





NATURAL REACTION

A COMPELLING CASE
FOR DITCHING THE
MANI-PEDIS AND
SPENDY SPLURGES...
AND GETTING IN TOUCH
WITH YOUR LESS-THAN-
PRIMP-Y SIDE

BY **PAULA DERROW**

I haven't had a manicure or pedicure in over two months. My hair, once artificially straightened and impeccably highlighted, is wild and wavy (or is it knotty?), with more than a few stray grays peeking through. And those stylish clothes and Italian shoes I wore to my luxe midtown Manhattan office every day for more than 25 years? They've been pushed to the outskirts of my closet—I don't need them anymore.

I haven't been banished to a desert island or joined the cast of *Survivor*. A year ago, I lost my longtime job in the publishing industry, where most of my erstwhile colleagues would blanch at the idea of going without makeup, blowouts and designer bags. I'm not high maintenance by nature, but I learned that if I didn't keep up with my fellow editors, who looked as airbrushed as the models in a fashion magazine, people noticed.

"New bra?" one (female) coworker inquired when I stopped into her office one day. "Um, actually ... yes," I stammered, peeking down at my breasts, made noticeably more perky by the expensive molded underwire I'd purchased at a lingerie shop the weekend before. "It looks great," she said, and I laughed, feeling some combination of gratification and discomfort. Because if my colleague, who certainly meant well, noticed my Le Mystere T-shirt bra, what else might she—and others—be noticing? My extra pounds? The fact that I'd worn this particular jacket twice in the same week? Or that I was one of the few people in the vast skyscraper in which we worked who was inching closer to 50? No wonder I often felt that, in the admittedly rarefied environment where I plied my trade, my appearance didn't quite measure up.

So when I got laid off from that job, it was with a mixture of dread and relief that I sublet my place in the city and hightailed it to the country, where my husband lived. We'd commuted back and forth for the first two years of our marriage—reasonable when we had full-time positions in different places. Now that I was building a freelance career, it made more sense for me to save money by moving to the sticks, at least for a while.

I'd be joining him in his house in a part of New England known as the Quiet Corner, a region populated by farms, stone fences, rushing streams and women likelier to don sneakers and scrunchies than tailored jackets, never mind \$80 bras. There were no "nice" restaurants, no spiffy colleagues and nothing to dress

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up for. So I didn't. As the weather turned warmer, my roots grayer and my skin browner, I found myself living in bathing suits and T-shirts I'd deemed too ratty for the city, paired with \$5 black flip-flops from the local tractor supply store. At my former job, I'd sometimes test beauty treatments in pristine dermatology offices, where the women in the hushed waiting rooms were immaculate and wrinkle-free (both their faces *and* their designer clothes). In my new life, I pretty much ignored my skin. I was never one to pile on makeup, but mascara and some artfully applied eyeliner had always felt essential; if I forgot them one day, I worried that I looked tired, or, at the very least, not quite dressed. Now, I threw on some sunscreen and, more days than not, skipped a shower. After all, my daily routine as a freelance writer included an hour-long swim across the local lake and back. Why bother with scrubbing and shaving and delicately scented shower gel? I smelled of eau de pond.

BUT SOME NIGHTS, as I lay in bed next to my husband, I worried that when the time came to return to the city, I'd no longer fit in; my scruffy nails and silver-streaked hair would give away my years and less-than-fancy stature in life. "Look at you!" my city friends exclaimed when visiting, gesturing toward my freckles and fleece pullovers. "You're a country girl, now!" I wasn't sure they meant it as a compliment. After they left, I'd peer into the mirror, trying to see the coiffed person I'd tried to be for so long.





In place of that woman, I felt more and more like the 8-year-old version of myself running free at sleep-away camp, when I'd coveted nothing more than to earn my junior lifesaving swim badge, borrow my bunkmate's perfectly worn denim shirt and get my hands on 50 cents to buy candy at the canteen. I was reacquainting myself with the long-lost me, the girl who'd actually learned to swim in a lake (no wonder it felt so familiar), who smacked a tetherball around a pole with gusto and who, one dark night, went streaking with her friends in the rain, completely naked, unashamed and shrieking with laughter.

I wasn't exactly running around in the buff these days, but I *was* feeling more comfortable in my skin. I'd spent years forking over money for an expensive gym membership, sometimes even paying for one-on-one training sessions. The results were sporadic, with nightly dinners out undermining my efforts at staying fit. But as I swam every day, gazing up at the clouds, looking around for turtles sunning themselves on logs or blue herons snatching at fish below the water's surface, my extra pounds began to melt away, like ripples on a pond. Smooth muscles emerged on my arms and legs as my body apparently began taking to this natural way of getting in shape.

FEEL COMFIER IN YOUR (BARE) SKIN

Getting dolled up can be a fun way to express yourself. It's when you feel you *must* look attractive to be liked and respected that there's a problem. "There's a psychological concept known as self-objectification: Internalizing the gaze of another, and being fixated on how you look to other people," says Joan Chrisler, Ph.D., professor of psychology at Connecticut College in New London, Conn. In fact, research has shown self-objectification ups the risk of depression and eating disorders in women.

A "natural break" can let you get in touch with the person you'd be if you weren't always being observed, Chrisler explains. Try the tips below to put the focus on the inner you.

For 24 hours, avoid the urge to sneak peeks at yourself in the mirror. Try to experience yourself "from the inside out," Chrisler says.

When you feel the familiar urge to scrutinize your appearance, **focus instead on what you're doing in the moment**, how you're feeling, what you're seeing and where you're going, Chrisler suggests.

It's about taking a more mindful approach to your day and to who you are.

Challenge yourself to leave home or even go to work with **zero makeup and in clothes and shoes that make you feel utterly comfortable**.

"Years ago," Chrisler says, "I decided to go to work without makeup, and I felt self-conscious. But the only thing that happened is that I met a guy that day, and we ended up dating for six months!" You may find that you feel more at ease without your usual shield.

Make a concerted effort to think only about your talents and what you offer the world—not your appearance, Chrisler says: "It's important to get in touch with your authentic self." Ask yourself: "How would I be if no one was looking at or judging me?" Then *be* that way. It may also help to amp up your activity level. "Being active in nature can be energizing. **Feeling good isn't just about looks,**" Chrisler says.

AND THOUGH I missed my city pals and the buzz of lively restaurants, I found myself liking my new life—or was it my new self? If not for the graying roots and raggedy toenails (there's still nothing as pleasing to me as a fresh pedicure), I was liberated by letting go of the rest of it. I treasured the temporary pause on acquiring stuff, the freedom to go barefaced and the daily chance to glide around in the water.

On the occasional night when my itch for something more exciting was too strong to resist, and I'd coaxed my husband into driving 40 minutes to a real restaurant, I'd dig out my hair-dryer and makeup bag and relish the rare chance to dress up. When I was finished primping, the person I saw in the mirror was glowing with health, her eyes sparkling. But I knew it wasn't the moisturizer or mascara; it was the real me, emerging again after a long hibernation. This person was OK with spending less on herself and attending more to the things that counted. Now, I can take my laptop outside to work under a tree with my bare feet stretched out in front of me, thrilling at a morning breeze or the sight of a hummingbird. I'm moving my body every day and getting back in touch with the girl I once was. I'd been missing her. ♦