

BODY

Mirror Images

Bad-mouthing your body can warp your self-image—and your children's.

BY HARRIET BROWN • PHOTOGRAPHS BY JADE BEALL

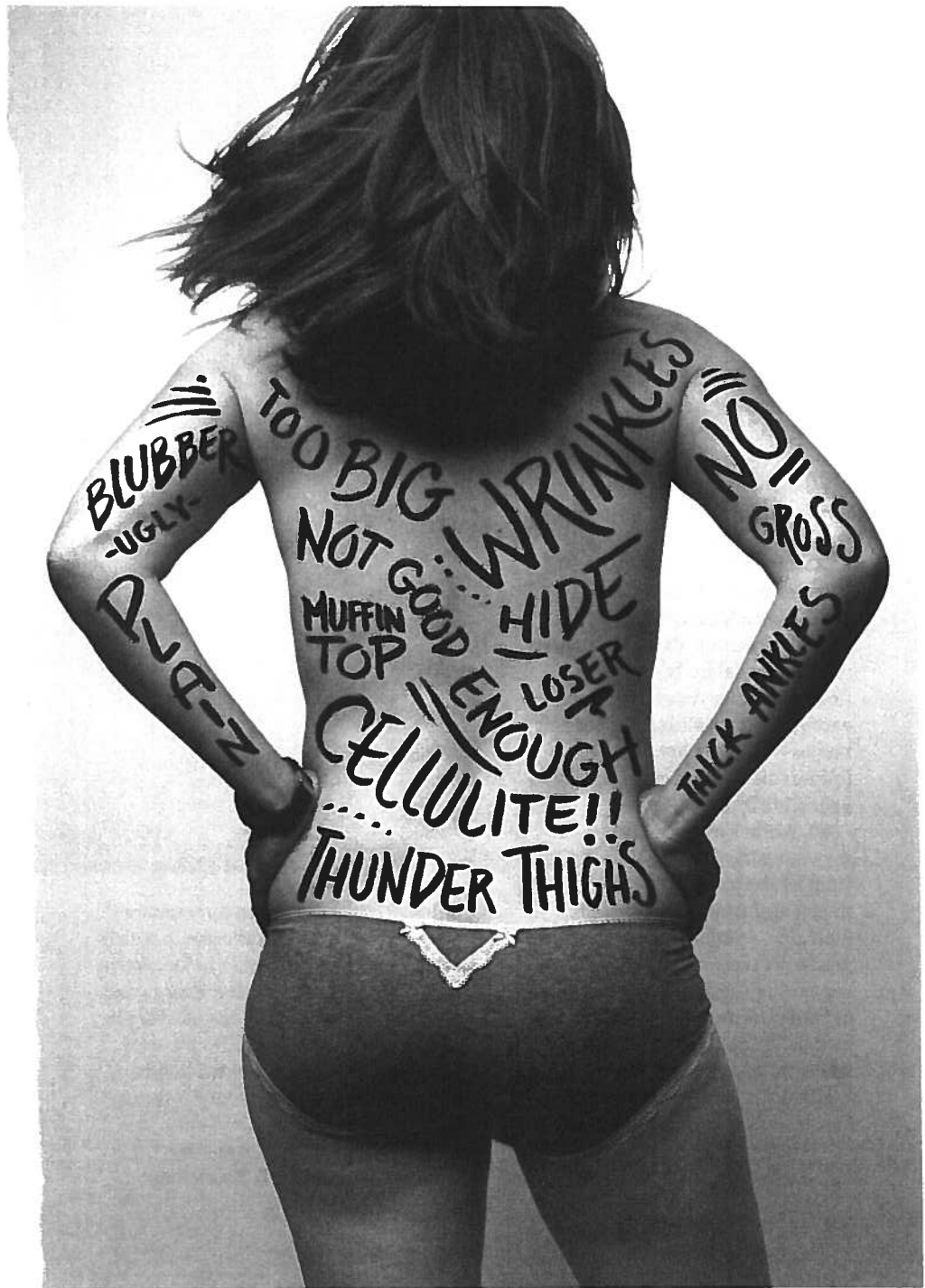
Every morning of her adult life, my mother stepped on a scale and recorded her weight on a chart hanging on the bathroom wall. She lost and regained the same 25 pounds a dozen times, and her comments about weight—

her weight, mine, and everyone else's—were rarely tactful. “You could lose 20 pounds,” she announced at the start of my sophomore year of high school, looking me up and down. “You’d be able to wear cuter clothes.”

I crept into my room, closed the door, and sobbed. In my imagination, my body, already a source of anxiety, ballooned into a disgusting blob. I was

a freak, and everyone could see it—even my mother, who was supposed to love me no matter what.

I swore if I had daughters, I’d never, ever do that to them. I’d let them know from birth that they were perfect just the way they were. I wanted them to grow up knowing their worth did not depend on their dress size, that they didn’t have to lose weight to be loved.



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Although I never criticized my two daughters' bodies, I didn't do so well when it came to my own. I cringe now, remembering the times I stood in front of a full-length mirror with my daughters nearby and said things like "Whoa, I had no idea my butt was that big!" and "Look at this disgusting stomach!" or "Oh my God, I'm never wearing a bathing suit again." I would never have uttered any of those things about my daughters or anybody else, but I said them all the time about myself—in front of them.

At the time, I didn't realize I was unintentionally giving my daughters a blueprint for body hatred. Research shows that when parents model body dissatisfaction—by either restricting their eating or complaining about their bodies—children are likely to follow suit and can carry those behaviors into adulthood.

So, while I was horrified when my youngest, then 14, stood in front of the mirror pinching her thighs and complaining about their size, I shouldn't have been surprised. When I protested, she rolled her eyes and said, "If I don't criticize my body, Mom, I won't have any friends." What had I done to allow my daughter to feel this way?

I couldn't undo the trash-talking, but I could put an end to it. It wasn't easy. I'd grown up under my mother's scrutiny. And research shows that even an



offhand comment about appearance from a parent can reverberate in a girl's head for years, putting her at long-term risk of low self-esteem, depression, and even weight gain. I was sick of living in a body I was at war with. It's a miserable way to be, and I decided it was time to do something about it—for my daughters and for me.

The first thing I did was stop bad-mouthing myself. "Modeling

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positive body image is one of the most important things we can do for our kids,” notes Carmen Cool, a psychotherapist in Boulder, CO, who specializes in helping women develop healthy relationships with food and their bodies.

Here are five other strategies I’ve used that can help break the cycle of shame.

Go easier on yourself. Improving your body image starts with learning to appreciate your imperfections. Tell yourself, *I am lovable just as I am.*

Drop the group fat talk. You know the drill: One woman complains about the size of her stomach, and others join in, competing to see who can be the most critical of her own body. This might seem harmless, but studies show that the more you participate in it, the worse you feel.

Stay mum on weight. When parents bring up weight with their children, they can unwittingly trigger disordered eating and other negative consequences. Even compliments about weight loss can cause damage, as they reinforce the idea that it’s important

to have a specific body type. A better strategy, says Katie Loth, an assistant professor at the University of Minnesota who studies body image, is to model healthy eating and physical activity behaviors and support our daughters in doing the same.

Avoid diet chatter. Comments about calories and carbs are not only damaging, but they also suck up a lot of mental real estate. What pressing problems might we help solve if we spent that energy and intellect on something more meaningful?

Find deeper connections. Instead of bonding through body bashing, spend your time in more productive ways: Plan a girls’ day, cook together, or watch a movie.

My mother died 5 years ago, still dieting, still believing she needed to be smaller so people would find her attractive and lovable. How I wish I could have persuaded her that the size of her body had nothing to do with who she really was. At least I—and my daughters, too, I hope—now know the truth. □

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Body image expert Harriet Brown’s most recent book is Body of Truth: How Science, History, and Culture Drive Our Obsession with Weight—And What We Can Do About It. She teaches at the S.I. Newhouse School of Public Communications at Syracuse University.