

## Health

## Snap happy

If you hate the sight of your body, stripping for the camera may sound like a nightmare, but it works. As the clothes peel away, so does the harshness of your self-criticism, says Catriona Wrottesley

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Catriona Wrottesley  
The Observer, Sunday 6 February 2005

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When you're feeling bad about your looks, you'd imagine the last thing you'd want is to have your picture taken. But, for nine years, eating disorders specialist Dr Ira Sacker, of the Brookdale University Hospital, New York, has referred patients with anorexia, bulimia and overeating difficulties to photographer Ellen Fisher Turk for nude photo sessions. And she's achieving remarkable success in helping them accept their bodies.

Turk's body-image work began when a friend, who'd been raped, asked if she would photograph her naked as a means of learning to like her body again. 'As we worked, I looked for what was unique and authentic about her,' says Turk. I found that in her lines and her form, the way light hit her face, the angles of her body. When I saw these things, I captured them. It soon became apparent that how I saw her was different from how she saw herself. Gradually she started describing herself the way I would.'

Dr Ira Sacker heard of Turk's work, and began referring patients to her. 'My first two patients reported it was a very positive experience. In that first year, I referred more than 20.' Turk has since worked with 150 women, some of whom were anorexic, bulimic, or overate. Others simply did not like their bodies.

Dr Sacker explains: 'People with eating disorders view themselves in distorted ways, often as larger than they are. They focus on certain parts of their bodies as problematic - usually stomach, thighs or hips - but Turk's photography offers a different perspective. It is an additional mechanism by which these individuals can more accurately see themselves. That makes treatment more effective. There's something special about Ellen's loving use of the camera. She looks for the person's soul inside.'

There's no compulsion to be naked; some remain clothed. But Dr Sacker says nakedness has helped many of his patients make peace with their bodies.

Turk, too, believes nakedness enhances the process. 'Unclothed, you're vulnerable. It's then we have emotional reactions. This sort of photography is a transformational tool to break through existing difficulties. Through seeing oneself differently, it's possible to shift how we feel.'

The woman being photographed begins clothed. 'She removes piece by piece, as she's ready. At first it's scary,' says Turk.

'I suggest she moves, lies, sits or stands, as she chooses. As I photograph I describe what I see. For instance: "I like how the light hits your collar bone."

If I capture that, she'll see it, too.

We talk a little, then it's quiet a little. I try to be as soft as I can, with respect for her and what she carries, for her humanity.'

A session lasts up to three hours. 'Afterwards people look victorious because they've faced something frightening.'

Two days later, Turk gives them a contact sheet with around 100 images, rather than individual prints, having marked with an erasable grease pencil the frames she thinks are note-worthy. 'We talk about whatever they want to share.'

Often it's the disliked images which are homed in on, but, according to Turk, it's the juxtaposition of the disliked with others which are liked that is important.

'Because it's all on one sheet, they're forced to keep looking at the variation between beautiful and not-so-beautiful. In resolving that conflict comes self-tolerance. The images reflect to these women that they have variation, depth, uniqueness.'

Logan Niles, 32, an actress, was 22 when she went to Turk for photo sessions. She had difficulties around eating, and wanted to challenge her negative perceptions about her body. 'I thought I wasn't thin enough, my thighs were too big, my boobs weren't perky enough. Aged 10, I'd gained weight because my family situation was difficult. I

comfort ate. By 12, I'd begun bingeing and purging with laxatives.'

When Logan first looked at her contact sheet she cringed.

'My eye was drawn to stretch marks on my breasts. My bottom looked huge. While Ellen was saying, "Look at that beautiful curve," I was looking at an acne scar on my back, or cellulite on the back of my thigh. But then I moved on and found others I liked.'

Dr Sacker says while these photo sessions do not cure eating disorders, they can help shift entrenched negative perceptions. 'For more than 70 per cent of patients I've referred, it's been effective,' he says.

However, he warns that it's important to be in therapy at the same time, because you need an eating-disorders expert with whom to process the experience. 'This isn't something you play with. You need to understand what you're dealing with.' Turk agrees: 'Don't try this yourself. People might take terrible pictures and make things worse.

It could feel like a confirmation of "lousy me". Niles says although her eating difficulties continued into her late twenties, her sessions helped her come to terms with her body.

Nine years later, she looks at the once cringe-making pictures and likes them.

'There's one I hated, which shows a large portion of my rear and thigh. Now I look at it and notice the curve in my side, the way the light falls on my body. Ellen was crucial in helping me accept myself. An important part of that was making me aware of how much I didn't accept myself.'

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