

# Week 5

## Cultural Expectations of Thinness for Women



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# **Week 5—Cultural Expectations of Thinness for Women**

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# Week 5—Cultural Expectations of Thinness for Women

## SOCIETAL EXPECTATIONS FOR THINNESS

This week's session focuses on how societal expectations for women to be "slim" and "feminine" lead them to binge eat and purge. The remark, "You can never be too rich or too thin," reportedly made by the Duchess of Windsor, encapsulates what society's expectations of thinness for women are. Orbach (1978) eloquently discusses cultural demands on women to be slim and to fit certain standards. She states that our culture emphasizes physical appearance as a central aspect of a woman's existence. As a result, the woman becomes self-conscious when she compares herself to the image of the "ideal woman" presented by the media. In trying to live up to this image, she becomes a victim of the diet and fashion industry that tries to remold her body to fit the "ideal" body type. According to messages from the media, the woman's body is unacceptable the way it is and must be constantly remodeled, deodorized, perfumed, and freed of excess hair. This job of refashioning women's bodies is constant, for the "ideal" body

type changes from year to year. Just as styles in clothes change every season, so are women's bodies expected to change. One year, the voluptuous, bosomy woman is "in;" the next, the thin, "Twiggy" type model is in fashion. One factor remains constant in these changing images: that a woman remain slim.

In this session, we elicit a discussion of these cultural demands for slimness and help women become aware of their feelings about these demands. Anne appeared to be speaking for most of the women when she described how it seemed to her that she could never open a magazine, turn on the television, or see an ad without this image of the ideal, model-slim woman being presented. Like other women, she expressed her anger at her inability to make her body conform to these standards despite her stringent dieting and purging. For Anne and for others, the binge-purge behavior is frequently related to their wish to look like the model-slim ideal type.

## **THE "PERFECT WOMAN"**

We do three exercises in this session to help women become aware of the unrealistic societal expectations for thinness and how it affects their

behavior. Because being thin is one constant in the image of the ideal woman, we ask women to list the qualities of the "Perfect Woman" as depicted by our society. We tell them to take a few minutes to visualize the perfect woman. What does she look like? What is she like? We write down their responses on the board as they say them. Some of the characteristics usually attributed to the perfect woman are physical. First and foremost, she must be tall and thin. With today's emphasis on physical fitness and exercise, a firm and muscular body is also important in the definition of the perfect woman. Long legs, a flat abdomen, and looking healthy are also mentioned. In addition, she must have a tan; white even teeth; as well as "flawless" skin without wrinkles, pimples, or blemishes. Other features include youth—the perfect woman is usually in her early twenties. Smooth legs and arms without any hair are also associated with the ideal woman. In addition, "perfect" features are important in the definition (i.e., a straight nose, large eyes, long lashes, and a round mouth). She must always be immaculately groomed, not a hair out of place, her make-up perfect, and her clothes must be the latest styles. She looks wonderful at all times and she does all this effortlessly. Variations of these statements are made by women. In addition to physical attributes, a perfect woman is bright, has a successful career, and a successful personal life. She is an intelligent

woman, who is also a gourmet cook, and a wonderful wife and mother. To sum up, the perfect woman should do "everything well" and do it "effortlessly."

Such an unrealistic image of woman only exists on television. This exercise generally brings laughter from women as they become aware of the absurdity of trying to live up to an unrealistic image of Superwoman, and feeling depressed and disappointed when they do not. The therapist can inject some humor into this exercise to make it more effective and meaningful.

## **PAYOFFS AND PRICE OF STRIVING TO BE PERFECT**

A second exercise is designed to make them aware of the payoffs and price of trying to live up to this ideal image. We ask women to list the advantages and disadvantages of trying to live up to this Superwoman image, and we write their responses on the board. Attention from men, feelings of confidence, and admiration from others are frequently listed as the benefits of trying to live up to this ideal. Women report, "I feel I can lick the world if I am feeling gorgeous," "When I really feel I look my best, then I get lots of male attention," "I like others to think I'm Superwoman, even if



I'm not. I like to be admired by others for being so slim and doing everything well."

We tell women that attention and admiration from others and feeling confident and good about themselves are certainly good payoffs. However, we ask if the payoffs make the excessive dieting worthwhile. What, we ask, are the disadvantages of trying to live up to this image? How do they abuse themselves and their bodies to be Superwomen? We ask women to list the price they pay in their efforts to reach this goal, and we put their responses on the board. Women list their health, their ability to have fun, their emotions, their identity, and their friendships as being affected by their attempt to be the perfect woman.

Responses such as these are typical:

"When I think of what I have done to my body, just so I can fit into a certain size, I shudder. I get scared when I think of all the physical problems I can have and what this can do to my health," said Anne.

"I feel starved and deprived most of the time. I'm also tired and irritable. I don't like feeling this way," Donna added.

"I feel insecure all the time. I worry that people only like me for my looks," said Penny.

""I get depressed because no matter what I do, I will never be thin enough and never look like the perfect woman," Delores reported.

""I don't have fun any more because I'm always worrying about how I look," Jackie added.

""I don't go out with friends because then I might eat and gain weight," said Celia.

This exercise can serve as an eye-opener, as the price of trying to look perfect is very high. We stress to women that looking good *is* important. It is the *excessive* time and effort that they spend on this aspect of their life that is self-defeating. The time and effort in thinking, planning, and worrying about that extra pound could be spent in more important ways.

## BEHAVIOR AROUND MEN

We do a third exercise to help women become aware of how societal expectations to be the perfect woman also extend to how they relate to men. As we have discussed previously, the role of sex-role difficulties and heterosexual difficulties has been suggested as central to bulimia (Boskind-White & White, 1983). We ask women to write down how they behave when they are around other women and how they behave when

they are around men whom they find attractive. Although many women intellectually rejected the stereotype of "feminine" behavior (e.g., demure, deferential, passive) and felt that it didn't apply to them, they were surprised to find that they related differently to men than they did to women. Penny, for example, prided herself on being a "liberated" woman. However, she was startled to discover that she frequently did not express her desires and preferences around men as much as she did around women. When a man asked her what movie she wanted to see or where she wanted to go out for dinner, she told him what she thought he wanted to hear. This is, in fact, similar to Rost et al.'s (1982) findings that although bulimics may have "liberated" attitudes, their actual behavior represents an adaption of their behavior to the traditional role concept of passivity, dependency, and underassertiveness. They hypothesize that this discrepancy is a source of stress and may even precipitate a binge. Given the women's perfectionism, it is likely that failure to live up to sex-role ideals occurs and results in some depression.

Women reported feeling more self-conscious around men than women, as expressed by these statements:

"I'm more conscious of the way I look and act when I'm around men, particularly those I find attractive. I'm not as

comfortable with men," said Clara.

"If I'm with a man I find very attractive, I blush or stutter. With women, I can be myself more," Donna added.

"I'm always aware that he's watching me and so I'm more stilted and awkward," Penny stated.

"I'm more coy around men, doing what I think they will like, doing things to get their approval," said Jackie.

Women reported performing for men and trying to please men. They were usually more open with women. The times they didn't trust other women were generally when they were competing for a man's approval. Through this exercise, women may gain some insight into how much of their behavior reflects their view of men as evaluators and of themselves as products to be evaluated. In their efforts to be products that would be evaluated positively by men, they subject their bodies to the stringent dieting and purging.

We have women identify some of the ways they behave differently around men than they behave around women and see if they want to change any of those behaviors. We ask them to study which of these behaviors are advantageous for them to keep and which are not. We do not

ask them to change long-term patterns of behavior, just to become aware of them. After becoming aware of their behavior around men, they can then choose which behaviors they want to keep and which they wish to change. They may wish to practice new behaviors and see if these are more effective in how they relate to men and in how they feel about themselves. They may want to experiment in small steps, for example, consciously not attempting to be "witty" or "perform" for a man. Is there a difference in the way they feel? In the way he relates to them? Or they may wish to express their preferences the next time a man asks them which movie they want to see instead of saying what they think will please him.

Through the discussions and exercises in this session, we hope that women will become aware of the self-defeating nature of trying to conform to an impossible image. We encourage them to stop trying to live up to an unrealistic ideal and to learn to accept themselves and their bodies as they are. Rather than trying to become the perfect woman, they can start accepting and loving their bodies, with "unwanted" hair, pimples, wrinkles, and all, even if they don't conform to what's "in" this year.

The homework for this week is geared to enhancing body image and leads into the next week's discussion. The first homework exercise is

adapted from Lonnie Barbach's (1975) Body Mirror Exercise in which women are asked to examine their bodies without any clothing in front of a full length mirror and list what they like about them. There is usually some resistance to this exercise related to the anticipated discomfort they will feel when doing this. In one group, this discomfort was manifested by several minutes of hysterical laughter as women anticipated looking at themselves. The therapist needs to be aware of how much emotional discomfort underlies this exercise and how much pain women experience because their bodies are not perfect. We tell them we realize this will be difficult for them to do, but it is essential that they do it. Using humor here can be helpful, and the therapist can demonstrate, exaggerating on any negative body parts. The therapist can ask each woman what part of her body will be most difficult to look at and ask her to exaggerate that part in front of the mirror (e.g., stick out her tummy, wiggle her hips, etc.). This exercise may need to be repeated several times until a woman becomes more comfortable with her body. As Jackie put it after several times of doing this exercise, "Now I can get to looking up to my knees. That's progress because I couldn't accept anything before. Next time I'll try to accept the part up to my thighs."

The second homework exercise is to help them become aware that

factors other than weight define a person's attractiveness to the opposite sex. They are to ask three men which women they consider sexy or attractive (movie stars and models excluded) and why.

The third homework exercise is designed to help them become aware of some distortions in their body image. They are asked to find a magazine photo of someone whose body they think looks like theirs and one of someone whose body they wish to look like. They are to bring these to the group for feedback. If the client is being seen in individual therapy, she can ask her friends for feedback. Continuation of the binge diary is also given for homework.

## SUMMARY

1. Review the homework for Week 4 and go over women's "yes's" and "no's."
2. Briefly discuss how societal expectations of thinness for women lead to binge eating and purging.
3. Ask women to list the qualities of the perfect woman and write those on the board.
4. Ask them to list the payoffs and price of trying to live up to this ideal and write those on the board. Discuss the implications

for them.

5. To help women become aware of how societal expectations to be the perfect woman extend to their relationships with men, ask them to write down how they act around other women and how they act around men. Discuss the implications for them.
6. Encourage women to stop trying to live up to an impossible ideal and to learn to accept themselves and their bodies as they are.
7. Give them the homework for this session.

## **HOMEWORK**

1. Read pages 20-21 from Susie Orbach's book *Fat is a Feminist Issue* (1978), which discusses societal expectations for slimness for women.
2. Do the Body Mirror Exercise (Barbach, 1975). Take an hour when you can be uninterrupted and insured of privacy. Set up a full length mirror in the privacy of your room or bathroom. Get into a relaxed mood by taking a bubble bath, listening to music, and/or drinking a glass of wine. Stand in front of the mirror and look at your body from all sides and angles. Talk to yourself as you look, telling yourself what you like, starting from your hair and going down to your



toes. If there are some parts you don't care for, such as a protruding stomach or "love handles," exaggerate those by sticking them out until you are comfortable with them. You may have to do this exercise several times over the next weeks until you feel comfortable with your body. Record on the provided sheet what you like about your body. Keep adding to your list.

*What I Like About My Body*

3. Ask three men to tell you which women they consider sexy and why. Ask them to pick women you know or point to someone (movie stars and models excluded). Record your reactions to what they say. Are you surprised by what you hear? Why? This exercise is designed to help you become aware of what others consider sexy or attractive. Many women are surprised to discover that fairly average looking women who do not fit the perfect woman image are considered sexy or attractive by men. They are also surprised to find out that factors other than weight are mentioned in defining a person's attractiveness.

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<i>Who Is Sexy and Attractive</i>	<i>Why</i>	<i>My Reactions</i>
1.		
2.		
3.		

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4. Find a magazine photo of someone whose body you think looks

like yours and one of someone whose body you wish to look like and bring these to the next session. Ask your friends for feedback. Most women see themselves as much chunkier than others see them. Many women have a distorted picture of their body and view it more negatively than do others. Ask your friends for a more realistic picture of yourself. Learn to see yourself more realistically.

5. Continue your binge diary (see Appendix).

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