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Baring Her Soul: An Interview with Leslie Goldman

SMW Women's Health & Fitness Tips

By Tracy Morris



Leslie Goldman, M.P.H., is more accustomed to being the interviewer, not the subject. The website for her book, *Locker Room Diaries*, lists an impressive array of her health related publications, including some titles that really woke up my eyeballs like, "Make Over My Period!" and "Vasectomy may be linked to dementia" for venues ranging from the *Chicago Tribune* to *Fitness* and *People* Magazines.

Ask what sparked her interest in writing the book, published in 2006 with the subtitle *The Naked Truth about Women, Body Image, and Re-Imagining the "Perfect" Body*, and you realize that her personal story is a perfect starting place to bring up the uncomfortable subject of eating disorders.

What I heard in Leslie Goldman's story made eating disorders sound not only not so foreign or uncommon to me, but possibly even close to home.

She gave me the abbreviated version of her story: "I went to college as a straight-A perfectionist, wanting to please everyone, the Good Girl. I was a 'big fish in a little pond' in high school academically; in college, there were 40 thousand other fish. I found myself unsure of how to fit in."

She recalls a fraternity party she attended as a Freshman. "Sitting with friends and looking at all these girls from the East coast. They had the total style picture: black pants, spaghetti-strapped tank tops, flat-ironed hair, and all the guys were talking to them. In my jeans and t-shirt, I wondered how I was going to compete with them." Then an image of Cindy Crawford, the super model, popped into her mind. "I'd read that she weighed 128 pounds and was about my height (5'11"), and I made up my mind that the next day, I was going to go running." The idea was to "try and tone up a little bit." Up to then, she had worked out a lot, but was never a runner.

Next thing she knew, 30-minute jogs became 45-minute runs. Her nutritional intake quickly changed from "a hearty appetite to egg whites for breakfast, salads for lunch and dinner." She began losing weight without really needing to, and the response from those around her boosted her effort.



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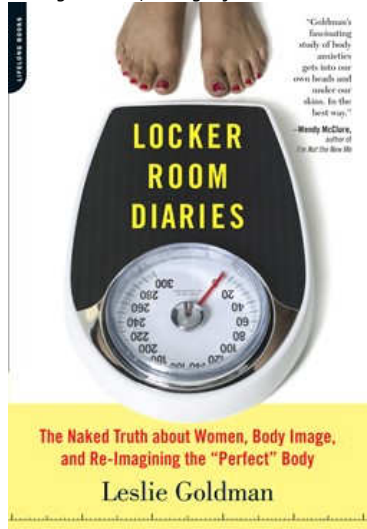
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"I was already slim and athletic, but you lose a few pounds, and people start saying things like, 'Oh, you look good! Did you lose weight?'," Goldman recalls. That was enough to fuel her fire. Soon, she was running for an hour after studying at midnight on a big campus by herself. Within her first semester, she dropped nearly 30 pounds.

"One morning, I weighed myself in the gym. The scale came to 128. I remember thinking 'that's Cindy Crawford's weight!' But I did *not* look like Cindy Crawford." Instead, she had circles under her eyes, her breasts had diminished, her menstrual periods had stopped, her hair was thin. A winter break visit back home threw her family into an uproar. "They were shocked, didn't know what to do, and had never had a problem with me before," Goldman recalls. She reluctantly agreed to check into a treatment facility.

"The clinic staff knew all about me — that I'd stopped eating fat, I didn't drink anything with calories, I wore baggy clothes and wore my hair in a hat to aid in being sort of invisible..." She went back to college, through different modes of treatment, and finally decided to push through her own stigmatized perception of antidepressants in her junior year, which she refers to as a breakthrough for her. "Antidepressants put me on a level playing field so I could address the disease."

She had relapses along the way during times of transition, which Goldman, now the researcher and writer, says is common for people with eating disorders (ED). She describes ED as a coping mechanism for life transitions — marriage and divorce, having children, losing a job — that virtually all women experience.



Goldman explains that taking severe control of your eating or exercise behavior can be a security blanket. "It's something you can hold on to, focus your attention on instead of those things in your life that are too disturbing to think about."

The idea for *Locker Room Diaries* developed when she overheard women in the locker room of her gym "saying the most horrible things about their bodies: 'if I could just cut this part of my thigh off, I'd be perfect' or smack their own butts and say 'gross!', get on the scale and stare and take off their towel and flipflops to make the number smaller..."

So the interviews with only a towel around her began, and the book resulted. She found women to be very open with their own stories. The book is divided into chapters that focus on different body parts, blemishes, typical female conditions like pregnancy, even an age group comparison.

"Often in the locker room, the older women are the ones who walk about without a care in the world. It's the young, sinewy girls who are changing in the bathroom stall because they're so afraid they might not be 'perfect'."

I asked if the difference in ability to display one's naked body had to do more with individual or cultural and generational differences.

"The older women said that looking back on their teens, they probably did have body image problems. They recalled going on these chalky drink diets or their mothers would make them wear a girdle, but there wasn't a word for it. Also, as they got older, their views about their bodies' purpose would change; instead of just being an object of beauty, it was to produce and then feed a child, then to care for their family, then fight cancer and beat disease. In the end, these older women in the gym were there with an attitude of taking care of their bodies 'because it takes care of me' instead of just wanting to look good in a pair of jeans."

We talked about the difficulty of communicating messages about eating, knowing that even words like "fitness" and "healthy" are loaded with sometimes unintended meaning. Goldman blogs at iVillage's The Weighting Game forum, where she says many women equate being thin with being healthy. She says what we need to promote is teaching women to love what they have, not an easy task when we're confronted with images that are impossible to attain.

When she speaks at colleges and public seminars, Goldman will often take before-and-after magazine shots to demonstrate how unreal the images are that consumers see.

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