

Body image & relationships

Therapist James Earl looks at how a simple change of mindset can boost body confidence.

Photograph by Sinita Leunen



Feeling good about sex and feeling good about our body seem to be inextricably intertwined. A healthy libido and a reasonably positive body image seem to go

together, and if our body image is not great, our interest in sex can diminish.

As we get older, this connection can become more problematic. We may feel less attractive and less desirable as our body changes, and it is easy to internalise these negative feelings. Consequently, we may 'turn down the volume' on our libido.

None of this is inevitable, however. That feeling of sexiness, desirability and positive body image is possible at any age. It is far less dependent on the absence of any natural signs of ageing – which is, after all, impossible – and far more to do with being comfortable with yourself and your life in general, and a poise and confidence which can be cultivated.

Body image is very much a feedback loop, if you think about it. To describe what I mean by a feedback loop, let's use the example of giving a talk to a room full of strangers. This is usually quite a terrifying prospect for most people. As you approach the podium, you have butterflies in your tummy.

The trick is knowing how to set up a feedback loop with the audience to help you relax. So, despite the tummy-flips, you drop your pitch as you start speaking (high pitch can sound nervous), you slow your delivery down (again, gabbled delivery sounds like you're worried), and you lean casually on the podium, conveying 'chilled out'. You may even open with an informal greeting, like 'Hi everyone!' (rather than 'Good evening, ladies and gentlemen').

All this is, of course, acting to a degree, though I prefer to think of it as employing a skill set. But the effect on your audience is immediate: they start to relax. They're thinking, 'We don't have to worry about her, she looks fine.' (People are generally nice; they worry for you, until they know they don't need to). And when they relax – guess what – you relax too. Hey, congratulations, you just set up a feedback loop.

Setting up a feedback loop about body confidence for yourself, your partner, social group and the wider world requires employing a similar skill set. Let's look at how it's done, in five steps.

1 First, you reflect that age has little to do with attractiveness or sexiness (why is it, for example, that both George Clooney and Helen Mirren are high on most people's list of sexy?). You reflect that life experience. A confidence in who you are and where you've come from is the very thing you need for that desirability. It's not the absence of wrinkles that makes you sexy – it's that you're comfortable in your skin. If you can feel that, you will project a positivity and poise that is genuinely magnetic. And SEXY. If this seems like a tall order, just treat it as a mental exercise. A degree of projected poise and confidence gives other people a way to feed back that confidence to you. At which point you can really feel it.

2 More than anything, start to renew those commitments in your life that make you feel like YOU: whether it's interest in film, music or theatre, seeing your friends, writing or reading. Don't let life get in the way too much. Remember to go dancing again, feed the ducks, walk beneath the stars. Go to an art gallery or take up playing poker...

3 Think about dressing as if you were a little more body positive, to help become a little more body positive. Exercise (not obsessively) just to feel a degree of commitment to yourself. Eat well, but enjoy food.

4 Talk to your partner (and/or friends) about how this is a journey. Don't be afraid to talk about how ageing can be a challenge. Life stages are there to be shared, and the chances are you are both feeling it. This can be enormously reassuring.

5 Remember that sex is only 5% something we do in a bedroom, and 95% the thoughts and feelings that make it fun. So talk to your partner about what renewing your commitment to having fun together means. This does not guarantee good sex, but a feeling of enjoyable connection is the normal, necessary precondition. Fun sex can lead to more confidence in your self-image, so here is another really great feedback loop worth exploring. And sex can be even better in the second half of life.

Being body positive really is being YOU positive. This is you, coming back to you. Welcome home!

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