

SECRETS TO SUPER-HEALTHY HAIR & SOFT SUMMER SKIN

**NEW!**

# Women's Health

IT'S GOOD TO BE YOU™

**GET FIT  
AND FIRM  
BY  
SUMMER!**

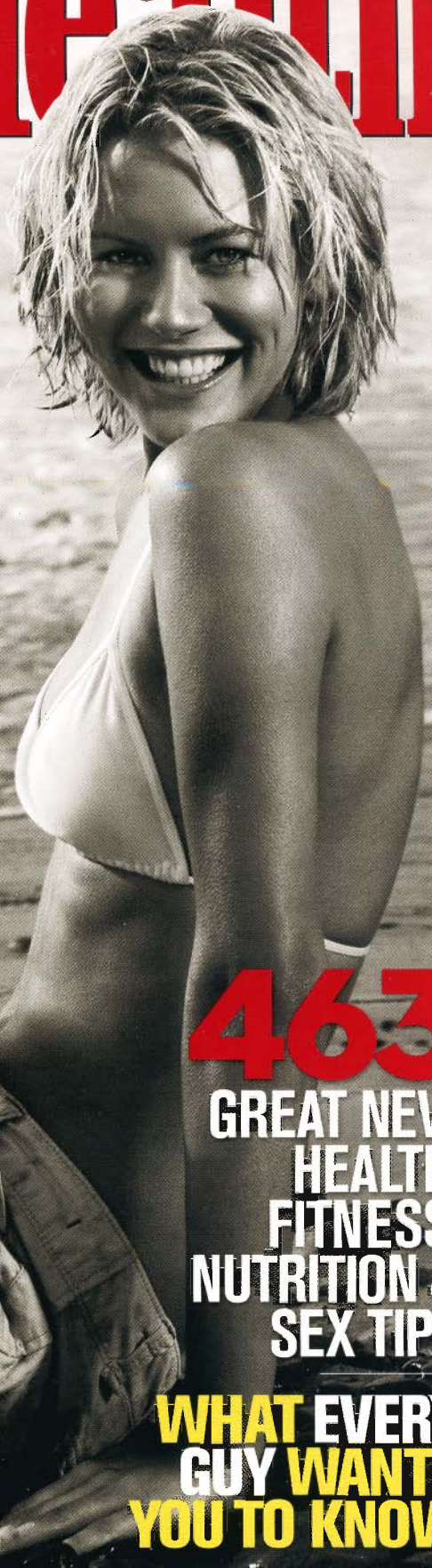
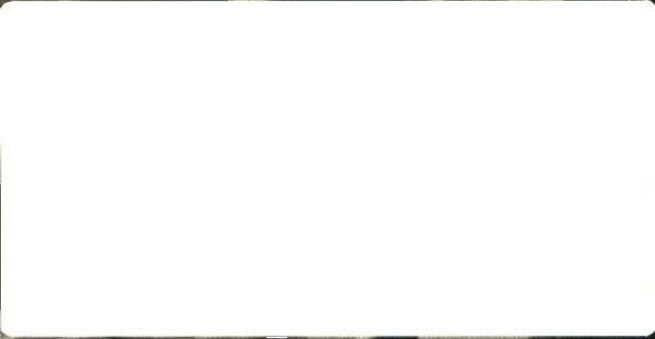
## Your Best Body in Just Weeks!

**Eat More, Weigh Less**  
Choose Foods  
That Fight Fat!

**31 GREAT  
WEB SITES**

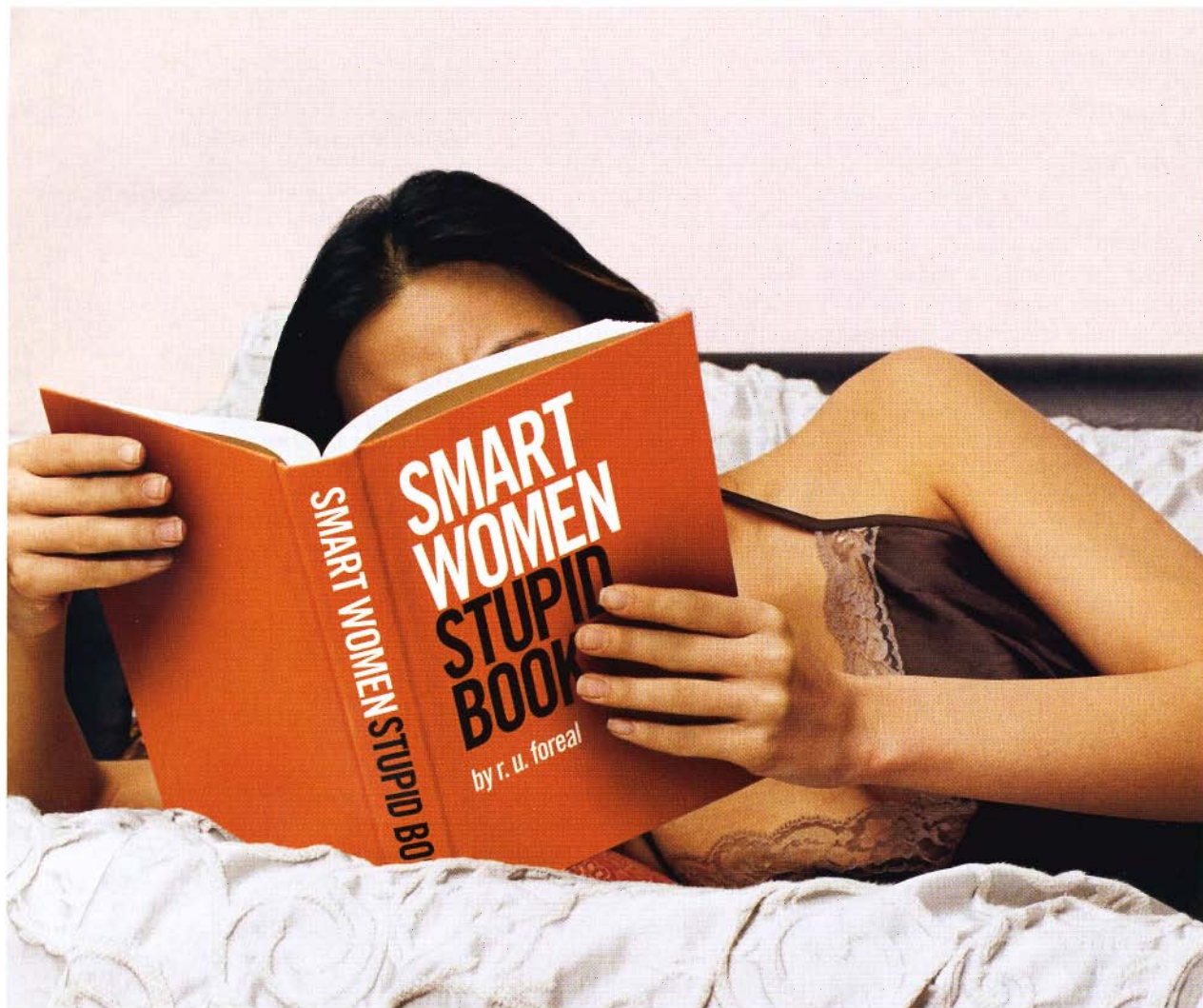
Save Time, Money,  
and Stress!

**Nutrition Report**  
The Truth About  
Caffeine page 80



**463**  
GREAT NEW  
HEALTH,  
FITNESS,  
NUTRITION &  
SEX TIPS

**WHAT EVERY  
GUY WANTS  
YOU TO KNOW**



## i was a self-help junkie

When you start curling up with Dr. Phil on a nightly basis, it's time to rewrite the rules of self-improvement **By Linda Formichelli**

**L**ast September, my husband and I moved to New Hampshire from Massachusetts. My longtime pals were now hours away, and I wanted to meet new people and establish roots in fresh soil. Really, I did. But did I join a book club, sign up for a cooking class, or do any of a hundred other activities that would require me to leave the house and make contact with living, breathing bodies? No. I huddled on the couch with Dale Carnegie's *How to Win Friends & Influence People*. Welcome to the mindset of a self-help junkie.

Most women's nightstands are piled high with classic novels, magazines, chick lit, and the occasional *Best American Erotica*. On mine? Teetering stacks of self-help books. For every negative emotion that flits through my mind, there's a title—or 12—offering a cure. *Letting Go of Shame*, *When I Say No, I Feel Guilty*, *Fearless Living*—yes, I've read them all. Self-help books give me a kind of high—the same I'm-on-top-of-the-world kick a compulsive shopper feels when she finds a pair of Jimmy Choo's at half price. But the high wears off when the book ends (or the foyer is crowded with pumps and stilettos). I'm left with a feeling of needing more, more, more. Sure, *Optimal Thinking* sounds good, but—ooh—how does it compare with the wisdom to be found in *Women Who Think Too Much* or *Eating, Drinking,*

Overthinking? Must...read...to...find...out.

And therein lies the problem: I spend more time reading about how to live my life than actually living it. Poring over the pages of *Self-Esteem* primes me for a confrontation with that incompetent counter-jockey at the DMV. A quibble with an old friend has me reaching for *The Friendship Crisis* to map out my next move.

My moment of clarity—if I can lapse into self-help speak for a sec—came when I realized that I never got past the reading and on to the real-life solutions. We'd moved in September; it was now December, and I hadn't so much as had a conversation with anyone but my husband and the DMV guy. "For some people, reading the books fools them into thinking they're making changes when they're not actually doing much," says Debra Hope, Ph.D., a psychology professor at the University of Nebraska in Lincoln. "Self-help books can keep you one step from your life."

### I'm Not OK, You're Not OK

I'm not the only one who relies on words to battle my woes. According to Bowker's Books in Print, a publishing industry data service, there are close to 32,000 self-help titles in print in the United States today, which means that countless thousands are joining me in my pursuit of self-actualization, empowerment, and wealth through the power of positive thinking. And we'll need those positive thoughts: Americans spent a whopping \$668 million on self-help books in 2005, a 44 percent increase over 10 years earlier.

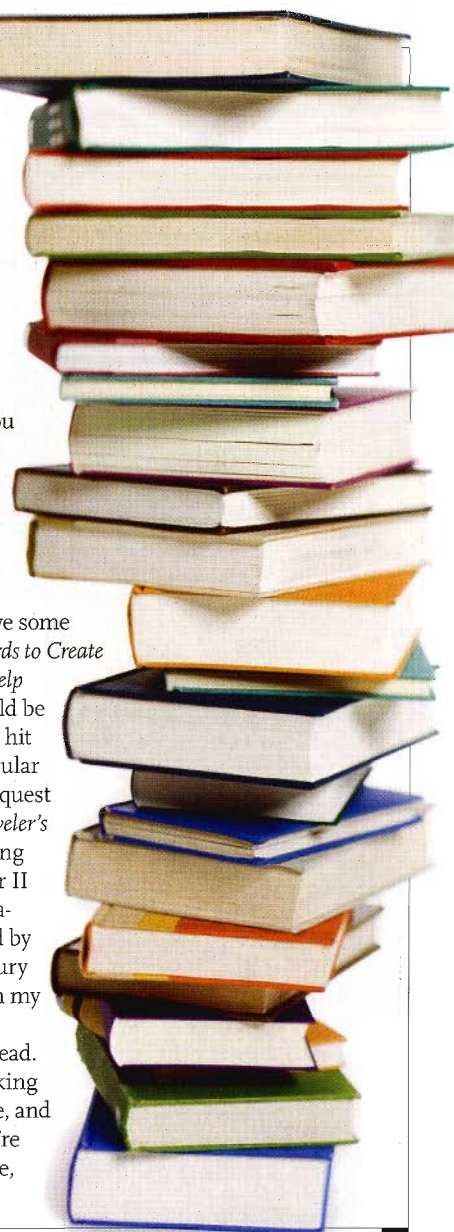
The trend seems to be a girl thing: *Publishers Weekly* reports that women account for 85 percent of the category's sales. One reason is that anxiety and depression tend to hit women more often than men, says Harold Dawley, Ph.D., a clinical psychologist and owner of selfhelpbooks.com, which sells self-help books and publishes daily self-help articles. "Women also read more books than men and are more inclined to seek help," he says.

What's behind this movement toward self-improvement? According to Dr. Hope, most of us have what we need to survive—food, shelter, a decent income, a network of friends—which lets us take our eyes off the prize and fix them squarely on our navels. "We can start to focus on ourselves, excessively so in some cases," Dr. Hope says. No surprise there. My junkiehood kicked into high gear once I reached a level of professional success. Instead of obsessing about how my husband and I would pay the mortgage, I started turning to self-help books to fix the intangibles. Tomorrow's dinner? Taken care of. My emotional state? Time to crack open *Living Your Best Life*.

### The (Self-Help) Road Less Traveled

So how do I break my self-help addiction and regain my life? Dr. Hope suggests I start by trading in the literature of transformation for a damn good book. When you're looking for something to read, do you want to engage your imagination, or, in her words, "read something that makes you realize your life is inadequate"? Enough said. The next time I head to Barnes & Noble, I pass quickly through the self-help section. My fingers twitch when I eye some sure-to-be pop-psych classics: *31 Words to Create a Guilt-Free Life* and *The Last Self-Help Book You'll Ever Need*. Wait, that could be a good one...no, just keep walking. I hit the fiction aisle and stock up on popular titles I'd passed over in my ongoing quest for self-improvement: *The Time Traveler's Wife* and *Memoirs of a Geisha*. Reading about a young girl in pre-World War II Japan who's sold into servitude, separated from her sister, and tormented by rivals for decades puts my 21st-century troubles—dripping chalupe juice on my new suede jacket—in perspective.

So that takes care of my need to read. But where does it leave my help-seeking ways? "Make friends, support people, and join groups that advance things you're concerned about," says Micki McGee,



“Self-help books give me the same I'm-on-top-of-the-world kick a compulsive shopper feels when she finds a pair of Jimmy Choos at half price.”

Ph.D., author of *Self Help, Inc.* As for all that stuff the books helped me with—self-esteem, anxiety, relationships—make a list of the good and not-so-good, suggests Patricia A. Farrell, Ph.D., author of *How to Be Your Own Therapist*. "Next to the ones that aren't so good, list three things you can do to begin making changes," she says. "Then give yourself simple weekly assignments to work toward those goals."

I've since offered my services to the local SPCA, joined a karate dojo, and sworn off an online forum that was a huge time-suck—and one more reason not to leave the house. If the whole program sounds totally self-helpy, well, I admit that it is. But hey, on some level that was the point—and it seems to be working. Oh sure, Dr. Phil and Suze Orman call out to me every night, but I haven't so much as turned a single page.

Linda Formichelli is a health writer based in Concord, New Hampshire. She is currently reading *The Kite Runner*. Look for her fine selection of used self-help books on [half.com](http://half.com).