The Recovering Heart

Emotional Sobriety for Women

Beverly Conyers

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Hazelden®

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Summary: "You are finally sober and drug-free. Your old, destructive lifestyle is fading into the past and now you are a woman in recovery. What an amazing gift you've given yourself. So why aren't you happier? As sobriety takes hold and your head starts to clear, a wide range of emotions can begin to emerge-feelings that until now you've 'medicated' with chemicals. Yet to stay sober, and to grow and flourish as a person, you must engage in healing and take responsibility for these emotions that have been neglected since you first starting using. Beverly Conyers, a prominent voice in recovery, uses personal stories and informed insight to guide you in achieving emotional sobriety by addressing behaviors and feelings unique to the female experience. Learn how to develop the inner resiliency to face and process difficult, buried emotions-such as shame, grief, fear, and anger-while freeing the positive feelings of self-worth, independence, and integrity. Discover how to heal your 'damaged self' by improving your communication skills, expanding your capacity for intimacy and trust, and reawakening a spiritual life. It is through your own personal journey of healing your wounded heart that you can free yourself to a life of self-acceptance, and lay the foundation for a rewarding and relapse-free second stage of recovery." —Provided by publisher.
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The names, details, and circumstances may have been changed to protect the privacy of those mentioned in this publication.

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And the day came when the risk
to remain tight in a bud was more painful
than the risk it took to blossom.

ANAÏS NIN

For M.V. and women everywhere who face
the darkness and find their inner light

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Acknowledgments

I am amazed and humbled by the generosity, honesty, and courage of the women who shared their stories for this book. They lived through long periods of pain, shame, and despair. Many of them faced rejection, abuse, and devastating losses. Worst of all, most of them came to doubt the value of their own existence.

Yet, each of these women found within herself some kernel of inner strength—a stubborn refusal to be destroyed by what had hurt her. By daring to believe in the possibility of a better life, they worked through their fears, overcame setbacks, and slowly moved toward a place of healing and self-affirmation.

In telling their stories, these incredible women revealed their hard-earned wisdom and opened my eyes to the boundless potential of the human spirit. I learned much more from them than I could have anticipated at the beginning of this journey. For showing me what healing really means, I thank them from the bottom of my heart.

To protect their privacy, I have changed some identifying details about the women in this book. Most of the names that appear were chosen by the women themselves.

Introduction

What scares me is that I'm going to ultimately find out at the end of my life that I'm really not lovable, that I'm not worthy of being loved. That there's something fundamentally wrong with me.

—DEMI MOORE,
actress, Harper's Bazaar *interview, 2012*

Loneliness. Fear. Self-doubt. Self-criticism. These feelings lie at the heart of the shadowy inner world of many women today—even women who seem to have it all. Regardless of how successful we may appear to others or how much we've accomplished in our lives, we're often our most determined detractor, our most unforgiving critic.

We might catch a glimpse of ourselves in a mirror and think, "I look old and tired. I look fat." Or we lose a job through no fault of our own and tell ourselves, "I'm a failure. I can't do anything right." Perhaps our marriage ends or we yell at our children and we conclude, "I'm a terrible person. I don't deserve to be loved."

For women in recovery from addictions to alcohol, drugs, food, and compulsive behaviors, this painful self-criticism goes even deeper. Our life experiences have led us to question our own value, to deny our fundamental worth as a human being. Many of us were subjected to some sort of trauma at a critical point in our development, often at the hands of someone we trusted. Trauma damages our core sense of self and fills us with shame.

Our addictions inflicted new traumas: fractured relationships, public and private humiliations, and lost opportunities. On top of all that, we bear the stigma of being a woman with addictions.

All addictions carry some degree of stigma, whether the addict is male or female. But a greater stigma is attached to women. According to the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, there are about 18 million alcoholics or problem drinkers in the United States.[1] By some estimates, about a third of them are women. Yet Al-Anon membership is overwhelmingly female. (Al-Anon is a mutual support group for friends and families of problem drinkers.) Shame surely plays a role in men's reluctance to publicly acknowledge and seek help for the problem of an alcoholic partner.

We can also see the stigma of female addiction in the public's response to celebrities with substance abuse problems. Consider the well-publicized struggles of actors Charlie Sheen and Lindsay Lohan. Many people seemed to regard Sheen's antics as nothing worse than the hijinks of a notorious "bad boy." Lohan, on the other hand, garnered widespread ridicule for her many failed attempts to get clean.

As one alcoholism counselor put it, "A man who falls down drunk is still a man, but a woman who falls down drunk is a tramp." The double standard was also observed by the late Carolyn Knapp, who wrote in her memoir *Drinking: A Love Story,* "A messy drunk's an ugly thing, especially when it's a woman."[2]

For women with addictions, the stigma becomes part of our self-identity, further damaging our already shaky emotional inner world. Our fear and our pain and our shame saturate the very core of our being, shaping our decisions, coloring our relationships, and defining who we think we are—sometimes even after years of living clean and sober. But that's hardly surprising, especially when we think about women in recovery within the broader context of womanhood today. "Traditional" and "modern" interpretations of femininity have been at odds for generations. In the mid-1800s, women's rights activist Susan B. Anthony wrote, "Modern invention has banished the spinning wheel, and the same law of progress makes the woman of today a different woman from her grandmother." A century later,

First Lady Bess Truman observed, "A woman's place in public is to sit beside her husband, be silent, and be sure her hat is on straight."

Since then, the emergence of feminism and the entry of millions of women into the workforce have given us a sense of empowerment that our grandmothers probably never had. Still, like generations of women before us, we are bombarded with confusing and contradictory messages about our value to society. It can sometimes feel as though womanhood itself is under attack.

On one hand, we are expected to be nurturing, pleasant, and wholesome (hence the stigma for female addicts). On the other hand, pornography permeates our culture and degrades the value of women. We are expected to be chaste and at the same time sexually proficient. We are told it's our minds, not our bodies, that matter, yet we are judged by our physical attractiveness. We are taught that we are men's equal, yet violence against women remains an ugly fact of life for millions of us. We are the breadwinner or partial breadwinner in our families, but women still are not equally compensated for doing the same work as men. Arguably, our central role in mainstream society remains that of homemaker and mother.

In this minefield of conflicting messages, is it any wonder why so many women struggle to develop a healthy sense of their own worth? For women in recovery, who have spent years numbing and running away from difficult emotions, the task is even harder. We have used alcohol, drugs, food, shopping, sex, codependence, and other substances and behaviors to avoid and distract ourselves from the wounds at our core. We have little or no practice with confronting painful feelings in ways that contribute to our personal growth.

Our early days of recovery provided yet another avenue of escape from upsetting emotions. We were physically and mentally stressed, and we focused all our energy on staying clean and sober, one day at a time. And rightly so. Abstinence is the goal of early recovery. Little else can be achieved without it.

But as time passes and we become more secure in our recovery, long-buried feelings inevitably emerge. Wounds from the past are still deep inside us, unexamined, untended, and unhealed. The harm we have done to ourselves and to others is waiting to be acknowledged, understood, and mended.

At this point some of us are tempted to relapse, to retreat to the familiar numbing comfort of substances or compulsive behaviors. This is understandable. Nothing has prepared us for the difficulty of confronting painful memories head-on. We never learned how to face the source of our anger and grief and remorse or to fully feel our emotions. We are frightened by what has hurt us in the past and uncertain of our ability to cope with it.

Yet personal growth requires us to stop running and start engaging in the process of facing our emotions—not so we can wallow in pain or relive the trauma, but so we can move beyond it and become our healthy, authentic self.

Most of our ideas about who we are—whether we call ourselves good or bad, strong or weak, worthy or unworthy—come from our *feelings* about ourselves. These feelings, which begin in infancy and develop throughout our lives, determine our understanding of who we are. And who we think we are—*how we see ourselves*—influences every choice we make, from our choice of education and career to our decisions about relationships and self-care.

That's why emotional healing is so powerful. Personal growth cannot happen without it. Until we untangle the web of hurtful and damaging emotions that prevent us from seeing ourselves clearly, we will continue to suffer from our secret belief that something is wrong with us. And that belief will prevent us from achieving our full potential or recognizing our true value as a unique, worthwhile person.

The Twelve Steps are not only a path to freedom from our addictions, they also offer guideposts to emotional healing, gently leading us to higher levels of understanding and self-awareness. Professional

therapists also offer support and guidance. Good therapists let us explore our emotions at our own pace and in our own way, understanding that emotional healing cannot be rushed. It unfolds differently for every woman.

This book is offered as a companion for your journey, not to provide answers—those you will discover for yourself—but to suggest avenues of exploration and to share the experiences of others on the same path. At the end of each chapter you'll find several journal questions. These are meant to stimulate ideas to write about or discuss with a trusted mentor or therapist. Use them only to the extent that you find them helpful.

Ultimately, the journey of emotional healing is deeply personal—and it is the work of a lifetime. Our search for our own truths and our own meaning, once begun, never really ends, because the accumulation of experience and knowledge cannot help but affect our understanding of ourselves and others. The way we think about something at the age of thirty is likely to be different by the time we reach sixty.

Nevertheless, as we acknowledge, examine, and come to terms with the feelings we have tried so hard to run away from, we can begin to free ourselves of old, negative misperceptions about ourselves. We start to see ourselves more clearly and to recognize our own strengths, values, and virtues.

As our wounded heart begins to heal, we take our first small, courageous, wonderfully liberating steps towards self-acceptance, personal fulfillment, and spiritual wholeness.

1

The Heart of the Matter

I almost think I can remember feeling
a little different. But if I'm not the same,
the next question is "Who in the world am I?"
Ah, that's the great puzzle!

—ALICE,
in Lewis Carroll's Alice in Wonderland

One bright Saturday morning, my friend Meg and I were taking a walk around our neighborhood. It was one of those perfect spring days when puffs of white clouds sail through the sky and a warm breeze stirs the green-gold trees.

I love spring. Something about the hopefulness of it makes me happy. But that day, I could tell Meg was troubled. Normally a lively and talkative person, Meg seemed quiet and sad. “I’m not very good company today,” she muttered after a while.

I asked if something was bothering her.

She gave a little sigh. “I was looking through some old photos last night. I don’t know why. Masochism, maybe. I found one of me and my mom I’d forgotten about. I’m about six and we’re on the beach and I’m glaring at the camera like I’m pissed off at the world.” She shrugged. “I don’t know. It reminds me what a miserable brat I was.”

“Oh, Meg! You had your reasons.”

“Yeah. She was a terror, that’s for sure. But at least she didn’t end up losing her kids.” She gave a pebble an angry kick. “I mean, what kind of piece-of-crap mother does that?”

I stopped and looked her in the eyes. “A mother who’s hooked on pills and alcohol,” I said firmly. “A mother who’s lost her way. But look how far you’ve come.”

She kicked another pebble and fell silent again as we resumed walking.

Meg's life looks good on the outside, but she's struggled emotionally for years. Her mom had been harsh and verbally abusive, her dad abandoned the family when she was eight, and she had her first child at seventeen after a drunken sexual encounter she barely remembered. Still, Meg earned a college degree and built a solid career in hospital administration. By the time she was thirty-five, she was married to a nice guy and had two more kids and a lovely house. She went on great vacations and wore pretty clothes and drove a new car.

She was living the American dream—except for an addiction to alcohol and benzodiazepines (tranquilizers) that she managed to keep hidden for years.

I didn't know her then, but Meg says that when she crashed, it was ugly. Her temper became explosive and her moods swung between rage and despair. She lost her job. Her husband divorced her and won custody of the kids. David, the youngest, said he was scared of her.

At the age of forty, she was living in a women's shelter and asking herself how it had come to this. But Meg's a fighter, and slowly she climbed out of the hole she'd fallen into. By the time we met, she'd been in Twelve Step programs for years. I know her as a warm and compassionate woman who has worked very hard to mend her relationship with her children. Meg has a nice condo and loves her job as a manager in a doctor's office. She also has a side business making jewelry, a talent she discovered only after she got clean and sober.

Still, there are lots of days when Meg doesn't like herself very much.

"We all make mistakes," I reminded her as we walked. "But you learned from yours. You changed. I think that's something to be proud of. "

"I know," she nodded. "I know it up here." She tapped the side

of her head. "But inside, I'm still the bad little girl. I'm still the bad mother."

I knew what she meant. I've experienced it myself. I can put on a good game face and present myself as confident and capable when I need to. I can look like I have it all together. But deep inside, a voice sometimes says that something's wrong with me. That if people knew the real me, they'd reject me.

Lots of women I know feel the same way. Between our external and internal worlds is a nagging disconnect, as if our accomplishments and decency are not as real as the flaws inside us. As Meg puts it, "I know in my head that I'm a good person. I know I have a lot of strengths. That's the thinking part of me. But the feeling part of me doesn't believe it. In my heart, I'm still an undeserving, worthless person."

Where do these feelings come from? How do we come to see ourselves as fundamentally unworthy human beings? And what's the difference between who we really are and who we think we are?

To understand the role our experiences play in how we see ourselves, we have to go back to our earliest childhood. That's when we begin to develop a sense of our own identity.

The Emerging Self

We all come into this world needing safety and security. We need to know that we'll be fed when we're hungry, cleaned when we're soiled, and protected and comforted when we feel threatened or are in pain. Long before we can express our needs with words, we instinctively cry, babble, and smile to attract the attention we need.

As newborns, we have little sense of ourselves as individual beings. Instead, we exist as an extension of our primary caregiver—most often, our mother. This initial bond is so powerful that many psychologists believe it sets the stage for our emerging sense of self and for the quality of our future relationships. If we're lucky enough to be in the care of someone who responds with consistency and sensitivity to our needs, we form a secure attachment to that person.

Secure and Insecure Attachment

For healthy emotional growth, children need to develop secure attachments with others: that's the idea of attachment theory. The child's attachment to the primary caregiver is the most important. The mother or mother figure gives stability to the child's world. The child can always turn to that person for protection and comfort.

From this nurturing base of secure attachment, toddlers feel safe enough to explore their world. They start to gain independence and satisfy their curiosity, knowing they have a safe haven to return to. In other words, healthy dependence promotes healthy independence and the self-confidence that comes with it.

But that curious toddler still needs her mother. In fact, "separation anxiety" in young children is a sign of healthy attachment. When a mother leaves and an infant or toddler cries, that's a sign of deep attachment to her. Gradually, children learn to trust that their mother will return and comfort them. They come to expect that things will work out. They relax, their self-confidence grows, and a sense of optimism takes root.

But what if the mother doesn't provide the comfort and security her child needs? What if the child's anxiety is not soothed? What if the mother is depressed, addicted, or emotionally distant for other reasons?

In these situations, we may develop what psychologists call an insecure attachment, an uneasy bond with our mother that can lead to social and emotional difficulties later on.

Forming a close emotional bond with another person is a basic human need. Psychologists say that it helps ensure our species' survival. Infants and young children literally cannot live without the care and protection of an older person. Our need for attachment is as absolute as our need for water.

"Even when a mother is emotionally distant, inconsistent, or abusive, her children will usually form an attachment to her," notes Marcela, who battled an addiction to alcohol and prescription drugs

before becoming a counselor in a women's recovery house. "It's instinctive. But the attachment is damaged. The mother can't be counted on to provide the care her child needs, so the world seems frightening and unpredictable. This instability can undermine the child's ability to trust and can lead to behavioral problems."

Secure attachment promotes independence, self-confidence, and a positive attitude. But insecure attachment can lead to anxiety, rebelliousness, anger, and low self-esteem. Children—even infants—who are not consistently cherished and nurtured may develop troubling behaviors to protect themselves from further harm.

How does maternal depression affect attachment and children's behavior? A 2003 article, "Mother Blues—Child Blues," published by the NYU Child Study Center, explained:

> The attachment relationship serves as a model for subsequent interpersonal relationships and is believed to be an important predictor of a child's future adjustment. Children of depressed mothers have been found to have difficulty in establishing secure relationships, which may put them at risk for later difficulties. Research has identified other areas in which developmental problems may arise. Young children of depressed mothers have been rated as more drowsy, passive, more temperamentally difficult, less able to tolerate separation, more afraid or more anxious, than children of non-depressed mothers.[3]

Marcela has seen such patterns in the children of mothers she works with. With no safe haven to depend on, she says, "A lot of these kids have to make it up as they go along. They're insecure and their behavior is a response to that. Even though they're too little to understand what they're doing, they're subconsciously trying to get the attention they need or avoid rejection and abuse."

For better or worse, the behaviors and expectations we learn in

our earliest attachment—whether secure or insecure—become part of our emotional repertoire. We carry them with us into future experiences and relationships.

But our fate is not sealed in the first few years of life. Far from it. In their book *Understanding Attachment and Attachment Disorders,* researchers Vivien Prior and Danya Glaser suggest that only about 65 percent of young children form a secure attachment with their primary caregiver. The rest of us make do with varying degrees of insecure attachment.[4] Parenting is tricky, as those of us who have been there know. Even with the best intentions, a mother may have emotional issues that hinder her parenting skills. Or maybe her parenting style doesn't suit her child's temperament.

We are not, after all, lumps of clay waiting to be molded into whatever our mother wants to makes of us. When we are born, our genes determine our tendencies toward a whole host of personality traits: we are anxious or calm, assertive or passive, cautious or impulsive. (Research also suggests that our genes can make us more prone to addictions, criminality, and depressive disorders.) So, the consistency and quality of care we receive from our mother is only part of the story. We also filter that care through our own inborn personality. One toddler may flourish with a hands-off parenting style, while another may need constant reassurance. In other words, parenting and genetics both play a role in shaping the quality of our earliest attachment.

Furthermore, life circumstances can change the picture. A troubled mother may blossom into a nurturing mother when she gets help for her own problems. Another mother may find that she is less skilled at parenting older children than toddlers. And traumatic events—such as a death, illness, or divorce—may upset the equilibrium of any securely attached child.

But whatever our inborn personality traits or later life events, psychologists agree that forming a secure early attachment with a nurturing adult gives children an emotionally healthy start in life.

Such a primary attachment plants the seeds for trust, for a sense of belonging, and—most important—for seeing ourselves as worthy of love.

But there is much more to the developing self. As we grow out of infancy, we begin to form a stronger sense of ourselves as people who are separate from our primary caregiver. (A two-year-old's constant "no!" is a sign of this emerging self.) And we begin to see how we fit into the bigger world around us.

A Pretty Little Girl

In one of my earliest memories of myself, I am about three years old, wearing a blue cloth coat with a matching cap that fastened under my chin. The outfit was secondhand, a castoff from a neighbor or relative. The first and perhaps only time I wore it, I remember feeling three things: the fact that the outfit was used, and this somehow diminished its attractiveness; my mother disapproved of my wearing it; and—above all else—it made me look awfully pretty.

I remember riding in a car and gazing out the backseat window, my attention captured now and then by a big truck or some structure in the distance. And then my awareness would return to what I was wearing. I would become conscious of myself in a pretty blue coat and I felt a warm, happy sensation, almost as if I were floating. I felt special.

I felt similarly happy a few years later, when I was six and got a pair of new red shoes with buckles. New shoes were a rarity in my family, and their bright color and pretty straps and cutouts made the shoes seem almost magical.

Around this time, too, I remember getting spanked with a ruler by my teacher for something I didn't do. I also recall going by bus to a charity Christmas party for poor children, where the nuns gave us presents. I received a doll, which somehow disappeared during the party, and a nun dried my tears and gave me an even better present: a wicker doll buggy that would remain in our family for years.

The kind woman sat beside me on the bus all the way home, and I remember feeling protected and safe.

But in my clearest childhood memories, I'm being picked on at school. My family moved around a lot, so I was forever the new kid. And we were poor, so I wore shabby clothes and was often dirty. One day when I was seven, I joined a bunch of kids racing around the schoolyard playing tag—until one of the boys shouted, "Yuck! Don't touch *her.*" I retreated and learned to become ashamed of my rough hands and ugly clothes and unattractiveness.

As the taunting continued and days and weeks turned into months and years, I began to think of myself as someone who wasn't likeable because I wasn't pretty and couldn't fit in to any group. There were popular kids—they were clean and nicely dressed and self-confident. And there were ordinary kids, who weren't as well-dressed or self-confident, but who nevertheless seemed just fine and had a stable circle of friends. And then there were the outcasts—me, and sometimes a few others, who hung around the edges of the playground and walked to and from school alone.

I'm still surprised by the extent to which my sense of self was determined by others in those early years. What was really inside me—my intelligence, my talents, my strengths—was yet to emerge. My ability to discern what is true and what is false was still to be born.

Like most children, I saw myself mostly through the eyes of my parents, other authority figures, and my peers. My parents were strict and disapproving, authority figures criticized me, and other children were cruel. Therefore, I concluded that something was fundamentally wrong with me, that for reasons I could not understand I was unworthy of being loved.

Before I learned the meaning of such words as shame, humiliation, anger, and despair, I felt those emotions. I couldn't put my feelings into words, but they were there, shaping the way I saw myself and damaging my perception of who I thought I was. Many women have told me they felt the same.

As young girls and adolescents, we face the universal task of preparing to take our place in the adult world. In this stage of development, our job is to identify our interests and abilities, expand our knowledge, and build the skills we will need to become self-sufficient adults.

Our sense of self directly affects our success in these endeavors. If we're convinced that we are stupid or that nothing ever goes right for us, we're less likely to try new things or to bounce back from failure. If we've acquired defensive behaviors to protect ourselves from the pain of loss or rejection, we're less likely to develop a social network that can lead to new avenues of exploration. And if we've learned to expect anxiety and distress in our emotional life, we're less likely to build the healthy personal relationships that sustain us during life's inevitable disappointments.

For girls—even those from stable families and secure backgrounds, and those who are popular and fit in with their peers—the monumental challenge of moving from childhood to adulthood is further complicated by the very fact of being female.

Psychologists say that by the age of three, most children have established their gender identity—that is, they tend to behave in ways that reflect culturally accepted gender roles. Generally speaking, little boys are drawn to rough-and-tumble play and games with elements of adventure. Little girls, on the other hand, tend to gravitate towards games involving home and childcare. Although many girls expect to have careers beyond that of homemaker, much of their make-believe world centers on home life. For example, video games that simulate dating and family life—like The Sims, which is wildly popular at the time of this writing—are played primarily by girls and young women. From their earliest years, most girls' sense of self is intrinsically linked with the traditional female role of guardian of family and relationships.

Most young girls also learn that they are expected to conduct themselves in a modest and "ladylike" way. Rowdiness may be acceptable

in their male counterparts, but many families still convey the message that girls are supposed to be demure, well-mannered, and quiet—in a word, *nice*. In her groundbreaking 1949 book *The Second Sex,* French philosopher and writer Simone de Beauvoir observed:

> All girls, from the most servile to the haughtiest, learn in time that to please they must abdicate . . . The young girl . . . [must] repress her spontaneity and replace it with the studied grace and charm taught her by her elders. Any self-assertion will diminish her femininity and her attractiveness.[5]

Of course, there are girls who are outspoken, who excel at sports, and who prefer active pursuits more often associated with masculinity. In a 2008 *Psychology Today* article about tomboys, author Sarah Showfety noted, "In a society that still often expects men to be tough and rugged and women to be gentle and pretty, embracing their inner tomboy allows females to stand out and be rewarded for activities, rather than appearance or demeanor." She went on to say that although almost half of women considered themselves tomboys as children, most girls leave tomboy behavior behind during adolescence, when they face peer pressure to conform to society's definition of femininity: Sugar and spice and everything nice—that's what little girls are made of.[6]

But being nice is not enough. Girls must acquire another attribute in order to earn true acceptance and admiration from authority figures and peers. That attribute is attractiveness.

It's How You Look That Counts

From our early childhood, family members and strangers alike tend to comment on our appearance—"Aren't you a pretty little girl!"—rather than on our intelligence or other qualities. One day when my older daughter was around five, we were walking together and we passed a little girl with long red hair. My daughter, who had

beautiful, wavy chestnut hair, looked up at me and asked, "Mommy, is her hair prettier than mine?" She already knew the value of her hair and felt threatened by someone whose hair might be considered more attractive.

One day recently, my four-year-old granddaughter asked me why I was wearing a particular skirt. When I told her I liked the skirt, she matter-of-factly explained that it wasn't a pretty color. I redeemed myself the next day by wearing something she approved of. "You look pretty today!" she exclaimed. She herself favors shoes with sparkles and whimsical dresses in purple or pink.

Although there is evidence that traditionally feminine interests—including the desire to look pretty—are to some extent determined by our biological makeup, our society's obsession with female attractiveness has raised the bar on appearance to unhealthy levels. As girls, we measure ourselves against the manufactured images of perfection that surround us—on websites, in magazines, on billboards, on TV and movie screens—and we see ourselves as deeply flawed in comparison. Even the prettiest girls fret about perceived imperfections such as "fat thighs," "flat chests," or "thin lips."

"I always felt inferior to other girls because of my small breasts," one young woman confides. "The boys called me flat-chested. It was embarrassing."

"I inherited my mother's nose and it's too big by conventional standards," says another. "By the time I was in high school, I was convinced I was ugly. Absolutely hideous."

"My skin used to break out and I got called pizza face," recalls another woman. "I was so ashamed of the way I looked, I cried myself to sleep almost every night."

So pervasive is the emphasis on female attractiveness that in 1993 Rush Limbaugh showed his audience an image of thirteen-year-old Chelsea Clinton and joked, "Socks is the White House cat. But did you know there is also a White House dog?" The remark drew both criticism and laughter. But the message was unmistakable: If we do

not meet conventional measures of attractiveness, we are a failure. If we're not pretty enough, we are fair game for ridicule.

Of course, women have been valued for their appearance for centuries. More than 3,000 years ago, Egyptian Queen Nefertiti—whose name means "the beautiful one has arrived"—was renowned for her beauty. The mythical Helen of Troy in ancient Greece won admiration as "the face that launched a thousand ships."

But the advent of magazine ads, movies, television, and today's 24-7 media, especially with Internet access on ubiquitous devices, has steadily increased the pressure on girls to achieve physical perfection. Too many of them starve themselves, color their hair, go to tanning salons, and get plastic surgery at ever younger ages, trying to achieve a look that society deems desirable.

Carol, a yoga instructor and recovering alcoholic who battled bulimia for years, recalls, "I was always the perfect kid, the good student, the student leader. My teachers loved me. I volunteered for everything. But inside, I felt like I wasn't good enough. It was always a struggle to stay skinny. I felt like if I let myself go, I'd become this ugly, worthless person. I had to look good to be good."

The struggle for perfection came to dominate Carol's formative years, as it does for many of us. Whether we focus our energies on being a model citizen, an outstanding student, a superior athlete, or a spectacular beauty—and many girls try to do it all—we measure ourselves against impossible standards set by the media and entertainment industries.

Inevitably, we come up short. By the time we reach our late teens, we are all too likely to carry deep feelings of inadequacy at our core—feelings made more intense by our confusing relationship with the opposite sex.

Sexual Awakenings

Most children engage in some sort of sexual play—"you show me yours and I'll show you mine." These games are expressions of curiosity

and have nothing to do with sexual arousal. Playing "doctor" is a way to inspect and compare, to explore the mysteries of being different. It's as innocent as a game of tag or blind man's buff.

But as girls, we gradually come to see our bodies as potential objects of male attention. This budding awareness can be unsettling and even frightening. I remember riding on a city bus with my mother when I was ten or eleven. I was wearing a jumper with no shirt underneath it. My mother looked critically at the bib front, which barely covered my chest, and said, "You're getting too big to wear that." I was deeply embarrassed and, for the first time, ashamed of my exposed body.

A friend of mine recalls an uncle commenting on her "large derriere" when she was eight or nine. "I felt insulted, like I was a piece of furniture or some object he could criticize," she says. "But I also felt like there was something wrong with me, and I started worrying about what I ate."

Another friend recalls walking down the street at age nine or ten and some teenage boys in a passing car shouting a vulgarity at her. "They yelled something like, *'Hey, baby! Wanna lick my—'* you-know-what. I was disgusted and shocked. I think that was the first time I felt like an object. The first time I thought that being a girl could be kind of dangerous."

For many of us, we become gradually aware of our bodies as objects of male interest. But for others, that awareness is thrust upon us at an early age.

"When I was three, an uncle sat me on his lap and put his finger inside my underwear," Carol confides. "I remember that it felt invasive, a kind of violation. My parents were in the kitchen. He told me not to tell my mommy and daddy. I never did. I knew instinctively that it was something to be ashamed of."

Her experience is not uncommon. The website Advocates for Youth reports that 12 to 40 percent of women have experienced "at least one instance of sexual abuse in childhood or adolescence."[7]

(We will look at the ramifications of this and other forms of abuse in chapter 2.) And many more of us are exposed to looks, comments, and actions that alert us to our vulnerability.

When I was eight or nine, I was playing alone on the monkey bars on the school playground after hours. A rowdy group of boys from my class came along and started grabbing at my skirt. I was afraid of what they would do to me if I got down, so I tried to kick them away while keeping my balance on the steel bars. Eventually they left, but that is the first time I remember being conscious of the potential menace of male strength. I also worried that because they had seen my underwear I might become pregnant—an early hint of the unequal consequences of sexual behavior.

As little girls, we may see ourselves as boys' equals—or even their superiors when it comes to behavior, cleanliness, and intelligence. But the physiological changes of adolescence can bring us face-to-face with our physical limitations. Generally speaking, boys grow to become stronger, faster, and bigger than we are. Even the most dedicated female fitness enthusiasts eventually come to accept that they cannot compete on the same playing field with most boys.

With puberty also comes breast development and the onset of menstruation. Some girls eagerly look forward to these changes, seeing them as portals to the mysterious world of adulthood. "I couldn't wait to start getting my periods," recalls one woman. "It seemed like that's when I'd become a grownup."

But for many girls, breasts become a source of discomfort and embarrassment, while menstruation brings a monthly reminder of feminine vulnerability. As Simone de Beauvoir explained:

> ... puberty transforms the young girl's body. It is more fragile than formerly: the feminine organs are vulnerable, and delicate in their functioning: her strange and bothersome breasts are a burden, they remind her of their presence by quivering painfully during

> violent exercise…Menstruation is painful: headaches, overfatigue, abdominal pains, make normal activities distressing.[8]

Even today, in the aftermath of the women's movement that exploded in the 1960s, puberty continues to be a time of anxiety and confusion for most girls. The ego-deflating recognition of superior male strength and the self-consciousness induced by our own physiological changes coincide with a blossoming awareness of ourselves as sexual beings. Suddenly, it is not enough to be merely pretty. To reach the ultimate in feminine achievement, we must also be sexy. This can be even more complicated and even traumatic if we are starting to have questions about our sexual identity at this critical time in our development. For some girls, awareness of a preference for other girls can come early and, depending on family and community acceptance or rejection of GLBT lifestyles, our sexuality and what it means to be sexy can be especially confusing and anxiety-provoking.

Be Nice, but Be Sexy

Sex appeal is as old as humanity itself. Stone Age fertility goddesses, biblical temptresses, and mythical Sirens attest to the mysterious female power to attract and enthrall. As girls, we glimpse that power when we observe how boys and men respond to certain females.

When I was in fifth grade, one of my classmates dressed in short, tight skirts and crisp, white shirts or form-fitting sweaters. Our teacher, a male, said to her one day, "They sure didn't make girls like you when I was in fifth grade." His admiration was unmistakable and, for me, unsettling. I was still a jump-rope, hopscotch kind of girl whose idea of companionship was to bury myself in a book. Was I inferior to my classmate? Would my teacher—or for that matter, my peers—like me better if I tried to look like her?

Around this time I also began to hear snatches of whispered conversations about kissing and "necking" at parties where parents

weren't present. The conversations were usually full of giggles and knowing looks, suggesting a world in which boys and girls did unimaginable things with each other.

Today's young women tend to be less naive than I was because they are exposed to overt sexuality at a much younger age. Websites, television programs, movies, music videos, and the fashion industry deliver the persistent and unavoidable message that to look good, girls have to look sexy. Furthermore, the purveyors of entertainment and fashion insist that sexiness is the key to a fulfilling life. Countless commercials and web and magazine ads depict beautiful, sexy young women desired by men, envied by their peers, and brimming with happiness that comes primarily from being sexually attractive. Girls absorb the message and measure themselves against the sex icons of pop culture.

But sex appeal goes beyond appearance, as girls soon learn. To make themselves more appealing to the opposite sex, even though we're more aware of societal conditioning, many begin to conform to the stereotypical feminine attributes of passivity and submissiveness. Girls may downplay their intelligence to avoid competing with boys, claiming that they just aren't good at math and science—areas associated with typically masculine career choices. They may feign weakness or lack of skill in something they are good at. One young woman I know is an excellent chess player, but she confessed that she never tries to beat her boyfriend at the game because it would hurt his ego. Although it has become more acceptable today to encourage girls to follow their talents and some of the old, limiting stereotypes are losing their power, many girls still tend to show deference to boys. I still see it consistently in the classes I teach in a community college: place one male with several women in a group project and, more often than not, the women will choose him to speak for the group, regardless of his ability or academic standing.

Research has also shown that by late adolescence, many girls become less willing to assert themselves, less willing to state honestly

what they believe to be true. Psychologists attribute this reticence to a loss of self-confidence related to the physical and psychological upheaval of adolescence. And there's also an element of calculation, as girls try to transform themselves into an object of desire.

For, as most girls learn early on, sexiness is a path to female power. The late film actress Marilyn Monroe had an unstable childhood that included long stretches in foster care, but as a teenager she learned that wearing tight sweaters would attract male attention and the approval she craved. Reality TV star Kim Kardashian has earned millions of dollars by marketing her sexuality. And high school girls everywhere see their pretty, sexy peers often getting preferential treatment from their teachers and adulation from the boys.

But many girls are anxious and confused by the message that sexuality confers power. Our culture expects women to be "nice," and overt sexiness clashes with that expectation. As adolescents, we fear that we'll be scorned if we're a "prude" or "frigid," but we'll earn contempt if we're "easy." We feel the sting of being treated like an object, knowing that our human worth is diminished in the process, and we're offended by masculine leers and suggestive comments. Yet we are perturbed and our vanity is injured if we fail to attract male admiration. Many of us struggle to reconcile these puzzling, contradictory feelings well beyond adolescence.

The Prince Charming Myth

Along with the anxiety and confusion created by our budding sexuality, our sexual awakening is inevitably entangled with the fairy tales that have fed our imaginations since the cradle—the handsome prince falls in love with the beautiful maiden and bestows on her the gift of "happily ever after."

It is a story that has endured in innumerable forms for generations because it touches some deep longing within us. When Kate Middleton married Prince William, who made her a princess and future queen, she became the real-life version of the fairy tale almost

every little girl had ever believed in. That she was the living embodiment of idealized femininity—pretty, submissive, kind, and sexy (in a nice way)—added luster to the story and instantly made her one of the most admired women in the world.

Whatever her inner struggles and insecurities may be, the Duchess of Cambridge projects an image of traditional womanhood embellished by modern glamour. Her life story is a new interpretation of the old fairy-tale myth that if we are nice enough, pretty enough, desirable enough, perfect enough, we will be rewarded with security, happiness, and love.

The myth, told and retold over the years, is absorbed into our subconscious as little girls, when doting family members call us "princess" and dress us up like dolls. If the myth is allowed to take root and blossom unexamined and unchallenged, it creates unrealistic expectations and encourages a level of passivity based on the notion that someone else is responsible for our happiness.

In this way, the prince charming myth paves the way for perpetual disappointment with ourselves, our romantic partners, and our lives—for the happiness and security we desire cannot be conferred on us by anyone. Instead, we must earn them through the arduous process of growing up.

Who Do You Think You Are?

As we enter young adulthood, we have likely acquired some deeply rooted notions about our personal qualities and our place in the world. We have also developed a set of expectations about how other people will respond to us, as well as a repertoire of behaviors intended to attract approval, minimize distress, and avoid rejection.

These notions and behaviors stem from what we have been told and experienced repeatedly over our formative years. Our family, peers, and authority figures all contribute to our understanding of who we are. Societal expectations make an impact as well.

But are our beliefs about ourselves accurate, or are they a misreading of what has happened to us?

As children, we all encounter rejection, disappointment, loss, disillusionment, and failure to one degree or another. Negative experiences are part of the human condition, and no one is immune from pain. If we are lucky, we have support and guidance from people who love us and who can help us develop the emotional fortitude to withstand difficult circumstances. We also have positive experiences to counter the negative—such as recognition for our abilities, affirmation from friends, or the discovery of special interests that enhance the quality of our life.

And if we are very lucky, the cumulative weight of the positive exceeds that of the negative, letting us enter adulthood with a sense of ourselves as capable, worthwhile people—not perfect people, for we all have limitations and insecurities—but people with an emotional foundation sturdy enough to support the building of a satisfying life.

But if our negative experiences outweigh the positive—if our primary attachment was insecure, if we learned to see ourselves as outcasts among our peers, if we failed to conform to conventional gender expectations, if we had few chances to develop our talents and strengths, if there were no one to help us deal with our pain—we may enter adulthood with a fundamental sense of inadequacy.

Because as children we always tend to blame ourselves when bad things happen to us, the repeated battering of our sense of self may lead us to see ourselves as incompetent, unworthy, and unlovable.

And if our experiences have included trauma, our already low self-esteem may be shattered. In the next chapter, we will look at the far-reaching impact of trauma and how it damages our sense of self.

Journal Activities

Note: *These activities may bring up painful feelings that are best explored with support from a therapist, sponsor, or trusted friend.*

1. Describe your earliest memory of yourself. How old were you? Where were you? What were you doing? Who else was there? What was going on? What was your role in this incident?
    - How did the people around you treat you?
    - Now describe the emotional context of that memory. How did you feel? Were you safe? Loved? Frightened? Happy?
    - How does this memory relate to how you thought about yourself when you were a child? Was it typical, or does it stand out because it was different?
2. Remember yourself at a troubled time in your childhood. How old were you? What did you look like? Where were you? What was going on? How did you feel? Who else was involved?
    - Who was there to help you?
    - What did you wish would happen?
    - What actually happened?
    - How did this experience affect the way you thought about yourself?
    - How would you interpret this experience differently today?

3. How did you fit in with your childhood peers? How did other kids treat you? Were you part of a group? What was that group like?
    - What conclusions about yourself did you draw from the way other kids treated you?
    - What different conclusions could you draw today?
4. As a teenager, how did you experience your budding sexuality? Did you use sexuality to try to get what you wanted? Were you frightened of it? Confused by it? Did you try not to think about it? Was it not much of a factor in your life at that time?
    - Describe someone you were attracted to as a teenager. What was it about him or her that you liked?
    - What does that attraction say about how you felt about yourself?
    - What does that attraction say about what you wanted or needed from a romantic partner?
    - To what extent have those wants and needs changed over time?
5. Think of how you perceived yourself as you entered young adulthood. List ten words that describe how you thought of yourself at the time.
6. Today, how would you describe yourself as a young adult? Why?

2

Trauma and the Damaged Self

Self-esteem isn't everything;
it's just that there's nothing without it.

—GLORIA STEINEM,
feminist, activist, and writer

Linda has an early memory of sitting in a high chair in a "poopy diaper." "My mother was there, and I remember being scared and ashamed," she says.

She doesn't remember what happened next, but she knows that fear and shame came to dominate her relationship with her mother. "She was very abusive, emotionally and physically," recalls Linda. "She always tore me down, always told me I was stupid and fat. She would start screaming at me, ranting and raving for fifteen or twenty minutes for the smallest thing—if I didn't vacuum right, if I didn't do the laundry right. One time she took off her high-heeled shoe and started hitting me with it. There was blood all over, on the wall, on the curtain."

Linda pauses to collect her thoughts. A small business owner who is active in Twelve Step programs for food and alcohol addictions, she chooses her words carefully. "I know now that my mother was addicted to prescription drugs and had a personality disorder. She was very narcissistic. But it took years for me to understand that. So I internalized all her abuse. I always thought there was something wrong with me. I was filled with guilt and shame."

Linda's relationship with her mother was unhealthy by any measure. But it went beyond that. Instead of providing the nurturing and security she needed as a little girl, Linda's world was chaotic and

unpredictable. Any small event could set off a round of abuse. She was traumatized by repeated rejection, condemnation, and rage.

To numb her distress, Linda began to develop compulsive behaviors. "I started overeating when I was twelve," she recalls, "and I got made fun of at school because of my weight. So I started taking diet pills when I was fourteen. Then I started drinking to come down from the diet pills."

By her midteens, she had multiple addictions—to food, pills, alcohol, and pot. They masked her pain but also fed her sense of shame and worthlessness. The more she used, the worse she felt. The worse she felt, the more she used. Her weight fluctuated by a hundred pounds or more from year to year as she cycled through periods of bingeing and starving. She tried to keep her drinking hidden, but her husband and children weren't fooled.

"All those years, I hated myself. I thought my mother was right, that I was a worthless person," she says.

Finally, when her daughter confronted her about her drinking, Linda decided to get help. But it wasn't until she had done the hard work of psychotherapy and Twelve Step programs that she began to see the link between her compulsive behaviors and childhood trauma.

Trauma has a deep and lasting impact on our self-image and how we interact with the world. Even if we believe we have moved on, or we tell ourselves "it wasn't that bad," trauma stays deep in our subconscious memory, filling us with feelings of fear, helplessness, and shame. It is a hidden trigger behind our most damaging thoughts and emotions.

To fully appreciate trauma's far-reaching consequences, we must first understand what trauma is and how our minds and bodies respond to it.

The Traumatized Self

Not every bad thing that happens to us is traumatic. We all feel some degree of fear, stress, and sorrow at various times during our

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Other Helpful Resources

Helpguide
www.helpguide.org

This nonprofit organization offers expert, ad-free resources to help people resolve health challenges.

National Coalition Against Domestic Violence
www.ncadv.org

The NCADV's mission is to organize for collective power by advancing transformative work, thinking, and leadership of communities and individuals working to end the violence in our lives.

Resource Center to Promote Acceptance, Dignity, and Social Inclusion Associated with Mental Health
www.promoteacceptance.samhsa.gov
800-540-0320

A service of the U.S. government's Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), this resource center counters prejudice and discrimination associated with mental illness by

- gathering information and research
- providing technical assistance and support

Women's Prison Association Institute on Women and Criminal Justice
www.wpaonline.org/institute

This national policy center is dedicated to

- reforming **policy and practice** affecting women in the criminal justice system
- publishing timely **research and information** on criminal justice-involved women
- serving as a **resource for policymakers, media, and the public** concerned about women and justice
- supporting the **voices of women who've experienced incarceration** in advocating for change

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About the Author

BEVERLY CONYERS began writing about addiction in response to her daughter's struggles with substance abuse. The author of *Addict in the Family: Stories of Loss, Hope, and Recovery* and *Everything Changes: Help for Families of Newly Recovering Addicts*, she lives in Massachusetts, where she teaches in a community college. She continues to learn about addiction and recovery and increasingly focuses on spiritual growth.

HAZELDEN, a national nonprofit organization founded in 1949, helps people reclaim their lives from the disease of addiction. Built on decades of knowledge and experience, Hazelden offers a comprehensive approach to addiction that addresses the full range of patient, family, and professional needs, including treatment and continuing care for youth and adults, research, higher learning, public education and advocacy, and publishing.

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Through published works, Hazelden extends the reach of hope, encouragement, help, and support to individuals, families, and communities affected by addiction and related issues.

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Beverly Conyers, M.A., is an editor and freelance writer who lives in New England. She is the author of *Addict in the Family: Stories of Loss, Hope, and Recovery* and *Everything Changes: Help for Families of Newly Recovering Addicts.*

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