

Counter-sex culprits

Body trashing creates an inferiority complex and reduces the desire to have sex.

by Simon Moon

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Many of us don't really like our bodies. Whether it's endless hours of work, body-bashing religious traditions, glorification of airbrushed Hollywood perfection, growing legions of people being absorbed into the relatively senseless numisphere of the Internet, or just plain old ignorance about how the thing works, our bodies are getting the short end of the stick.

What's worse? It's getting in the way of good sex.

Body wisdom is a lost art. For most people, especially in America, talking about our bodies, feeling them, being comfortable in them, and taking care of them are low on the priority list. Lack of body awareness and trashing of our physical selves exacts a heavy toll on our sex lives. Maybe that's why a recent poll by Harris Interactive indicates that Americans have far less sex than people living in 25 other countries. The worldwide average was 103 times per year. In America, the average was 85. Only the Japanese and Nigerians had less sex than Americans. What's more, people ages 16 to 24, who you'd think would be boning more than any age group, said that they need more time for intimacy, romance and tenderness — more than any other age group.

“There are a lot of things that militate against people being comfortable in their own skin,” says Dr. Richard Wagener, aka Dr. Dick, a practicing clinical sexologist for more than 25 years and host at DrDickSexAdvice.com. Dr. Dick also carries a master's degree in theology

from the Jesuit School of Theology, Berkeley, along with a list of other impressive credentials. “People who are comfortable with their bodies make better lovers,” he says.

First among our counter-sex culprits is the ungodly pace of our lives. High levels of stress can K.O. your sex drive, reducing testosterone, which is among key hormonal sources of horniness in both men and women (yes, women produce testosterone — from their ovaries no less). Decreased sex drive is a common complaint in people who have stressful jobs and long work hours. And many of us add to the trouble by indulging more frequently in unhealthy habits when we’re stressed — drinking, smoking, overeating — all of which can inhibit our level of desire and ability to enjoy sex. That is, if we’re not too tired to get going at all.

“I hear this from a lot of people,” says Dr. Dick. “People ask me how they can find time for sex. They work one or two jobs and come home exhausted and have a partner, but they don’t feel amorous, and they drink pop, caffeine, take amphetamines, eat way too much food, drink way too much alcohol, and they’re sleep deprived. All of this stuff militates against a healthy sexual response cycle.”

People can mitigate stress and boost their libidos by listening to their bodies and giving them the attention they deserve, says Antero Alli, mentor to Free Will Astrology author Rob Brezny, body wisdom researcher and founder of Dreambody/Earthbody Lab in Berkley, Calif. A great deal of Alli’s work uses physical movement as a medium for engendering levels of self-awareness, deepening spiritual awareness and other lofty pursuits. The body has an intelligence all its own, he says, and it doesn’t like to be ignored.

“The body’s central need is to be felt deeply,” says Alli. “We have to recognize the body’s need to be felt deeply, and we need to take it very seriously.”

Alli says that a body's primary response to body trashing is to seize up, get complicated, add weight so it's harder to ignore, and generally scream for attention. People who ignore their bodies ignore them at certain peril.

“Body trashing is another word for self-hatred,” says Alli. “There is a certain kind of contempt that goes with it. We need to work on making a healthy commitment to our bodies and the material world.”

Commitment to the material world, including the physical component of our selves, is frequently undermined by religious traditions based on body denial, denial of pleasure, and condemnation of the material world. Many of the early American settlers, as well as many modern Americans, adhere to doctrines that condemn the body and its functions, feelings, and pleasures — “like we're all living in a prison of meat,” as author Peter Lamborn Wilson is fond of saying. Many of us commit the schism of emphasizing “higher” and “lower” selves, with the “lower” self receiving the designation of morally inferior. Many Christian traditions, Eastern religions, New Age philosophies, and others make a habit of denigrating the body, seeing it as a source of suffering, temptation and corruption.

“I remember when I sat in the confessional I would hear women talking about how they had sinned because they had enjoyed sex with their husband,” says Dr. Dick.

This denigration is so pervasive that it has even become deeply rooted in our language, creating a sort of semantic prejudice against sex and pleasure. We refer to sex as smut, from the German “smotten,” or stained, for example, and call out sexual references as “dirty” or “nasty,” despite the fact that most people find the act itself pleasant to one degree or another.

“So many things in our culture cast sex as a negative, and there are very few things that promote sexual well-being,” says Dr. Dick. “The tide in our

culture is fundamentally sex negative. As a result, there is very little information or education about sex and sensuality.

And even if people want to learn, there are cultural pressures and religious pressures against knowing and celebrating the body.”

Bad body imagery

Body denial also makes us susceptible to the next big culprit — a pervasive culture rooted in unrealistic body imagery. We are bombarded by body images that are, quite frankly, absurd, bordering on fictitious. The majority of the population does not look like cover models on *Cosmopolitan* or *Men’s Health*. And while there’s nothing wrong with being healthy and fit, the pervasiveness of perfect body images can make just about anyone wonder whether he can measure up.

“People feel like they’re less-than and that their averageness won’t translate into sexual success,” says Dr. Dick. “Compared to what we see in commercial culture, the average woman and man come up really short.”

Ignoring our bodies or ignorance about their inner-workings makes us particularly susceptible to images and products that are created to profit from shame about our bodies’ imperfections — weight loss pills, miracle diets, cosmetics, and cosmetic surgery, for example.

“Not feeling our bodies makes us more susceptible to the lies and stereotypes that are constantly projected about sexuality,” says Alli. “But these images of sexuality are intended to sell us things — selling images of sex that have very little to do with sexuality. They essentially leave us empty because they’re not connected to reality.”

One of many modern responses to pervasive dissatisfaction with our physical selves is to escape physical reality entirely through escape into the bodiless realm of cyberspace. While most people can balance online

interaction with old-fashioned, visceral interaction, an increasing number of people are using the Internet and other forms of mediation to escape the complexities of traditional social interaction, says Dr. Dick.

“A lot of people react to feelings of inadequacy by relating to one another in cyberspace,” he says. “It’s much easier to have a 10-inch dick online than in reality. On the Internet, you can be slim; you can be trim; you can even be another gender. If it’s just cybersex, you can get away with the lot because the person on the other end is none the wiser.”

And while the Internet often serves as a great place to meet potential partners, a substantial percentage of users — from 12 percent to 20 percent, depending on which study you believe — develop an unhealthy dependence on the safety offered in cyberspace and other forms of mediated communication. The old Bell telephone tagline “Reach out and touch someone” carries within it a sinister truth — that touching someone is precisely and sadly what you’ll never be able to do through networks of fiber-optic cable. What the old slogan really says is “Pay us to mediate between you and the very sense of touch itself.” Those with an unhealthy dependence on mediated communication are drawn by what Jewish-German philosopher Walter Benjamin called the “utopian trace” — a sort of hidden, un-scratchable itch embedded within products sold to us through perpetual reinforcement of dissatisfaction. For those overwhelmed by the notion of reaching out and touching physically, escaping into cyberspace provides an unhealthy distraction from fears of inadequacy, distorted self-image, the pains of 3-D existence, and the ickiness of mingling bodies.

“This projection of consciousness into the Internet temporarily alleviates some of the pain, frustration and suffering that people, on a physical level, aren’t ready to face yet,” says Alli. “In cyberspace, consciousness escapes into nonlocal strata of references and identities — a disembodied and painless place.”

Educate yourself

Rather than escaping, both Dr. Dick and Advice Goddess Amy Alkon suggest tackling barriers to sexual fulfillment through education and experimentation.

“This is not Saudi Arabia,” says Alkon. “Go out and buy a copy of the Joy of Sex. So many people would rather sit around with their problems like a cherished pet. You have to look at other things when you are fat or unhappy. Look at the underlying causes, and get over it.”

Perhaps the greatest barrier to sexual fulfillment is the absence of good information, says Alkon. In a culture that denies the body, people operate based on myths rather than facts.

“So many people believe in stuff that is unscientific and not based on good data,” she says.

Dr. Dick agrees.

“If I am unsure about my body, or I don’t know how to control or be on top of the mechanics of my body, or what I want or what need, I will operate from all sorts of mythologies,” says Dr. Dick. “I hear things from adults in their 20s and 30s that you wouldn’t believe. Did you know that Mountain Dew is a contraceptive? We need to give people permission to investigate and educate themselves and see how all that generic information about sex applies to them as individuals. That could be anything from masturbating to learning how to find pleasure in their feet. We have a long way to go in making friends with our own body.”

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