

Feel great naked

BY TARA ALI

“Exercise helps me love my body”

Haley Frew, 25
“I love my eyes and my butt, but appreciating my whole self is a work in progress. Working out makes me feel good about my body. I also find my girlfriends are great at putting my hang-ups into perspective – and I do the same for them.”

Your body is incredible – it can heal cuts, run marathons and gargle the love theme from *Titanic*. So why is it so hard to be nude? Experts reveal how to whoop-whoop that foxy woman in the mirror

YOU ASKED FOR IT!

“I’d like to see more real women with different body shapes.”

– Tracy Burleigh, WA

We like your thinking! We’ve illustrated this story with four gorgeous (and brave) readers.

PHOTOGRAPHY: CARINNER THEVENAU HAIR & MAKE-UP: CAROLYN TRAVAGLIA

A confession: I’m bashful about being in the buff. I’ve perfected the art of changing underneath a towel in the gym. I leave my underwear on for massages. And feeling comfortable in a bikini is something I haven’t experienced since puberty hit. My hang-ups are pretty typical – I could do with losing five kilos, my belly could be flatter. Yada yada. Yet logic – and seeing photos of Jack Nicholson on the beach – tells me that body confidence has very little to do with how I look naked and everything to do with how I feel. My body and I have been through a lot together, so not feeling 100 per cent happy with it seems kind of ungrateful. What gives?

“It’s almost impossible to feel naturally good about your body in this culture of Photoshop and size zero,” says WH sex expert Jacqueline Hellyer. “Then there are the messages we take on as young girls, such as the tactless remark your Dad made about your chubby thighs, coupled with the fact that we pretty much never get to see a real female body in the media anymore. We subconsciously take on the message that there is something wrong with the way we look, because no one wants to show our kind of body off.”

And that’s a huge shame, reckons Thea O’Connor, a dietitian and body image consultant who works in schools to teach teenagers about body acceptance. “Considering all that your body allows you to do in life – from simple things like waking you up in the morning to the magic of growing a baby – you should be treating it like your most adored friend,” she says. “Instead, most of us berate it for not looking some other way.”

A health survey of 2613 *Women’s Health* readers found that only one third of you are happy with your overall appearance. So how to deprogram ourselves from this faulty thinking? “Firstly, you need to make the decision to,” says Hellyer. “Any one of us can look at our body and find inadequacies. Or we can love it and think it’s great. It takes practice. You also need to make a conscious choice not to buy into the culture of body perfect.” Turns out that accepting and loving your body – jiggly bits and all – is something you need to keep renegotiating as the years pass. We grilled the experts for the best ways to adjust your nude attitude, and put their theories to the test.

STRATEGY 1

YouTube Tina Turner

“A woman who feels good naked is a woman who has discovered her own definition of beauty. She knows that it’s ultimately about personal attitude,” says Laura

Redmond, a self-esteem coach and author of *Feel Good Naked* (amazon.com). Redmond, like all the experts we spoke to, says that broadening the types of female bodies you look at is fundamental to self-acceptance. Mostly we see the same female body over and over in the movies, magazines or porn – a size and shape that accounts for a tiny percentage of all women. Redmond recalls her greatest source of body epiphany – the first time she saw Tina Turner perform live – and how she was transfixed by her legs and electric gyrations. She realised how bold and sexy the singer was. Other women who don’t fit the “mould” to tune into include Nigella Lawson, Helen Mirren and Deborah Mailman.

“Become really aware that women in the media are all affected to look better. Even newsreaders on TV wear much more make-up than you’d ever wear in real life,” says Hellyer. “There’s a lot going on to make people look good.” Chances are, you haven’t seen that many regular naked women since you were around two or three years old, the age when most of us learn it’s not OK to scale a climbing frame in the nude any more. When you do look at other women, turn off the critical voice and try to check them out neutrally. “Often women zone in on better-looking women and say to themselves ‘Oh, I’m not as good as that’, or they seek out women less attractive than they are and judge them: they’re fatter, or plainer,” says Hellyer. Looking at different shapes and sizes and thinking “Hey, we’re all women” will change your mind and broaden your view of what a body “should” look like.

TRIED AND TESTED In the gym this week I surreptitiously check out the women brave enough to do the birthday suit shower walk. It’s eye-opening. An older, rounder woman looks really cuddly and smiley naked, like she’d be fun in bed. Another girl who is tall and athletic strips off and I notice that one of her boobs is quite a different shape to the other. And another skinny >>

"I couldn't have done this shoot a year ago"

Bianca Burrows, 33
"I used to have a really distorted body image and was a compulsive eater and exerciser. In the past 12 months I've worked hard to develop a healthy relationship with my body. Now I recognise that a bad body day means something is going on at an emotional level, so I'll have a bath or a massage, or stand in front of the mirror and tell my body how grateful I am for it."

MAKE LIKE KATE WINSLET

Now there's a woman who seems happy in her own skin. Here, five ways to be happy in yours:

- 1 Nude up more often. Spend time sans clothes outside of having a shower or getting dressed. Read a book naked, apply your make-up in the buff or do some nude ironing.
- 2 At the beach, look at different body shapes. Find something great and something not-so-great about every body you see and it'll sink in that we all have our good bits as well as our flaws.
- 3 Take the focus off the sexual and on to the sensual. Sleeping naked is one of the best ways to start feeling comfortable with your own body.
- 4 Work out. Studies show exercise therapy can be just as effective as regular therapy in tackling body-image issues.
- 5 Do something brave - skinny dip, or volunteer to be a nude life model. These acts are surprisingly liberating.

50

Percentage of women who are comfortable being nude. The other 50 would rather drink month-old milk.

SOURCE: ONLINE POLL OF 1036 WOMEN'S HEALTH READERS

woman is covered in moles. Truth is, there are so many different shapes and sizes, it's futile to compare - there will always be someone thinner, more toned, saggier or heavier than me. I also discover that flicking through *Vogue* makes me want to live off salads, while YouTubeing *We Don't Need Another Hero* makes me wonder if I still have that black mini dress in my cupboard somewhere.

STRATEGY 2

Sweat up a glow

Here's a revelation: fat days are all in your head. And that means there are some controllable things you can do to sweeten your body image, with working up a sweat at number one. A study from University College London, UK, found that women who played sport regularly rated their bodies as more attractive than women who were exercise-shy. There's also some evidence to suggest that your muscle tone is tighter and firmer looking immediately after exercising, so do a body scan and give yourself a wink after Pump class. Other external factors, such as having a flattering mirror in your bedroom (a full-length one angled against a wall makes you look taller and slimmer), fake-tanning, waxing and looking after your skin all help. But even with all this, if your inner critic is louder than Sharon Osbourne after happy hour, then there's work to be done.

"Studies show that girls as young as five to eight years old are aware of their weight and equate thinness with popularity," says O'Connor. "It's a deeply ingrained message and it can be hard for women to give up the promise that losing weight will make them feel better about their bodies. But your 30s is a time to make peace with that, because that's when your body will start really changing." Another incentive: science has found that feeling good about your skin and bones is important for your health. Researchers at Columbia University, US, found the psychological distress accompanying negative body image pushes up women's BMI. In other words, it keeps you in the cycle: feel crap, eat more, weigh more, feel even worse.

Taking off your mean-girl goggles does amazing things for your sex life too. A study in the *International Journal of Sexual Health* showed that women who feel more positively about their bodies find it easier to reach orgasm. "There is a very self-focused component to female sexuality," says psychologist Dr Marta Meana from the University of Nevada, US. "Women have to be convinced that they are desirable in order to believe that anyone else finds them desirable." Think about it this way: if you haven't been in the mood lately, it might be because you're feeling unattractive (gained a couple of

kilos, noticed your breasts sagging, spotted a new dimple of cellulite) and figure your partner couldn't possibly think you look hot. In her private counselling practice, Dr Meana sees many couples in which the woman "will completely avoid certain sex positions because she's embarrassed by how she thinks her body looks. But the husband hasn't even thought of that. He's shocked! 'That's why you won't get on top?' Because you think your breasts sag?!" The key to this can be repairing your relationship with yourself.

TRIED AND TESTED I sign up for the free Inner Cosmetics workshop on O'Connor's website (thea.com.au/tips). Every week a new tip arrives in my inbox. The first is to keep a body diary, so every day for a week I write down the thoughts I have about the external me. This is interesting; I note that each morning before a shower I scan myself naked in the mirror and zone in on my belly and legs to see if boot camp is working. Mostly I decide it isn't. But looking in the mirror right after a morning sweat session I feel very different. I like the way my skin is glowing and my heart is still pumping. On those days my clothes seem to fit better too. I also observe how watching models parade up and down the *WH* office for a casting session makes me feel envious. Another tip is to note when my inner critic shows up. It starts shouting when I'm sleep deprived, and when a colleague hands out cake, which is too creamy for my liking, but I eat it anyway. To counteract this, I go to a 90-minute yoga class, which I know switches off my inner nag. When I'm in the warrior pose and my arms ache and my quads burn I feel powerful and in awe of my body.

STRATEGY 3

Think like a German

For a nation of beach lovers, Australia is remarkably prudish about the naked body. In the same week that German naturists have an 18km nudist hiking trail approved, a local news article debates whether an overseas men's magazine cover showing a topless Lily Allen (who is covering her breasts) could ever go on sale in Australia. The general consensus is no. Social commentator Mark McCrindle believes that despite our laid-back, anything-goes Aussie lifestyle, we're more uptight than the British. Dr Les Rootsey, owner and publisher of *The Australian Naturist* magazine (TAN) agrees. "We're getting more conservative about the naked body, not less. The younger generation are not flocking to the nudist lifestyle and it could be because they're getting ever more body conscious". Rootsey, who has been a naturist for 45 years, tells an anecdote of a >>

holiday in Germany (the birthplace of nudism) where he had stopped for a cup of coffee at a roadside cafe. He watched as a car pulled up and an entire family got out, stripped off and showered naked at a nearby tap. They then got dressed and drove off again. "You would never see that in Australia," he laughs.

While you may not be keen to use your annual leave for a sojourn at your local nudist camp, thinking of your body as more than just a sexual entity really helps. "Look at art books of nudes, take a dance class, find different ways to express your body," says Redmond. Think about it: if the only time you spend naked is in the shower or during sex then that means the only time you spend naked is when you're worrying about looking good. So for most of us, being naked is linked to feeling anxiety or pressure. "Shifting the focus from appearance to function turns down inner criticism," says O'Connor. She advises doing pleasurable, sensual things with your body, such as having a full body massage or exfoliating your skin from head to toe with a luxurious scrub.

TRIED AND TESTED On a mission to break out of my non-nude comfort zone, I email photographer Kiren Chang (kirenphotography.com) to ask if he will shoot me nude as research for this story. His email pings back "Your article sounds fascinating, I'd be happy to. Let me know when you want to shoot". Gulp. We arrange a date for a week's time. My immediate thoughts are that I need to get a wax and a spray tan, and work out like a maniac twice a day for the next seven days. But it turns out it's not so bad. I start off in my underwear, but soon >>

"All bodies are beautiful, no matter what size or shape"

Sarah Hughes, 29

"Giving birth to my son changed my body dramatically. My boobs shrunk and lost fullness and that took a lot of getting used to. As a teenager I thought I was tall and thin and plain and that was all. But as I've grown older I have come to appreciate my body more. All bodies are beautiful. Yes, I have small breasts, but they don't define me."



16

Average size (92cm bust, 74cm waist, 99cm hips) of an Australian woman, based on the current Standards Australia garment rating scale.

SOURCE: NATIONAL SIZE AND SHAPE SURVEY, 2004.

32

Percentage of women who rate body image as their top concern, even over family conflict and stress.

SOURCE: BODY IMAGE AND SELF-ESTEEM VOLUME 279, ISSUES IN SOCIETY

I get into it and before long I'm buck naked in front of the camera. "There's a difference between being naked and being nude," Kiren tells me. "The first is vulnerable and the second is empowering." I don't think I ever feel fully relaxed, but after an hour of shooting I spot a book I love on his shelf and ask him if he enjoyed it. For the few minutes we discuss *Shantaram* I forget I'm naked. Those frames turn out to be the best ones. Weeks later I have the photos on a disc and every now and then I take a peek. I still don't love certain parts of me but I do notice things I hadn't before: I have a great curve in my lower back. I have glowing skin. Long legs. And my body looks much better when I'm smiling.

In the end...

The experts agree that the key to feeling and looking confident naked is in your power. "If you want to grow old confidently and be a feisty 85-year-old who doesn't give a shit, then do some self-adjusting now," advises Hellyer. For women, ageing and pregnancy can be a time of great body wonder, or distress – it's all about your perspective. "Having a nice name for the bits you have issues with will soften your view," says O'Connor. "I didn't like the stretch marks that having children gave me, but my husband calls them my tiger stripes and now they don't bother me." Hellyer, who looks every inch a confident woman with a great body, agrees. "I'm short, I've got bandy legs and I've got grey hair. But I've also got pert boobs, a great bum and a warm smile. That's how I present myself and it shows."

So if you love your lips paint them red. If you have cute ears, tie your hair back. A common trait of women who have a good body image is that they adopt the attitude that their body is incredible and they find a positive for every perceived flaw. As plus-size comedian Dawn French says in her book *Dear Fatty* (\$24.95, Arrow Books), "I know for a fact that if you can genuinely like your body, so can others. It doesn't really matter if it's short, tall, fat or thin, it just matters that you can find some things to like about it." French is a woman who doesn't waste any brain cells fretting about her body. And that spirit is the epitome of attractiveness. **WH**

"The older I get, the fewer hang-ups I have"

Robyn Webster, 39
23 weeks pregnant

"Being unique is beautiful, and I have so much love for my growing belly, and the little person inside. Practising yoga since my early 20s has given me a knowledge of my body's strengths and weaknesses, and a way of enjoying them both."

