see. If, for example, we walk into a boutique and expect the assistant to treat us rudely because we don't feel glamorous enough to be there, we will focus only on those behaviours we perceive as being rude or try to explain away any ambiguous behaviour as rude because that is what our expectations dictate.

Self-esteem affects our general perception of life, and our perception of ourselves. If you already have low self-esteem and a consistently negative body image, your self-esteem has to battle that negativity to grow. It works the other way round too: people who have high self-esteem have more positive expectations about their interactions with others and then consequently a more positive self-esteem and body image.

Simply stated, having bad body image can lower our self-esteem. Some psychologists have suggested that up to 33 per cent of our self-esteem is directly related to body image. Which means that the way we value ourselves is linked to how we think we look. And if one is negative, it's likely that the other will be too. Equally, a healthy body image usually equates to a high level of self-esteem. Body image is concerned with the way we see ourselves, self-esteem with



## BODY IMAGE

the way we feel about ourselves, based on judgements we make according to many factors, one of which is body image. As one improves, undoubtedly the other will too.

By now it should be apparent that your thoughts play an integral part in your body image. People with poor body image tend to spend so much time and allocate so much of their attention to hating their bodies that eventually they separate them from their identity. Now, this may seem far-fetched, but when you think about it it makes sense: if you are experiencing a deep rejection of yourself because of the way you look, the reality is that it's easier to concentrate that self-loathing on a specific part of your body rather than hating the whole you. This kind of *depersonalisation* is often present in weight-related self-consciousness, when people identify themselves with their face rather than their whole body. The reasoning behind this seems to be 'I hate my body, but my face I can live with.' Unfortunately, by doing this, what that person is doing is underscoring the negativity they feel about themselves by rejecting their own body. Eventually, the worry they feel about not being the ideal weight or looking the ideal way is just a smokescreen that serves to hide the self-loathing that they actually feel.

The way we make sense of what is happening to us, what we feel, dictates how we behave. If we don't feel confident about our bodies or, indeed, ourselves as a whole, we often look to other people to provide reassurance and validation. We might be prepared to endure ridiculous diets and painful surgery to attract the attention and affection of others. For example, someone who feels lonely may attribute this to being 'fat', and assume that the route to finding companionship or love is to lose



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weight. Someone who hates their nose may blame it for all their problems, so consequently, they reason that the key to changing their life must be a nose job. We make such links and assumptions all the time, fixating on one body part and making it the scapegoat for every problem we face. Or assuming that if we can just gain control over our weight/skin/chest size, then everything will automatically fall into place, and we will gain control over everything in our life. Many psychologists believe that eating disorders are what happens when people making an attempt to become more attractive and/or gain control go too far.

Someone who has a good level of self-esteem, respect for and the confidence to stand up for themselves and what they believe in can be described as having reached 'autonomy' – literally 'living according to one's own laws'. Unachieved autonomy, which means living in accordance with everyone else's expectations and desires, is not only a feature of body image and eating disorders but also of the preoccupation that so many of us have with food and our bodies. More and more, psychologists are realising exactly how essential a healthy body image is in gaining this autonomy. There is now strong evidence to suggest that wealth, power and popularity are not as crucial to happiness as previously thought. According to current thought, we need self-assertiveness to be happy, with the ability to feel in control of our fortune, competency and, most of all, a strong sense of self-esteem.

By now it should be clear that the way we perceive things affects the way we feel about things, so looking in the mirror can give you insight not just about how you look but about how you feel as well.



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### The Way You See You

**O**K, I can do this . . . just take a deep breath and think calming thoughts, right? I made it, I'm here, I am in the girls' changing room, surrounded by three full-length mirrors and six down-lighters. What sick, disturbed, sadistic mind came up with the idea of putting down-lighters in a changing room? If they accentuate every dimple on my face I can't bear to think what my bum is going to look like! I mean, isn't the whole point that they're trying to sell you clothes, not make you feel like running off and attaching yourself to an industrial-sized fat-sucking vacuum! And why's the stupid curtain that is meant to act as a door too narrow to cover up the entrance? I keep catching that annoying elf-like salesgirl who looks about twelve looking at me! I know she's dying to come up to me for the third time since I've been here and say, 'Are you sure you don't need a bigger size?'

Right. I'm going to do this. I mean, if I can't face myself in a bikini then there's no chance that anyone else will be able to. I'll just focus on my face while I slip my jeans off . . . My lord, the pores on my nose are HUGE! (Mental note to self: must remember to get more apricot scrub.) OK, jeans off, bikini bottom on, am now looking at toes . . . Not bad, although second toe from right has remnants of last month's pink nail varnish. (Mental note to self: must remember to buy more nail varnish remover.) Moving up to ankles, on the plump side but still pretty shapely – but a lot hairier than they looked in the shower this morning. (Mental note to self: must buy leg wax.) Right! Knees – I am starting to feel weak, the cellulite has actually travelled to my knees! My legs look like two huge uncooked doner kebabs. (Mental note to self: buy every cellulite cream on market and book appointment with GP to discuss anti-depressant medication.) Well, things can't possibly get worse – in for a penny in for a pound (or several stone, in my case) – I will look at my bum . . . OH, MY GOD!

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*Bum was certainly not this big last summer – my cheeks seem to be oozing out of the bikini bottom like the Swiss cheese on my mother’s broccoli soufflé. How can something grow so much so fast? OK. Don’t panic! Have brought in matching sarong because I knew something like this would happen. OK, sarong-look isn’t working, just makes me look like I’m hiding something, like I’ve wrapped my soufflé in a large layer of puff pastry. (Mental note to self: never, ever eat cheese again.) I have at this point lost the will to live let alone shop, but some masochistic part of me urges me to try on the bikini top. I put it on and open my eyes. As I try to suck in my flabby belly it becomes painfully obvious that if I intend to breathe on the beach my belly will protrude, considerably. I lift my arms to make my breasts look like they are perkier than they are only to notice that where I used to have triceps I have a jiggly piece of meat which I’m sure I have heard referred to as a chicken fillet.*

*Throw my clothes back on and leave the changing room feeling depressed and defeated. I hand over the evil bikini to the twelve-year-old elf, and as I walk out I hear her say, ‘We’re expecting a shipment of larger one-pieces next week. Pop in!’ (Mental note to self: breathe deeply, do not punch elf.)*

If you were asked to draw a self-portrait, parts of it would be very different from the reality – perhaps the thighs would be a bit wider, or there’d be more spots or wrinkles. The closer your portrait resembled reality (allowing for those with less than Van Gogh-like talents) the better. What you see when you look in the mirror isn’t just a reflection of how you look on the outside but a combination of your physical self, your thoughts and feelings. On a good day tousled hair is sexy, on a bad day it’s messy. The thing is, though, that to ‘see’ and ‘accept’ yourself as you are, you have to learn not only to see yourself accurately, but be



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able to separate the negativity you may feel about other aspects of your life from the way that you look. By doing this you will learn to like what you see, and feel positive about it. More importantly you will learn to question why you don't like certain parts of your appearance and decide to what extent this dislike is based on the way you think about things rather than what is reflected in the mirror.

The more positive you feel about yourself, the more likely it is that you will behave confidently and react more positively to those around you. It's like a self-fulfilling prophecy: you expect people to react positively to you, so they do. A better body image filters through to most aspects of our life, it suggests underlying confidence and emotional stability, which result in a higher degree of self-esteem. Everything, from going to the beach to going on job interviews, becomes easier – simply because we like who we are.

### **Now and Then**

If you've decided that you don't like the way you look, this decision probably didn't occur to you overnight, it's more likely something that has developed over a long time, starting when you were a child. Whether it was realising that the good princess in the fairytale was always beautiful or that your favourite pop stars were always pretty and petite, you got the message as a child that you should look a certain way to have a good life. Although many things work together over the course of our lives to contribute to the way we see ourselves, two of the most powerful factors involved in the way we process information about our appearance are past experiences and our current understanding of what's





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happening around us. Let's start with the past. The way we process information about our looks can be affected by knowledge that is already stored in our memory, which may influence the way we categorise and understand incoming information. So, our perception of anything starts with an idea we already have stored in our minds. Any self-assessment can only be made within the framework of an already established self-concept. It's like when you meet somebody who you have heard a lot about for the first time.

If you have heard that this person is very annoying, that they talk too much and lack personal hygiene skills, you form a picture of them based on that information. When you actually meet them for the first time it's very hard to build an opinion of them outside this preconceived idea. In fact, what happens is that you expect not to like them, or, even, you expect them to reject you so you reject them first. It's the same with body image, the reason we constantly confirm a negative body image is because it is difficult to break free from perceiving ourselves as we have done before. Even if what we see in the mirror isn't so bad, if we have a negative, preconceived notion of what we are looking at, then we won't like it no matter what.

Now, even though past experiences can programme us to view our bodies negatively, it doesn't mean we're doomed to a life of hating how we look. The one thing that is more important than the way we interpret experiences from the past is how we interpret experiences from the present. Depending on how you choose to make sense of things in the here and now, you will either reinforce your negative body image and feel worse about yourself or you will begin to reject the negative thoughts that make you feel bad about yourself and gain a better body image.

