

✦ SHIFTING
THE ✦
NARRATIVE

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In the following pages you will be asked to journal and explore certain questions related to how you think and feel towards your body. This is not an easy task however, learning to love your body is something we can consciously begin to choose over time.

The questions in this journal are aimed at shifting the narrative that has developed so you can begin to feel more positive about the way you view yourself. After each prompt, there are further reflections around the question posed.

You are inherently already a whole person, however, at some point or another parts of you may have become discarded and negative thinking styles developed as a result of past experiences, interactions and the many difficulties that lay within our Western culture around body and beauty standards.

It is my hope that these journal prompts begin to ignite more compassion and acceptance of you. You are able to begin at any of the journal prompts, not necessarily working from start to finish and finish wherever you please.

Some tips to completing a journal entry, begin in a calm space, free from distraction. Take in three deep breathes, in through the nose, out through the mouth, read the prompt and allow yourself to write down whatever thoughts are formed in your mind. If you notice an uncomfortable feeling come up, drop the pen, notice where this feeling is sitting, see if you can allow this feeling to be here, see if you can put a name to the sensations observed and come back into your breath.

See if you can in this moment of difficulty and pain, give yourself compassion, “This is hard....” “I can allow myself to notice the feelings associated with this part of me and am willing to give this feeling some space” “I am committed to shifting the negative views I have of body” “I am learning to accept all parts of me...” or any other compassionate response you can think of.

After you’ve journaled there are some further reflective information provided to you. I would love to hear how you’ve gone and if you feel you could do with some further individual support to get in touch!

Warmly,

Marie Claire Mandicos - Mental Clarity Psychology

Why do I want to look different or a certain way?

We need to relinquish the idea that looking a certain way will bring about instant happiness or connection or, reduce sadness or rejection. This is a myth. Being able to let go of conventional beauty standards and societal norms that have been engrained in us allows us to move closer to body acceptance. It also can help us understand that happiness and peace comes from within not from outside validation. So what is the real problem here, our body or societal expectations on what is the “correct” way to look?

Do I ever judge other peoples bodies? Why? How does that make me feel?

We all judge at one time or another, however, how helpful is this really? Judging does not change anything rather likely exacerbates difficult emotions. Learn to drop the criticism and judgement you offer to others. As we judge another person we also teach ourselves that value is placed on how we look and thus we internalise this view. Every person deserves to be loved and accepted as they are in their current body, including you.

When do I feel worst about how I look? That is, what prompts me to judge myself?

Have you completed an inventory of the types of information you digest on a daily basis? Likely, you have multiple social media outlets each of which feed you particular information. Having a cleanse from the types of information you take on board and deleting content that does not align with your values of how you want to relate to yourself, can be a healthy way to remove toxic messages you may be receiving, consciously or not, on a regular basis. It is now time to delete any accounts, remove particular conversations, cease engaging with particular people or going to certain places that make you feel bad about your body. Move towards people, places and things that make you feel empowered and positive about your body. This may look like following social media accounts that align with how your body looks or finding groups that may speak about the particular difficulties you face.

What do I know about my body? How in tune am I to it's needs, desires, wants?

If you feel that you in fact, do not have a particularly deep understanding of your body's needs, wants, desires, nows the time to start! For those who may have a uterus, begin tracking your cycle if you do not already, tune into the different phases of the cycle and observe how it may need more rest, pleasure, food throughout. For males, try connecting with all areas of your body that may experience pleasure not only the penis. Ask what else your body may need, more rest, connection with others, nutritious food etc?

Some practices to consider may be a body scan, tuning into sensations and allowing yourself to observe what is showing up right now. Other forms of mindfulness movement are a great way to begin tuning in such as yoga, thaichi, dance weight lifting and pilates.

What do I do that helps my body feel good every day? What gets in the way of my giving myself these opportunities?

Developing habits that align with what makes your body feel good is an important part of shifting any negative connotations you have towards it. If you don't already, start building in a practice that you could realistically do each day, perhaps a self-hand massage, going for a run, putting on your favourite outfit that makes you feel amazing, putting on your cosiest and comfiest outfit, moisturising your body, eating a nourishing meal. This is about shifting our mindset and giving opportunity for you to feel good about your body.

What sense do I connect with most? Touch, taste, smell, hearing? What's it like when I connect with that sensation? When is the last time I connected with that sense?

We are sensual beings, connecting with our felt sense daily is so important to stay in contact with our body. When we are disconnected from the body and critical of ourselves we are dismissing the opportunity for us to feel pleasure. Now is your opportunity to tune into your senses and allow yourself to feel pleasure!

How do I feel about sex and masturbation? What narrative do I tell myself? Was sex and masturbation normalised for me or a taboo subject to be kept behind closed doors? What happens when I experience sexual desire?

Having a healthy relationship with masturbation and self-pleasure is an important part of improving our relationship to our body. You are worthy of pleasure in the body you have now! Recognising that this is a natural and enjoyable part of being human and challenging any negative connotations we may have developed as a result of “how sex should look” will help us on our way to more body acceptance. Masturbation also has many benefits including that, it is a great tool for creating oxytocin so, the more the merrier!

What is it like when I am with a sexual partner?
Am i present or dis-engaged and worried? How
do I want to be with a sexual partner?

Perhaps you are someone who gets caught up in worries, anxious about performance, is fixated on what the other person must be thinking about you or worried about how your body looks or feels. If this feels familiar, I invite you to let go of prioritising outcomes in your sexual experience (the big O) and see if you can get curious and feel into the different sensations of what it's like being with this person. Perhaps there are areas of the body that feel more sensual than others, focus your attention to the touch of the other person and see how using one-mindfulness skills (that is, being in this moment and letting go of worried or critical thoughts) can allow you to find joy in the experience now.

Why do I exercise? If I do not exercise how do I feel about myself?

We want to shift the narrative that exercise is about weight loss. Exercise is SO much more! Exercise is a way to get in tune with ourselves, to help lift our mood state, reduce stress and help keep us overall, healthy! I like to bring in some gratitude here recognising that I am truly lucky to be able to engage in some of the exercises I enjoy. If you find that you push yourself to do too much and then are not able to live up to that perfectionistic standard because well, life happens! You can try bringing in some more realistic goals for yourself and dropping the self-judgment when it arises. This can help us be a bit more balanced so, move when we want to, push and exert ourselves when we can and rest when we need to! Your worth is also not hinged on how much or how little you moved your body.

What parts of my body am I grateful for? Take a moment to reflect on what it is your body can do for you and does support you to do on a daily basis.

Thinking about what our bodies do on a daily basis is actually mind blowing, there are many processes that go on in the background without us needing to be consciously aware of it like, automatically digesting our food, breathing, supporting restful sleep and regenerating skin cells. Focussing on what the body can do rather than getting caught up in a negative loop around what it is not or cannot do for us continues to perpetuate a cycle of depreciation and negativity. Focussing on being proud and genuinely grateful for our bodies is a lot more helpful.

When I look in the mirror, what do I see?

Engaging in small, daily rituals is something that can assist in shifting that negative mindset. This body positive way of thinking is not something that can happen over night however, with time and patience we can begin to rewire our automatic negative views. Try looking in the mirror again and this time, try saying three kind things about your body and what you see. The aim is not to force ourselves to love all of our parts but to begin to shift the narrative, from “I hate my fat thighs” to “My thighs are strong and allow me to run!” Don’t pile on the shame if you can’t come up with three things, know that this is a work on progress and you’re beginning to choose something different!

What other thoughts come up about how I view my body as a whole and it's parts?

If body positivity isn't working for you and feels inauthentic, try body neutrality. That is, if it's not believable to tell yourself that "[your] thighs are beautiful" yet, try "all humans have thighs". Over time, the negative automatic thoughts will shift to more body neutral thoughts. Try re-writing any initial negative and critical thoughts to either more neutral or body positive thoughts below.

If you have or are going through the process of child birth. How did your view of your body shift, if at all?

Becoming a mother brings with it many changes, not only to our physical self but to our mental and spiritual self too. Learning to move gently with the changes that have come and stepping into the woman you are during and after childbirth is a process and one that I encourage you to go gently with, harnessing your capacity to be self-compassionate with the changes you observe both outwardly and inwardly. If you are not yet a mother however, plan to be, now may be an opportunity for you to consider how you may go gently and embrace the inevitable change that will arise when this day does come.

It is my belief that over time we have slowly become disconnected from our bodies. This may have been as a result of multiple factors including but not limited to, the messages we received growing up through caregivers and social connections and the societal expectations and views of the body and its beauty standard. This has prompted us to develop beliefs that do not serve us and perpetuates this want to detach from our beautiful bodies. These practices are aimed at supporting you to reconnect with yourself, reconnect with your senses, increase a sense of safety from within and quieten down the analytical mind which can quickly jump to criticism and judgment.

I hope this journal has supported you to begin the journey in understanding how you view your body and what factors have led up to feeling dissatisfied and thus created a critical narrative around it.

If you are wanting to further delve into this with support please feel free to reach out to look at options for individual support.

Warmly,

Marie Claire Mandicos

Resources

1. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3745223/>
2. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/26995158>
3. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/8293029>
4. <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0001879108000912>
5. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4381543/>