



## Discussion Guide

For Adults Working with Teens

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### **Beyond a "Flawless" Body: A Newfound Image of Me**

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There were times when I was dying to get out of my body. I honestly did not like who I was, the way I was, and the way I looked. As I matured, these strong emotions finally took their toll.

And then I realized that outer appearance wasn't the only important thing in life, and I overcame my pessimistic perspectives about myself. Of all the lessons I've learned so far in my 17 years on earth, gaining a positive body image has been the hardest one to grasp.

These days, when teens turn on the TV, they're exposed to sickly thin celebrities showing off the latest trends, which usually—well, mostly—begin with a pair of pants below the hips. Teens are constantly exposed to music videos featuring barely-clothed girls with "flawless" bodies.

I remember wanting to be as thin as these girls. I changed my eating habits by only eating salad for lunch, but it never worked out.

I tried to do 40 sit-ups every other day, so my tummy could get as flat as a washboard. When that didn't work, I was sad and angry. Why couldn't I be lucky like those girls on TV and be flawless?

As time went by, reality began to set into my mind. I asked myself questions: If I am really smart, why don't I feel that way? If I am really beautiful, why do I feel so badly? I felt like I wasn't getting enough information or help from family or friends. They didn't say unhelpful things, but what they said didn't satisfy me. I decided to get answers for myself.



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### A New Outlook

I started reading very intriguing books, so I wouldn't only think about things like bodies. I read Edwidge Danticat's *Breath, Eyes, Memory*; Venise Berry's *All of Me: A Voluptuous Tale*, and a feminist anthology called *Words of Fire*.

These books dealt with issues related to me as a female, a black person, and an individual of Haitian descent. The books inspired me to think of situations that really matter in present-day society.

Then I became more involved in activities in my school, community, and surrounding urban areas. I tutored, volunteered at a soup kitchen, worked with Habitat for Humanity, and visited sick children at hospitals. By volunteering and making decent grades, I didn't enhance my looks, but I did enhance my knowledge. This made me feel excellent.

I also did physical activities. I joined track and threw the discus. Every week I trained by lifting weights. This made me feel stronger, both physically and mentally.

### Being Beautiful

I don't have society's "perfect" body. But I [love](#) my body. I love the components of my body, which include physical and emotional strength, intelligence, pride, and a soul. It's OK to love your body the way it is—round, thick, thin, square...whatever.

It's all about you adding to the physical beauty you were born with. And I don't mean only with makeup and clothes, but with knowledge gained from real-world experience.

When you watch a child you've tutored in math finally understand a mathematical concept—that makes you feel beautiful. When you help build a house or serve homeless people warm soul food—that makes you feel great about yourself. Once you gain real-world knowledge, you realize that you're beautiful from the inside out to the outside in.



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### Body Image: Q & A

To find out what causes teens to have a poor body image, *Sex, Etc.* interviewed Linda Smolak, Ph.D, a professor of psychology, and women's and gender studies at Kenyon College in Gambier, OH. Smolak is also a consultant to the Harvard Eating Disorders Center, in Boston, MA, and the U.S. Office on Women's Health, in Washington, D.C.

### **Sex, Etc.: How serious a teen issue is having a poor body image and low self-esteem?**

**Linda Smolak:** It can be very serious. Some girls will go on to develop serious eating problems, including the potentially fatal disorders of anorexia nervosa and bulimia nervosa, in order to try to achieve that "thin" body.

Others will submit themselves to cosmetic surgery, including liposuction and breast enhancement, to get that thin-with-big-breasts look that is almost impossible to find naturally. Cosmetic surgery usually carries risks without health benefits.

Boys may start using steroids or diet supplements to get "bigger." Some of these are potentially fatal.

### **Sex, Etc.: How much of a role does society play in a teen's perspective of his or her body?**

**LS:** Huge. We all think we're not influenced by the media. But we buy certain products, dress in certain styles of clothes, and talk in certain ways, because of what the media tells us.

### **Sex, Etc.: So, what leads a girl or boy to develop a poor body image?**

**LS:** First, girls are more likely than boys to have a poor body image. But some recent research suggests that boys might be catching up.

Lots of things contribute. Media images are important contributors, at least



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among girls. Think about most of the TV shows and movies you see. Most of the women are thin. Even singers—young girls like Britney Spears or Christina Aguilera—are thin. This makes girls think that the road to success involves being thin.

Boys see a wider range of male body types. Think of the show *King of Queens*, for example, and how the man looks. Then think of *Friends* and *The Drew Carey Show*. These shows feature men with various body shapes, but the women's shapes don't really vary.

Peer teasing also influences body image, as does peer sexual [harassment](#) (at least for girls). And parents' comments about weight and shape can influence body image.

### **Sex, Etc.: How can a girl gain a positive body image?**

**LS:** Recognize all the things your body enables you to do—dance, play sports, play musical instruments, etc. Take good care of your body by eating nutritious foods (at least most of the time), being physically active, and getting enough sleep.

Try to understand that media messages are intended to get you to buy things or be a certain way. They're not realistic; many of the photos you see are edited.

And the people you see in movies have staff to help them look like that, and even then there are lighting and camera tricks—and of course computer tricks, like putting someone else's legs on someone's body—that are used to achieve the "look."

Finally, empower yourself and your friends—don't tolerate teasing about weight and shape, or sexual harassment. Report it and work against it.



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### **Sex, Etc.: How can a boy gain a positive body image?**

**LS:** Similar things. I'd add not to buy the message that every boy needs to be an athlete. Furthermore, messages that say you have to be the biggest and strongest and fastest to succeed in athletics are dangerous. You shouldn't aim for one particular shape.

### **Sex, Etc.: How can family help a teen during a time of low self-esteem?**

**LS:** Try not to focus too much on body issues. Let the teen know what you like and respect about her or him. And when the teen wants to talk about problems with peers or body image, listen without judgment. Don't belittle his or her concerns by saying things like "everyone thinks that" or "you'll grow out of that."

**Sex, Etc. Contributor Colleen Farrell, 14, of Plainwell, MI, asked some Michigan teens for advice on maintaining a positive body image. Here's what they had to say:**

"Make a list of qualities that you like about yourself. Then make a list of what you don't like. The like list will be longer than the dislike list, and that will make you feel good!"

—*Stephen Comfort, 15, South Haven*

"Don't compare yourself to others, because that will bring you down and make you dislike yourself."

—*Sara Demory, 14, Detroit*

"Don't think there's just one type of person in this world because there isn't. Everyone is different, and that makes everyone unique in his or her own way."

—*Stephanie Van Ravensway, 17, Houghton*

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