

Why is a woman's self-esteem often so low? How does knowing God help with this issue?

On her bestselling CD, Kasey Chambers sings: "Am I not pretty enough? Is my heart too broken? Do I cry too much? Am I too outspoken?" From the song's popularity, she seems to have struck a chord with most women (probably a few men, too). We spend our whole lives thinking, "Am I acceptable? Why do people look right through me?"

Self-image – in particular, body image – is an enormous issue for women. Working in my practice, I've found 95% of the women I have seen don't feel comfortable in their own skins. Why is this? Why are women so preoccupied and so unhappy about their bodies? Why is their self-esteem so often so low?

For some, they have experienced sexual abuse. This is very significant, especially since a startlingly high proportion of women have reportedly been subjected to some sort of sexual abuse. If someone is abused, they tend to lose the ability to say "No", and feel OK about it. Sometimes, abused women can feel like their body belongs to anyone. They tend to feel like their body's not special, not important. Sexual abuse is a big factor in some women's negative perception of their body.

Families can also be responsible for the negative ways we see ourselves. Children hear everything! You've got to be so careful about the comments you make in front of your own children. Small comments from unthinking siblings or careless parents can have deep and lasting effects. Parents can sometimes unwittingly buy into 'beauty myths', by always commenting on a child's appearance. We need to expand our children's sense of beauty – when they are kind to people, or responsible or helpful, these are beautiful things! This requires some thinking on the parents' part.

Another key influence on body image is the media. From a very young age, we are force-fed images of beauty. There's a Savage Garden song which contains the line, "I think the beauty magazines promote low self-esteem." That's probably very true. They do promote low self-esteem and aren't much good for us. Perhaps we should avoid them and not put money back in the industry. I have been on a beauty magazine 'fast' this last year. I only allow myself to look at them now and then when I go to visit the doctor! It's very hard to go cold turkey, but I strongly recommend it in terms of feeling much better about yourself.

Negativity warps our perception of our self and of others. It also generates what are commonly called neuroses.

Number one neurosis is, of course, weight! As a doctor, I don't think there's anything wrong with weight loss. Healthy weight, and health in general, is a good thing. The best way to measure your weight is the Body Mass Index. Your BMI = your weight in kilograms divided by your height in metres squared (BMI = kg/m<sup>2</sup>). A BMI anywhere between 20-25 is normal. The average woman

in Australia is 24; models are about 16.4 – on the verge of hospitalisation. Weight should be a health issue, not a beauty issue.

Beauty and fashion is the next common neurosis. I love clothes. I love the different ways that everyone dresses, and I think clothes are a great way of expressing your personality. But the whole beauty industry is a huge money grabber. As Christians, we are obliged to watch our money and where we spend it. Does it really make you feel any more content when you spend money? It isn't wrong to get your legs waxed or to care about the clothes you wear, but it's still worth challenging ourselves in this area.

The third neurosis is competitiveness. If women have a propensity to sin in a particular part of life, perhaps it is in this area. Competition leads to gossip, jealousy and feeling bad about ourselves. We look at someone else, and we want to be like her (or not like her), instead of looking at ourselves, working out how we're meant to be, and how loved we are in God's eyes. We want to be liked by other people, to be up to their standards or admired by them.

Why does this matter so much? Just toss that desire out the window, because in the end, it's just you and God. Being competitive is a fool's game. Why compete with your friends instead of encouraging them and valuing them – we need each other.

So how can we keep our neuroses in check? I've outlined a few practical tips, but there is an underlying solution to the suggestions I've made. We could actually listen to what God says about us. What does God say about our bodies and our self-image and how does this affect our self-esteem?

Firstly, God likes your body. He planned it and made it. Here is Psalm 139: 15, 16:

“My frame was not hidden from you when I was made in the secret place, when I was woven together in the depths of the earth. Your eyes saw my unformed body. All the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be.”

Even when you were being created in your mother's womb, God's hand was absolutely in control. He decided which chromosomes got together, which egg, which sperm. He was there, he really wanted you, just the way you are.

Furthermore, God chose you. 1 John 3:1 says “How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called the children of God.” God wants you to be his child as much as we want any of our children to be our children. If you have been a Christian for a while and you feel part of a church, it is easy to forget the fact that it's actually you, individually and specifically, that God chose and Jesus died for. It wasn't just for Christians in general, you're not just part of a lump sum. He thought about you.

Secular psychologists identify four ingredients of good self-esteem, and it's very interesting as a Christian to have a look at them.

- i. • **Your pedigree.** Having a sense of where you come from, of your family, is an important factor in how people see themselves. For Christians, it's amazing. You're part of a royal family! The Bible talks about us being heirs of the kingdom, with Jesus. So if you ever felt jealous of Diana, remember, you are a princess! You have the best pedigree

going.

- ii. • **Performance roles.** Christians talk about do's and don'ts, but can end up deceiving ourselves into valuing ourselves by how many 'do's' we have done and 'don'ts' that we have not. As Christians, there are no roles to perform, except to enjoy God and be his children. In realising this, there is a huge release of stress about performance roles.
- iii. • Believe it or not, non-Christian psychologists also see **eternal significance** as very important. People need a sense of where they fit into life, the universe and everything. As a Christian, you know that you fit into this in a really important way. We know we have eternal significance.
- iv. • Lastly, **the love of another** is very important. Relationships are great but they're very difficult as well. They will always be flawed, they're never going to totally satisfy us, and we're never going to totally satisfy somebody else. But there is one relationship that does, and that is the love of Jesus. Again, Jesus' love is not just for 'us' as a group; it's for you individually.

These are issues to pray about. We can pray that God would help us to really grasp hold of these concepts, nurturing our understanding with his word in Scripture. We can ask God to help us to be happier with the way we are and to help us feel more comfortable in our skins.

In the end, for every woman there is a place that is in between being vain and being a slob. It's a place worth searching for. But remember, most importantly, that you are unique. You are really precious. God has made you, and he enjoys you. He didn't just make you and then say "Oh boy, it's not going to be much fun spending time with her in heaven". In heaven, we will enjoy each other. It will be so totally and utterly satisfying in a way that nothing is now.

So don't spend all your time and money pursuing that fat free, full-lipped, tummy-tucked, muscle-toned, pencil-eye browed, smooth-skinned, chisel-cheeked size 6. You are a princess, already fabulous, designed and loved by God. Enjoy it!