



Pretty Nasty

What is it about beautiful, successful women that sparks a backlash from other women? **Katherine Bebo** decodes our competitive habits and finds a friendlier solution



While

the content of fad-diet book *Six Weeks to OMG: Get Skinnier Than All Your Friends* by Venice A Fulton is causing an uproar (it promotes skipping breakfast, having cold baths and blowing up balloons!), it's the title itself that got us thinking. The promise to 'get skinnier than all your friends' openly mines the concept that women are naturally jealous of each other and want to compete with other women for pole position. Venice encourages the notion that being thinner than your mates – the same ones who'll never forget your birthday and who turn up on your doorstep in a crisis – is 'the best motivation'.

In a world where celebrities are praised for their red-carpet outfits one minute and parodied for having cellulite the next, women are constantly striving to be slimmer, prettier, fitter, better. But we're also primed to find flaws in those around us, particularly the women who make life look effortless. It's not just a theory: a study published in the US journal *Psychological Science* found that women are far quicker to criticise their peers than men. So where does this judgemental pattern stem from and, more importantly, is it healthy?

BACK TO BASICS

Women are complex, so it's no surprise that there are loads of reasons we have a tendency to turn on one another. 'Women can be competitive for many reasons,' explains psychologist Dr Paola Bailey (psychologyofwomen.com). 'It could be to achieve a goal, to boost self-esteem, to fulfill a need for admiration or respect or simply because we enjoy the thrill of conquering a challenge.'

It could even be an in-built 'survival of the fittest' strategy. 'In an animalistic way, we compete to attract the best mate so we can reproduce,' suggests life coach Rebekah Fensome (rebekahfensomelifecoach.com).

The problem, Dr Bailey says, is that we've grown up in a society where women aren't 'allowed' to be traditionally competitive. Men are permitted, even encouraged, to be the best sportsman, the most intelligent student and the highest paid employee, while women are labelled 'aggressive' and 'unattractive' if they are openly competitive or strive to reach the same lofty goals. So, we're forced to compete in arenas where it's 'allowed',

such as physical appearance and domesticity. 'Women tend to judge themselves on these sorts of external

factors,' says Dr Bailey, 'because it presumably tells the world of their value.'

Despite how far the fight for equal rights has come, popular culture still reinforces this narrow view of exactly how women are supposed to compete. Just take a look at the TV programme *The Bachelor*, where women are pitted against each other to win the heart of one man, using their looks and feminine wiles to reign supreme. 'Our society highly values appearance in women,' says Jessica LeRoy, founder and executive director of the Center for the Psychology of Women. 'We don't often hear of women being competitive over who's the smartest.'

The trickle-down effect of schoolyard bullying may also be to blame. Life coach Louise Presley-Turner (thegameoflife.co.uk) says that a woman's urge to be competitive could be linked to childhood. 'Perhaps we were laughed at in the playground or didn't get good enough grades, which has culminated in a lack of self-worth,' she says. You might have left school far behind, but the insecurity that can follow breeds jealousy.

PLAY FAIR

While competing can be a healthy part of life, encouraging you to become better educated and more accomplished, Dr Bailey warns that a competitive streak that rages out of control can lead to destructive consequences. 'Training too hard can endanger your health, just as pursuing that "perfect" relationship can damage friendships, as those around you feel ignored,' she explains. Even more worrying, 'Becoming overly

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fixated on your looks can lead to conditions like body dysmorphic disorder,' Rebekah adds.

This doesn't mean that women should quit being competitive altogether. Like most things in life, moderation is absolutely key. Too little and you could find you lack motivation and the drive to succeed, but too much could be toxic. 'Use competitiveness to drive healthy behaviours, but remember that for any pursuit to be healthy, it needs to be flexible,' Dr Bailey says.





FRIENDS FOREVER

Seething with jealousy when your friend catches a break? Louise Presley-Turner reveals how to cope...

WHEN SHE SCORES A COOL NEW JOB...

'Remember, there's a perfect job out there for everyone. What suits your friend's skills won't necessarily suit yours. Discover your talents and put your energy into pursuing your own new, exciting direction.'

WHEN SHE'S LOST WEIGHT...

'Congratulate her, then put your energy into

focusing on what you can do to get in shape, too. Use her success to inspire you into action.'

WHEN SHE'S GOT A CUTE NEW MAN...

'Ask to meet his mates! But also remember you need to love yourself before you can love someone else. Focus on building your own self-confidence before getting out there on the dating scene.'

GET COMFORTABLE

The very nature of competition means you're comparing yourself to others – ranking yourself against your friends' figures, jobs and relationships. But it can be a dangerous game: someone will always have something you want – whether it's glossy hair, skinny thighs, a fat pay cheque or a boyfriend who looks like Ryan Gosling. 'Comparing yourself to others inevitably leads to insecurities and it's a tremendous waste of time and energy,' says Dr Bailey.

Often, the women we compare ourselves to aren't even realistically portrayed themselves (hello, Photoshop!). Try to think of it this way: as perfect as someone may seem from an outsider's perspective, you have no idea what may be going on inside. 'When a woman compares herself to someone else, she doesn't have the full story,' Jessica explains. 'All women struggle with something and we should try to empathise with that.'

Instead of focusing on what others have, why not concentrate on all the gifts that you've been blessed with? 'Always trying to be the best can be exhausting,' says Rebekah. 'It's important to enjoy the life you have and live in the present.'

To build your inner confidence, Louise suggests that for 30 days you look in the mirror each morning and affirm, 'I am perfect just the way I am', 'You'll feel the shift in your attitude,' she promises. Dr Bailey agrees that acceptance is key. 'It can take perseverance, but accepting who you are, including your appearance, your thoughts and your feelings, will mean that your strengths shine brighter and your weaknesses (or your perception of them) will fade into the background.' ❧

Sick of insecurities?
Smash your
judgemental habits