



The naked truth

A husband and wife each take a long look in the mirror and bare their true feelings about their own body—and their partner's
By Rebecca Field Jager

In a typical couple, the woman worries about what her body looks like to her partner—the man, not so much.

Karen, 39, and Tom, 44, have been married for 15 years, and have two daughters. She's a nurse; he's a pipefitter and often leaves the family's New Brunswick home for several weeks to work in the oil fields in Alberta. Karen and Tom (who declined to be photographed or use their real names) don't go to the gym, but both stay active hiking, swimming and rollerblading with their daughters. Our writer asked each to take a few minutes to strip down (separately), take a look in the mirror and tell us how they feel about their own, and each other's, bodies.

BEST HEALTH Standing naked in front of a full-length mirror, what do you see?

KAREN (5'5", 140 lb., size 9) My eyes immediately go to my stomach. I hate it. I always have, even when I was in my 20s and 20 pounds lighter. It's a big muffin-top bulging thing I've never been able to get rid of. Now it has stretch marks from having had kids. Tom says they aren't noticeable, but to me they are.

TOM (6', 235 lb., size XL) I see a good-looking guy. If I had to change something, it would be my double chin, which comes and goes depending on my weight. But other than that, I'm happy.

BH What do you like most about your body?

KAREN My breasts. I'm a 36B, which I think is a nice size. Before I had kids I was an A-cup, so I like that my boobs are bigger. Unfortunately, so is everything else. When I was younger, food wasn't important, but now I have to make breakfast, lunch and dinner to make sure the kids are eating properly, so I'm around food more and I end up eating more. And our social life—everywhere we go or when we have friends over—revolves around food.

TOM I think my butt is probably my best asset.

BH What do you like most, and what would you change, about your spouse's body?

KAREN He doesn't have the six-pack he used to have but, truthfully, I don't really mind. The

thing I like most about Tom is his arms. They're big and strong.

TOM I wouldn't change a thing about Karen unless she wanted to change it herself. If she wanted to get toned, then of course I'd like it, I'd support her. But she's a good-looking woman at 39. The thing I like most about her body is her butt. I've seen women in their 20s who don't look as good in Lululemons as Karen does. I do wish she were more confident about her body, though, and more comfortable around me naked. She used to be, but she's lost some of that over the years.

BH Many men worry about penis size. Your thoughts?

KAREN It's weird that men worry about that. It's such a myth that women run around wanting a guy with a gigantic penis. Tom's is perfect.

TOM (laughing) I'm happy with my penis. I'm the guy in the locker room walking around naked and swinging. I'm not shy.

BH How do Karen's feelings about her body affect your lovemaking?

KAREN I'm shy in bed, modest. I don't like taking my shirt off, though I usually do—but I want the lights to be off and I want us to be under the covers. When he does look at me naked, I worry that he's thinking, What a big belly!

TOM No matter how much I tell Karen I love her and that she is beautiful—which I tell her every day—she still worries about her stomach. There's a little bump

there, but it's no big deal. Would I love to see her dance around the house naked? Yes, because it would make her even sexier.

BH Do you still get aroused to see your spouse nude?

KAREN Sometimes, but we always seem to be rushing here and there so there's never time to think about it. But when the girls are settled in bed and there's nothing going on...I do get excited.

TOM Oh yeah.

BH You both admit you're not in as good shape as you were when you were younger. Has that affected your sex life?

KAREN Sex is a lot better now. We're more comfortable with each other and since the kids are older, we're not sleep deprived.

TOM It's much better. We know so much more about each other and what the other person likes.

BH Do you think you'll let yourselves go as you get older, or will you fight aging every step of the way?

KAREN We talk about becoming more active once the kids are older, and I think we will. No matter what, though, we'll grow old together happily.

TOM When the kids are more independent, we'll have more time for fitness. For now I'm not worried. We're always on the go with the girls, and we both have jobs that are physically demanding. I work hard, and in everything she does, Karen is also a heavy lifter.

After reviewing Karen and Tom's comments, Toronto-based social worker Sheri Betel weighed in. To her, Karen and Tom reflect a typical couple in that the woman has more body image issues than the man. "Although it's becoming less so, men and women are socialized differently," she says. "Men focus more on their careers and accomplishments to feel good about themselves, whereas women, from childhood, are pressured to focus on beauty."

Is there anything Karen can do to become more confident? "She has to realize that feeling sexy is all in the brain. If Karen had the confidence to run around the house naked [when the kids aren't around, of course], it's that confidence—not her body—that Tom would find most desirable." To gain confidence, Betel suggests little tricks such as accentuating the positive and minimizing the negative. In Karen's case, it might help to wear lingerie that highlights her breasts but covers her belly. It helps, too, to be well rested. "It's hard to feel good about yourself if you're overworked and overwhelmed."

And remember, says Betel, as a woman you're very likely your own worst critic. Your partner, on the other hand, is probably your biggest fan. □

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