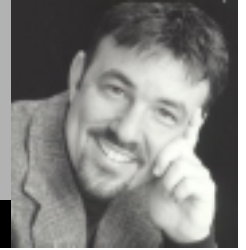


# Kort's Korner

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## Straights and Queers Both Have 'Body Image' Fears

**Between The Lines Newspapers - February 25, 2003**

Spring's right around the corner. Time to bring out your summer wardrobes and start waxing or shaving your body. But what if you are struggling with weight issues, low self-esteem, eating disorders, sexual addiction or other issues related to your body and it doesn't cooperate the way you want it to? What if those extra pounds you put on over the past winter won't come off or your body doesn't cooperate the way you'd like it to? For many lesbians and gays, the issue of body image is a strained one. In her book *Looking Queer*, Dawn Atkins explores how members of the GLBT communities think and feel about their physical appearance.

About now, my clients start talking about anticipating spring and summer. Some overweight lesbians complain of feeling self-conscious, and dread getting into summer clothes, let alone a bathing suit. Thankfully, *Looking Queer* addresses the plight of lesbians who closet themselves out of their concerns about their weight and body image: "Ironically, the lesbian-feminist standard of self-acceptance for women has created a taboo around worrying about weight and body image, going so far as to identify negative body image and obsessions as a 'straight women's thing'".

My gay male clients talk about their desire to start or increase a diet and work-out program. They try to create the perfect gym bodies: sculptured chests, buns of steel, and well-defined big biceps. But what if a man can't

achieve a buff, hairless, well-hung, tanned or blemish-free body-or doesn't even want one? Many gay men feel themselves isolated for not achieving this happy, perfected ideal image.

I'm not exempt from feeling this pressure! Over the past few years, my partner and I have gone on a number of all-gay cruises. On our first trip, lying on my back in my bathing suit on a lounge chair, I realized I was surrounded by men without a single hair on their bodies, especially not on their backs. My back is covered with hair, and I wondered about getting emergency waxing before I stood up and exposed my back. For our next trip, I vowed to remove it. Screaming in pain-to the delight of my "dominatrix mistress waxing operator" who poured hot wax on my back and pulled it all off once it hardened-I vowed never to do this to myself again. I joked that she must

have sold my back hair at the local carpet store, for use as an area rug.

Of course hair removal, dieting, and exercise can all be ways to look good and feel positive about your body. However, some obstacles prevent us from achieving these goals. As lesbians and gays, we're told to deny our bodies and bury our physical sensations. "Don't look at-or smell, or touch, or taste-another member of the same gender and enjoy it!" While lesbians have developed greater flexibility in how they define attractiveness, as females they've been handed

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*"Our community needs to move beyond the "looksism" and actively challenge the narrow, restrictive concepts of what it means to love and accept ourselves."*

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*Continued on reverse*

messages like, "Don't be too sexual," and "Be thin for your man". From this socialized goal-to please the male gaze and resemble Barbies-women develop eating disorders. Binge-eating and purging help them feel in control of their bodies, and lesbians are not exempt.

The phrase "lesbian body image" isn't found in psychological literature, because of the belief that body image is a problem for straight women only, or that lesbians have gotten over worrying about it. This isn't true and only isolates those lesbians who haven't gotten over it!

For his part, a gay male-like males in general is taught to be a sexual predator and develop a masculine physique. When he views sex as a means to feel in touch with his body, giving him permission to feel other men's bodies, sexual addiction can develop. Gay men spend hours at the gym, developing bodies that they can "wear" like a good Armani suit.

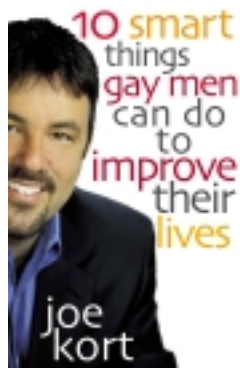
During childhood, sexual and physical abuse can also vandalize the healthy development of feeling in charge of one's own body. The perpetrator, when engaging in such abhorrent behavior, claims ownership of the child's body. Another common body-image disorder

is sexual anorexia, where the sufferer limits or deadens his sexuality to the point of becoming asexual. Paradoxically, he or she becomes preoccupied with sexuality and views "being sexual" as dirty and disgusting. Although heterosexuals can develop this as well, in my practice, I see many gay men and lesbians who suffer sexual anorexia. We are more vulnerable to it, unfortunately, given the message that gays should abstain from sex, if not be completely celibate.

Were you unsuccessful in your New Year's resolutions to get the pounds off, stop the sexual acting or over-eating? If so, that might mean you should rid yourself and work through some of these issues. Take a look at what messages you were told about your body, what others have done to your body and/or your expectations of what your body should be.

Make it what you want it to be, because our bodies aren't owned by anyone but ourselves. Our community needs to move beyond the "looksism" and actively challenge the narrow, restrictive concepts of what it means to love and accept ourselves.

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