Dear Alice,

My boyfriend and I have been together for two years. He always compliments me and is very good to me. My problem is that I feel funny undressing in front of him and I can't wear sexy nighties in front of him. I have a very low self-esteem. When I look in the mirror, I see fat. I want to be able to wear sexy things for my boyfriend and feel good about myself. What can I do??

Answer

Dear Reader,

Sporting sexy things for one's paramour is one of the many perks (no pun intended) of relationship life. And it is a great testament to your relationship that your boyfriend compliments you. Some wise person once said, however, that "reassurance never reassures." So it is possible that his compliments may not be fully sinking in. In order to accept kind words from others, some part of you must also believe the statement. Have you noticed how you react when he compliments you? Are you able to hear and believe positive comments about your appearance?

It is possible that your low self-esteem, or at least your negative evaluation of your appearance, may affect you beyond intimate situations. Do you think this is true? In the western world, the skinny image of feminine beauty is everywhere. Any young child can tell you what an "ideal woman" should look like and very, very few women fit that standard (which is not culturally universal). Many people have internalized negative beliefs about themselves. These messages did not originate with you: They are the voices of young peers, family members, TV, magazine and billboard ads, and other mass-produced images of a standardized and very specific idea of beauty. Once a person has internalized a negative belief about the self, it can be very difficult to unlearn it, especially if you have held the belief for a long time.

So what to do about it? Here are some strategies to address your self-consciousness:

Gaining more insight. Many psychologists believe that suffering can be alleviated through insight. There are many different kinds of insight: You can gain insight about the source of your pain, insight about how and when it operates currently, and insight about how your low self-esteem may affect other people. Source insight can be helpful because it can help you understand how and when the view was established. Many believe that people experience a
type of liberation when they are able to make connections between early experiences and current thinking. You are able to see that your view of self originated outside of you and may very well be distorted. Gaining more insight into how others view you, you may begin to wonder if your own negative view of self is distorted.

**Changing thoughts.** Even without gaining insight, people can change their belief systems. Cognitive behavioral therapy is one way in which a therapist can help address distorted thinking or false beliefs that you may have about yourself and about your appearance.

**Changing emotions.** What are the feelings that come up for you when you undress? Do you experience anxiety? Shame? Fear? What emotions come up when you imagine yourself wearing something sexy for your boyfriend? What emotions do you notice yourself feeling when he compliments you? Do you feel happy? Embarrassed? Doubtful? Another benefit of therapy is that it may help you uncover some these emotions and which may allow you to work on changing them. Sometimes, negative self-esteem can be as much about someone’s emotional state as one’s thought process.

**Fake it ’til you make it.** Some psychologists believe that changing behavior is what leads feeling better. If you do the things that you’d like to do, even if they cause anxiety, you may eventually become “de-sensitized,” meaning that the negative feelings may become less powerful over time and may be replaced by more positive ones, especially if you have good experiences when you take such risks.

A great deal has been written on the subject of body image and self-confidence. If you're looking for some good reads, here's a list:

- Joan J. Brumberg’s, *The Body Project: An Intimate History of American Girls*
- Rita Freedman’s, *Bodylove: Learning to Like Our Looks? and Ourselves and That Special You: Feeling Good about Yourself*
- Marcia Hutchinson’s, *Transforming Body Image: Learning to Love the Body You Have*
- Ophira Edut and Rebecca Walker’s *Body Outlaws: Young Women Write About Body Image and Identity*
- Susie Orbach’s, *Fat Is a Feminist Issue*
- Kaz Cooke’s, *Real Gorgeous: The Truth about Body and Beauty*
- Judith Rodin’s, *Body Traps: Breaking the Binds that Keep You from Feeling Good about Your Body*
- Linda Sanford and Mary Donovan’s, *Women & Self-Esteem*
- Charles R. Schroeder’s, *Fat Is Not a Four-Letter Word*
- Eve Ensler’s *The Good Body*
- Naomi Wolf’s, *The Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty are Used Against Women*

Whatever you decide to read, seeking support may be another good option. Best of luck on your journey to feeling more positively and confident about yourself.

Take care,

Alice!

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Resources

Counseling and Psychological Services (CPS) (Morningside) [10]
Mental Health Service (CUMC) [11]
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