

Why is it that women  
pick up on the slightest slur and  
**never hear the good stuff?**

Criticisms are stored forever;  
compliments evaporate instantly.

*AIMEE LEE BALL*, who got tired of worrying  
about the quality of her brownies, her talent,  
her legs, and her conversation,  
went in search of some answers.

# WOMEN AND THE NEGATIVITY RECEPTOR

PHOTOGRAPHS  
BY GREG MILLER



**M**Y GODDAUGHTER, VISITING FROM COLLEGE, IS sprawled on my bed while we enact one of our regular rituals: I peruse my closet, offering her the clothes I no longer wear. “Take this, I don’t have the legs for short skirts,” I say, or “These pants make me look hippy.” She regards me with quizzical amusement, suggesting that I have body dysmorphic disorder—that I’m one of those people preoccupied with minor, and often imaginary, flaws in physical features. At the very least, she insists, I need new glasses. ¶ And we’re not talking mere physical insecurity. When I meet a book editor about a potential publishing contract, I fret about my abilities, discounting a thriving career and a reputation in good ▶





YOU (AND I,  
AND ANYONE)  
CAN MAKE  
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IT'S NOT THAT  
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standing of more than 20 years. If guests are coming for dinner, I worry that my home won't be pleasing, that my brownies won't merit the caloric expenditure, that the conversation won't be sufficiently scintillating. Somehow I manage to navigate life fairly well, to earn a living and have relationships, to walk without weaving and chew without spitting. But as I watched the movie *Pretty Woman* recently, it occurred to me that plenty of us have the same self-doubt that derailed the Julia Roberts character. There's a scene where she's telling the wealthy businessman played by Richard Gere that nobody ever plans to be a hooker, that she fell into this line of work because she didn't think much of herself. Gere observes that she's a special person with a lot of potential and capabilities. And she replies, "The bad stuff is easier to believe."

**W**HY IS IT THAT SOME PEOPLE, THE DONALD TRUMPS of the world, seem to believe only the best about themselves, while others—perhaps especially women, perhaps especially young women—seize on the most self-critical thoughts they can come up with? "It turns out there's an area of your brain that's assigned the task of negative thinking," says Louann Brizendine, MD, a neuropsychiatrist at the University of California, San Francisco, and the author of *The Female Brain*. "It's judgmental. It says 'I'm too fat' or 'I'm too old.' It's a barometer of every social interaction you have. It goes on red alert when the feedback you're getting from other people isn't going well." This worrywart part of the brain is the anterior cingulate cortex. In women it's actually larger and more influential, as is the brain circuitry for observing emotions in others. "The reason we think females have more emotional sensitivity," says Brizendine, "is that we've been built to be immediately responsive to the needs of a nonverbal infant. That can be both a good thing and a bad thing."

The hormonal surges in the female brain—what Brizendine describes as the rising tide of estrogen and progesterone—make a woman more sensitive to emotional nuance, such as disapproval or rejection. The way you interpret feedback from other people can depend on where you are in your cycle. "Some days the feedback will reinforce your self-confidence," says Brizendine, "and other days it will destroy you." Her decision to make this hormone cycle in the female brain the focus of her research was

made in medical school, when she was working with adolescents at Yale–New Haven Hospital. "How teen girls come to believe bad stuff about themselves really captivated me," she says. "There's something about the menstrual cycle that puts your emotional self in a bad light at least a few days every month. About 90 percent of women feel some kind of increased emotionality two to four days before their period starts, where they're crying over dog food commercials. I wanted to get a message to girls who are slipping down some slippery slope and get a safety net under them."

Scientists are pretty much in agreement that at least half of your personality comes from your gene pool—it's part of the identity card you're issued at birth. Life experiences help to shape the other half. If you acquire some idea about yourself—perhaps you're known as the problem child in a classroom or the slacker in a family—that idea will have an impact on your brain circuitry and get built into how you think about yourself. "Our human brains love to categorize and label—'the pretty one' or 'the dependable one' or 'the smart one,'" says Brizendine. "Then you grow accustomed to the label and often re-create that identity because it feels familiar. It can mean all kinds of goodies but also all kinds of burdens."

The only time I go into Old Navy is when I need a teen-appropriate gift. (I generally have a rule: If I can't stand the store's music, I'm too old to wear the store's clothes.) But recently I was seduced into the dressing room by the lure of cool cheap stuff and found a virtual petri dish of youthful vulnerability about believing the bad stuff—I eavesdropped on one plaintive "Does this make me look fat?" after another. "One of the major tasks of adolescence is, Who are you?" says Jessica Henderson Daniel, PhD, associate professor of psychology at Harvard Medical School. "Belonging and finding your niche in terms of assets and liabilities is colored by what other people see—because you don't live in a bubble. More often than not, girls don't look like what they think they should look like." There is a critical window of opportunity in early childhood when it is possible to infuse a girl with a sense of self-worth that is not based on the size of her breasts or the luster of her hair, says Daniel. "People generally fall short of the media ideal, which is why I advocate helping youngsters prepare for adolescence in their elementary years, building up their skills so they have proof that they are more than an image. Youngsters who have pride in accomplishment are more anchored."

**A** STUDY AT THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS ILLUSTRATES how easily body image is undermined: A group of adolescent girls were in a room with an attractive woman who complained about how fat she was (the implication being that anybody who was heavier than she would *really* have something to complain about). There was an immediate impact on the body image of the girls, even though the encounter was brief and the woman was a stranger. "Up to 50 percent of adolescent



girls have body image concerns,” says Eric Stice, PhD, lead researcher on that study. “Up to 70 percent of girls say they would take a pill to lose five pounds; with males, it’s maybe 15 percent. And puberty moves young men toward the ideal male body image, strong and muscled, but moves young women *away* from the ideal female body image, lean with no hips. It’s really sad that adolescent girls look at airbrushed images in the media that aren’t even real. They’re killing themselves for something that isn’t real.”

I had terrific parents and others who consistently let me know I was smart, pretty, and valued. But for some people, the roots of believing the bad stuff as adults may lie with parents who do not demonstrate faith in a child’s abilities, and no other adults are around to provide illumination. “There’s a nice body of evidence showing that kids with at least one supportive adult who counteracts these messages can find avenues for expressing the positive sides of themselves,” says Susan Nolen-Hoeksema, PhD, a professor of psychology at Yale and the author of *Women Who Think Too Much*. Parental depression is readily transmitted to kids, too. “The parents see the world in negative terms and present this view to their children,” says Nolen-Hoeksema. “They’re hypercritical and irritable toward their kids. They don’t want to be, but it’s part of their disorder. Those kids have a real tendency to adopt self-critical thinking. It tends to be perpetuated across every aspect of a child’s life, especially in a small community, where you stay in the same school district, and your brothers and sisters are in the same district, and the teachers know your parents. You remain ‘the fat girl’ or ‘the slutty girl.’ It’s really hard to shake off.”

**O**NE REASON IT’S HARD TO SHAKE OFF IS WHAT PSYCHOLOGISTS call the drive for self-verification—to have others reflect the beliefs we hold about ourselves. Most people are highly motivated to believe the best of themselves, and subtly or not so, they look for feedback from others to confirm these good feelings. But someone who’s depressed will go out and seek negative feedback, verifying her own thoughts. In a 2000 study by Thomas E. Joiner, PhD, a psychology professor at Florida State University, the self-verification motive was so powerful that it overrode the pain of negative opinions. And a 2001 study coauthored by Joiner’s colleague psychology professor Roy F. Baumeister, PhD, confirmed the idea that “bad is stronger than good”: Bad feedback, bad parenting, and bad experiences are much more powerful than good ones. People remember the bad more vividly, process it more efficiently, and pay more attention to it. Bad impressions or stereotypes form more quickly, and negative feelings produce longer-lasting effects. So my brain tricks me into remembering more vividly the occasional cooking disaster (a moment of silence now for the leaden spinach gnocchi I once foisted on innocent guests) than the preponderance of delicious food I’ve cooked. Or the miserable period of my life when I was injured, couldn’t exercise, and [CONTINUED ON PAGE 220]

gained ten pounds instead of the rest of my life when I've fit into skinny jeans.

Naturally the peer group has great power over what you believe about yourself. "If other kids are calling you names and don't want you on their teams, you pick it up with lightning speed," says Nolen-Hoeksema. I was consistently the last one chosen for volleyball, and to this day I regard myself as a person with zero athletic prowess. I always seem to be the least graceful person in yoga class (yes, I know yoga is not supposed to be a competition, but really, people), and I almost wept with gratitude when someone in a jazz dance class told me I moved well. I carry that clumsy little girl I used to be like a monkey on my back, partly because I am what Nolen-Hoeksema has identified as a "ruminator," someone who mulls, analyzes, worries about past, present, and future (the word derives from the Latin for cows "chewing their cud"). If you're a ruminator (and the tendency is there fairly early in life, getting back to that identity card you're issued at birth), when you enter challenging emotional situations, you're more at risk for taking in negative messages—from family, school, the world—essentially turning them on yourself, building a big file of evidence that you really are a screw-up or that people don't like you. "Being a ruminator makes this stuff stick," she says. "But it is changeable. What cognitive therapy seems to do is not convince you otherwise but teach that you can look for alternative ways of viewing yourself. You say: *I know this bad stuff feels like it's true, but it tears me down.* And you make the choice to think otherwise."

The most powerful messages are the most global—you feel "ugly" or "fat" or "stupid" or "not good enough"—and they're hard to deflect in adolescence, when you're not sophisticated enough to say: "That's one person's view, and it needn't stick with me." Kids can be remarkably intuitive about the need to protect themselves from negative feedback—remember that childhood chant "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but names will never hurt me." But such an incantation is protective only if the child really believes it. And it's easier to believe the bad stuff when you're unhappy or nervous—a phenomenon known as memory bias. "Our moods shape our ability to recall things about ourselves," explains University of Toronto psychotherapist Zindel Segal, PhD. "Naturally, when you're feeling down, it's easier to recall failures or

times when you've messed up. The mind is mired in a negative view. The same holds true for anxiety: Someone who is timid or frightened might be leery of a new situation, might look for comfort in ways she's been able to secure it before. It's staying with the devil you know."

Back to *Pretty Woman*, which is really a paradigm of the wake-up call that Segal says can change negative thinking: "The Roberts character gets into a relationship with Gere that's different from one with an ordinary wealthy john. His interest in her is as more than just a hooker, and she feeds off that to explore herself." For people who don't live in Hollywood movies, a wake-up call could be reading a book that inspires you, or having an experience that shakes you out of your usual pattern. I've been thinking about Austen and Brontë heroines like Fanny Price or Jane Eyre, who come from small, mean, meager lives but blossom when exposed to the world beyond. I've heard the adult children of alcoholics talk about escaping strife at home by finding refuge with neighbors or at school, where they're encouraged by messages of possibilities. The next step is identifying the barriers in your way, Segal says: "It could be a spouse who tells you you're no good, or a boss who says you don't deserve a raise. Maybe you're someone who has grown up taking care of others but not yourself."

There is good—no, great—news about changing a pattern like negative thinking, according to neuroscientist Michael M. Merzenich, PhD, at the University of California, San Francisco, who has demonstrated how the brain remakes itself all the time. Taking recordings from the nerve cells of a monkey's brain, Merzenich and his colleagues showed how a particular area of the brain became inactive when the animal was unable to use one of its fingers. But within a few months, the neurons no longer receiving signals for that finger were appropriated for use by an adjacent part of the hand.

"The brain is not like a computer that has fixed wiring and connections," says Merzenich. "Every aspect of you is created by the brain revising itself in response to your interactions in the world—and I mean everything. How you define yourself—the person you are—is a product of plastic changes in your brain. That includes things that relate to your attitude and your emotional construct. What you are is a result of how your brain has tried to create a model of the world, and the brain is plastic until you die."

Transforming negative thinking doesn't

occur instantly. "People can't just change their attitude on a dime," says Merzenich. "You're going against all that weight of experience. Thousands of historic moments have led to that bad attitude—every time you've thought about yourself in a defeatist or inferior position. That's deeply embedded, and it takes a substantial effort over a substantial time to drive the brain in a new direction." But you (and I, and anyone) can make profound, fundamental changes in how the brain operates. It's not that different from doing Pilates or taking a spinning class to change your physical self. In fact, Merzenich cofounded a company called Posit Science that produces technical "brain games" as training exercises for that highly plastic part of us. We know that we can enhance memory; now, remarkably, it seems that we can improve outlook.

For me, believing the good stuff starts with awareness. The ruminator residing inside me is not easily silenced. (Is this article good? And does it make me look fat?) But I'm at least recognizing and acknowledging when she makes an unwelcome appearance. I tell her that she's looking good, that her brownies are to die for, that she should just chill.

I may even reconsider short skirts. **Q**

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