



PSST...

You are
not alone
with body
image issues

Sharing the BIG secret

At Emma Willard, I lived in ignorant bliss. It wasn't until I moved on to a coed college that I developed negative feelings about my body; until then, my body had been irrelevant. It served me well for sports, but otherwise I hadn't really noticed it.

They say beauty is in the eye of the beholder. And what a critical beholder a woman is, especially as she views herself. Women in our culture seem trained to focus on their faults. What's striking is how unaware we are that our peers share the same insecurities. Although we women complain about the few extra pounds and share diet secrets with each other, we rarely talk about how profoundly a negative body image can affect us.

Think about it. Perhaps you're self-deprecating about your weight. Maybe you joke with your friends about your imperfect body. But have you ever really owned up to the sense of shame you feel? Those of us who contend with a distorted body image ultimately feel like we're alone in our misery.

I think women inadvertently make things worse for each other by being so reluctant to admit to a negative body image. It's like there's a stigma attached to having a poor self-image. Combine that with the stigma attached to not having the ideal body, and you've got a double whammy.

Let me give you an analogy. Have you ever waxed your moustache? Ever used Jolen bleach? Come on, even Jennifer Aniston uses Jolen. In a photo I once saw of her walking out of a drugstore, you could see that aqua box through the plastic bag she was holding.

But it's embarrassing to admit! A woman with a moustache? Shameful. And as long as we keep our waxing and bleaching a secret, it will continue to be shameful. We could really make things easier on ourselves by sharing the secret.

"Yes, I had a distorted view of my body at Emma Willard," one alumna wrote when she responded to an informal, unscientific survey I sent to 60 alumnae this spring. "It was great to be at a school where everyone had a healthy attitude, but it was really hard to be the only one with a problem." The only one with a problem? Seven other girls in her class wrote that they too struggled with the same issue at Emma.

"For too long, body image suffering (and the body myths that feed it) have remained a big secret that many women feel too afraid to admit to one another," reads the introduction to *The Body Myth: Adult Women and the Pressure to be Perfect*. "This is every woman's secret. It's about time we started talking about it."

Single-sex education fosters a sense of empowerment, a sense of sisterhood—this should be the ideal environment in which to talk about this issue. And in fact, among the 30 alumnae who responded to my survey, almost everyone felt the single-sex environment allowed them to escape—however temporarily—body image issues. "There was no hormone-induced competition over guys," wrote one alumna, "which allowed us to be understanding and supportive of each other rather than critical."

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Yet the sense of secrecy, the sense that it was their own private issue pervaded the responses—nearly every one of the 30 alumnae requested anonymity.

I spoke with some current students, too, who agreed. A junior from New York told me, “No one really cares how you look. At Emma, you prove yourself with smarts, not your size.” And a senior from Wisconsin said, “Since coming to Emma my body image has definitely improved. I think being in an all-girls’ school does give people a more positive attitude.”

Research supports what these women are saying: that a pro-female environment promotes a positive body image. The *New York Times* reported last year that “women who describe themselves as feminists are more forgiving than other women when assessing the attractiveness of women who are either very underweight or very heavy.” And I read in the *Journal of Youth and Adolescence* that “a coeducational environment is a risk factor for body image disturbance, compared to a single-sex school.”

So is this why I lost that ignorant bliss when I went off to a coed college? Was the new coed environment to blame? I think the sudden attention from boys made me hyper aware of my body. “All of a sudden you’ve got boobs,” my classmate Anna Quick Palmer ’88 explains. “It takes a certain getting used to. Even if you like the boobs, when you’re around guys all of a sudden, you’re going to have a different image of your body.”

That makes sense. But maybe I could have been ready somehow, better prepared for attention from guys. I’m not blaming this on Emma Willard; there’s much more to it in my case. I just wasn’t used to being around boys. I had been in an all-girls’ school since 5th grade, and I had no brothers or male cousins around. As empowering as a single-sex environment was, maybe the transition to coed life was just too jarring.

Certainly not everyone’s body image suffered a blow from coed life. “I enjoyed getting attention from men for the first time,” an alumna wrote. “I was more conscious of my body and appearance, but I was also very happy.” Another noticed that men were much less critical of the female body and that her body image had suffered from the *lack* of a male viewpoint at Emma. “There was no one of the opposite sex available to offer a gentler and more appreciative perspective on the female body.”

In a paper published by the American Psychological Association in 2000, researchers argue that a coed environment is actually better for girls than a single-sex environment when it comes to body image. “The presence of males may actually mitigate a female’s distorted body image,” researchers wrote. One reason is that “girls considerably underestimated the size of the female figure to which boys are in fact attracted.” Alas, the competition to be thin is a notoriously *female* endeavor.

Jane Fonda ’55 has spoken of this female competition to be thin, and in her memoir *My Life So Far*, she reveals that her eating disorder got its start in an all-girls’ environment. “Starting my freshman year at Emma Willard,” she writes, “being very thin assumed dominance over good hair in the hierarchy of what really mattered.”

Nancy Jo Phelan, director of health services at Emma Willard, believes that for the most part, the single-sex environment fosters confidence, “There are no boys, so often girls can think more about academics than about how they look since they’re not out to impress anyone”—but she acknowledges that “sometimes I think they feel the competition amongst each other.”

While some believe that a single-sex environment can exacerbate body image issues, I like to think that Emma Willard gave us a *temporary* reprieve from society’s preoccupation with women’s looks. It was clear from the survey responses I got that temporary is a key word.

One of the questions I asked alumnae was, “Have you ever had a distorted view of your body?” Almost everyone said yes.

A study commissioned last year in the U.K. found that employers lose \$172 million each year “due to negative body image” sick days. Jenny Craig surveyed 800 women last year and found that 60 percent prefer sex in the dark, so they can hide their bodies.

“I feel like it’s totally shallow to think so horribly about the way I look, but it’s how I feel,” wrote an alumna. “Even my husband doesn’t know the extent of my issues.”

It’s about time to start a dialogue about body image. Clearly, many women have issues with their bodies, and while Emma Willard alumnae may not be run-of-the-mill, we’re still consumers of American culture and—after all—human. Acknowledging a poor body image now or in the past does not mean that you’re clinically depressed or an anti-feminist or a lost cause.

“Women have an obligation to each other,” one alumna wrote. “I think it’s almost immoral not to share your insecurities. We owe that to other women.” If any of us are even the least bit ashamed about what we think of our bodies, let’s start talking. No more silence. e



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BODY DIALOGUE

Excerpts from comments by alumnae respondents to an unscientific, informal survey by author.

I rarely go to the beach or to a pool in a bathing suit with friends because of how I know/think I will look.

My husband was raised by a woman with a poor body image (not out of disorder but out of snobbery—everyone should be smart, intelligent, attractive, skinny, etc.). As a result, he has felt poorly about his image and passed that same judgment onto others and me. **I reject it outright as poor upbringing, faulty beliefs, and something I refuse to subscribe to.**

I will say that anytime I ever had a break up etc., I always went back to the **“I’m not pretty enough”** or “I’m fat, if I was thinner he wouldn’t have dumped me.”

My issues most likely came from society—magazine images and tv—maybe somewhat from peers (not that they were critical, but everyone was talking about needing to lose weight and watch what they ate . . .) .

Seriously if I could afford it I would be having lipo, Botox, a full time trainer, etc.—just to attempt to get to where I thought my body should be. **I envy people who don’t seem to let it affect themselves.**

Many years ago, I was down to 95-100 lbs, and people used to tell me how **I was too skinny and I didn’t look good**, etc., but I still never felt like I was happy with how my body looked.

I think it started in elementary school with my mother and father making comments, then other kids. **One of my daughters is two years younger than her sister and she is already larger** (taller as well). Our pediatrician recommended we go to a nutritionist together to discuss food and eating. **I told him that there was no way a 6-year-old needs to start worrying about her body image in kindergarten.**

I hate having my photo taken. I hate shopping because I can’t ever seem to find anything I feel that flatters me, and **I try to avoid full length mirrors unless necessary to check if my shoes match my outfit.**

I have always had a distorted view of my body. Currently I am pretty **“normal,”** but when I look in the mirror, I am never happy with what I see. I see myself as overweight and out of shape and am generally pretty unhappy about it.

I think I have always felt like I am larger and fatter than any other person. I have never been able to stand naked.

I’ve always been **self-conscious** about my rear end and hips.

I was the proverbial **“fat kid”** when I was young, so I have struggled with how I look since. I vividly remember as a teenager seeing photos of myself when I was a kid and thinking “My god, was I really that fat?”

The one thing at this age is that I can feel and watch my body change almost day to day.

I feel **100% responsible** for how I feel about myself and don’t blame others. It doesn’t help seeing images of what we as a society think is beautiful, but really I am responsible for what I see when I look in the mirror.