



# Musings From Phoebe

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## Women, Eating, Body Image

The news today is full of the increasing problem with obesity in America, which certainly is becoming a significant - and costly - health problem. But it's a bigger problem for women, since we pay more dearly for our extra pounds because of the way we are portrayed in the media. It's an old story - we all know the models we see in magazines are Photoshopped and airbrushed to an unrealistic perfection, but we still buy it. We have to be thin to be successful, to be happy, to be loved.

And then, of course, there are many good and significant articles and books about how we should not buy into this, how we should accept our bodies, imperfect as they are. Read the interview with Karin Lewis, below, a psychologist specializing in eating disorders, and really take to heart what she's saying.

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## A Book Worth Reading at Any Age:

**Our Bodies, Our Selves: A New Edition for a New Era**, by the Boston Women's Health Book Collective, Judy Norsigian

*Our Bodies, Ourselves*, the classic book about women's health and sexuality that is written by women, for women. Since its first newsprint version in 1970, *Our Bodies, Ourselves* has been created and revised by women speaking from our own research and experiences about our bodies, health, and medical care.

This edition reflects the work of more than four hundred women — and quite a few men — who share both personal stories and health information based on the latest scientific evidence. The result is a new **Our Bodies, Ourselves**, rewritten for today's realities. Women are the primary consumers of health care in the U.S., but, the authors say, they are grossly underserved. In addition, the medical community has viewed many life-stage conditions—pregnancy, premenstrual syndrome, menopause—as illnesses rather than natural processes that require teams of supportive practitioners. The book's rousing political orientation

## And by the way ...

As long as we're talking about body image, think twice before you invest in liposuction. A recent edition of *The Week*, an excellent news magazine, reports that researchers from the University of Chicago have found that it can backfire on you by encouraging the fat deposits to reappear elsewhere in the body. They used full-body scans to chart the distribution of fat in a group of women who had undergone liposuction on their lower abdomen and thighs. After surgery, those areas remained slimmer, but the same amount of fat quickly showed up in their upper abdomen, shoulders, and triceps. And the sad part - when researchers explained the study's results to a second group of women, have opted to have the procedure anyway. It's sad.

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## Two Interesting "Glass Ceiling" Obituaries

Two old women are no

may motivate readers to access the numerous resources listed or the companion OBOS Web site. More than a book, OBOS is a health movement and deserves a place on every woman's bookshelf.

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## A Discussion With Karin Lewis

Karin Lewis is a Boston-area psychotherapist who specializes in eating disorders, and has seen her practice grown exponentially in the past year. She has real concerns about how the media is affecting girls and women and their comfort level with their looks, resulting in them neglecting their spiritual, core self.

**Phoebe:** Tell me about women and eating disorders.

**Karin:** There are so many different aspects, one being the cultural message that we can never be "too thin or too rich" or that being thin equals accomplishment, success, popularity, intimacy and an unspoken comfort/ease in life. We also we live in a culture where the media completely distorts what the female body is supposed to look like. What you see in a magazine is not what the people look like; everything is airbrushed to show perfect skin, no wrinkles, no bulges, nothing but perfection, and that simply isn't real. And this is destroying how women and girls feel about their bodies. Anne Becker, a Harvard Researcher did a study in 1995 on the island of Fiji which was the year that TV was introduced to the island. At that time, the larger women were more admired as being fruitful, wealthy, and attractive, and there were *no eating disorders on the island*. Within three years of the introduction of television, 15% of the women on the island had eating disorders because of the women shown on T. The islanders felt that the thin, beautiful powerful woman was respected, had the best job, the husband, the beautiful clothes. In this society we completely disregard what the person is like inside, relying only on the first impression of appearance..

It's a catch-22. Women purge, starve themselves, abuse laxatives, and get thin quickly in a completely unhealthy way. Yet they're being complimented on their appearances, so they do it more. So they're not being complimented on their intelligence, big heart, talents – just their looks.

Eating disorders wound you spiritually, too; the women and men who walk into my office have a soul disorder. They're completely empty inside. If you're looking for a good way to distance yourself from a house full of family conflict, the one thing you can control is your weight. If they can't cope, they focus on the eating. We're dealing with terrorism, financial crises, environmental disasters, but if you can't deal with that, you can deal with how fat your thighs are. And think about the woman

longer with us, but the obits are an interesting read. Jean Partick (1924 - 2011) was the sole math major in her class at Northwest Missouri State Teachers College, and went on to join an all-female team tasked with "setting up" ENIAC, a very early computer created by the Army to precisely calculate the trajectory of artillery shells. The press coverage when it was introduced focused largely on the men who'd built it, ignoring the women who programmed it. Much of the magic of ENIAC was written by Jean Bartick, who was recognized only toward the end of her life as a programming pioneer. She went on to program two early business computers, BINAC and UNIVAC.

And another one from the *Boston Globe* several months ago. A woman named Kathleen Fahey Weller graduated in 1937 from Radcliffe College as a successful chemistry major, "undaunted by the reluctance of some Harvard professors to accommodate women in advanced classes and labs." So lest we forget - times have improved.

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## Of Interest ...

*Fitness* reports that 51% of 2,400 women surveyed they'd give up sex for a year if it meant they'd be skinny. 43% say they skip meals regularly to lose weight, while 39% say they've taken diet pills, and

who has been sexually traumatized and wants men to stay away – she puts up a 200 pound wall. And the women who are petrified of growing up – they choose anorexia, where they become so ill they are cared for by others, and can be a little girl again.

**Phoebe:** Which disorder is the most dangerous for women?

*Karin:* Research says anorexia but they're all deadly disorders. A 19 year old girl had a heart attack in the middle of the night because her body just couldn't take one more binge/purge cycle. It's total Russian roulette. Remember all the media frenzy around Terry Schiavo, who finally had her feeding tube removed a few years ago? She had a stroke as a result of an eating disorder. They are very dangerous; I have clients with no teeth left because of the acid from purging, their hair will fall out on their heads, but their bodies will grow more hair to keep them warm since they're in survival form. Overeating is just as dangerous – weighing 300 pounds is a huge strain on your body. Think of all the ailments you have – knee surgeries, back problems, because your body can't support the weight.

Just recently on the Today show there was a segment about women in their 40s 50, 60s who are starting to get eating disorders because of their inability to cope with transitions in life, so they're going back to their old coping skills.

**Phoebe:** What is the best way for women to prevent these disorders and to save their daughters?

*Karin:* Use your voice, and don't define yourself by your physical being. In the home, how the mother talks about herself is important. Avoid the "Fat chat" of "I ate a cupcake, I have to go to the gym for an hour now." Girls will find a coping skill to manage their lives, be it drugs, alcohol, or losing weight. If they look good, it doesn't matter if they're empty inside. And we must stop giving positive reinforcement for bad behavior. If you admire the fact that they are thin, they will keep purging.

Mothers should listen to their children and be really aware of what they watch on TV, what they're talking about, what their friends are doing and watching. If there is a trauma, work it out. It's the little traumas that no one knows about that collectively can cause a lot of problems. Family dinners are so important; this is such a good time to talk about these things. Don't just plop your children down in front of the TV. Be accepting; we're in a harsh, critical world.

20% exercise daily for two or more hours at a time.

### Did You Know That:

- 44% of baby boomers say they have little or no faith that they'll have enough money when they retire. 25% say they plan to never retire.

- Pressing your cell phone to your ear can at least temporarily alter your brain, a disturbing finding from the National Institutes of Health. They scanned the brains of 47 volunteers while they had cell phones attached to each side of their heads. During a 50 - minute call, activity in the brain's neurons closest to the antenna increased by 7 percent - a significant amount. Researchers admit they have not idea what this actually means.

### Teach Your Children

The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends that doctors and parents need to wake up about how social media affects children. "Kids can be insecure in general," report author Gwenn Schurgin O'Keeffe told LiveScience.com, "And Facebook can heighten those anxieties to a huge degree." Cyberbullying and rejected "friend" requests can lead to profound psychosocial outcomes, she says.

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