

## **That old Achilles heel can make us our own worst enemy**

**By Ruth Ostrow**

A WOMAN I know came to visit the other day. She was hurt by her partner. She said that he kept making unhelpful and critical comments about her body.

"I feel so depressed. He keeps saying these awful things like my stomach is fat. I don't know if I can stay with someone who is that critical," she complained.

I was trying to get a grip of the situation. There are always two sides to a story.

"Did he say these things in a vicious tone?" "Not really."

"Did he seek to put you down or was he trying to be helpful?"

"He did say that exercise would help."

"Did he volunteer his displeasure at your body or did you ask him?"

"I asked him but only because I know that's what he's really thinking. I keep seeing him looking at other women."

This is very typical behaviour for women, to the point of parody -- seeking reassurance rather than the truth, and then getting upset by the answer. When the woman began showing me her belly, I could see the set-up.

"Look," she said pinching herself, "Do you think I'm fat? I had children out of this stomach, what do people expect? Tell me the truth."

I began reassuring her as one would.

"You have a bit of a belly but that's only natural. It's considered beautiful in many cultures to have curves, look at the awe and wonder belly-dancers inspire".

Then I cut to the chase.

"I think the only person who is really worried about your stomach is you. It's you who thinks you are too fat. You're the one hating your belly and looking at other women's bodies, not your partner."

As I spoke, my thoughts turned to the subject of hurt. The adage is that no one can hurt us unless we let them, but I think it's more accurate to say that no one can hurt us unless we believe them.

The woman was upset because her partner was reflecting what she believed about herself.

She'd forced him into a position where he was verbalising her body-image issues, self-esteem problems, and insecurities, so that she could feel bad about him rather than taking responsibility for her own feelings and behaviours.

If someone were to tell me my writing was bad, I wouldn't be hurt, just consider it a difference of opinion.

If someone were to criticise my appearance, I would be hurt. Why?

Because like 99 per cent of the female population, I have body-image issues that can be easily stirred.

Men have less problems with body-image but, as I found from my years as a sex and relationships writer, if you venture anywhere near the area of sexual potency, penis size or performance, most men become hypersensitive.

No matter how gorgeous the woman, no matter how virile the male, you only have to lift an eyebrow at the wrong moment to trigger an avalanche of bad feelings, which are then attributed to your disapproval, and any comments like "but you are an extraordinary lover" are rejected as gestures of pity and placation.

Trying to reassure someone with self-esteem issues is like pouring water into sand.

"Do you love me?" is another set-up. The person who continues to ask for reassurance really should be asking: "Do I love me? And if not, why not?"

Often the things we say to ourselves, are far worse than anything anyone else around is saying to us. One of the most useful hints I've heard on this matter came recently when I was listening to a tape from lectures given by renowned international healer Dr Caroline Myss (PhD) whose classic books *Why People Don't Heal* and *How They Can* and *Anatomy of the Spirit* examine the underlying causes of illness.

Her lecture series suggests that any self-speak that humiliates, hurts, or undermines us is often more damaging to our psyche and our health than anything we eat or do. Therefore we have to deal with the things that corrode our self-esteem, rather than continuing to complain or feel bad.

Even though she is a naturalist, Myss maintains that it doesn't matter what we have to do in order to feel good about ourselves -- we must do it if we are to maintain optimal mental and physical health, vitality and wellbeing.

If you feel you are not smart enough, re-educate yourself. If you feel unlovable, do things that make you proud. If you hate your body, buy new clothes, get fit, do therapy and yoga, have facials.

We have to get rid of the negative self-speak at any cost, and once we've done our best and changed what we can, then we need to accept the things that we can't change. Meditation and visualisations are used very effectively by Myss.

The way I see it, we all have a version of Achilles heel, a soft spot, a tenderness, a weakness that aches when accidentally brushed or knocked. And we need to heal our own heel, so we can stop blaming others or using those we love as emotional crutches.

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