

# what we *want* to look like—and why

## An Epidemic of Self-Hatred ●●●

### Maggie

Most women would kill to look like Maggie. Arguably the most fit woman in the gym, Maggie is a runner, a biker, and a serious weight lifter. At five feet three inches, she weighs about 100 pounds, has 12 percent body fat, and is pretty and petite. She has amazing definition in her torso, a small round bottom, and sinewy, well-defined arms. It's hard to believe she's a mom in her early forties. She is a true athlete, capable of doing virtually anything I throw at her.

To look at her, no one would imagine that Maggie actually hates her body. As her personal trainer, though, I know the truth. During our training sessions, she constantly complains about her “fat thighs” and her “lard ass.” At first, I thought these statements were Maggie's way of fishing for compliments, but over time I realized that she was actually serious. In fact, Maggie is so dissatisfied with her appearance that she recently decided to have liposuction on her legs.

When she told me this in confidence, I was dumbfounded. For the life of me, I couldn't imagine: (1) what kind of doctor would agree to do this procedure on someone who looks like her, and (2) where the heck he plans on sucking out the fat from!!—there's nothing there that I can see.

It's moments like this where, as a fitness professional, I feel as if I live in a world gone mad. Here is this beautifully toned creature, yet no amount of evidence can convince her that she has a fabulous body.

Unfortunately, Maggie is not alone. Not by a long shot. Sadly, there is a virtual epidemic of female body bashing in this country. We live in a society where most women are unhappy with the bodies they have—regardless of what they look like. In fact, in one study, an unbelievable 90 percent of the women surveyed said they were dissatisfied with their appearance.

Consider these other sobering statistics:

75 percent of normal-weight women think they are overweight.

90 percent of women overestimate their body size.

70 percent of women between the ages of thirty and seventy said that they wished they were thinner.

Seven out of ten U.S. women are “on a diet” at any given time.

89 percent of all plastic surgery is performed on women.

No wonder the diet industry generates a staggering \$50 billion annually! Perhaps most disturbing of all—despite this amount of money spent on weight loss—47 million women in this country are currently overweight, and diet failure rates are as high as 95 percent!

## The Culture of Unhappiness ●●●

### The Barbie Body

Why are so many women so unhappy with their bodies? Why are so many of us trying to change ourselves?

After fifteen years as a certified personal trainer and an exercise physiologist, I can tell you that one of the main reasons that women are disappointed by their appearance is that they have a distorted concept of what a healthy, “normal” female body is supposed to look like in the first place.

Every day, I meet with female clients to discuss their fitness goals. Almost all of the women I speak to tell me that they are working out not for the many health benefits but rather to alter something about their appearance. Whenever I ask specifically what it is that my client would like to change about her body, invariably she begins to describe the “Barbie Body.” She tells me that she wants to be longer, leaner, with thin legs, a small waist, and large, buoyant breasts. In fact, I have never had a client say that she wanted to be shorter, bulkier, with thick legs and a round middle and small (or saggy) breasts. It’s just not the ideal that most of us have internalized.

Nearly every woman I have ever met wants to look like an unnatural (and virtually unattainable) standard, a standard that most of us have internalized to the point that we believe it to be a desirable and realistic goal. In other words, the person most women believe they should strive to be is usually someone they could never realistically expect to become. Like it or not, though, the Barbie Body is a part of our collective female psyche.

Most of us grew up with Barbie. We changed her outfits and marveled at her perfect blond hair, her large nippleless breasts, her inconceivably small waist, and, of course, those long, long legs. Barbie has no body fat, no lumps, no bumps, no bulges, no unsightly veins—she is pure plastic perfection. We began to believe (either consciously or subconsciously) that this was what we would look like when we became women.

However, normal female physiology being what it is, most of us ended up looking dramatically different than Barbie. In other words, we ended up looking like, well—real women. We developed normal body fat on our legs, thighs, and/or tummies. Our legs were too short, our breasts weren’t big enough—or perhaps they were too big. Bottom line, no matter how puberty affected our bodies, it’s a safe bet that we didn’t magically transform into the Barbie doll that we always thought we would become. Over time, because of the chasm between our fantasy and our reality, most of us began to feel increasingly frustrated with our appearance and even hostile toward the bodies that we inhabit.

Certainly, on a logical level, most women understand that Barbie’s anatomy has little to do with reality. Just look around. There isn’t a whole lot of real-world evidence for the notion that women actually do look like Barbie. Yet on a deeper level, most of us, in our heart of hearts, still yearn to look that way. There’s slim chance of that.

The fact is, Barbie's dimensions have so little to do with reality that a woman would have just as much chance of turning into Tinkerbell, Minnie Mouse, or Betty Boop. Consider the following statistics:

If Barbie were a flesh-and-blood woman, she would be at least five feet nine inches and would weigh only 110 pounds.

According to the Met Life Ideal Height and Weight Tables, the normal weight range for a five-foot, nine-inch woman is actually 129 to 170 pounds.

The Met Life Ideal Height and Weight Tables list 110 pounds as an appropriate weight for a small-framed woman under five feet two inches.

The average American woman is actually five feet four inches tall and weighs 140 pounds.

If Barbie were a real person, her bust-waist-hip measurements would be 39-18-33.

The average American woman's measurements are 35-28-38.

In a recent study, a group of scientists created a computer-generated model of a woman with Barbie-doll proportions. According to their analysis, based on those proportions, Barbie's back would be too weak to support the weight of her upper body. Moreover, a torso of that size would be too narrow to contain more than half of a liver and a few centimeters of bowel. Their conclusion: an individual with Barbie's dimensions would likely suffer from chronic diarrhea—and would ultimately die from malnutrition. Not a very pretty picture at all.

Yet for most of us, the Barbie Body still represents the gold standard of womanly beauty. It is a lie that most women believe (on some deeper level) to be a truth—a form of collective insanity. Unfortunately, the vast chasm between this deep-seated belief and reality sets women up for a lifetime of body hatred and self-loathing.

## Models: Normal Women or Freaks of Nature? ●●●

Unfortunately, our unrealistic role models didn't stop with Barbie. As we moved through puberty and into our teens, our icons of female perfection shifted from the Barbie dolls that we played with to the

real-life “dolls” who graced billboards and the pages of fashion magazines—models.

Nearly everywhere we turn, we are inundated with photos of air-brushed female perfection. Images of models are so prevalent in our daily lives that it’s easy to believe that this is what real women are supposed to look like. It’s not. Although models are flesh-and-blood people, their dimensions have about as much to do with normal human female bodies as Barbie’s do. Think about it. The very reason that models are paid thousands of dollars per day for people to take photographs of them is that they have highly unusual looks. Specifically they are (1) more attractive than the average woman, (2) taller than the average woman, and (3) much thinner than the average women. In other words, they represent an unusual exception to the rule, not the rule itself—and not necessarily the ideal. We need to put models in an appropriate context and appreciate them for being the beautiful freaks of nature that they are. Consider:

The average model is actually thinner than 98 percent of American women.

Only 5 percent of the women on the entire planet have a model’s body type naturally.

The average model wears a size 2 to 4.

The average American woman wears a size 12 to 14.

The average model is five feet eleven inches and weighs 110 pounds.

The average woman is five feet five inches and weighs 145 pounds.

According to the Met Life Height and Weight Tables, the normal weight range for a five-foot, eleven-inch woman is actually between 135 and 176 pounds.

Putting it another way, most women aren’t five feet eleven inches—and even those who are, aren’t supposed to weigh 110 pounds! Based on those proportions, the average model is actually *thinner* than a Barbie doll!

Yet on some level, most of the women I meet still believe that if they work hard enough at it, diet enough, work out enough, and get the right plastic surgeon, they, too, can look like a supermodel. The reality is, the overwhelming majority of us do not, cannot, and should not even try to look like fashion models.

All of which begs the question: if models' bodies are so unrealistic, why don't advertisers use more realistic role models instead?

There are several reasons for this. For one thing, a model's straight-up-and-down figure doesn't compete with the clothing. This allows the clothing to hang unobstructed by hips or breasts, as if on a living clothes hanger.

Also, because the camera provides only a two-dimensional image, it flattens out the body, adding at least ten pounds to a woman's appearance. That means someone needs to be remarkably slight in real life to still appear slender on film. In fact, models who are sometimes shockingly thin in real life often don't appear to be emaciated in photographs or on TV.

Even the standards for what a fashion model is supposed to look like have gotten progressively thinner over the last thirty years. Back in 1968, the average model was 8 percent thinner than the average American woman. Today's average model is about 23 percent thinner than the average American woman.

Finally, and most significantly, it is in the advertisers' best interest to perpetuate a culture in which women hate their own bodies. Think about it. Women who are unhappy with their bodies make great consumers. The stronger a woman's drive to transform herself into something (which in reality she has no chance of becoming), the more motivated she will be to buy various products. The media constantly deliver subtle messages reminding women that they are inherently flawed and don't measure up to the standard. Marketers play on this insecurity by implying that if women purchase a particular product, they will be "fixed." Scores of products, from exercise equipment to face creams, are advertised this way.

Perhaps the greatest irony of all is that these beautiful models whom most of us are striving to look like don't actually look like this either!

We often forget that advertisers spend thousands and thousands of dollars just to get a single flawless image. Thanks to the work of makeup experts, hairdressers, stylists, photographers, lighting experts, and airbrush artists, these already "perfect" women have been made to appear even more so. With new advances in digital retouching, nearly every woman in print ads today is basically a painting, altered in every imaginable way to be even more flawless than she already is. No wrinkles, no cellulite, no blemishes, and thighs as thin as the art director wants. No wonder most of us are disappointed when we look

in the mirror and see something very different from the ads in magazines!

Research suggests that the more exposure that women or girls have to unrealistic body images in magazines and on TV, the greater their levels of body-image dissatisfaction. Strong societal pressures on females to be flawless begin at an age far younger than most of us realize.

An estimated 50 percent of thirteen-year-old girls say that they are unhappy with their appearance. By the age of eighteen years, that number increases to a whopping 80 percent! In 1970, the average age at which a girl started dieting was fourteen; by 1990, the average age had dropped to eight. In a survey of the readers of *Teen People* magazine, nearly 70 percent of the girls surveyed said that models in magazines influenced their idea of the perfect body shape. Twenty-seven percent of the teenage girls polled said that they felt pressured by the media to have a perfect body. Middle and high school girls who read fashion magazines frequently are twice as likely to have dieted and three times as likely to have started working out to lose weight, as compared to less frequent readers. Here are some more disturbing findings:

Girls as young as five have expressed fears about getting fat.

A study of ten-year-olds revealed that 80 percent of them were afraid of being overweight.

In one study, 51 percent of nine- and ten-year-old girls said that they felt better about themselves if they were “on a diet.”

The number-one wish for girls ages eleven to seventeen is to “be thinner.”

In one survey, some of the primary school girls interviewed actually said that they would prefer to live through a nuclear holocaust, lose both of their parents, or get sick with cancer rather than be fat.

Despite what you might expect, it's not just girls and young women who obsess about their looks. Studies suggest that older women feel as much pressure to be thin as their younger counterparts do. A survey of women ages thirty to seventy-four found that 70 percent of them were discontented with their weight—even though all of the women surveyed were of normal weight! In fact, some studies suggest that women between the ages of forty and fifty-five are actually the group least happy with their figures. Elderly women (defined as older than sixty-six years of

age) have body-image dissatisfaction similar to that of younger women, but they are less likely to take actions to change their appearance.

Clearly, there is an epidemic of female self-hatred in this country. Whether women are overweight or not, young or old, the majority are unhappy with their own bodies. And as long as women compare themselves to unnatural standards, this trend is likely to continue. As women, we need to constantly remind ourselves that the images presented in the media have little or nothing to do with reality. We need to look around in the everyday world and remind ourselves what women actually look like.

Look at your mother, grandmother, sisters, friends, and coworkers. How many of them are flawless? Yet don't you find something beautiful about almost every one, once you get to know her? Pretty eyes, nice skin, silky hair. Sure, we all look a bit different from one another. We all have our imperfections and our own particular brand of beauty. None of us is flawless. Just like snowflakes, all of us are remarkable and no two of us are alike.

So, if as a sex we aren't meant to look anything like the images presented in the media, what are we supposed to look like? In the next chapter, we'll examine the reality of what the female form actually is and explore the notion of reasonable, attainable goals for looking our best.