

“When I let

MY SEX LIFE

Andrea Amador,
45, Chestnut
Ridge, NY

Nearly 60 percent of women admit to covering parts of their naked bodies during sex. And that habit can undermine physical *and* emotional intimacy: In a study in the *Journal of Sex Research*, women who disliked their appearance reported having less sex and fewer orgasms, as well as feeling discontent in their relationship. Here, how one woman triumphed over years of body contempt to reclaim her sexiness!

Ugh! I'm too frumpy and fat to have sex, thought Andrea Amador as Angel, her husband of 17 years, kissed her neck. Shrugging him off, she allowed her thoughts to drift back to the slender, dark-haired beauty she had seen at a neighbor's party a few hours earlier. *I'll never be as thin as she is. It's only a matter of time before he leaves me for greener pastures.*

Two pregnancies had left Andrea more than 25 pounds heavier than she'd been on her wedding day. And the extra weight made her feel anxious every time she looked in a mirror. “All I saw was blubber,” she says. “I'd tug at my stomach and scream, ‘I hate you!’”

“I felt like I had to look the way I did when I first met Angel in order to be attractive to him,” Andrea explains. “Sure, he would tell me that I was beautiful regardless of what size or shape I was. But no matter how many times he complimented me, it just seemed like all I heard coming out of his mouth were lies. So trying to get back to the way I was—losing the extra weight—became the focus of my life.”

“Hating myself took up all my time and energy.”

Every Saturday morning, Andrea would awaken to her blaring alarm clock at 6:30 A.M. for her weekly Weight Watchers weigh-in. As she stepped onto the scale, she'd close her eyes and pray that it

go of my weight worries,

STARTED TO SOAR!"

bliss

would register a lower number than the week before. "I felt like those three digits determined my fate," Andrea recalls. "I'd eat nothing but veggies for a week to get a 'good' reading. But then I'd feel so deprived that I would binge. My one weakness was mint-chocolate cookie ice cream. When I was upset about my weight, I'd eat it by the pint."

Andrea funneled so much of her time and effort into her obsession with dieting that she seldom had energy left over to feel sexual. "Sex felt like a chore," she confesses. "It was something I'd do because we were married and that's what you're supposed to do."

And even during her rare moments of intimacy with Angel, Andrea couldn't escape her inner critic. *I'm not the woman he married, she'd think as they made love. I hate my breasts, and my legs are so fat. I'll never be hot and sexy again. I would rather be alone eating a pint of ice cream than be naked right now.*

And while Andrea was aware that her body hatred was creating a growing distance between her and Angel, it wasn't until she took her 12-year-old daughter, Kara, to the doctor that she realized how much her dieting had impacted her family. "Kara witnessed my bingeing sessions firsthand," Andrea says. "And she gained weight because she adopted similar habits. When the doctor turned to her and told her, 'No more snacking,' I watched her beautiful face melt. I knew something had to change."

On the quiet drive home, Andrea turned to Kara and said, "I'm ready to stop these bad eating habits. Can you do it with me?" Later that day, Andrea cleared all the notes on calorie counts and point values from her kitchen cabinets and swore off dieting forever.

After just a few months, Andrea had gained 30 pounds. "Watching the weight climb back on was awful," she

says. "I was so tempted to return to dieting. But even though I was gaining, I noticed that I wasn't stressed out by food anymore. It was like a burden had been lifted from my shoulders. I finally felt free to live my life."

"Now my husband and I are like newlyweds!"

Giving up dieting had an unexpected benefit for Andrea: She began to feel sexier when she was intimate with Angel. "To enjoy sex, you have to love the skin you're in. When I was dieting, I didn't," says Andrea. "But once I started appreciating my body as it was, I was able to block out my negative thoughts. I realized that being sexy has nothing to do with how I look—it's about all the wonderful gifts I bring to the table."

Andrea's newfound confidence has made sex more satisfying than ever. "I'm back to being as frisky and sensual as I was when I was younger," she reveals. "I even initiate sex more often than he does. Plus, being open to my body has increased my sensitivity, and that's made my orgasms much more intense. Now sex is something I look forward to each and every time!"

What's more, Andrea's marriage is heating up *outside* the bedroom, too. "We're closer than ever," she reveals. "I feel more comfortable being silly and playful and joking around with him. We cuddle up together at night instead of just rolling over to opposite ends of the bed. And I touch him throughout the day again. It feels like we've turned back the clock 15 years!" raves Andrea. "We've solidified our relationship and are more deeply in love."

Talk back to your inner critic this way to FEEL SEXIER THAN EVER

To silence your body-bashing thoughts, try this weekly exercise: Undress and face a full-length mirror. As you look at your bare curves, focus on your favorite features—your smooth shoulders, your generous breasts, even your perky toes or glossy hair. Next, declare out loud what you like about what you see. "Verbalizing your attributes may feel a little awkward at first, but positive statements are a powerful way to answer back to condemning self-talk like pronouncing body parts as 'fat' or 'ugly,'" says Emily Harrell, a professional counselor and sex therapist at the Berman Center in Chicago. "Doing this exercise regularly can train the brain to take on a more loving tone when thinking about your body, which fosters self-acceptance." For an added confidence boost, spend as much time alone in the nude as you can. Notes Harrell: "Women spend so much time hiding their bodies that they forget how good being naked feels."

A screen siren's secret to sexy

"Real sexiness comes from within. If you punish yourself for all your flaws, you'll never feel or seem sexy at all. Love yourself and celebrate your body. That's how it's done!"

—Virginia Madsen, actress



Photo: Andrea: Jenny Acheson. Hair: Ariel Vega for Agency Gerard. Makeup: Gregg Hubbard for Agency Gerard. Stylist: Meg Goldman. Celebrity photo: John Sull/WireImage. Text: Dana Squilla. Sidebar text: Melissa Gotthardt.