

THE *body* ISSUE...

...is impossible to escape. *It's the most personal relationship of your life, yet each of us feels something very different. Here, three women give moving accounts of their physical sense of self, on the good days, the bad days and the days when acceptance is sometimes a struggle*



Beverly Johnson
photographed for
US Vogue in 1973

‘I still feel the same, though every part of me has aged’

by Beverly Johnson, 61

When you're a supermodel, you are known for your body, but it's hard for me to believe that this month, it will be 40 years since I first appeared on the cover of *US Vogue*. I still *feel* the same, though every part of me has aged, from my fingers to my toes.

When I look at that cover now, I feel an amazing sense of pride. I was in the right place at the right time, which meant I was the first African American to grace the cover of an iconic fashion magazine. That picture is as beautiful and special to me now as it was then - it broke down colour barriers at the

time, but perhaps it's even more important now that there are fewer women of colour on the runways than there were in the 1970s.

Still, I remember those days with mixed emotions. I was 5ft 9in, 125lb and a size zero. Modelling has a lot to do with physical appearance, and there was a time when that was a big focus for me. I don't think I'd be alive if I was still that weight - I was skin and bone. We just didn't eat. We thought water was fattening and survived on one bowl of brown rice and egg a week. Yet I don't regret >>



Beverly on a US *Glamour* shoot in 1973 BELOW: In August 1974, she became the first African-American woman to appear on the cover of US *Vogue* RIGHT: With her daughter Anansa



'There's beauty in diversity and that includes body shapes'

doing it. Being a model transformed my life. My father was a steel labourer making \$75 a week; I could make that in a day.

I modelled for decades and thought it would be a relief when I left the industry, but there was no upside really. You still want to look good for yourself, so keeping my body healthy and in shape is always going to be part of the deal. I've been left with a lot of eating issues, which I view as an occupational hazard. I no longer get hungry - my stomach doesn't grumble or send signals to my brain any more. Somewhere along the way, there was a disconnect. I can go all day without eating and have to remind myself to have dinner. And I feel like I have some sort of body dysmorphia: when I'm at my heaviest, I usually think I look my thinnest and my girlfriends have to call me out on it.

Luckily, my daughter, Anansa, who is 35, hasn't inherited my body hang-ups, although she has followed in my footsteps to a point. But she's done it her way. After fainting through sheer lack of food, she decided conventional modelling wasn't for her. She returned to school to get her MBA, but then decided she was going to become a plus-size model. Her reasoning is that she wants to inspire women to look good the way they are. There's beauty in diversity and that includes body shapes. I'm so proud of her and feel like I learn from her every day. That's the other thing about

getting older: you realise you have no time to rest on your laurels.

Now, I see myself ageing all over, but it's a slow process. Fortunately our eyes age with our bodies, so that's a gift. I don't plan on showering each day with my glasses on! I have gone through so many stages of womanhood since my career launched,

and I'm lucky to have my mother as an example of ageing gracefully, so I can't say I long for any past era of my life. There are women who fight to maintain the body of a teenager, but in truth, that's unnatural and often unflattering. In fact, a little weight as we age helps us look younger. But there is a line, and I could always lose five pounds. Now, at the age of 61, my focus is on being healthy and staying active.

My life could have turned out differently. I was originally studying law at school, but instead, made a choice to pursue a career where, on one side, you are a sort of icon, but in reality, you are self-employed in the business of fashion. Everything I learned then has contributed to my longevity in the industry, and to my success now with my own hair-extension business. Modelling taught me to be tough. All my life I've been told 'no', and it's still almost a daily occurrence. But experiencing that for so long has just taught me to keep going and given me drive, even in the boardroom. My mother, who was a nurse, says the most important thing is to maintain your dignity, so whatever I do, I keep my head held high.

Being a supermodel added so much to my life, but I'm still Beverly from Buffalo, New York. I cherish the opportunity I had to play such a pivotal role in the fashion industry, but really, my goal at this stage is just to approach the day ahead looking and feeling my best. >>

“My leg went from being the thing I wanted to hide, to the thing I wanted to show off”

by Stefanie Reid, 29

Every teenager has hang-ups. For me it was my hair: big, curly and unmanageable. But I've always been proud of my body. When I was 16, I was strong and fast on the rugby field, and that was what mattered. I dreamed of becoming a professional athlete - but that summer, in 2000, everything changed.

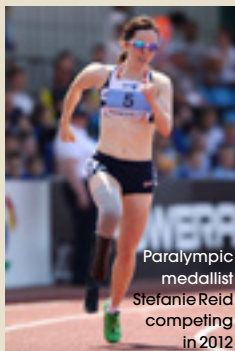
I was on holiday in Toronto with some rugby teammates and we'd spent the day tubing on a lake. On my final spin around the lake, I fell off my tube and was left treading water, waiting for the boat to turn back. It was then that I saw another boat coming towards me and as they were going so fast, I knew they hadn't spotted me. I also knew there were propellers under that boat, which I'd have to avoid at all costs. I thought I could duck under the water low enough for it to pass over the top of me. But I'd forgotten about my life jacket. However desperately I tried to dive down, I couldn't. And then it was too late.

I remember seeing the crest of the boat glide over me, pushing me down; then, later, rising to the surface. For a moment, honestly, I thought I was fine. Then I realised the water around me was red. I instinctively felt my body and found a deep laceration in my back, but it was only when I was hauled back on to the boat that I saw the state of my foot. There was just so much blood. Waiting for an ambulance, in the middle of nowhere, there were points when I thought I was going to die.

I was operated on by the best orthopaedic surgeon in Canada, where I was living at the time, and when I came round, I felt euphoric, until my mum explained what had happened. She couldn't look at me when she told me they hadn't been able to save my foot. I remember turning away, not wanting to look at her either. How was I supposed to play rugby? What would my future look like as an amputee? Did I even want a future? I instantly grieved for the part of my body I'd lost.

After a week of refusing food, a nurse called Claudette jerked me out of my depression. When I said I wasn't hungry, she slammed down her tray and said, 'Stefanie, that's enough. There's a 12-year-old girl on the ward below you who lost both her feet, and she can still smile. What's your excuse?'

That was the turning point. After just under four weeks I went home, and five months later I walked without aid. I had no idea how painful it would be - or how soul-destroying. I thought it'd be a symbol of my progress, but the truth is, getting a prosthetic leg is



Paralympic medallist Stefanie Reid competing in 2012

I never think about how I look when I'm running'

always a letdown, even now, because it's just not yours. You hope that every new leg will be the one that makes you

forget, the one that makes up for the loss, that feels like it belongs to you - but it doesn't.

Some things returned to normal - I graduated from high school, and went on to study biochemistry - but others, like rugby, I had to let go of. I tried to play again, but without my foot, I felt like a dead weight. I concentrated on fading into the background, learning to walk so naturally that even my closest friends didn't realise I was disabled, and hiding my prosthesis in loose trousers. I felt trapped by my own negative feelings but I didn't know how else to be.

And then, one day, it all changed again. I started to run at university and loved the feeling of doing something so physical, but I had to wear a different leg on the track, so was forced to change my prosthesis in front of people. Inevitably, they were curious at first. But a week later, no one cared. And the whole thing took on a different meaning for me. My leg went from being the part of me I wanted to hide, to the thing I wanted to show off - I even painted it hot pink.

There are still moments when I'm unhappy with my body, but I never think about how I look when I'm running. I'm covered in sweat, mascara running down my face, but that's when I feel most comfortable: when I'm chasing after a goal. In those moments - like when I won the silver medal for Team GB in the long jump at the London 2012 Paralympics - I don't have time to worry about cellulite, or what my leg looks like. That's what sport does. It gives you the ability to look at your body from a different perspective and be proud of what it can achieve - whatever it looks like. >>





“There are many things I owe to my mother, but a healthy body image is not one of them”

by Emma Laurence, 30, Red's senior sub-editor

There are many things I owe to my mother. A ridiculous, ‘make ‘em laugh’ sense of humour, the ability to see lemonade where others see only lemons, and a firm appreciation of what winding down the windows, turning up the radio and singing along, loudly, can do for the soul. There are many things I owe to my mother, but a healthy body image is not one of them.

As much as I love my mum, Phyllis, I’ve always been just a little bit angry at her – and it wasn’t until I started writing this that I really understood why. I have been at war with my body for as long as I can remember, sometimes starving it to the point of exhaustion; other times, stuffing it with food until it hurt to breathe. And I know it’s been the same for my mum. When I was growing up, our weight problems united us – but they also divided us. Our battles became one and the same, so I’d get cross with her if she ‘cheated’ but jealous when she’d shed pounds on yet another fad diet.

Now, I’ve all but lost the fight. My body isn’t the enemy any more; it’s an albatross that follows me around and occasionally, cruelly asserts itself – when I have to ask for the seatbelt extension on a plane, or leave the shops empty-handed because *nothing* looks good on me.

There have been plenty of times when my mum gave up the fight, too. For all the times she reached her ‘goal’ weight, there were many more I saw her hit rock bottom. And each time, she would tell me that she *had* to ‘hit rock bottom’ in order to begin the journey back. Rarely was it that simple.

As a result, I’ve only ever viewed my body through a prism of extremes – of painful excess and unsustainable loss. Moderation wasn’t in our family’s vocabulary.

I don’t actually blame my mum – not now, anyway – the school bullies played

their part, too. I was four years old, a little bit fat, a lot shy and far too clever for my own good when the first in a long line of mean girls stood up to take their shot. I had target written all over me. But I do wonder if their 14-year campaign (different faces, same shit) would have been quite so successful in its obliteration of my self-esteem had the attitude in our house towards food, and fat, been less two-dimensional. If I hadn’t watched my mum yo-yo diet her way through my childhood. Hadn’t grown up thinking secret eating, binge-eating and crash diets – in that order, on repeat – were the norm. If I’d ever been taught the ingredients of a healthy diet, rather than just put on a diet.

I had a friend at uni whose mother was a counsellor specialising in eating disorders. When we met she was living on ready meals, Capri-Sun and vodka. By the time we lost touch a few years ago, she had become a gym obsessive with thinning hair, a shadow of her former self. Another very good, very beautiful friend of mine is in constant competition with her mum over who has the better figure. And when I raise the issue in the *Red* office, I discover almost everyone has inherited some sort of hang-up from their mum – from an (unfounded) fear of getting fat to a very real fear of frogs.

Me, I’m only afraid of two things: perpetuating my mum’s long and ultimately lonely quest for thin; and passing on the same insecurities and negative beliefs to the children I hope someday to have.

I know that my mum’s ups and downs were, eventually, a factor in the demise of my parents’ 29-year marriage, and I never want to push anyone away like that. I know, too, that I don’t want my war with weight to end as my mum’s has. Albeit reluctantly,



Emma and her mum Phyllis, in 2012 ABOVE LEFT: Phyllis with Emma, aged six, on holiday; and below, in 2006

Our weight problems united us, but they also divided us



I supported her decision last year to undergo gastric bypass surgery at 64, an operation with a one in 100 death rate, and one that means she will never be able to eat normally again. Whatever that means. That she saw it as her only option both saddens and terrifies me in equal measure. But I do not want it to be mine.

There are times I wish I had never heard the word ‘diet’. That I could go back and tell my 13-, 18- and 22-year-old selves they were fine, beautiful even, at a size 14. But I can’t. All I can do is try to move on.

We can talk about it now, my mum and I. She says she felt, and still feels, ‘powerless’, seeing me deal with the same demons I grew up watching her fight. ‘It’s a pattern I will always regret,’ she told me recently, tearfully. I believe her, but I’m not sure she’ll ever be able to fully accept, or even understand, her part in it all. And that’s okay. We’re friends now, and for that, and so many other things, I am grateful. So I’ll keep trying, keep squeezing the lemonade out of life – and, rain or shine, I’ll wind down the windows, turn up the radio and sing, as loudly as I can. Because that’s what my mother taught me. 🍷