

Naked Truth

Staring down swimsuit anxiety

By Susan Josephs

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By the time she was a teenager, Stacey Nye couldn't wear a bathing suit without observing a set of self-imposed rules. "I never put my legs flat on a lawn chair because my thighs would spread," she recalls. "When I would stand up, I always put a towel around my waist." For Sharon Goldman, summer used to be the worst time of year. While many of her friends wore bikinis, she would sit on the beach "in ugly one-piece suits," wishing she had smaller breasts. "I never let myself be photographed in a bathing suit," she recalls.

Nye and Goldman are not alone in their tales of swimsuit woe. Though exceptions surely exist, it's tough to find a Jewish or, for that matter, an American woman who wholeheartedly loves herself in a bathing suit and doesn't fear the three-way fitting room mirror like she fears the dentist's chair. For many women, this simple piece of Lycra can unlock a Pandora's box of body image and self-esteem issues, and it's not difficult to understand why. Simply watch TV, read a magazine or glance at yet another stick-thin airbrushed model on a billboard. "Our eyes and our brains are trained to think that's what a woman's body should look like," says Ophira Edut, a New York City-based activist and media entrepreneur who's spent the past decade championing the cause of positive female body image. "So when you put on that bathing suit and look in the mirror, you're setting yourself up for a shock."

"The vulnerability that a bathing suit brings up for the vast majority of women is overwhelming," says Susan Bartell, Ph.D., a Long Island, N.Y.-based psychologist specializing in female body image issues. "You can't hide in a bathing suit the way you can in other clothes." Bathing suit anxiety is rooted in the combined fears of exposure and judgment, says Nye, Ph.D., a Mequon, Wisc.-based psychologist who also specializes in body image and women's issues. "In a bathing suit as opposed to your underwear, you're completely exposed to lots of different people at one time. Also, women tend to notice those who they think look better than them. There's also the issue that if you do cover yourself at the pool or the beach, you stand out even more."

For Jewish women, bathing suit season can conjure up an additional set of culturally specific anxieties. "We have this whole legacy of the *baleboosteh* and the *bubbe*, of short, dark and curvy women who are cooking all the time," says Ruth Andrew Ellenson, editor of *The Modern Jewish Girl's Guide to Guilt* (Dutton). "These are women not found on the pages of the Sports Illustrated swimsuit issue." Bartell, author of *Dr. Susan's Girls-Only Weight Loss Guide* (Parent Positive Press), believes that the "fantasy of going to the store and finding the suit that will make your body perfect" has particular resonance for Jewish women raised by parents who believed or expected their children to be perfect. Not all cultures struggle with issues of perfectionism, she says. "I treat a lot of Jewish girls with eating disorders and there's no question that some of this stems from the quest to be perfect."

Wendy Shanker, author of the humorous memoir *The Fat Girl's Guide to Life* (Bloomsbury), adds that Jewish women contend with the "added element of ancestral

modesty issues. In Brazil and Spain, you come out of the womb in a bikini. In Jewish culture, you've got Orthodox women going swimming in long skirts and pantyhose," she observes. "Even if you're not observant, these notions of modesty are wired into you. Plus, we're not a beach culture. All the food you associate with the ocean...crab, shrimp, pina colodas...the whole thing reeks of goyville."

It's a severe understatement to say that American notions of beauty have evolved since 1945, when Bess Myerson, barely fitting into her size 12 white Catalina swimsuit, became the first Jewish woman to win the Miss America pageant. Back then, Myerson's Jewishness made the evening news. Had Myerson won today, she'd make headlines for wearing a size 12. Ray Gottesman, a 75-year-old resident of Boynton Beach, Fla., remembers that as a "skinny 18-year-old, I wanted a swimsuit that exaggerated my hips and padded my bottom a bit. Back then, it wasn't so good to be a skeleton," she recalls. "It wasn't the look."

As a college student in the 1960s, Doreen Kingston wore a bikini, "but I don't remember feeling self-conscious about it. Maybe because it came up to my belly button," she recalls. "I also remember girlfriends that didn't have the best figure having no problem hanging out on the beach in their bathing suits. We weren't so hard on ourselves." Today, wearing a bathing suit "is still not such a problem" for Gottesman, though "it's never going to be my favorite outfit. Look," she says. "There's beauty at every age and it's ridiculous to think you'll look anything different than your age." Kingston, on the other hand, estimates she hasn't worn a bathing suit in about 20 years. "I carry my weight in my stomach and you just can't hide that in a bathing suit," says the 60-year-old homemaker from Irvine, Calif. "I definitely feel more self-conscious now. Bathing suits are so much more revealing today."

For Goldman, a 38-year-old copywriter and musician from Brooklyn, N.Y., wearing a bathing suit became less odious after she had breast reduction surgery at age 19, which took her from a 36DD to a 36B. "As saggy as I might feel now, nothing could be worse than the trauma I experienced as a teenager," she says. "I remember feeling the ugliness of my breasts like it was yesterday." The "constant sense that we're not good enough is a form of female oppression," says Ellenson, who lives in Los Angeles and recently lost weight. "I can fit into a size 6 and 4, but I obsess that I can't wear a size 2. In our society, women are never thin enough, pretty enough or young enough and we all buy into it." Although the media and fashion industries might be prime culprits behind bathing suit anxiety, swimwear designers in recent years have responded to the collective outpouring of female angst toward their products. Lands' End, for example, which primarily sells its clothes through catalogs and the Internet, allows women to shop for swimwear by "anxiety zones." A&H Sportswear promises its "Miraclesuit" will make women look 10 pounds lighter due to a fabric that contains more Lycra than other bathing suit fabrics. Swimwear designers such as Malia Mills and Shoshanna Lonstein Gruss offer two-piece suits not as sets but as "separates," so a consumer can mix and match.

"Working in swimwear is a challenge," says Laura Reiter, who designs two lines of swimsuits for A&H Sportswear and has worked in the industry since 1968. "Sadly, you'd think times have changed, what with more women earning better salaries and in so much better shape. You'd think they'd have a wonderful self-image but there's something about getting into that bathing suit that strips them of their power." Mills, who has four stores in New York City and two in Connecticut, began designing

swimsuits because growing up in Hawaii, “where swimwear was a uniform, the shopping experience was always a drag and I always had to stitch the top smaller to fit me,” she recalls.

With “Love Thy Differences” as her company’s slogan, Mills is on a mission to “teach every woman that if the suit doesn’t fit her, there is something wrong with the suit, not her body. I want to encourage women to feel beautiful just the way they are, and every suit I make must answer to this,” she says. Like many women interviewed for this article, Mills believes that bathing suit anxiety is mostly an American phenomenon. Recalling a vacation with European friends on a Spanish beach, “not once did I hear anyone complain about their bodies, and there wasn’t a cover-up in sight,” she says. “And these women were of different sizes and ages. They were totally at ease with their bodies. In America, the message is one of scrutiny instead of celebration, where it’s all about how women need to improve or change or limit their options to look good in a swimsuit.”

Fortunately, one does not have to move to Europe to alleviate bathing suit anxiety. Bartell recommends putting on an old bathing suit before shopping for a new one. “Tell yourself you won’t look that much different. You’re never going to find this Holy Grail of a bathing suit, so it’s important to keep your expectations realistic,” she says. “I tell my clients to remind themselves why they’re in a bathing suit,” says Nye. “Is it because you’re a model or because you want to have fun with your friends at a pool party? What you look like in a bathing suit is not as important as you think it is.” Mills urges women to “throw away all the fit tips” listed every year in the mass media during bathing suit season. “There is no one perfect suit,” she says. “But there are different styles for different occasions and moods. If a suit doesn’t fit, fling it aside and try on another. Remember you have options.”

Rachel Caplin, author of *I’m Beautiful Dammit!* (Terrace Publishing) and the founder of Curvolution, an organization dedicated to body size acceptance, likens bathing suit anxiety to the fear of flying. “Just like you have to fly to get over that fear, you need to just put on the damn bathing suit and go outside. You can analyze yourself to death in therapy, but it’s not going to overcome your fear,” she says. “And avoid dressing room drama. Get in. Get out. The dressing room is not a place to linger and analyze.” Recently, Edut, who’s re-launching her body image website, www.loveyourbody.org, had an epiphany about adopting a more radical, activist approach to bathing suit wearing. Arriving at a water park in a tankini, Edut “went into psychological terror” when the time came to take off her T-shirt. She wound up taking off her shirt because “I thought to myself that I could contribute to a little shock therapy, do something to counteract those hundreds of ads we see every day and say to the world, ‘this is what a woman looks like without Photoshop,’” says Edut, who’s 34 and describes herself as short and curvy. Edut believes that any woman brave enough to wear a bikini in public regardless of body size “is making a contribution. We need to muster up some courage and push back,” she says. “We need a new context with which to view our bodies, and all it takes is one simple act of love-handled defiance.” Shanker also had a recent revelation about bathing suits. “A friend of mine was taking her baby for her first swimming lesson and I saw a picture of my friend in the pool with her kid. That’s when it occurred to me that if there’s a mom in that class who’s missing such a moment with her kid because of how she looks in a bathing suit, then that woman is a fool,” she says. Since then, Shanker has been “more

willing” to wear bathing suits. “I’m never going to be the girl from Ipanema,” she says. “But man, life’s too short. Take a dive. Get in the pool.”

Susan Josephs is a freelance writer who lives in Venice, Calif.

Our Swimsuits, Ourselves Don’t shrink from your next beach outing or bathing suit purchase. Instead of reading articles on “how to lengthen your legs” or “what to avoid if you’re pear-shaped,” consider the following suggestions:

“Take a lot of suits with you into the dressing room. Try on different styles and brands. Different brands have different ways of fitting. Remember that a bathing suit is meant for swimming, for enjoying the outdoors.”

—*Laura Reiter, designer of Mainstream and Laura R swimsuits, A&H sportswear*

“Whether or not you hate your bathing suit or your body, give yourself permission to put it on. Act your way into right, loving thinking. Go out and feel the breeze on your skin and see how your body responds.”

—*Rachel Caplin, author and founder of Curvolution*

“Experiment! It’s hard to tell how a suit on a hanger will suit you, so have some fun. When in doubt, ask for help. A suit can go from droopy to divine just by tightening the straps or trying on a different size. And remember, you don’t need to change the way you look. You need to change the way you look at yourself.”

—*Malia Mills, Malia Mills Swimwear*

“Ask yourself this question: If I do what I really want to do, which is take off my shirt and go swimming, how is that going to affect the lives of people who might be watching? It’s our dumb narcissism to believe that all these people are analyzing us. Remember when you’re out there that you’re NOT in the bathing suit Olympics.”

—*Wendy Shanker, author*

“Take the shopping in small steps. Give yourself a limited amount of time to shop. Do some deep breathing beforehand. Do something non-food related afterward to reward yourself. And remember that it’s really about how we feel on the inside, that if you can walk around feeling how you want to look, people will see that.”

—*Stacey Nye, Ph.D., psychologist*

“There’s beauty at every age. If you’re my age, a bikini is not going to be a sexy look. Don’t keep remembering what you looked like 20 years ago. I’m 75 and I still get compliments on how I look and it’s because I want to be stylish but I also don’t try to dress below my age.”

—*Ray Gottesman, resident of Boynton Beach, Fla.*

“Do not go into a store expecting that putting on a bathing suit will magically metamorphose your body into something different. Try on an old bathing suit before you go to the store and expect that the new bathing suit won’t look that much different. Also, choose your shopping partner carefully. Make sure she’s really supportive. Avoid those stores that have communal fitting rooms, so you will not run the risk of comparing yourself to the teeny-tiny woman trying on the same suit as you.”

—*Susan Bartell, Ph.D., psychologist*