

THE CENTERFOLD SYNDROME



How Men Can Overcome
Objectification and
Achieve Intimacy with Women

GARY S., Ph.D.

Foreword by Lenore E. Walker

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Objectification and
Achieve Intimacy with Women

Jossey-Bass Publishers • San Francisco

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For sales outside the United States, please contact your local Paramount Publishing International Office.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Brooks, Gary R.

The centerfold syndrome: how men can overcome objectification and achieve intimacy with women / by Gary R. Brooks.—1st ed.

p. cm.—(The Jossey-Bass social and behavioral science series)

Includes bibliographical references (p. 213) and index.

ISBN 0-7879-0104-0

1. Men—United States —Sexual behavior. 2. Heterosexual men—United States. 3. Sex (Psychology). 4. Intimacy (Psychology). 5. Man-woman relationships—United States. I. Title. II. Series

HQ28.B76 1995

306.7'081—dc20

95-8838

CIP

FIRST EDITION

HB Printing

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

THE CENTERFOLD SYNDROME

GARY R. BROOKS

Foreword by Lenore E. Walker

Calvin R. Brooks

1922–1993

He did all he possibly could

FOREWORD

The women's movement, which began in the late 1960s and continues today, has fundamentally changed the way women and men relate to one another. Nevertheless, old habits die hard. More significantly, some deeply conditioned attitudes still have a profoundly negative impact on both individual identity and the potential for intimate relationships between the sexes.

In this book, Gary Brooks offers a way to overcome one of the most insidious and destructive of these conditioned attitudes: men's objectification of women's bodies, their voyeuristic preference for perfect trophies over real women, their secret masturbatory images that invade their minds not only on the street but even while making love to their partners, isolating men in their own fantasies.

Dr. Brooks calls this malady the Centerfold Syndrome, since its most obvious symptom is a fixation with the pursuit of those air-brushed fantasies from the pages of *Playboy* and *Penthouse* magazines. But the social conditioning that has created this obsession can be found everywhere in our culture: on television, in advertising, and in the way men are raised. They are brought up to both depend upon and yet also resent the power they perceive women hold over them as gatekeepers to this precious commodity—their objectified body parts!

Gary is painfully honest about many men's blighted concepts of sexual relations. But he goes beyond mere analysis to document a group of his patients who are both abusers and victims of the Centerfold Syndrome. You will see George confronted by his own daughter, who wants to be a cheerleader in a skimpy costume. You'll meet Arthur, who is dealing with his wife's mastectomy—first put

off by the disfiguring surgery, then able to get beyond these feelings to recognize his emotional bonds to her after so many years together. You'll also follow the real-life drama of Chad, who struggles to have a real relationship with a "plain" girl after dozens of unsatisfying one-night stands with "babes . . . big breasts, long legs, hot-to-trot." And Mike, obsessed by the compulsive use of pornography for masturbation. Not to mention Paul, expelled by his wife, who finds a young and gullible surrogate woman to abuse. These and other members of Dr. Brooks' group fight to overcome the ingrained attitudes and habits of the Centerfold Syndrome and to achieve some kind of real partnership and intimacy with women.

Ultimately this is a positive book. Its message is that change is possible, that many men and women have the desire to improve the way they relate to each other, to move, sometimes in a painstakingly slow crawl, toward the expression of emotional intimacy and sexuality. Many of the men in this book are well on the way to becoming the partners of new, feminist women. They will be the ones who design the new rules for relationships.

This is an exciting time to live in, and this book gives us good ideas about how men and women can live together with a greater sense of intimacy and true partnership.

June 1995

Lenore E. Walker

PREFACE

A mong the many things that are right and admirable about contemporary manhood, there are some things that are not working well at all. Most men struggle resolutely to meet the continually shifting expectations of the male code. For the most part, their efforts produce vital benefits for their loved ones and for themselves. In some ways, however, everyone gets cheated. This book is about one of those ways.

The Centerfold Syndrome looks critically at the sexuality of heterosexual American men. Much of what I describe will apply equally to gay and bisexual men, but I am most confident in my knowledge of the heterosexual male population, so I have restricted my observations to this group.

My thesis is that there are a number of ways in which the traditional construction and practice of male sexuality are highly dysfunctional. Most men are too voyeuristic, too objectifying of women's bodies, too competitive for sexually attractive women, too needy of validation through sexuality, and too fearful of emotional intimacy. As I will attempt to demonstrate, it makes sense to conceptualize these problems under the rubric "the Centerfold Syndrome."

As yet, I can't provide scientific evidence that the behavioral patterns I have observed fit neatly into one syndrome, or that they are part of several problem configurations. I can't be certain that others have observed similar patterns. Only research and public discourse can clarify this. What I can say with some certitude is that there clearly are significant problems with heterosexual male

sexuality and that these problems make it very difficult for women and men to establish emotionally intimate relationships and to experience sexually gratifying lives.

In the following pages I will describe my observations, my formulations about these observations, and my ideas about what needs to be done. This should be interesting.

Temple, Texas
June 1995

Gary R. Brooks

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

An interesting and stimulating symposium presentation never would have evolved into this book if it had not been for the vision and enthusiasm of my editor, Alan Rinzler. He knew immediately what I was trying to say, helped me refine my message, and pushed me relentlessly to complete the project. Nothing less would have worked.

For the twenty-three years during which I have been a professional listener, troubled men have taught me invaluable lessons about the stresses of manhood, forever dispelling the naive idea that only clients benefit from the adventures of therapy.

Like so many men who are trying to find a new path, I am deeply indebted to many courageous and compassionate women who have offered ideas, critique, challenges, and compassion. A brief list must include Michele Bograd, Glenace Edwall, Phyllis Frank, Lucia Gilbert, Roberta Nutt, Carol Philpot, Louise Silverstein, Barbara Wainrib, and Lenore Walker.

Because I once thought I traveled alone, I have been elated to discover the friendship and encouragement of many caring men. Ron Levant, Don-David Lusterman, and Roy Scrivner have been mentors, teachers, and most-treasured friends. Joe Rickard taught me how to be a professional. Joe Pleck has been an intellectual beacon. Many other men—Bob Brannon, Jim Doyle, Glen Good, Richard Lazur, Jim O'Neil, Ron Ruhnke, Murray Scher, and Jack Sternbach—have helped me explore new ways of being myself in the company of men.

My mom has always given tirelessly of herself and made me want to be the most I could be. My dad fought his entire life, and in the process gave me courage to face my fears.

My daughters, Ashley and Allison, have given me joys I couldn't have imagined. Patti has been a loving and supportive partner, who has made the journey easier and the future bright.

—G.R.B.

CPSIA information can be obtained at www.ICGtesting.com
Printed in the USA
BVOW02*1321270315

393542BV00009B/57/P



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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

2 The Centerfold Syndrome

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

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