

**Two Major Portions of Chapters 1 & 7 of
THE CENTERFOLD SYNDROME-- How Men Can Overcome
Objectification and Achieve Intimacy with Women by Gary R. Brooks**

[Dr. Brooks graciously permitted us to use these large portions of his book to supplement the anti-porn-addiction teachings of www.mychainsaregone.org. We encourage you to buy and read his whole book. For reference purposes, original page numbers mark the material above it.]

1 – WHAT IS THE CENTERFOLD SYNDROME?

I'm a relatively normal and emotionally stable guy who grew up believing that looking at and desiring physically attractive women was both pleasurable and inevitable. Now I'm not so sure.

During the past several years, as I have studied the lives and conflicts of men, I have begun to question the value of much of what I had previously accepted. I once assumed, as many men do, that success at work and in a career was the greatest measure of a man, that physical toughness and heroic acts were pathways to proving manhood, that men had to keep the upper hand with women, that only “queers” loved other men, and that emotional sensitivity and vulnerability were signs of weakness. Of all these assumptions, however, none has been more deeply ingrained than the belief that physically attractive women's bodies are the most magnificent spectacles in nature, and that men are destined to fervently desire them, to compete for them, to sacrifice emotional and physical well-being for them, but rarely to enjoy them except from afar. Men and women have accepted this bizarre state of affairs, strangely enough, as both unavoidable and relatively harmless. Neither is true. In fact, in studying this situation I have come to the conclusion that this male pattern of relating to women's bodies, which I am calling the Centerfold Syndrome, represents one of the

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most malignant forces in contemporary relationships between men and women.

The centerfold has been one of the dominant cultural icons of the past half-century. As interpreted by *Playboy* magazine's founder Hugh Hefner and *Penthouse* magazine's publisher Bob Guccione, today's centerfold is a racier, slicker, and glossier fantasy woman, even more perfect and idealized than the pinup girl of the 1930s and 1940s. Her airbrushed perfection permeates our visual environment and our consciousness, creating unreal fantasies and expectations, imposing profound distortions on how men relate with women and to women's bodies, and, in turn, how women relate to their physical selves and with men.

ELEMENTS OF THE CENTERFOLD SYNDROME

The five principal elements of the Centerfold Syndrome are (a) voyeurism, (b) objectification, (c) the need for validation, (d) trophyism, and (e) the fear of true intimacy.

Voyeurism

Nothing heightens the emotional intensity of a sexual encounter as much as looking directly into the eyes of one's partner. Similarly, the unique features of a female partner's physical appearance—the way her breasts swell in a dress, the outline of her torso through gossamer fabric—can become a powerful sexual stimulus for a man. Certainly, the visual sense always has and probably always will play a major role in men's sexual responsiveness. In the latter half of this century, however, this component of men's sexuality has been so exploited, distorted, and outrageously exaggerated that the emotional and sexual health of most contemporary men has been seriously compromised.

Throughout our culture, in movies, on television, in magazines, and in public meeting places, men are continually assailed with

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images of naked and semi-naked women. Not only are the glossy soft-core porno magazines more plentiful than ever, but even the covers of many “women’s” magazines feature the same type of comely, buxom models who are also pictured on hot rod magazines, tabloid newspapers, and, once a year, mainstream sports magazines. Advertising billboards promote “men’s clubs” that are “topless” or “bottomless” or that feature models in lingerie. A popular restaurant celebrates women’s “hooters” more than it celebrates its food. Beer companies seem to be competing to see which can cram the most bikini-clad women into a thirty-second commercial. Superhero comics are liberally sprinkled with images of breathtaking superwomen in skintight bodysuits. The creative inspiration for one entire television series is the adventures of scantily clad lifeguards. Increasingly, women are encouraged to wear bathing suits and exercise outfits that cover their derrières with little more than a thin fabric strip.

Only religious fundamentalists and radical feminists appear to be alarmed about this wave of female body glorification. The culture at large seems to be generally indifferent to this trend, seeing it as harmless titillation, pretty much a natural product of men’s biological makeup. I strongly disagree with this position. It is my contention that this mania, this explosion in glorification and objectification of women’s bodies, promotes unreal images of women, distorts physical reality, creates an obsession with visual stimulation, and trivializes all other natural features of a healthy psychosexual relationship.

Objectification

Voyeurism and objectification are closely related. Just as the Centerfold Syndrome calls for men to become *observers*, it also calls for women to become the *observed*. Women become objects as men become objectifiers. As the culture has granted men the right and privilege of looking at women, women have been expected to

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accept the role of stimulators of men’s visual interest, with their bodies becoming objects that can be lined up, compared, and rated. The process is distinctly one-way, with women’s bodies highlighted and male observers remaining in the shadows or anonymous in a crowd. Objective physical aspects are critical: size, shape, and harmony of body parts are more important than a woman’s human qualities. The women objectified by the media remain relatively anonymous, often without names, except for pseudonyms such as Miss May, Miss Nevada, or Miss Rotary Camshaft. Despite the occasional pretense of connection through shallow interviews or background sketches, centerfold women are left devoid of real personalities, portrayed as superficial cartoon characters. Men talk of their attraction to women in dehumanizing terms based on the body part of their obsession—“I’m a leg man,” or “I’m an ass man.”

What’s more, one fantasy woman is never enough, since images that initially can be enormously novel and exciting can quickly lose their zip. Objectifying observers soon find one naked woman boring and routine, and look for new and different images to provoke their fascination—“variety is the spice of life.” At times, the confirmed objectifier becomes so attached to the thrill of the new and different visual experience, he resorts to the kinky and the offbeat, becoming preoccupied with visual fetishes. Bizarre magazines featuring only “Big-Breasted Mamas,” “Black Beauties,” “Oriental Cuties,” or “Biker Babes” are in part a pathetic effort to override the boredom inherent in

such superficial sexuality.

Since centerfold fantasy women are presented only to stimulate and to invite admiration of their perfection, they are unlike real women, who not only have physical flaws but also expect things from relationships and can be interpersonally threatening. When centerfold women are available to men as visually perfect and emotionally distant sexual fantasy objects, real women become more complicated and less appealing. In fact, when men become fixated on narrow and idealized images of female beauty—youthful bodies with uplifted breasts and full but firm bottoms—their real

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partners, by comparison, may come to be seen as not only less appealing but even ugly. Stretch marks, varicose veins, sagging breasts, and cellulite-marked legs, common phenomena for real female bodies, may be viewed as repugnant by men who see women as objects.

Furthermore, when a man in a relationship is continually distracted by a fantasy life dominated by visual images of idealized bodies of strangers, that man will frequently be emotionally absent from his partner; he will be unable to have intense, here-and-now experiences with her. Tragically, if he spends most of his emotional energy on sexual fantasies about inaccessible people, he frequently will not be available for even the most intimate emotional and sexual moments with the most important person in his life.

The Need for Validation

The traditional concept of manhood is an elusive state to achieve. Most men have only a vague sense of their masculinity and, therefore, continually worry about whether they measure up, and they are quick to become alarmed at the first sign of failure, weakness, or vulnerability. They are programmed to crave validation of their masculinity, and they frequently view women's bodies as a medium for that validation. This need for validation disempowers them and creates an odd yet vitally important inversion of the traditional power relationship between women and men. Despite the fact that they generally have had considerable advantages over women in physical strength and economic and political opportunities, men have frequently felt one-down about sexuality. Although there are multiple ways that women could conceivably validate a man's masculinity, the avenue critical to most men is the sexual one. When women are envisioned as sexual objects and made the centerpiece of men's visual world, they become imbued with enormous psychosocial power. They are seen as having invaluable manhood tokens that they may, or may not, choose to dispense. The more

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physically attractive a woman is, the more validating power she is seen to have.

What have made matters worse are the long-standing gender differences in socialization about sexual activity. Young men have been encouraged to be promiscuous—that is, to seek sexual activity with scant consideration of relationship needs, intimacy, or emotional compatibility. At the same time, young women have been encouraged to attract men's attention, yet to withhold and serve as the gatekeepers of sexual activity.

Even when participating in sex, men are not free from the need for validation. In recent years, thanks to abundant technical advice from sex manuals and implicit assumptions that men's "performances" are the critical determinants of sexual fulfillment, many contemporary men have become obsessed with producing physical evidence of women's sexual pleasure. A dramatic response from a woman's body—erect nipples, gyrating hips, a shuddering orgasm—can be interpreted by a man as unambiguous evidence of his manliness. Conversely, a cold, listless, or

indifferent response from a woman's body often leaves a man feeling ineffectual, inadequate, or resentful. Rarely can a woman find the right words to reassure a man of his worth when he has decided that her body is underappreciative of his manly attentions. To many men, the state of a woman's body may come to be viewed as a masculinity barometer, with its natural fluctuations mistaken as irrefutable evidence of either a man's sexual competence or his shameful inadequacy.

The power imparted by women's sexual leverage, when viewed in light of women's relative powerlessness in other spheres, sets the stage for considerable misunderstanding between women and men. Women, of course, are keenly aware of men's economic and political leverage, but are frequently unaware of the degree to which men feel powerless in terms of sexuality. Men, aware of their insecurities about sexuality, are deeply fearful of women gaining power in areas once thought to be the basis of men's security and worth.

At this critical juncture in the history of gender relations, the Centerfold Syndrome is made infinitely worse by a culture that

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plays to men's fears and heightens men's feelings of sexual disempowerment. As I have already discussed, artificially enhanced images of exquisitely desirable women are everywhere, but these women are remote and unattainable. They are on screens or glossy pages, but physically unavailable. They parade across well-lit and well-guarded stages, before masses of sexually aroused men who hoot but don't touch and are ultimately left unfulfilled, frustrated, and demoralized.

All men and all women are diminished by this noxious situation. The very few women who meet centerfold standards only retain their power as long as they maintain perfect bodies and the leverage of mystery and unavailability. All other women suffer from pressures to live up to the outrageous centerfold standard and from the disappointment of partners when they fail. The very few men who form sexual relationships with centerfolds are often left disappointed, fearful of loss, or envious of those who tryst with even more desirable centerfolds. The great majority of men who never come close to sex with their dream woman are left feeling cheated or unmanly.

Trophyism

Men also experience their masculinity in relation to other men. That is, they ask themselves, How do I stack up against the other guys? Men compete in this way because they believe that the tokens of masculinity are in short supply, with the most valuable prizes obtained by only the worthiest men. Women's bodies become part of this scenario as they are objectified and treated as potential trophies—living testaments to a man's prowess as a financial success, skillful sexual performer, or fearless warrior.

This male competition for access to women's bodies begins in adolescence when boys compete to be the first to “score,” to achieve the most sexual conquests, to “make it” with the sexiest teenage girl. The women's-bodies-as-trophies mentality, damaging enough in adolescence, becomes even more destructive in adult-

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hood, when the “trophy hunts” of adolescence clash with men's developmental need to “settle down” and select a long-term companion. While collecting new and different sexual trophies may be celebrated among male adolescents, it is a sign of emotional immaturity in the world of most adults. Furthermore, while actual trophies retain their basic physical characteristics, human trophies do not. Women's bodies age, losing their trophy-like characteristics, especially in comparison to newer varieties. Hence, the trophy-hunting man, initially satisfied with his trophy-wife, must eventually face the maddening reality that his prize will eventually lose her lustre, while other

potential prizes will emit near-irresistible allure.

Another aspect of this trophyism mentality makes it especially dangerous. Trophies, once they are won, are supposed to become the property of the winner, a permanent physical symbol of accomplishment and worthiness. This cannot be so with women's bodies. Women, of course, no longer want to be passive objects, and they have a growing say in who they spend their lives with. From the perspective of the trophy hunter, this is a horrifying trend, as he can never be assured that his trophy will remain his. At any time, she may choose to sit on the shelf of another man. This is a devastating occurrence for a trophy-hunting man, one that commonly provokes him to desperate and destructive reactions.

The Fear of True Intimacy

Men are created within women's bodies and their first experiences of love and security come from intimate physical contact with their mothers' soft and welcoming bodies. Fathers' bodies could provide similar sensual pleasures, but they traditionally have been unavailable to young boys, or when available, have been stiff and threatening.

Though young boys treasure the opportunity to be physically close, both for sensual pleasures and for reassurance in times of vul-

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nerability, they soon encounter social pressures to distance themselves from their mothers' bodies and establish a place alongside the bodies of men. This early developmental injunction, endemic to traditional parenting of boys, causes them to have lifelong conflict with women's bodies, a conflict that is the essence of this fifth and most complex aspect of the Centerfold Syndrome.

Young boys are conditioned to feel shame over feelings of weakness and vulnerability, encouraged to suppress their needs for sensual physical contact, and expected to develop male body armor with hard muscles and an emotionally stoic exterior. While they try to emulate heroes that are brave, intrepid, fearless, physically aggressive, and emotionally tough, boys cannot ignore that they are still insecure and crave physical comforting. At especially vulnerable times, they may allow nurturers to give some measure of soothing and comforting, but fears of humiliation quickly surface. Frequently, boys discover that some touch and physical closeness are possible through acceptable "boy" activities like sports and horseplay, but they remain continually aware that these sensual pleasures must not be acknowledged.

In short, boys learn to associate women's bodies with softness, intimacy, and sensuality, the very qualities they have been taught to reject. Despite their common exteriors of manic activity and rough play, boys often crave physical closeness and sensuality, but have no way to ask for it and few avenues by which to experience it.

In adolescence, young men find themselves besieged by two powerful yet contradictory forces—waves of sexual urgency and the extreme prohibitions against emotional intimacy. The sudden appearance of the hormonal pressures of sexuality catches young men unprepared; the fear of intimacy leaves them confused and conflicted. Help is rarely available. Usually there is some token guidance in the form of caution about the need to be sexually controlled, but boys recognize these admonitions to be contradicted by their bodies, their peers, their role models, and their culture, in

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which the dominant message is that sex is great and a man should acquire as much of it as possible.

Sadly, young men, who have had minimal preparation for the multiple complexities of sexuality, have also been encouraged to be physically tough and insensitive to emotional issues. Emphasis has

been placed on aggressive and competitive skills, with very little emphasis on interpersonal skills of communication, empathy, and nurturing. Young men badly want sexual intimacy, but have learned to fear and suppress their needs for emotional intimacy and sensuality. They learn that the safest form of sex is the “slam bam thank you ma’am” variety.

It is conceivable that under optimal circumstances sexual activity might help boys to rediscover these long-suppressed parts of themselves and might help them unlearn their fears of these “feminine” qualities. The opposite typically occurs, however, as young men experience their brushes with sensuality and emotional intimacy as confusing and threatening to their hard-won masculine independence and desire for “sexual freedom.” Most young men therefore give primacy to their sexual needs, while continuing to suppress their needs for sensuality.

As young men learn to wall themselves off from too much emotional intimacy in sex—to develop nonrelational sexuality—they are also taught to sexualize all feelings of emotional and physical closeness. As a result, they become unable to experience nonsexual intimacy. Because their closest approximations of emotional intimacy and most intense exposure to sensual pleasure occur almost exclusively in the context of rapid-orgasm sexual activity, male adolescents learn to closely associate sex and intimacy. Further, they are poorly tutored in distinguishing the two, because they have been raised in a culture that generally gives minuscule attention to men’s sensuality and intimacy needs while exalting their sexual needs. Because of this confusion, it should not be surprising that a man who wants to replace his feelings of emotional distance and alienation with ones of closeness and connection misinterprets the feelings as sexual ones and assumes that he is just “horny.” Con-

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sequently, men may seek sex when they really want emotional intimacy, sensual pleasure, or physical comforting. Moreover, they frequently may engage in sex when they have no interest whatever in emotional intimacy.

Sometimes the distinction between the desire for sex and the desire for intimacy is irrelevant. In some cases, a sexual relationship may help a man discover his sensuality and intimacy needs, and he may develop a deeply fulfilling relationship with his partner. More often than not, however, this blurring of sexual needs and intimacy needs will create significant relationship constraints. When young men do not learn to distinguish the two sets of needs, they will be highly restricted in their capacity to develop and maintain relationships. For example, intimacy with male peers will incite homophobic panic, and intimate friendships with girls will be contaminated by compulsive sexual overtures. Limited in their pursuit of true intimacy, young men may be prone to overdependence upon a sexual partner; or to defend against excessive intimacy, they may seek promiscuous sexual activity, rather than risk getting too close to a partner. Even when remaining monogamous, young men may be prone to seek distance through fantasy and emotional withdrawal.

Ultimately, this fifth aspect of the Centerfold Syndrome is about how men are taught to suppress their needs for intimacy and sensuality, and come to invest too much emotional and psychological power in some women’s bodies. Fearing their potential overdependence on women, men develop a preoccupation with sexuality, which powerfully handicaps their capacity for emotionally intimate relationships with men and for nonsexual relationships with women.

WHY AREN’T THERE MORE COMPLAINTS?

Although the tenets of this syndrome are indoctrinated into children at an early age, some of the teaching has been so subtle that the more covert implications are missed. Commonly, the

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Centerfold Syndrome is accepted as a relatively natural outgrowth of innate, gender-based biological differences. Furthermore, the social and psychological tension produced by the syndrome has often been presented as culturally beneficial—the basic lifeblood and energizing force of our society. The significant problems related to the syndrome have been disguised or dismissed.

Consequently, only some women have protested as yet that the Centerfold Syndrome objectifies them, depersonalizes them, reduces them to body parts, perpetuates anatomical lies, and idealizes unreal fantasies about women's bodies and sexuality. Sadly, many more women accept some of the fraudulent premises of the Centerfold Syndrome and take on the hopeless task of meeting its standards, rarely satisfied with their successes, and ultimately blaming themselves for the inevitable failures.

Yet, although damage to women as the result of the Centerfold Syndrome is gradually becoming clear, there is virtually no awareness that it also harms men. This isn't surprising, since very few men seem dissatisfied with their sexual socialization. Most seem happy to embrace the Centerfold Syndrome, though some will admit disappointment that they have not been able to capture a true centerfold. Nevertheless, it's my contention that the Centerfold Syndrome is deeply harmful to women *and* men. It produces major asynchronicity between men and women and is a crucial component in the “battle of the sexes.” Since it prevents real intimacy, mature discourse, and honest interpersonal connection, it creates barriers to understanding and becomes a significant obstacle to healthy relationships.

The Centerfold Syndrome is pervasive, but it is not inevitable. It is neither an unavoidable outgrowth of biological forces nor the product of moral weakness resulting from Adam succumbing to Eve's temptation with the forbidden fruit. Rather, it is a social construction, and like all socially constructed realities, it can be deconstructed.

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[The rest of Chapter 1 is Dr. Brooks' brief personal memoir of how the Centerfold Syndrome affected his own life. His story mirrors that of so many other men in America. Check online. A copy of this book would be an excellent resource for your own library or to lend to others.]

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7 – OVERCOMING THE CENTERFOLD SYNDROME

The first step in overcoming the Centerfold Syndrome is recognizing the symptoms. The following list represents some of the multiple ways that the Centerfold Syndrome can be manifested. A man may have the Centerfold Syndrome if

- He is visually obsessed with women's bodies.
- He regularly gets girlie magazines such as *Playboy*, *Penthouse*, *Gallery*, or *Hustler*.
- He throws out all his issues of *Sports Illustrated* except the annual swimsuit issue.
- He frequents topless bars, strip shows, wet T-shirt contests, tight-fitting jeans contests, or perhaps even aerobics classes.
- In the middle of a meaningful conversation with an intimate friend he cannot help but break eye contact to stare at an attractive female stranger passing by.
- In conversation with a physically attractive woman he cannot avoid looking at her breasts.
- A primary sexual outlet is masturbation with pictures of naked women.

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- His masturbatory fantasies are primarily of him watching a naked woman and never include him and a woman sharing an intimate moment.
- When engaging in sex with a loved one, he frequently augments his arousal by imagining an unknown but sexually appealing woman.
- He is excited by the prospect of his partner “dressing up” or playing the role of someone else (such as a French maid, a hooker, or a dominatrix).
- His self-esteem needs regular bolstering by praise about his sexual performance.
- He feels less manly if his sex partner doesn't orgasm or doesn't display a dramatic physical response to his lovemaking.
- He is intensely interested in the number of orgasms his partner has or in how he compares with her previous lovers.
- He generally avoids foreplay and afterplay during lovemaking.
- He rarely engages in nonsexual touching.
- He can only be comfortable being touched or comforted by a woman and cannot tolerate being touched by another man.

SUPPOSE YOU HAVE IT

If you've come this far, you've been willing to grant that there may be such a thing as the Centerfold Syndrome and that it may be having a negative impact on your life. To do this, you've already countered to some extent the pressure of those forces that wish to maintain the status quo. You've questioned the culture's denial of this problem. You've probably avoided being totally discouraged by those who insist that change is foolhardy since women and men always have been and always will be so essentially different that things must always continue as they are. It is hoped that you've also

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been alert to the ploys of those who want to shift the blame to women, claiming that they're the ones who enjoy tantalizing and controlling men.

Finally, you've had to avoid being duped by those who try to perpetuate the Centerfold Syndrome by aligning it with the cause of sexual freedom. For many years there's been a school of thought that holds that any challenge to soft-core pornography is automatically antisex. Those who profit from objectification and sexual exploitation of women claim that their products are “sex aids,” that they *help* men be sexual. They do. But *they help men be sexual in the old-fashioned way that harms women and debases men's sexuality*. These magazines continue to teach the values of the Centerfold Syndrome. The cause of sexual freedom will be served when men choose to reject soft-core pornography and seek intimate sexuality with real women.

What do we need to get on with the process of change? First, we need to become deeply knowledgeable and respectful of the socialization processes of women and men. We need to be supportive of those women who are courageously challenging violent pornography, rape mythology, sexual harassment, and other forms of oppression of women's bodies. Some of these women see little hope for men or for improved male-female relationships in the foreseeable future; but there also are many women who are determined to eliminate oppression, who are not as outraged at men and not as pessimistic about improved relations between women and men. These women are sometimes confused, sometimes disappointed, frequently impatient, but resolutely hopeful that the situation can be substantially improved. Both groups of women are valuable allies in the struggle against the Centerfold Syndrome.

To have a real chance of success, we'll also need to be compassionate toward men and respectful of their experiences. Even though men need to be held accountable for their actions in establishing and perpetuating the sex industry, enormous numbers of men have also suffered from it. Men like Mike, Arthur, George,

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Luis, Terry, Chad, Paul, and Fred have had their sexual potential hampered and in some cases seriously damaged by the sex industry and the Centerfold Syndrome.

The need for significant change in the most central aspect of men's lives cannot help but be terrifying. It's natural to worry that the outcome could be calamitous, that sexuality will be screwed up forever, that all that was good will be destroyed. It takes a little honest examination of the matter to acknowledge that *male sexuality is already quite screwed up*. The changes we are working toward will produce not one ounce of lost pleasure. What will be lost is a very large measure of anxiety, guilt, insecurity, alienation, and profound estrangement between women and men brought on by the current construction of male sexuality. What will be lost is sex between people who don't know or care about each other; sex between persons and objects; sex based on revenge, proving oneself, or showing off; and sex that's part of a masquerade.

THE GOALS WE PURSUE

We hear a lot of calls to give up things we like because they're bad for us: tasteless humor, cigarettes, cigars, alcohol, cholesterol, saturated fat, salt, and sugar. The last thing men need now is someone suggesting that they should do away with the "best" parts of male sexuality: no more girl watching, no more magazines, no more recreational sex.

This book is not about eliminating male sexuality; it is about overhauling it. It's about replacing irresponsible, detached, compulsive, and alienated sexuality with a sexuality that is ethically responsible, compassionate for the well-being of participants, and sexually empowering of men. To accomplish this goal we'll need to modify what we expect of women and men. Men will need to value women not only for their physical attractiveness, but also for their personal strengths, talents, and intelligence. Society's models of competent men will also need to evolve. The old idea of judging masculinity by the capacity to "score" will need to be replaced with

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the concept of men as sensitive and understanding. Men will need to question the idea that their manhood must be proven and regularly measured by their acquisitions and symbols of success. We must grasp the idea that many men can be more by doing less. We can help men be more fulfilled when we can help them give up the need to always be in the driver's seat (literally and figuratively), and to more frequently go along for the ride, enjoying the scenery, talking to the kids, supporting the work and appreciating the talents of the woman who's driving.

Finally, we need very different metaphors for male sexual arousal. Men's sexual arousal was once thought of as a volcanic force, a boiler of continually building pressure. Deprived of outlet, it could erupt or explode, wrecking havoc on those so foolish as to ignore its urgent needs and destructive potential. We need to replace this image of male sexual arousal with one that is both more physiologically and psychologically accurate, and more likely to generate humane approaches to sex. Sexual arousal does not endlessly mount until a man explodes. Sure, there may be wet dreams, but that's about the "worst" that can happen. Men need to learn to think of their sexual arousal as a naturally rhythmic and cyclical variation in their lives. At times they will be aroused, but if the situation is inopportune, the arousal will pass. This latter model gives men a far more useful way to think of sex—as less an irresistible demonic force and more a natural rhythm that can

be integrated with the other rhythms of their lives.

HOW MEN CAN CHANGE THEMSELVES

Efforts to overcome the Centerfold Syndrome can be launched at many levels. The first of these is the level of the individual man, since short of immediate and sweeping social upheaval, there's no real likelihood that things will change unless many individual men take on this project.

The following directions are addressed to the men reading this book.

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Self-Evaluation

The first step in an action plan is a careful self-evaluation: Does the Centerfold Syndrome apply to me? I'd encourage you to approach the evaluation with an open mind and not think of the Centerfold Syndrome as a rare sexual perversion. Rather, it is mainstream male sexuality—many more men have it than do not. Its features are so common to men that it's probably easier not to waste time wondering if you have it and to save your energy for figuring out exactly which aspects of it apply to you. It's certainly possible that you may have escaped the effects of mainstream male socialization, or that at some point you recognized the syndrome's symptoms and rejected it as silly and inappropriate. If so, you are in the minority.

The first step in self-evaluation is checking the symptom list to see how many items are part of your sexual behavior pattern. If you're not sure, then monitor yourself for two weeks. Pay close attention to *how* and *how much* you look at women's bodies. When you're in environments where there are large numbers of attractive women, do you frequently (several times per hour) catch yourself staring at a woman's body? Do you find yourself undressing her or trying to picture her without clothes on? Do you ever get caught looking and try to pretend you're looking at something else? Have you gone so far as to try to find secret ways to steal glances? Do these voyeuristic activities ever get in the way of your daily objectives? Do they take just a few seconds, or do they consume a sizable portion of your day?

You next might want to monitor how your voyeuristic habits affect you. Do they create emotional and physical arousal? If so, does that arousal assist or hinder completion of your daily activities? Does looking at these women ever leave you feeling tense or disoriented? Do the feelings you experience pass quickly, or do they linger throughout the day? What are your thoughts during periods of sexual arousal? Are they respectful of your partner and empowering of you? Do your thoughts treat her as a valid and integral part of your life, or do they treat her as an object?

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If you can't tell for sure whether you're voyeuristic, you might consider asking a woman you know and trust. "Do you see me as someone who watches women? Who looks at women sexually? Who stares at women's body parts?" Many men are surprised to discover how much women notice.

Next, you could monitor your sexual behavior. If you masturbate (the great majority of men do), what are your principal masturbatory stimulants? Do you rely on visual stimuli, either video or pictures? Are you able to pay attention to yourself and focus on your pleasant bodily sensations, or do you focus exclusively on the characteristics of the visual image? Are you ever able to develop masturbatory fantasies that include you and a loved one together, enjoying intensely intimate pleasure, or do you exclusively fantasize about sexy strangers?

As part of your sexual evaluation, you might consider reviewing your sexual heritage. How did you learn about sex? What did you hear? How were things presented to you? How did your male

peer group think about sex? How did your father? Was sex presented to you as an opportunity to be intimate with women, or as a game or holy crusade? How were sexually interested women portrayed? How were attractive women portrayed? What was a competent male supposed to be like? Where did sex fit into that formula? Spend some time reflecting on how you think of yourself as a man. Have there been a great many times when you haven't felt manly enough? Is sexual performance a critical aspect of your self-definition? How do you, react to occasions of impotence? Could you survive the traumatic loss of your penis?

Think about your tolerance for intimacy. Do you allow yourself to talk openly and frankly with someone you love? After sexual intercourse, do you feel comfortable lying there and talking intimately, or do you build an emotional wall around yourself? Do you inextricably associate touch and sex? Are you comfortable being touched or embraced by a man who cares about you?

Once you have completed this self-evaluation, you should have some idea how much your sexual preferences resemble those of the

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Centerfold Syndrome. You have some variant of the Syndrome if you learn that (a) you're so much into watching and objectifying women that the habits interfere with your relationships and life objectives; (b) you prefer sexual fantasies rather than the real women in your life; (c) you rely on sexual performance to feel more manly; or (d) you become so preoccupied with sexuality that sensuality, touch, and nonsexual intimacy are extremely difficult.

Recognizing the Benefits of Change

Once you've identified possible problem areas, begin to focus on the benefits of change. In what ways will a new approach to sexuality make your life less stressful and more meaningful? The list might include such items as:

- Freedom from the distracting and anxiety-inducing aspects of voyeurism
 - Decreased reactivity to media manipulations of your attention and emotional state
 - Increased sense of mastery of your sexual arousal and less reactivity to sexual fetishes
 - Less fascination with pornography
 - Greater appreciation of women based on mutual interests and emotional compatibility
 - Less anxiety about rating your sexual performance
 - Greater confidence in the underpinnings of your relationships, with less possessiveness and jealousy
 - Greater comfort with a loved one's changing physical appearance
 - Greater chance for greater sexual harmony and emotional connection with your partner
 - Increased possibilities for nonsexual yet intimate relations with women and men
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- Pleasure rather than guilt and alienation after masturbation Fewer sexual fantasies of strangers interfering with your intimate moments with a loved one
 - Feelings of closeness to rather than distance from your partner after sexual intercourse.

Seeing Women Differently

Once you've identified your own motivations for overcoming the Centerfold Syndrome, you can start changing your habits and behaviors. First, you'll need to do what you can to minimize the hypnotic pull produced by the culture's classical conditioning of your sexual arousal. Your conditioned arousal to sexual objects (such as leopard panties and black spike heels) and women's

body parts (swelling breasts, shapely legs, curvaceous derrières) cannot just be wished away; but you *can* lessen their power over you, *and* you can develop new, more functional habits. Instead of using sexualized objects in pornography to stimulate arousal for masturbation, you can substitute more relational and emotionally meaningful fantasies. For example, instead of imagining a naked stripper or bikini-clad stranger, image yourself in an intimate, loving, and sensual setting with someone you care deeply about. Learn to focus your attention on your physical responses and pleasure, instead of on the gyrations of a sexualized object. As you learn to write your own personal “man’s romance novel,” you will broaden your sexual repertoire considerably and be less reliant on objectifying pornography.

You can also change the way you’ve learned to visually “work over” women. Once again, you can’t expect to suddenly become disinterested in a “gorgeous knockout bitch in spike heels, body-hugging dress slit to her waist, heaving breasts and supple derriere slithering beneath the silky material.” (I tried but couldn’t squeeze any more of our conditioned sex-triggers into the description.) You *will* look. It’s not a good idea to fight this, since these stimuli

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actually gain strength when we try to suppress them; but once the conditioned response has been elicited, you can then retake control of yourself. You don’t have to stare and turn the event into a major recreational activity. You don’t have to make a big exercise of mentally undressing her. Nor do you need to enhance this arousal with a stream of emotionally stimulating self-talk (“Wow, is she ever fantastic; she’s the sexiest women I’ve ever seen; boy does she get me hot”). Instead, you can notice your response, note the beginnings of an arousal sequence, and consciously interrupt the sequence. Almost all men who have physically attractive daughters know this is possible. For them, the physical attraction is noticed, but it is stopped at that point.

You can learn to think about your sexual arousal in a different way. It’s superbly ironic that we men have been taught to be masters of stoicism, utterly skilled at tolerating fear, pain, and fatigue, yet when it comes to sexual arousal we’re easily overwhelmed. Lust reduces us men to weaklings. We need to think about sexual arousal in a very different way. Instead of seeing it as a powerfully urgent drive, demanding rapid expression and quick relief, we must learn to think of it as a rhythmic and natural variation, an ebbing and flowing of physical and psychological states that we can learn to integrate into our emotional and relational realities. Our sexual arousal needs to be seen not just as a physical urge, but as an integral part of our emotional, relational, and spiritual state of mind.

Finally, we can learn to “see” women differently. Instead of zooming in on body parts like a microscope, we can work to develop the capacity to see holistically. We can learn to be attracted to a broader perception of the entire woman, a perception that is less attuned to specific body features and more attuned to a global impression based on integration of input from visual, emotional, and kinesthetic senses. In that way, many standards of feminine beauty will be possible for us, as we integrate each woman’s appearance into our interpersonal experience of her, rather than isolating her as a material object.

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[The rest of Chapter 7 offers more steps to be taken against the Centerfold Syndrome by couples, by wives of those with the problem, by parents, by men helping other men, by women coalitions, and by working for cultural change. We at MCAG may disagree with a few philosophical points, but no other psychological resource “hits the nail on the head” as this book does. Again, we thank Dr. Brooks for making these excerpts available for those seeking release from porn addiction through the ministry of www.mychainsaregone.org.]