



# Body Lovin' Guide 2

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# Introducing...

**Dr Emma Johnston**



Dr Emma Johnston has been worked as a Clinical Psychologist since 2000 with a special interest in body image issues. She has worked with a number of clients of all ages who have experienced depression, anxiety or other forms of emotional distress as a result of poor body image and low self esteem. Emma lives in Adelaide with her husband, three children and two west highland terriers.

I met Dr Emma Johnston eight years ago at Mums group, she had a warm and friendly disposition and I liked her immediately. Over the years we developed a delightful friendship based on good laughs, constant ribbing off one another and sincerity. Emma and I have cried together, we've partied together and our children have grown up together.

A few years ago when I started the Body Image Movement I asked for Emma's advice regarding a handful of body image questions, her response and solutions were clever yet practical. Over the next year or so I raised more and more questions and then one day I asked her if she would be interested in becoming Body Image Movements' resident Clinical Psychologist, to which she replied "Yes"!

From that moment on Emma has been working side by side with me, supporting the Body Image Movement to become all it has become today. In 2012, we developed a seminar for parents and carers called "Developing Daughters" and the following year we re-developed this concept into "Developing Daughters, Supporting Sons. The seminar has been a huge success and we've travelled all around Australia teaching parents how to help their children to foster a positive body image. (We've even had to share a few twin beds in dodgy hotels in the early days to make ends meet and to fulfil our objective of sharing our positive message to everyone we possibly can! I'm very lucky that Emma isn't too precious!)

In 2013 we developed the Body Lovin' Guide, it was filled with strategies on how to live a life of wellness from the inside out. The feedback we had from people was very positive, so much so that it left them wanting more and in particular wanting more from a body image perspective. This revised edition of the Body Lovin Guide has been written by Dr Emma Johnston with a focus on helping YOU to develop a positive body image.

The guide has been written with lots of love and good intentions and I know that you will get a lot from it! So go grab a cuppa, settle down somewhere cosy and get reading...

I look forward to staying connected with you on social media.

*Taryn x*

# Index

WHY DOES BODY IMAGE MATTER?	P.1
ARE YOU READY?	P.3
WHAT IS THIS BODY IMAGE THING ANYWAY?	P.6
HEALTH AT EVERY SIZE	P.9
FIRST WORLD PROBLEMS	P.12
HOW WE THINK	P.14
UNDERSTANDING TRIGGERS	P.16
STEPPING BACK INTO THE PAST	P.18
HOW YOUR PAST SHAPES YOU NOW	P.21
THE CHATTER IN YOUR HEAD	P.22
LIVING MINDFULLY	P.26
EATING MINDFULLY	P.29
THE JOY OF MOVEMENT	P.33
TIME FOR SOME ZZZZZ's	P.35
THE EBB AND FLOW OF MOTIVATION	P.37
WHERE TO FROM HERE	P.40

# Why it matters

## WHY DOES BODY IMAGE MATTER?

Wellbeing is certainly a term that we see bandied about in the media a lot; so-called wellness segments in newspapers and magazines. They always seem to be related to diets, weight loss and exercise. Is this really what wellness is all about – you deserve wellness if you eat clean organic apples, or drink pure mountain spring water? Or exercise for an hour a day at high intensity, or follow the latest fad ‘miracle’ diet? Is wellness simply about having to eat certain things and not eat other things and move about a lot?

Thankfully, this is not the case. Wellness is a complex and multifaceted issue that involves both mental and physical wellbeing. Thus dieting and intensive exercising are not part of a wellbeing or wellness picture, as the dieting traps and subsequent weight cycling, food restrictions and guilt, and wearing our bodies down with excessive exercise are so very far removed from any definition of mental health, or mental wellbeing. In fact I am constantly confused that by trying to ‘guilt’ people into believing they are too fat, or too unfit, leads somehow to a place of wellbeing. In my experience, it leads more clearly to a place of mental ‘ill-being’, that is being plagued with unhelpful negative ruminations, stress and even depressive symptomatology, as well as physical “ill-being” from weight cycling. So if this is what wellbeing is not, what is it? A helpful definition of wellbeing encompasses four key components;

1. **Emotional Health:**  
Characterised by the ability to cope with life's demands without becoming overwhelmed
2. **Mindful Living;**  
Having the ability to be present in the moment at any given time
3. **Healthy Sleep;**  
Waking feeling refreshed and rested most days, and
4. **The Nurturing of our Physicality;**  
Appreciating and being aware of our physical selves.

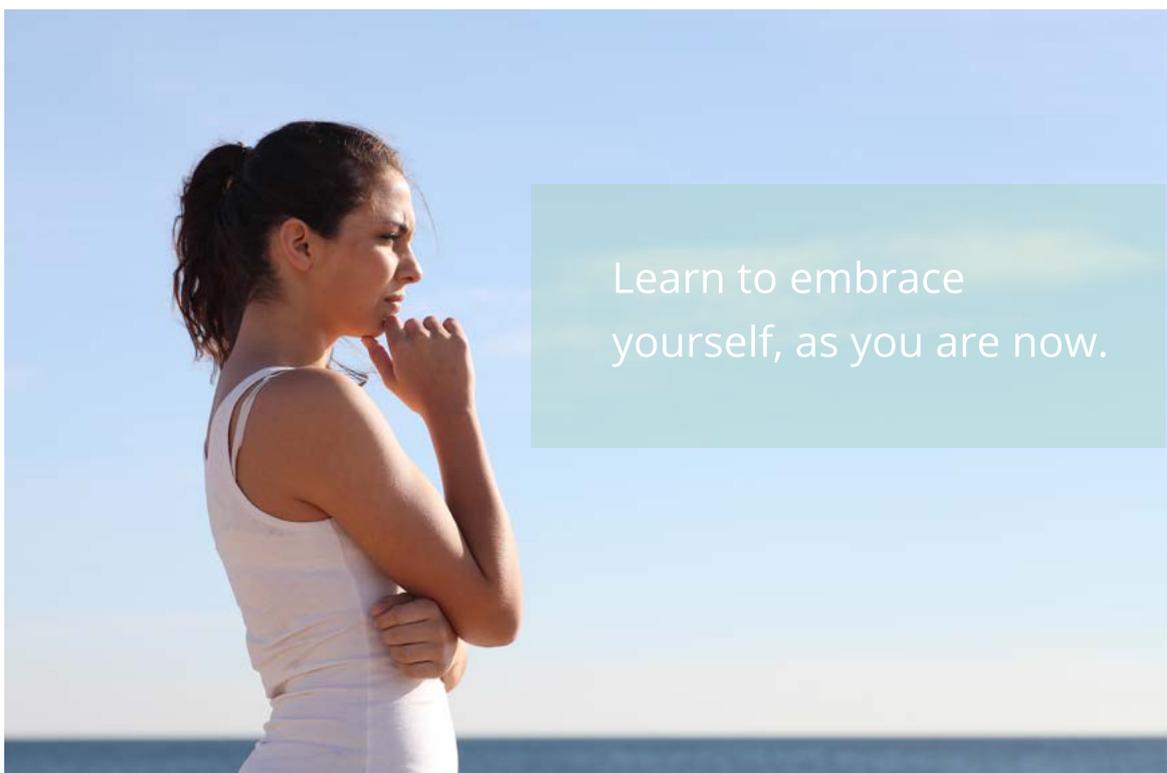
No wonder this definition of wellbeing doesn't appear in the newspaper liftouts or the magazine racks – essentially it is easier to conceptualise wellbeing as being about diet and exercise, and easier to sell products that target diet and exercise. Reflect on this for a moment – do we actually see the physical representation of the media driven idealised model of beautiful as also encompassing well-being? Idealised beauty is generally just so far from any true definition of wellbeing.

So back to the important but significantly less sellable or sexy version of wellbeing, as encompassing overall emotional health, and overall physical health. Let's debunk yet another myth which has been perpetuated into our psyche by this media driven world in which we live – the conceptualisation that if we feel horrible enough, embarrassed enough or disgusted enough about our physical selves, then this will drive and motivate positive change in our behaviour which will in turn drive wellbeing. In truth, if this worked, diets would work, and we would not have the diversity of ridiculous diet related information with which we are actually constantly bombarded. Guilt, or embarrassment about our own physical selves is not a motivator. It is instead, a powerful tool that takes us away from mindful existence, and leads us into a place of emotional ill health.

# Why it matters

We know this when it comes to parenting – how often are we told to discipline the behaviour and not the child – target the behaviour that is not acceptable, rather than targeting the child themselves as being not acceptable. This is well established parenting practice to allow children to be raised to have a healthy sense of self-esteem. So why, as adults, do we get sucked into believing that our weight is a reflection of our own internal weakness, or our drive to eat is actually a deep-seated personal weakness. Ridiculous, isn't it. Why are we sucked into this? Because a multi billion dollar industry needs us to believe that wellbeing is linked to diet and exercise, and it is our own personality flaw or internal weakness that causes us to physically be other than what is portrayed to us as being ideal. Let me give you this example – if we go to a psychologist and find that our emotional distress remains unchanged, we return to our family doctor and ask to be referred to see a different psychologist, as that psychologist was not effective in treating our emotional distress. If, however, we go on a diet and we don't lose weight or lose weight but then regain weight, we don't go to the diet company and say it doesn't work – we buy into the diet industry's notion that the reason the diet didn't work is because we didn't stick to it rigorously. Thus we accept personal responsibility for a product or concept that doesn't actually work, which means that we keep going back to it – either the same product or a different product in the same category of nonsense (ie. a diet).

By being able to redefine wellbeing and wellness as encompassing more of our whole selves, mental and physical wellbeing, we aim to allow everyone to achieve a greater level of self-acceptance regardless of how close or how far they are from the media driven unrealistic ideal of beauty and acceptability in this society. How does body image come into this? If guilt is not a motivator to assist us in striving for wellbeing, then what is? Learning to love and accept ourselves as we are, right now. Stop loathing, hating and criticising our own physical selves, and guess what – we will be armed to make some decisions in our lives that allow us to move to overall physical and mental wellbeing. So why am I writing the Body Lovin' Guide – to help facilitate the change that will allow you to learn some ways to embrace yourself, as you are now.

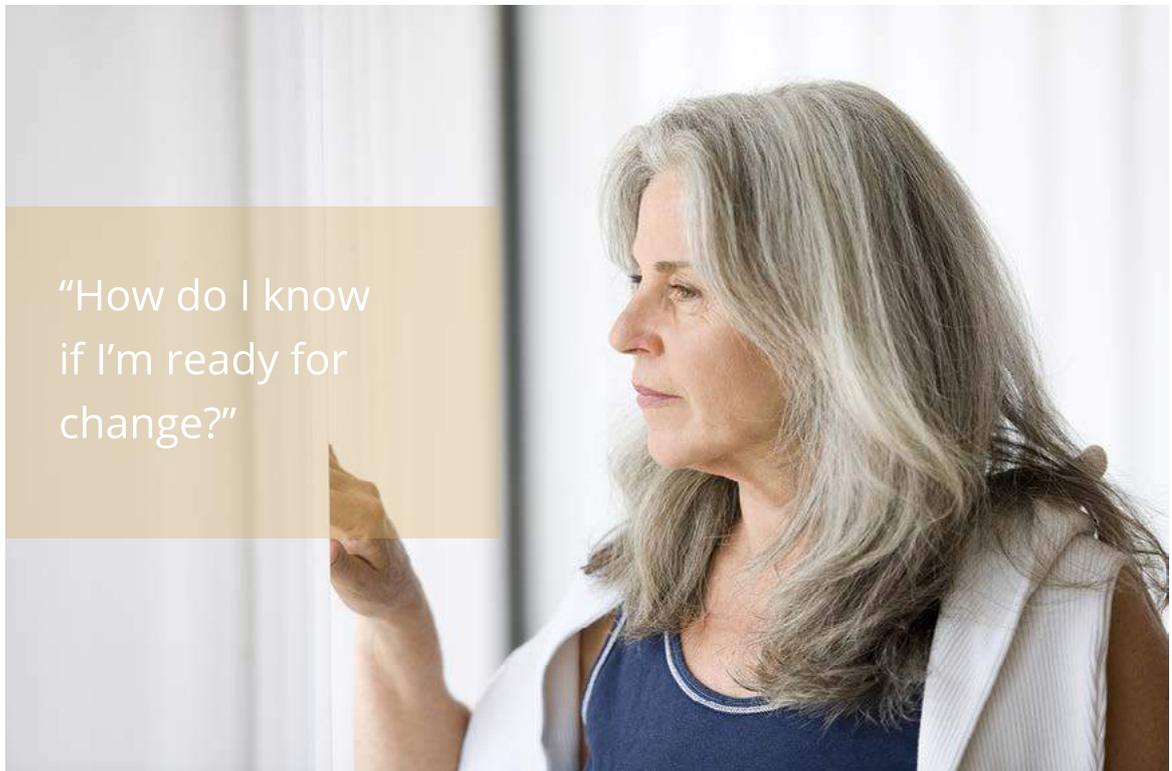


Learn to embrace  
yourself, as you are now.

# Ready?

## ARE YOU READY?

The time is here. It's time to ask yourself; "Am I ready for change? Is this the right time for me?". Presumably you are feeling motivated and ready. You've made the decision to invest some time and money into this Body Lovin' Guide, an investment in your future wellbeing and happiness. But are you truly ready? How can you assess your willingness to embrace new concepts? Let me offer you some valuable insight into your readiness to accept some new ideas and concepts, allowing you to let go of often long-held beliefs about your body and yourself. Let's take a look at some different stages of readiness to change, to allow you to assess where you might be up to at this stage (concepts borrowed from the psychological theory that underpins Motivational Interviewing).



# Identify your position

## STAGE 1: PRECONTEMPLATION

Precontemplation is the stage you are at if you are saying to yourself “no way do I want to, or no way I can change anything about my body image related attitudes and beliefs”. Presumably you would not be in this headspace if you have invested the time and money into this guide. Perhaps if a well-meaning friend or relative gifted you the Body Lovin’ Guide you may be thinking “damned sure I won’t be learning to love this body!”. If you do find yourself reading through the chapters in this guide, and finding yourself unwilling to open up to the suggestions and information presented within, then you may simply be in a stage of precontemplation, and not be yet ready to embrace change. If this is the case, please just put the Guide somewhere safe and accessible in the future. Set a reminder in your phone to perhaps revisit this Guide in three, six or even twelve months time. Perhaps in the future you may be in a place where you are better able to make the most of the information contained herein.



Making a decision...

## STAGE 2: CONTEMPLATION

(I know, I know, the names of these stages are more descriptive than inspiring, but I do think that the messages are helpful!). In the contemplation stage of change, whilst not yet ready for change, you are open to the idea that change may be something you need. Often the thoughts that go through the mind of someone in a stage of contemplation is “yes, that sounds OK, but ...”. This stage of change is characterised by considering ideas but finding yourself (often subconsciously) putting up lots of barriers (otherwise known as the “yes, but” phenomenon). So, as you read through the material presented here, if you find yourself saying that the information is good but it’s too hard to put anything into practice, you are likely in the contemplation phase of change. If this is the case it is well worth considering what might be required to move you into a place where you are more able to engage with some of the suggested changes in beliefs and attitudes.

How can you do this? Let’s start by examining what life would be like if you did love your body exactly as it is now. What it would be like if you were more accepting of your physical self. What would life be like if you were able to focus more on health rather than beauty, and consider your body to be a vehicle rather than an ornament. Can you imagine being able to let go of some of the beliefs and expectations that have been restricting your ability to live life to the full? Because guess what? The only thing that stops us making change is us: our beliefs, our expectations, and the perception that we have of others expectations of us.

So congratulations if you are contemplating change, you are nearly ready to commit to this amazing journey. Perhaps you may simply need some more time considering the pros and cons of being challenged to learn to love and embrace your body.

# Identify your position

## STAGE 3: PREPARATION

For those who know that you are ready to change your old ways of thinking and believing, you are in the preparation stage. You are nearly there. You are almost ready to read this Guide with an open mind and participate fully in the suggestions presented within. You may be saying “I’m ready to do this” or “I plan to follow this through”. This is such an exciting headspace to be in, as you are a vessel, ready to be filled with the information presented, and then work out which pieces of information are pertinent to you and your situation. You have probably been finding information from other sources, or you are one of the hundreds of thousands of people who actively follow the Body Image Movement. This Guide has come at exactly the right time for you. Herein is the information and the strategies to launch you into the journey you are clearly very ready to take.

## STAGE 4: ACTION

Finally we have the most exciting stage of change – the action stage. As you can imagine from the name given to this stage, you are in a place where you are absolutely committed to attempting the activities and suggestions to engender change in your body image. Bring it on! You have considered the aspects of your self-perception that you would like to change and this Guide has come at the right time, even if it is to consolidate action you are already taking on learning to love your body. You are ready to do things when the right knowledge and information is presented to you. If you are in the action stage you are likely thinking “hurry up and give me some information, I want to get on with it”.

**Congratulations, you are there and you are going to get enormous benefit from this Guide, to set you up with new habits and attitudes for life. Let’s go!**



It’s time  
to move forward..

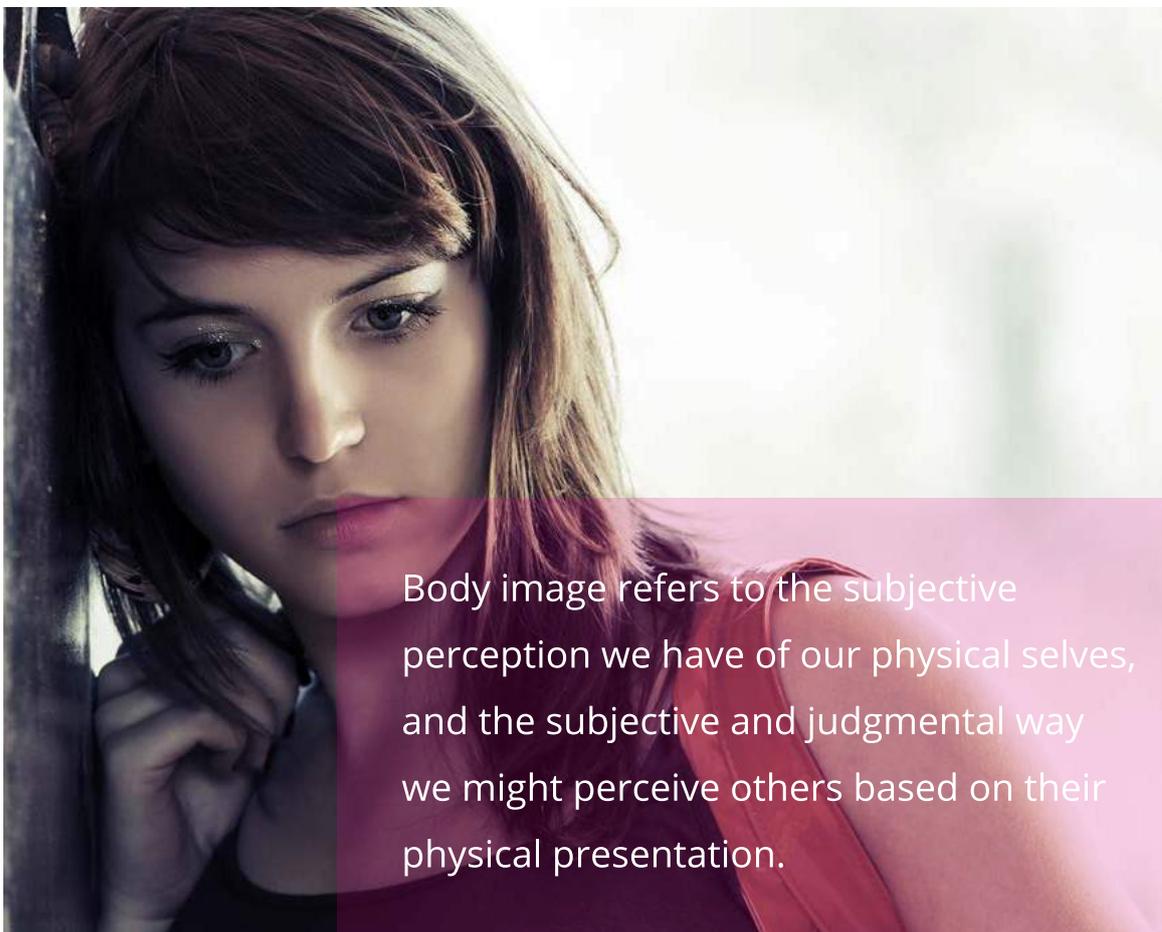
# Body Image

## WHAT IS THIS BODY IMAGE THING ANYWAY?

It is very important to talk very briefly about some boring definitions before we proceed. Let's visit some concepts about body image. Does body image refer to a realistic and accurate appraisal of our physical self? Let's answer this with a loud and resounding "NO".

Body image has nothing to do with reality. Body image refers to the subjective perception we have of our physical selves, and the subjective and judgmental way we might perceive others based on their physical presentation. Subjective perception refers to the way we think about ourselves, or our mental dialogue about ourselves, if you like. When you look in the mirror, what is your mental dialogue about? Do you focus on the parts of your body that you are not happy with and engage in unhelpful or even hateful dialogue? Or do you appraise your body in a fairly even handed way, recognising that there are aspects of yourself that you accept and embrace because they represent you in your life's journey. Likely you are in the majority – many people and women in particular are very negatively judgmental about their own body.

Before we venture into the realms of understanding our harmful thinking patterns, let's first have a look at why body image has become a problem in the first place.



Body image refers to the subjective perception we have of our physical selves, and the subjective and judgmental way we might perceive others based on their physical presentation.

# Body Image

## THE BODY IMAGE CRISIS

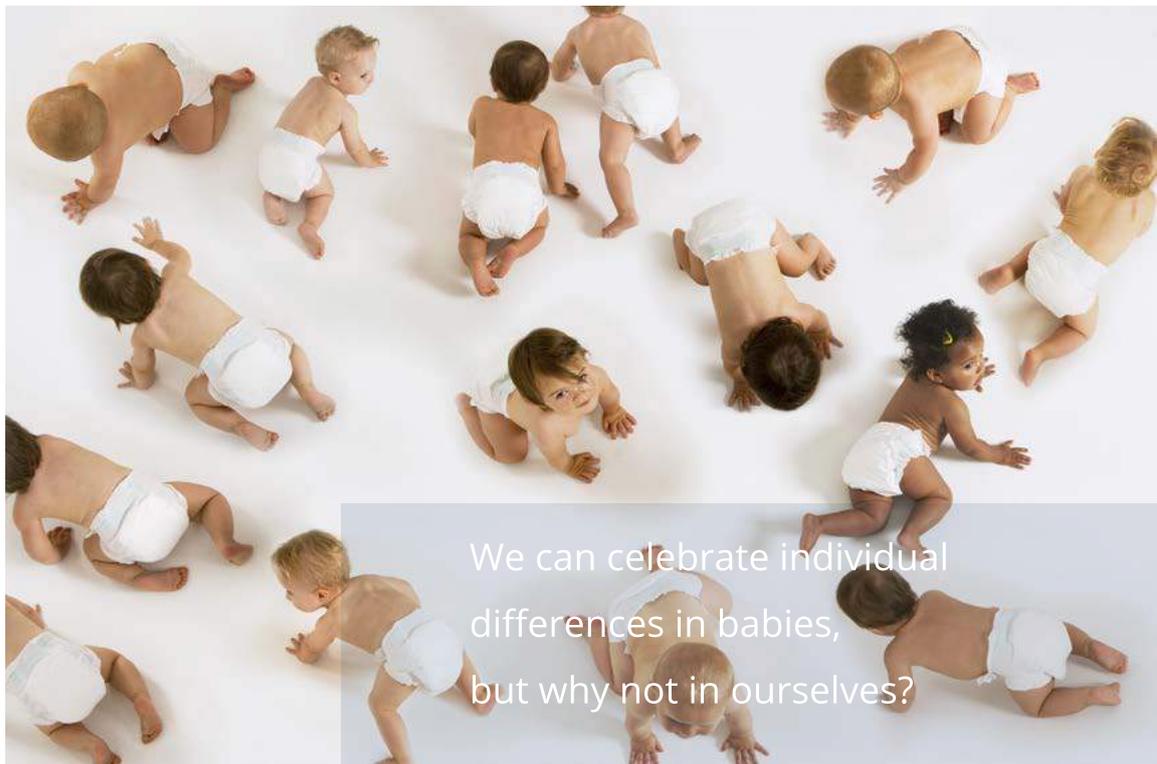
It is relevant I think to have a discussion about why there is a crisis of body image in our society. I define crisis as meaning that there are so many people of all ages who are so locked into a place of feeling unhappy about their body, often to the point of diagnosable mental health conditions arising from the unhappiness, that it becomes a significant issue impacting on society as a whole. In my clinical practice, I ensure that I check in with clients, as part of a comprehensive assessment, about how they feel about their body and health etc. I never cease to be amazed by the proportion of people, women and men, who are silently plagued by negative and destructive thoughts about their physical selves. Even interacting in the world at a social level, I constantly hear people talk about trying to lose weight, dieting, and other statements related to unhappiness about physical appearance. Recently I went to a charity quiz night (although my key contributions to the table was to be able to answer the Dr Who related question and the fourth wife of Henry VIII) and I was astounded by the number of women at the tables talking about how they shouldn't eat this or that because they were trying to lose x number of kilograms, but they had been good sticking to a diet for a week so gave themselves permission to eat the food – no doubt setting up a cycle of guilt for the following day, with regretful thoughts about having eating certain foods. This, to me, is a crisis. (And don't worry, I will be revisiting this quiz night later in the guide!).



So why is it that so many people, (women especially) hate some aspect or many aspects of their physical selves? Why is it that women also feel it is an obligatory part of life to be on a diet of some sort, or restricting eating certain foods in some way. Surely the answer has to lie in the society in which we live, with expectations of size and shape, and the belief that certain sizes and shapes are firstly more attractive and secondly a sign of better health. Societal values and ideals are driven by media, and media is driven by money and advertising. There is a massive, multi-billion dollar industry that keeps telling people that we are overweight or unattractive the

# Body Image

way we are, so that we spend money 'fixing' ourselves. Unfortunately (as well as the problems inherent in creating insecurities and then preying on those insecurities to make money), this has led to a culture of valuing thinness and thin privilege, which has driven the body image crisis that we see today. There is little room in modern industrialised society to feel content with being over a size 14. The media is a strongly influential tool in locking us into unhealthy and unhelpful mindsets. Now, with media driven ideals of what the human body should look like, within very limited parameters of individual difference, and a massively available industry with products galore to sell to us, why is it that we are not all the size or shape that is fed to us as being ideal and desirable? Because diets don't work and weight loss is one of the most misleading goals around. The human race comes in different shapes and sizes and trying to get the diversity of the human body to conform to one notion of the right shape to be, is nonsensical as well as terribly damaging from both a physical and psychological perspective.



We can gather a bunch of 6 month old babies together and celebrate individual differences in size and shape – long and thin, short and round, long and round, etc. Why then, when these babies grow up into teenagers and then adults, do we suddenly expect everyone to be roughly the same size and shape – and if they are not, they can be left in a place of guilt every time they eat something.

What is needed to enhance body image is to look at it from a societal as well as an individual perspective. A paradigm shift is required, and thankfully one exists, in the form of the Health At Every Size Movement.



# Health

## HEALTH AT EVERY SIZE

We have discussed why there is a body image crisis, but at this point I think it is critical to discuss the emphasis that society not only places on size and shape and beauty, but also on size, shape and health. There is a great myth that is perpetuated by society that size equates directly to health. The belief seems to be that the heavier someone is, the less healthy they are.

To me, this is lazy medicine and lazy practice for allied health professionals. It is so easy for a doctor, physiotherapist, or psychologist to place emphasis on the importance of weight loss for health. Ultimately by saying this, the professional can completely divest themselves of any responsibility in understanding the complexity of health issues and simply focus on weight loss, thereby making it the fault of the patient that they are unwell if they didn't do as they were told and lose weight! We are told that our health is compromised if we are not safely in the 'normal' weight category according to our Body Mass Index (BMI). As far as I can see, BMI gives no information other than our weight as a proportion of our height. If our health is compromised if we are not in the normal weight category, why is it that people in the overweight category live the longest? If our weight is such an issue that it is now referred to as "the obesity crisis", why are we living longer than we ever have before? Why are we told that our children are the first generation who will not outlive their parents, when life span increases all the time? Why?? Because of society, thin privilege, and the laziness and misunderstanding of the health professions.

Body diversity is a reality. As mentioned, gather a large group of six-month-old babies together and look at them – are they all the same size and shape? No, of course not! Do we put a moral compass on babies who are longer or larger or have fatter legs or arms than other babies? Of course we don't. So why then, do we as a society, think that it is completely OK to tell adults who are fat that they are lazy, a drain on our health dollar, sick, unfit, unwell or unworthy? It's surely madness?? Yes, people who are fat can be very unwell and suffer chronic health conditions. Often, the symptoms of these chronic health conditions are weight gain (such as the physiological response to insulin resistance), but let's completely ignore that and instead say that they are fat, therefore they have become sick, therefore they deserve to be sick as long as they remain fat. Guess what – skinny people get chronic health conditions as well, and skinny people also use up the sacred "health dollar". But no, let's not be fair about this, let's be completely biased in media reporting and blame fat people for the economic woes of the country as well as everything else we might blame them for.

Would you believe this, because I bet you never hear it – a fat person who eats intuitively and uses their physicality in ways that brings them joy, is just as healthy as a thin person who eats intuitively and uses their physicality in ways that brings them joy.

There is a multi-billion dollar industry with powerful allies in the government. This industry, incorporating pharmaceutical, weight loss and exercise/health, has it in their best interests to ensure people continue to blame themselves for their weight, and believe that they are not entitled to experience a fulfilled and meaningful life unless they lose weight.

Set point theory describes the weight that we are genetically programmed to be. Throughout our lifespan the body tends to protect the set point weight within a range of about five kilograms or so, so that if our weight drops below set point, our body metabolism slows and the body stores fat in order to protect the set point weight. Nothing reduces the set point weight and everybody

# Health

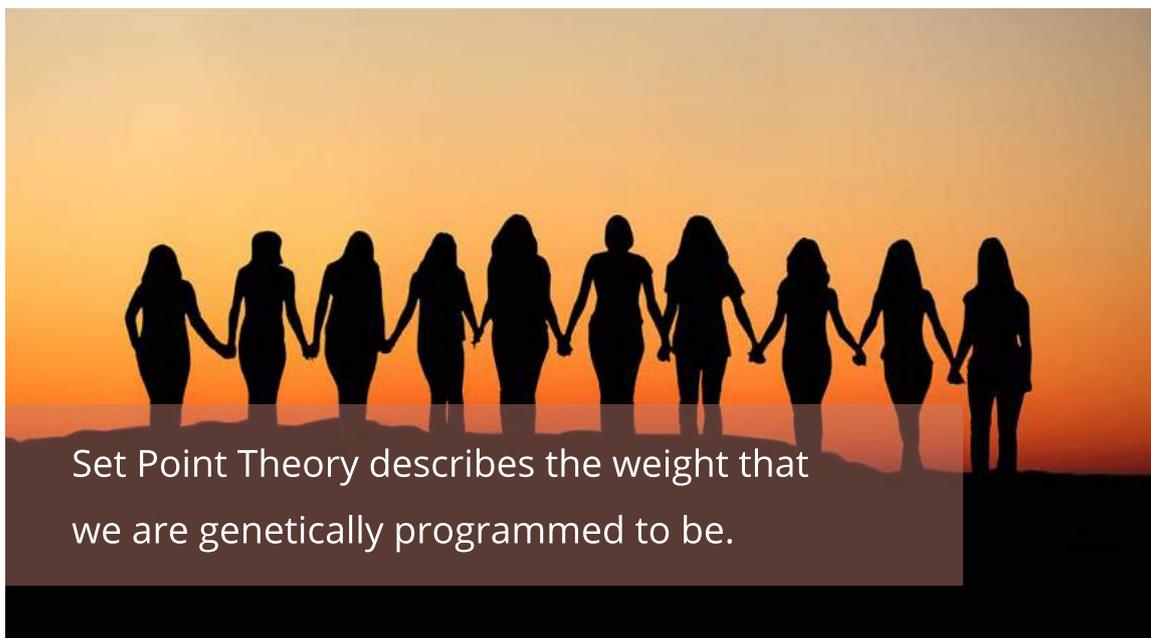
has a different set point. Some set points are simply higher than others. Set point theory clearly explains weight cycling as someone loses weight and their body compensates, their weight goes up, but in order to protect against further weight loss, the body increases set point weight, so the weight tends to rise to above that which it was before. What we tend to see in people who chronically diet, is that over their adult life, their overall weight increases over time, despite them spending their lives on calorie restrictive eating plans.

I have known for a long time that dieting is very bad for psychological health, and now it would seem that the literature supports the notion that dieting is also exceptionally bad for physical health too. We will be talking later about motivation and that negative self-thoughts are not motivators for behavior change.

So if I am saying that dieting is not only unhelpful but potentially damaging, then what do we do? In my opinion, as a society we would show clear health improvements and improvements in broad psychological wellbeing if everyone was given the opportunity to firstly approve of themselves exactly as they are now, and then given the opportunity to find ways to embrace physicality safely and with enjoyment (some people genuinely enjoy punishing boot camps, some do not!). It would also give people the opportunity to let go of emotional eating habits, and trust themselves to embrace the concept of intuitive/mindful eating. This, then, would allow people to find their true set point weight, and allow people to enjoy their lives at whatever shape or size, without existing in the society of derision born through thin privilege.

Understanding the health at every size paradigm allows us to now question our own assumptions about our own body, or about other people's bodies. The Body Image Movement believes in body diversity and body acceptance regardless of size and shape.

If you are interested in Health At Every Size, please have a look at [www.lindabacon.org](http://www.lindabacon.org).



Set Point Theory describes the weight that we are genetically programmed to be.

Let's move back to an individual level and have a look at why it is important to foster a positive body image.

# Health

## WHY BODY IMAGE MATTERS

Having a positive body image does matter. That I can clearly see from observing the effects on human beings of having a negative body image. I am in the position of working with so many individuals from so many different backgrounds, who suffer from poor body image. And so I see why it matters. It matters because poor body image can lead to depression, anxiety, eating disorders, social isolation, a sense of hopelessness, helplessness and even a complete sense of worthlessness. All of this in relation to the way in which we perceive how we look.

Body image discontent or dissatisfaction is so pervasive and so common, driven as we have seen, by media and the so-called health and wellness industry. Body image dissatisfaction is intrinsically linked to low self-esteem, and low self-esteem is intrinsically linked to a myriad of mental health disorders. Poor body image is linked to our gender identity also and therefore can impinge on interpersonal relationships, and intimacy. Having a negative body image is clearly bad news. Hopefully from reading the previous chapters you are understanding more and more that no-one deserves to have a poor body image, and we should not judge ourselves, nor judge others, based on size and shape. If you don't like your body, it is very hard to like yourself as a person. Just think for a moment about what an incredibly powerful statement that is.



Again, to continue to put this in context, let's briefly examine whether body image concerns are just an issue of first world countries.

# hierarchy

## FIRST WORLD PROBLEMS

I want to introduce the theory of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, to help put body image issues into a global perspective. Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs describes human needs in the form of a pyramid. Each level of need becomes relevant only if all the needs in prior levels have been met.



The first level of need is defined as physiological. This is the fundamental need that we have as human beings for survival. Our physiological needs include air to breathe, food to eat, water to drink, and an ability to sleep.

The next level of the hierarchy is safety. This includes a security of body, employment, shelter, resources, morality, family, health and property. Thus it incorporates the need for shelter and protection from external hazards, a secure environment for ourselves and our family, security in being able to continue to provide financial stability, and an ability to remain relatively healthy. Only after our physiological needs have been met can we focus on meeting our needs for safety, and with physiological needs met, safety can take precedence.

Then there is the need for love and belonging. This is about forming close relationships with family, sexual relationships, friendships, and understanding ourselves in the context of a community. It is about our need to be a part of something bigger than just ourselves as individuals. However, this need for love and belonging can only be nurtured if our physiological and safety needs have already been met.

# hierarchy

After meeting the needs of physiology, safety, and love and belonging, we are free to explore our esteem needs. This is the level at which we can focus on elements of our self-esteem; confidence, achievement and notions of respecting ourselves and receiving respect from others. This is the level at which we can begin to occupy ourselves with concerns about body image and other aspects of our self-esteem. In the Western world we are fortunate enough to be in a position where our needs of the first three levels are met, and so we are in a position to focus on our esteem needs.

Unfortunately for many people this can result in a life spent agonising over how our body looks, or how we define ourselves as a person. All humans have a need to be accepted and valued by others, but more importantly we need to develop the capacity to accept and value ourselves, to gain true healthy self-esteem.

Finally, the highest level of the hierarchy is that of self actualisation. At this level, our need to have oneness between ourselves and our environment is the principal focus. This is an area characterised by creativity, spontaneity and a lack of prejudice.

So, in countries where people are not able to take for granted the availability of food, clean water, shelter, and warmth for granted, there is no capacity for these people to endeavor to meet the needs of esteem, and therefore negative body image does not exist. So in many ways, the fact that we can experience high levels of emotional distress in response to how we appraise our body is actually a sign that at least we are living in an environment that is offering safety and security.



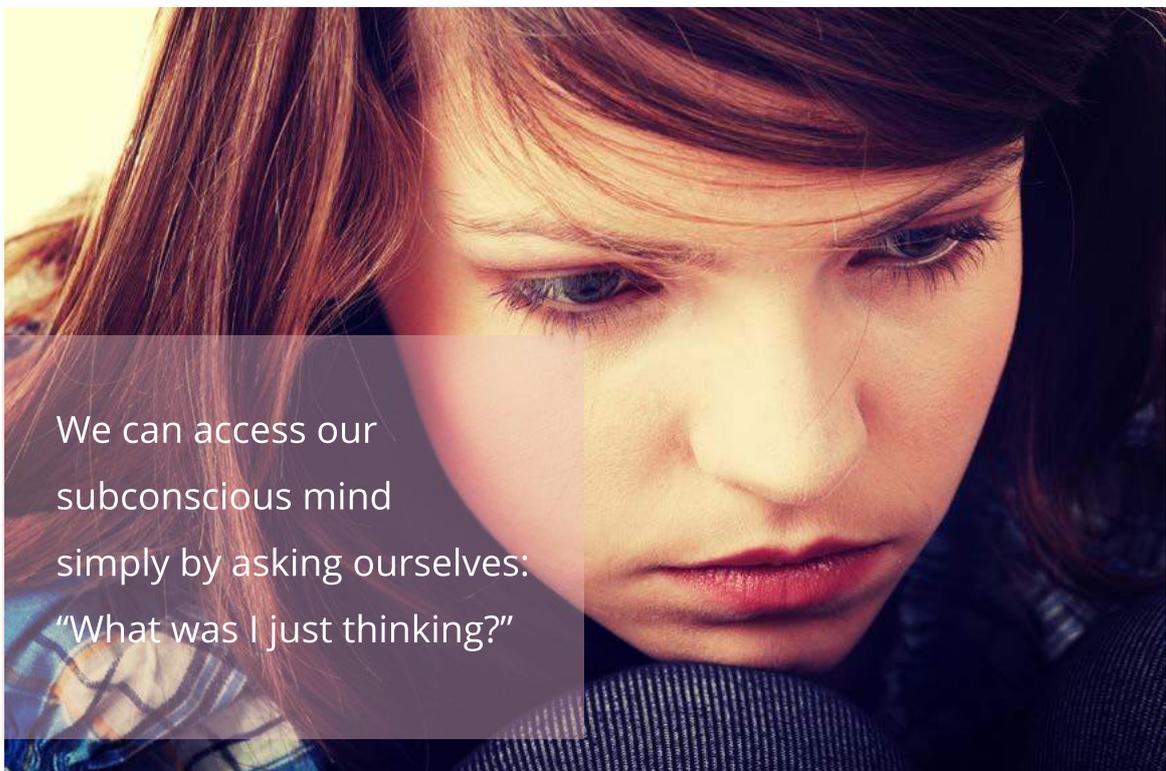
Let's take a more detailed look now at the way we think and how this relates to poor body image.

# Thoughts

## HOW WE THINK

So if body image is our subjective perception of how we look, how do we understand this. It really comes down to how we think. We need to understand how we think about our body, why we think this way about our body, and how to either change our perception or learn to ignore the way we think about our body.

In truth it is very difficult to change the way we think about our body. Often, no matter how hard we try to reason with ourselves about why our body is the way it is, the negative self talk will most likely return. Do not fret if, despite your best efforts, old habitual thinking patterns return.



We can access our subconscious mind simply by asking ourselves: "What was I just thinking?"

## ACCESSING OUR THOUGHTS

Much of our thinking occurs automatically. That is, we are most often unaware of our mind chatter as much of our internal dialogue occurs at the subconscious, rather than the conscious level. Subconscious thoughts remain outside our awareness, until we bring those thoughts into the conscious mind. The way that we know we are experiencing negative or unhelpful thoughts in our subconscious mind is through recognition of a heightened emotional state (for example a sudden rush of anxiety or sadness). If we become attuned to our emotional response as being driven by our thoughts, we can access our subconscious mind by simply asking ourselves "what was I just thinking".

# Thoughts

Why is it important to access our thoughts? Because it is our thinking that drives how we feel, or our emotional response to a situation. It is not the situation we are experiencing (for example looking in the mirror or discovering our jeans feel tight) that drives how we are feeling, but our thoughts about the situation (or the meaning that we place on that situation). What is important when we are looking at our emotional response is not the objective reality of the situation (I have put on my jeans and they are firm) but the meaning we attach to that situation (I have put on my jeans and they are firm which means I am fat and useless and haven't been able to lose weight). If you do experience a negative emotional response when you look at your body in the mirror, it is not what your body actually looks like that drives those feelings, but instead your own perception of your body, driven by a preconceived notion of what your body 'should' look like. This relates back to our discussions about society and media influencing our perception of what people should look like.

Having a negative perception of our own body is both destructive and unhealthy and can result in damaged sense of self, or poor self-esteem. So the message here is accept your body. How do we make this happen at a practical level? As mentioned above, it is important to understand your own self-talk as it is at the moment. What are some of the messages that enter your mind when you describe your body and overall physical self? Can you divide these messages into categories of positive messages (helpful thoughts) and negative messages (unhelpful thoughts)? Understand that it is normal and ingrained in us as human beings living in this society to have unhelpful messages go through our minds when we appraise ourselves. Try it now. Take a pen and paper and write down some of the thoughts you have about your body, both positive and negative.

Negative
Positive

Hopefully there are some positive things you are able to say about your body. Now let's look at the negative messages. I would imagine that these messages are fairly well entrenched in your psyche at the moment and would therefore be hard to challenge directly.

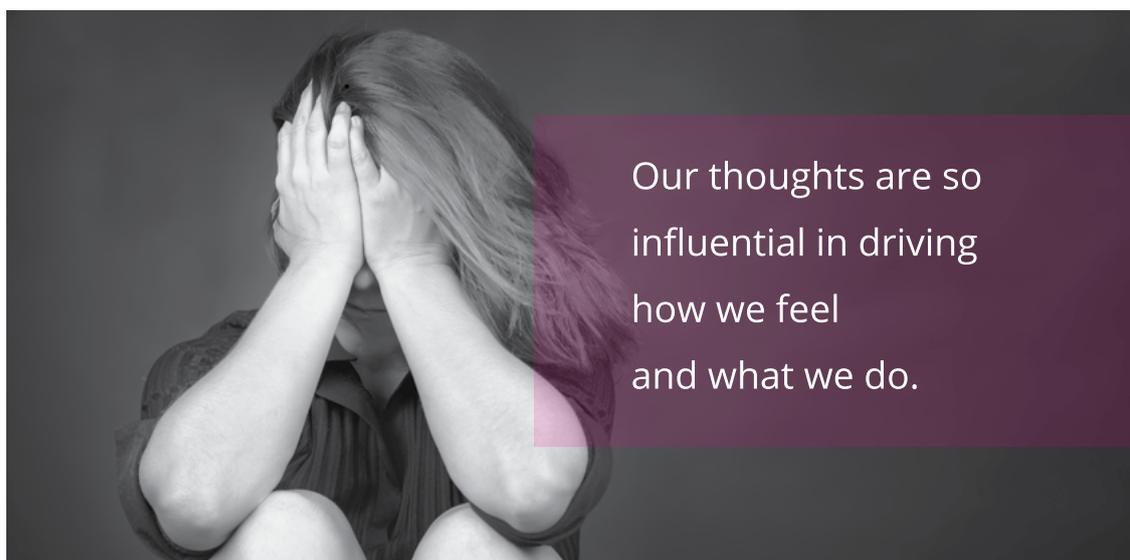
First, let's look at understanding more about the content of our negative thought processes in terms of the triggers to negative thoughts about our body. Then we will have a look at our personal history, before exploring a mindfulness approach to managing our thoughts.

# Triggers

## UNDERSTANDING TRIGGERS

It's really important to draw together the information we have so far about the way in which our thoughts are so influential in driving how we feel and what we do, combined with the knowledge we have about living more mindfully, and being fully present with ourselves and our own body.

Let's now look at the triggers that drive the thoughts that lead to the low mood and possible avoidance of enjoyable activity, or self-punishing behavior's such as overeating. This is different for everyone, so you will need to take some time for self-reflection here.



Our thoughts are so influential in driving how we feel and what we do.

What are the different times of day you tend to feel worse about your body? Getting in the shower, out of the shower, getting dressed, trying to leave the house, putting on exercise clothing, taking your baby to a swimming class, going out at nighttime, going on a date, buying new clothes, going out to eat in public??? Try to start identifying the triggers that launch your mind into the unhelpful and damaging barrage of negativity about your body. Start to recognise the pattern -

Trigger → unhelpful body related thoughts → unpleasant emotions → Choices made (eg. avoidance).

Trigger	Thoughts	Emotions	Choices/Actions
Put on swimmers to take baby to swimming	I look so fat, I hate this. Everyone will see how disgusting my body is..	Anger Anxiety Sadness	Avoid taking baby to lesson or take baby but disengaged
Stepping out of shower and looking in mirror	I am so revolting, I am weak, My cellulite is gross. This is my fault.	Sad Angry Anxious Guilty	Avoid looking in the mirror. Start the day with shoulders slumped



# Triggers

Now its your turn. Work out your particular trigger times for experiencing those unhelpful and damaging thoughts about your body.

Trigger	Thoughts	Emotions	Choices/Actions

Can you notice any patterns in the times that you are more vulnerable to negative mind chatter? If so you can use this knowledge as a powerful way to practice noticing these thoughts as being part of a mental dialogue, and not truth or reality. Is there anything you can do in these vulnerable times that does give you joy, in an effort to distract from this destructive mind chatter.

Next, let's take a look at the way in which our personal experiences can influence how we think about ourselves.

# Reflection

## STEPPING BACK INTO THE PAST

In my role as a Clinical Psychologist, I always discuss with my clients their most salient experiences from childhood and adolescence. The reason for this is that very often, current distress, or current unhelpful thinking patterns can be linked to messages that someone has received during their early years. This might include messages from parents, siblings, friends, peers, or teachers. It is always extremely enlightening to discover that a lifelong hatred of your nose, for example, stems from a barely remembered comment made by a bully at school. Or that a paralyzing paranoia about body hair as an adult, relates to one comment that your mother made to you as a child that you will have to wax your back when you are older. Or perhaps a memory that you were teased as a child by your brother for having larger hands than him, has led to a debilitating anxiety about the size of your hands as an adult. Most often there is a way to trace a route to the formation of poor body image (although not always as clearly as outlined in these examples). Does it matter? Is it important to find out the possible root causes of body image distress? I think that wherever possible, it is really important.



From a very young age  
we are exposed to a cultural  
ideal of body shape and size.

So how do we start to uncover the origins of our own body image story? It is important to examine our past with awareness of both our personal history (experiences with people we have had direct contact with) as well as sociocultural experiences (including an understanding of the culture in which we have been raised, and media influences).

# Reflection

If you need more evidence of the strength of cultural norms on our own body image experience, look at the figures of women who were deemed to be the epitome of beauty in 16th and 17th century art – full figured large women with big breasts, large thighs and large stomachs. Were you brought up with Barbie and Ken, both of whom are slight of figure, or action heroes with big muscles, or Cinderella, small of waist and tall, as opposed to the ugly step-sisters who are fuller of figure and shorter. From a very young age we are exposed to a cultural ideal of body shape and size. In some eastern cultures, fat continues to be associated with wealth and success, as well as fertility. Our culture is influenced by skinny dolls and skinny actresses and even skinnier models. Women are told that they are only beautiful if they are a certain body shape, with no extraneous hair and smooth unblemished skin. Additionally, certain cultures (including ours), because of the emphasis on looks, completely objectify women as sexual objects whose most important traits are their looks.

You (most likely) would have been brought up surrounded by these cultural ideals of male and female idealised body shapes. It is individual differences in our personalities as well as our own genetically predetermined size and shape, coupled with our experiences with people we know directly, dictates how much we tended to be influenced by such messages.

What toys do you remember playing with as a child – were they stereotyped in size and shape? What TV programs do you remember watching? What messages about body size and shape do you think you got from those shows? Do you remember internalising (taking the messages very personally) some of the images from toys or television shows? Do you remember believing that having a certain body shape was more desirable than having a different body shape? Did you directly experience some level of social exclusion based on your shape or size?

Let's now look at what we might call interpersonal influences on our own body image wellbeing. Interpersonal influences refers to the messages we received as a child from people with whom we had direct contact, including family, friends, peers, teachers, etc. Of course it is really important to be able to accept personal responsibility for the way in which we think about things. However to enable us to achieve good psychological health, it is also really important to recognise where some beliefs may have come from. This is not to blame people who have perhaps delivered very unhelpful messages to us, but instead to gain a greater understanding of the often misinformed nature of our beliefs. Messages include not only those statements we may have heard that were directly about our own size or shape, but also comments that people around us may have been making about themselves, such as a mother constantly criticising the shape of her own stomach or bottom. This is the subtle (or not too subtle in some cases) communication about the way the world should be which is called modeling. Our parents model behaviours and expectations through the things that they say to us. In addition, siblings can play an influential role in the development of poor body image. Research has shown that brothers are the biggest culprits in body based teasing. One of the shared experiences of those who do not experience body image problems is the memory of receiving positive regard and acceptance of physicality from family and peers throughout childhood.



# Reflection

## REFLECTION

Can you remember messages you received either about yourself or about others, that may have continued to impact on your perception of your body now? Were you teased about parts of your body? Did you get told things by people you loved and respected, that influenced your self-perception of your body?

## A WORD ON PERSONALITY CHARACTERISTICS

As alluded to earlier in this chapter, I mentioned that some people can be exposed to the same societal influences as others, and can even be teased as children about some aspect of their appearance, but appear to be relatively unaffected by this. This is to do with self-esteem. Self-esteem is about our inner sense of self worth – our worth as an individual that surpasses any external features. It seems to be the case that those who are possessed with a healthy sense of self worth or self-esteem can become almost immune to the opinions of media or of others. Those who are most unaffected in their body image are those whose self worth is not based in any way on their physical appearance.

### EXERCISE

Write down some memories on early body image messages you received as a child or an adolescent that have likely been influential on the way you perceive your body. Write down the details of these messages – who presented them, were they verbal or behavioural, were they directed at you or performed in front of you? Become aware of the feelings invoked as you write – it can be amazing how raw the feelings are when you consider difficult memories from the past.

# Reflection

## HOW YOUR PAST SHAPES YOU NOW

So how do we draw together what you now understand about some past experiences and the way you talk to yourself about your body now, using our knowledge we have gained about the way we think?

It is crucially important to have a really good look at your self-talk relating to your body and see if you can draw some links with past experiences. Maybe this is the time to take the opportunity to remove all of your clothes, stand in front of the mirror, and listen to your inner voice. Are you saying anything positive about your body, or are you only saying negative statements? Is your mind zeroing in on aspects of your body that you don't like, and overlooking the rest of your body. Is your language particularly punitive and attacking or is it gentle and encouraging? Is this your mother's voice you are hearing, or your father's voice? Is it the voice of the schoolyard bully? How much of your self-talk has been generated from messages you have received in the past and been unable to let go of?

As children, our developing brains use the cues around us and messages received from people to help form our belief system. This means the set of rules and guidelines that exists in our minds and gives us a framework for our lives. However, some of the beliefs we develop as children are irrational and unhelpful, such as the belief that as a woman you have to be skinny and attractive to be successful in life. Because as adults, of course we can read that sentence and clearly see that success is a concept that encompasses many areas in life, most of which have nothing whatsoever to do with thinness or attractiveness. However, if you, as a child, received messages that supported the belief that success comes to those who are skinny and attractive, and you have never questioned that belief, but find yourself to not fit the skinny and attractive idealised model in your mind, then emotional distress and body dissatisfaction will likely be your bedfellows.

Surely, it is much easier to challenge the belief, or recognise the thoughts in your mind telling you that you are not good enough because you are not skinny and attractive as being part of a dialogue from childhood, than to continue to buy into the belief and live a tortured and unhappy existence? The most powerful factors giving rise to negative emotions associated with body image are our own way of thinking about how we look and judging how we look. This is so powerful it even influences our perception of how we see others appraising us.

So, if we can see that much of our current dialogue comes from past messages that have led to unhelpful beliefs, then we are now empowered to recognise that we no longer need to buy into such beliefs.

This leads us to an important discussion about understanding mindfulness of thoughts.

# Self talk

## THE CHATTER IN YOUR HEAD

Now that we have a better understanding of our internal dialogue and where it has come from, it is important to understand something else about that internal dialogue. That is; just because thoughts drive emotions, and those emotions are unpleasant and uncomfortable and in turn drive our choices and behaviours, the thoughts themselves are just that. Thoughts. Not truth, not reality, not the voice of a higher power. Just thoughts. They are an inner dialogue, not an outer reality. This, we need to learn to accept. We may have spent our whole lives believing our thoughts are truth and fact, but they are not. As well, emotions are just emotions. Strong unpleasant feelings never overwhelm us when we realise that they are just feelings. Emotion is an internal experience. It is not intolerable when we recognise it for what it is. If we start to recognise that a thought (not a truth or fact) is driving an unpleasant emotional experience (an internal experience) then we can make some better decisions about whether or not we need to act on the thoughts or on the emotions, or whether we can act "despite" the thoughts and emotions.

Having thoughts and having emotional reactions to those thoughts does not make us worthless or hopeless. It makes us human. Our humanity comes from being a creature of thought and emotion. To be human, we need to experience emotions and thoughts.

In traditional cognitive behavioural therapy the goal of treatment is to identify unhelpful thinking patterns and work to change those thinking patterns to more functional and helpful ways of thinking. An alternative strategy, epitomised in another form of cognitive therapy, Acceptance and Commitment Therapy and Mindfulness based Cognitive Therapy, is to learn to acknowledge that our mind chatter can be constant, but as stated, not true or real. The more we believe our mind chatter to be the truth, the more time we spend listening to that mind chatter, and hence the less we are able to engage with the here and now. The alternative to this is to learn to ignore the mind chatter and engage with the present moment. This is defined as living mindfully.

So let us empower ourselves and acknowledge that our minds are not machines of truth and fact, but are instead bastions of ideas and beliefs that may be based largely on unhealthy and unrealistic ideals.

### HOW DO WE STOP LISTENING TO AND BELIEVING THE MIND CHATTER?

Listening to our unhelpful mind chatter clearly affects our ability to engage fully with what is going on around us, and can have a significantly detrimental effect on our mood state. Imagine, if you will, getting dressed to go to a wedding. You put on your outfit and notice it feels tighter around your middle than you might like, which triggers unhelpful messages such as;

*"I'm too fat"*

*"I hope I'm not in any photos because I'll wreck them".*

*"I look awful"*

# Self talk

Sound familiar? If so, you can well imagine the feelings you would be having by the time you arrived at the wedding. You would hardly be in a positive emotional state. This would then affect your ability to enjoy the wedding and the opportunity to socialise. So what could you do instead of buying into the mind chatter?

How about learning to stop listening to your mind when you realise the chatter is unhelpful. A good analogy used by the well-known ACT therapist Dr Russ Harris, is to imagine watching a really good movie on the television. When the movie is on you are fully engaged with it, paying close attention to the sound and vision. However during the ad breaks you tune out the television as you engage with other activities or thoughts (for example thinking about making a cup of tea, or what you need to do tomorrow or chatting to someone else in the room). Whilst you are doing this the television remains on at the same volume (which in ad breaks seems to mean louder than the volume of the movie!) but you have chosen not to pay attention to it. Once the movie recommences, you again tune in and pay attention.

Now let's extend this analogy to mind chatter. If we have trouble trying to change our negative self-dialogue, how about we set up a goal of learning to tune out when our mind is engaging in the negative and self destructive talk, but tune in when we are engaged in more helpful dialogue. One way to do this, that I particularly like, is to recognise when our mind is in a negative cycle and simply thank our mind (with a heavy dose of sarcasm) then choose not to engage in the thoughts, but move onto engaging with something else.

Another idea is to develop an understanding of the themes under which your mind chatter tends to fall and imagine a brightly coloured umbrella representing that theme and place those thoughts under the umbrella (for example the "I'm fat" or "I'm hopeless" umbrella). Doing this immediately disengages us from what seems to be the reality of those thoughts. Try this now with some of the negative thoughts you have about your own body – do any of these thoughts follow along a theme?



Learn to tune out when your mind is engaged in negative thoughts and tune into your mind's helpful dialogue.

# Myth

## A REMINDER ABOUT THE MYTH OF NEGATIVE SELF TALK BEING A MOTIVATOR

It is a myth that negative self-talk motivates change behaviours. Punishment does not motivate and so negative and punitive self-talk does not encourage us to engage in more positive health behaviours. Loving and respecting our body assists us in being motivated to look after our body by listening and responding to its cues. Clinical experience and reflecting on the available psychological literature clearly indicates to me that self-hatred and self criticism tends to led to self destructive behaviours. This concept is discussed further in the chapter on motivation.

## BODY SCAN

This is a mindfulness technique to bring an awareness of our physical selves without buying into the attached unhelpful thought processes and unpleasant emotions. It helps us to view our body from the inside. Here's how to go about it:

1. Find a quiet comfortable place to lie down where you won't be disturbed.  
Close your eyes
2. Develop a conscious awareness of your breathing – notice what it feels like to breath. Notice what it feels like as each breath moves in and out – how it feels as your chest rises and falls and your lungs expand and contract.
3. Allow your mind to become aware of sensations within your whole body.  
Notice how the surface you are lying on feels underneath you, and how your clothing feels on your body. Remember, you are not judging (eg. My jeans feel too tight, I'm so fat") you are simply noticing ("I can feel my jeans around my waist" (or maybe around your hips if you're gen y!!)
4. Start moving methodically over your body. Start with directing your mind to one foot and became aware of the sensations in that foot as you breath in and out.
5. Methodically work your way through your whole body, checking in with how each part feels as you are continuing to breath in and out.
6. When you complete an awareness of all parts of your body, bring your focus back to your breath, then allow yourself to open your eyes gently and re-orientate yourself to your surroundings.

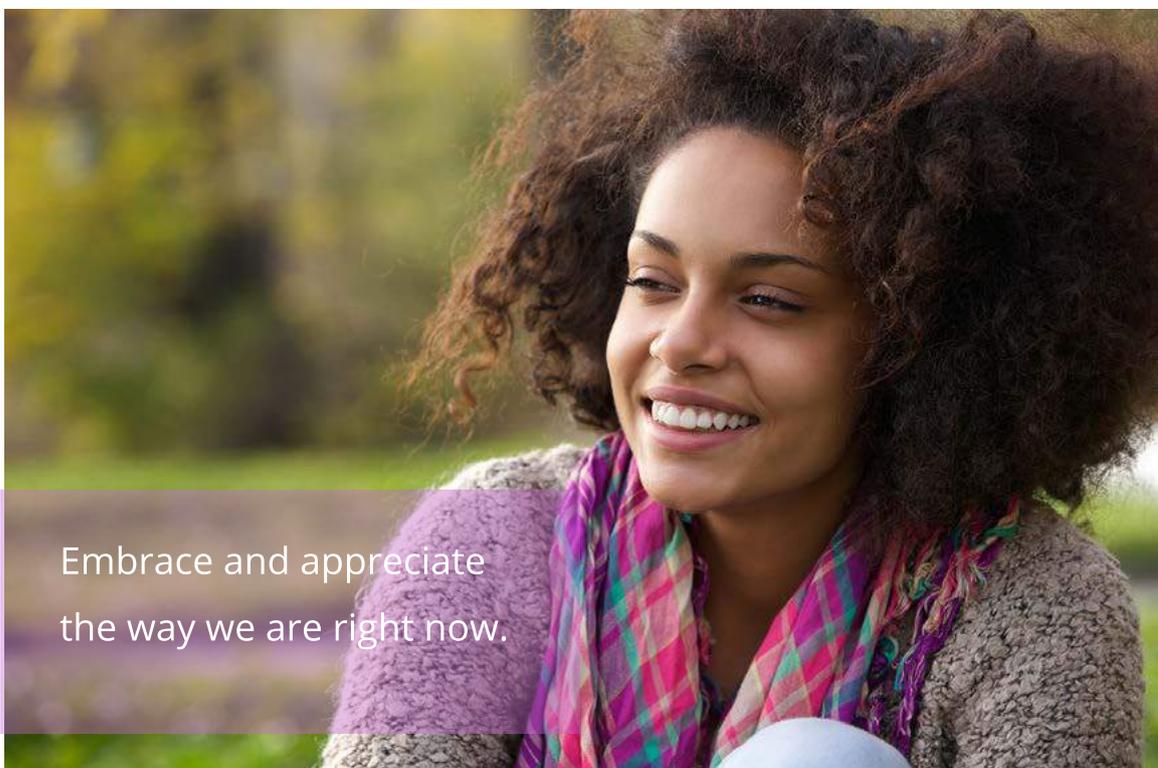
# Positive self talk

Over time, concentrating your mind on your body as a whole allows you to be less focused on believing the thoughts that enter your mind about the external you. Instead, you will become more masterful with recognising the thoughts as being no more than thoughts (ie. not fact or truth) and therefore not buying into a sense of reality of the thoughts, which inevitably leads to a strong distressing emotion.

## LEARNING TO DESCRIBE YOUR BODY OBJECTIVELY AND WITHOUT CRITICISM

A big part of being in a place to nurture our body is to be able to embrace and appreciate the way we are right now. Sounds crazy, I know. Surely we need to hate our body and be embarrassed in order to be motivated to look after ourselves? In reality the contrary is true; to nurture ourselves we need to show respect to ourselves and our body, no matter what it looks like.

Spend time in front of the mirror and objectively describe yourself – don't use pejorative and judgmental language such as "ugly, gross, dumpy, bad, etc". And don't just focus on either the parts of yourself you don't like or the parts of yourself you do like – focus on your whole being – the whole body that transports your mind every day. Keep allowing yourself the time to do this every day – to get to know your body without the heavy judgment. Remember, all bodies are good bodies.



Let's look at these concepts of mindfulness and integrate them into how to live life more mindfully.

# Being Mindful

## LIVING MINDFULLY

I want to discuss incorporating an understanding of mindfulness of thought into a broader concept of living mindfully. To understand mindfulness there are a couple of important basic premises. One is accepting that thoughts are critical in driving how we feel and the choices we make or actions we take. As discussed, thinking is the means by which we make sense of the world – thinking is the way we attach meaning to what is going on around us. However the second premise is that at times thinking can become unhelpful or destructive.

Have you ever thought to yourself “I wish I could switch off my mind” or “why can’t I stop thinking about that”. We can often get unhelpful thoughts stuck in our minds – this is called ruminating. Ruminating can become all-consuming and often we can spend vast amounts of time living in auto-pilot because we are so consumed with our thoughts. Living life consumed by our thoughts removes any chance we have of connecting with our life going on around us. Have you ever experienced the situation where someone is talking to you and you realise that you have no idea what they were saying? This is an example of not living mindfully, or not being in the present moment, as you were not engaging with the person talking to you but instead engaging in your own thoughts. Does this happen often, and if so is it a problem?

Well, let’s firstly imagine a scenario where you are going out and every piece of clothing you put on sets off unhelpful mind chatter.

*“I look too skinny”*      *“I’m too fat”*  
*“I don’t like how this looks on me”*  
*“I’m not comfortable in this”*  
*“My skin is blotchy & revolting”*

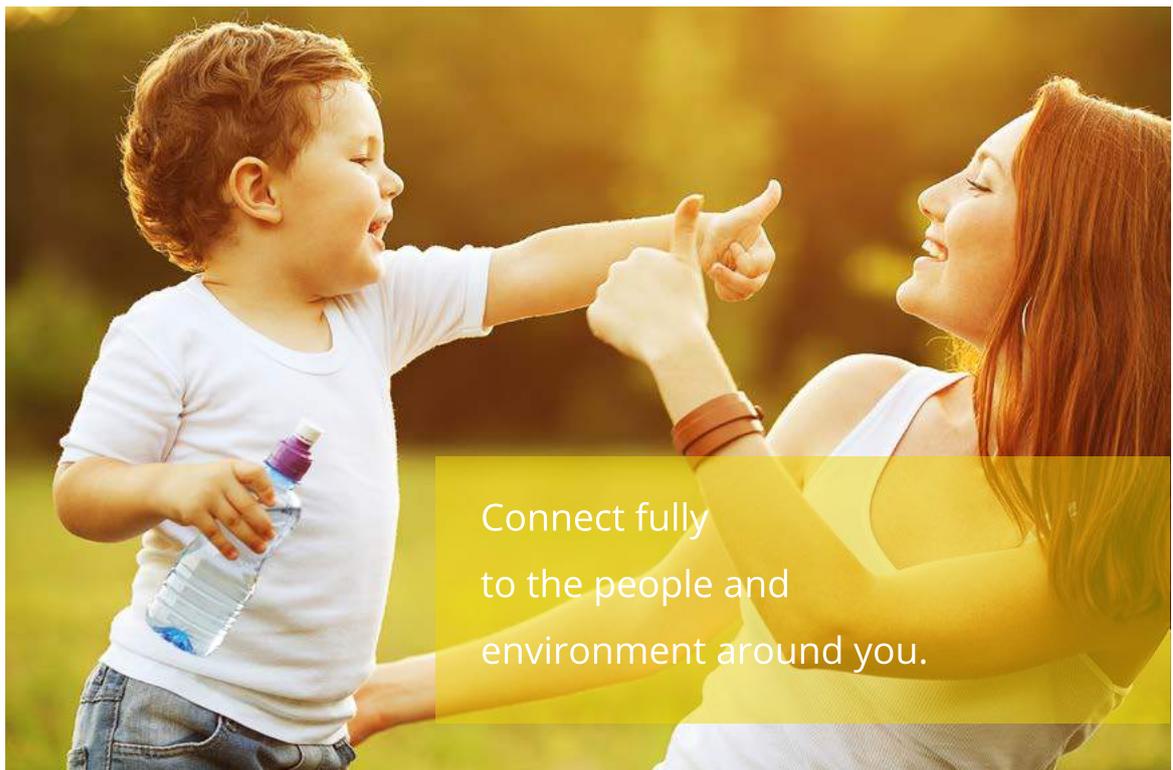
You eventually decide on some clothing but unfortunately your mind is now well and truly functioning at its unhelpful best and continues to feed you negative messages about how you are looking. You get to the party but with your mind in overdrive you find it almost impossible to concentrate on any conversations around you and you don’t even notice certain people at all. Your body is out at a party but your mind is fully occupied with its own chatter, and so you are far from engaged with the situation you are in. This has a detrimental effect on your mood, and can even have a detrimental effect on the way people around you are responding to your heightened distraction, thinking that you are aloof or unfriendly.

# Being Mindful

In contrast to this, living mindfully means being aware and attuned to what is going on around you. That is, being fully engaged in an activity that you are doing, rather than just 'going through the motions'. In other words, allowing ourselves to connect fully to our environment. Connection to our environment means that we can engage in more purposeful behaviour (rather than doing things on auto-pilot) and finding richness in every day simple experiences. Consider the simple act of going for a walk. Do you walk with a lack of awareness of your environment because your thoughts are all consuming? Or do you walk along appreciating the feeling of moving your body, hearing the noises around you and noticing the environment? Existing more mindfully (being more present in the here and now, more connected to things around us) brings greater levels of peace and contentment to our psychological selves, as by definition, existing more mindfully reduces the opportunities we have for becoming absorbed in our own unhelpful ruminations.

The way to live more mindfully is to firstly practice noticing when we are thinking and what we are thinking. If we want to reduce the amount of time we engage in our unhelpful thoughts then we need to notice that our mind is engaging with unhelpful thoughts. We need to then practice purposefully noticing what is going on around us, which immediately helps to disengage us from the ruminations.

Try noticing the environment as fully as you can the next time you go for a walk. Try to concentrate fully on the person you are having a conversation with. Try to slow down and spend time patting your dog or cat and notice the feel of their fur. If you have kids, try to fully engage with an activity they are doing. By noticing more of the external reality of life, we can become more mindful, and thus more peaceful within ourselves.

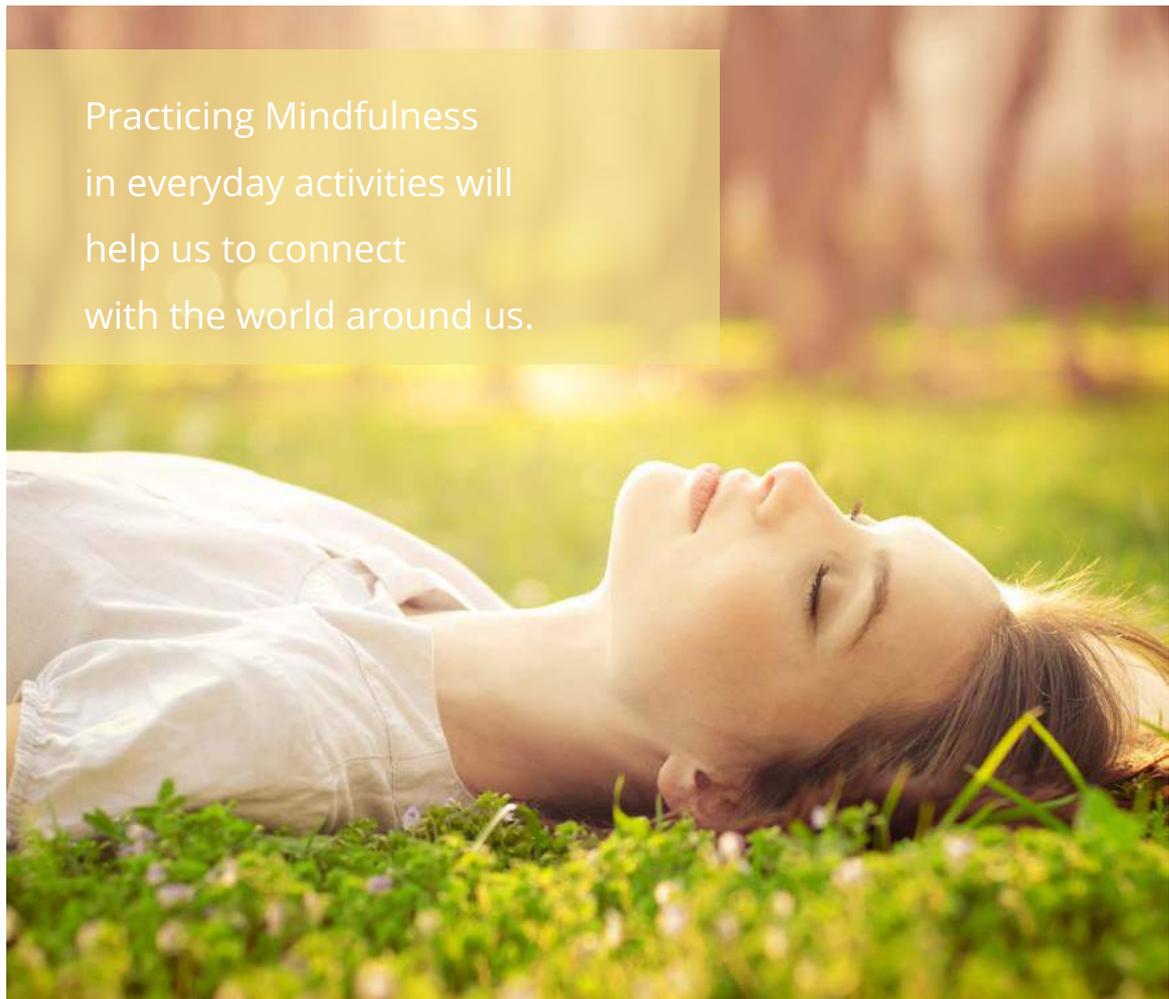


Connect fully  
to the people and  
environment around you.

# Experience Things

Some other everyday activities in which you can practice mindfulness include;

1. Looking at a picture – try to notice all the elements of the picture, rather than just the picture as a whole. Notice colours, forms, textures, etc.
2. Swimming – notice the feel of the water on your body and the feel of your body as you propel yourself through the water. Notice how your muscles feel as you move through the water.
3. Waiting at a bus stop – notice the people around you. Notice the seat you are sitting on, or the feel of the pavement you are standing on. Look at the cars passing, and the trees around you.
4. Lying in bed – notice the weight of the covers on top of you. Notice how your body feels in the position of rest. Do the body scan exercise.



Practicing Mindfulness  
in everyday activities will  
help us to connect  
with the world around us.

Essentially we can practice mindfulness in everything we do, allowing us to become more connected with everything we do.

This can be of particular relevance in eating, explored in the next chapter.

# listen to your body

## EATING MINDFULLY

I read an article recently that incensed and infuriated me. It was entitled “Mindful eating” but was actually an article about different diets – calorie restrictive programs, the 5:2, the paleo diet, to name a few. The article defined mindful eating as being mindfully aware of sticking to a rigorous eating regime. What a load of clap trap. Mindful, or intuitive eating has absolutely nothing to do with diets and dieting and calorie restriction. Mindful eating has been developed in response to the recognition of the harmful nature of diets, dieting and caloric restrictions. So, what exactly do I mean by mindful eating?

Mindful eating is a way of removing all the food-based rules that are imbedded in the minds of most people who live in western society. It is about trying to become re-tuned to the very clever signals that our body gives us in response to food. We have already discussed set point weight, and we now understand the incredible mechanisms that the body employs to maintain a certain weight. Well, the body also has complex systems that allow us to take in necessary nutritional requirements for health and wellbeing, without the rule driven methods of diets. Don't believe me? Research conducted with young children has demonstrated that when children are given a large variety of foods to choose from, and given the freedom to eat what they like and as much as they like, they overall choose foods that meet the nutritional requirements of their young bodies. Amazing, hey?

Mindful eating removes the necessity for classification of foods as being good or bad, and therefore removes the unhelpful emotional component of eating (the emotions such as guilt, shame, sadness, anger, anxiety, etc) and leaves only room for food to lead to pleasure. Whilst it is well beyond the scope of this guide to discuss all aspects of mindful eating, there are some simple and intuitive messages to leave you with.

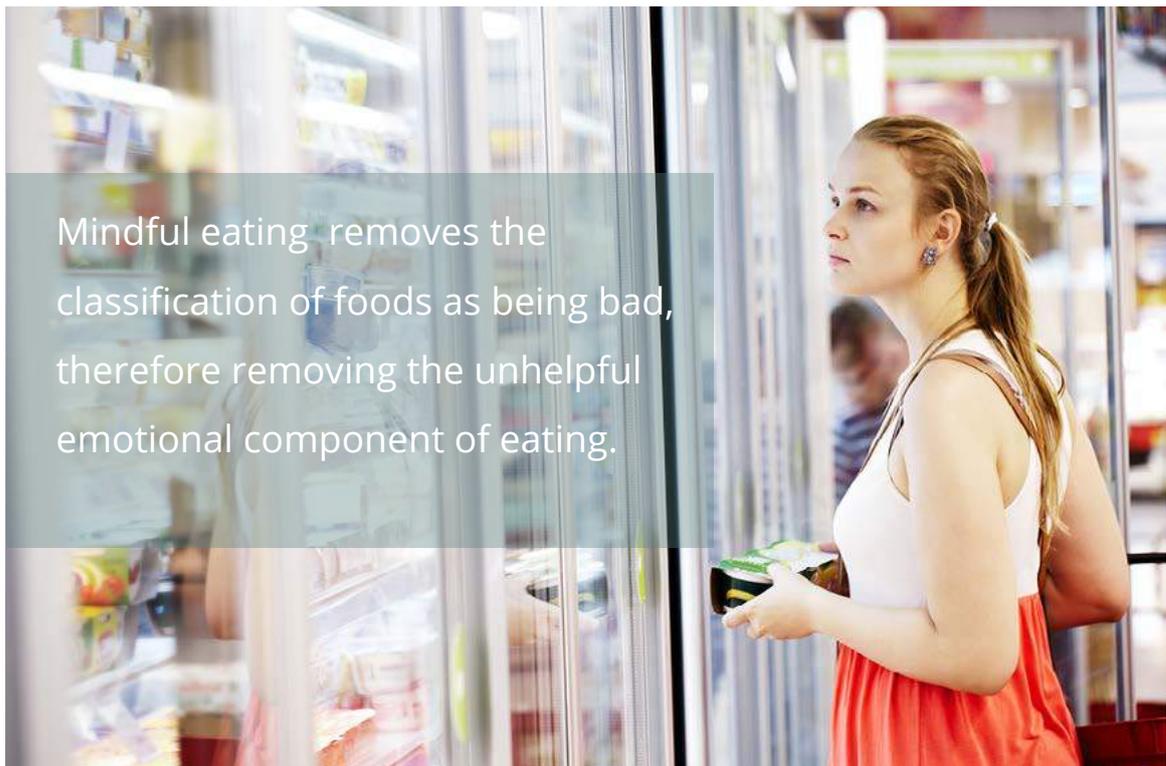
Listen to your body's  
signals regarding food.



# listen to your body

Firstly, train your body to tune into its natural signals of hunger and fullness. Unfortunately even from a very young age we are encouraged to eat in response to a large variety of cues (not just hunger) and we are encouraged to eat beyond the feelings of satiety (or fullness). Many of us, as adults, are left with difficulties in recognising what we feel like when we are gently hungry (although I am sure dieters among you certainly knows what it feels like to be starvingly hungry) and we often don't eat in a way that allows us to recognise when we are feeling comfortably full. It is incredible the number of conversations I have with people who associate hunger with being weak willed. Let's just make it crystal clear right now, that hunger is a natural physiological signal indicating that the body needs some fuel. So if this were the case, why on earth wouldn't we just respond to that physiological need by (ready for a gasp of shock and horror) just eating!

And what do you eat? Well, try to put aside the complex nutritional plans, dieting advice, rules and regulations that you may have been following (just as a "by the way" – remember from our HAES chapter that if you have dieted and you are like the 96% of the population for whom a diet has been unsuccessful, remember; do not blame yourself for this, blame the fact that diets don't work) and ask yourself 'what is it that my body wants to eat right now?'. Whoa – what ..... No rules? No ideas about how much protein I should be having right now transcribed into the number of raw almonds that I'm allowed to eat .... No. Ask yourself 'what does my body feel like eating right now'. Go and start eating it. Eat every mouthful with appreciation. Eat every mouthful without distraction. Enjoy eating. Feel pleasure in the food that you are eating. Then, either when you are no longer really enjoying the taste and sensations of the food, or when you feel full; stop eating.



# listen to your body

OK, now you've mastered that, what next? Mindful eating also involves listening to other signals that our body is giving us. If, one hour after eating, you feel exhausted and sluggish, take a mental note of what you ate an hour ago. Remember next time you are feeling hungry and want to respond with that food, consider also how you would like to feel in an hour. If it doesn't matter that you feel sluggish and exhausted, go for the same food. If you are in a situation where you need to feel enlivened and awake, try a different food that also meets the requirement of your body's hunger. Mindful eating is about understanding the way in which our own body is responding to the foods we eat. Have fun and experiment. There are no rules about what food you can and can't eat. If you read a magazine every time you go to the toilet, maybe experiment with eating more fibre. If sugary foods leave you feeling energy deprived, eat sugary foods when you don't require lots of energy. Whatever you do, don't accidentally create rules (for example cut out all sugar). If you do, you will fall into the cycle of craving sugary food because it becomes forbidden. Forbidden foods drives cognitive restraint which leads to unhelpful thoughts about the food that has become a forbidden food, increasing the propensity to end up eating very large amounts of that food.



There are no rules  
about what food you can  
and can't eat.

Let me take a moment to talk about what we might call (for the purposes of shared understanding) 'junk food'. If you find that you feel compelled to eat junk food when you are hungry, let yourself eat it. We eat far less junk food when we know that we are allowed to eat it whenever we like. The desire to eat certain foods will reduce if you let yourself eat them, and this will enable you to eat junk food far more mindfully and stop when you are no longer hungry or no longer getting the pleasure from each mouthful. I saw this encapsulated at the recent quiz night that I have already alluded to. Everyone at each table brought along food for the supper, and that food was left in front of everyone for the duration of the quiz night. I was sitting next to



# food for thought

a nice woman who said to me “I can’t believe someone has brought along chips (potato crisps) and chocolate. I’ve been so good for two weeks and not eaten any junk”. I then proceeded to gently observe this nice woman eating a very large quantity of both the chips and the chocolate, far more than anyone else at the table was eating. All the while, she kept commenting, “I feel so bad, I can’t stop eating this, I’m going to have to make sure I don’t eat any junk for the next two months”. Can you see what effect food rules and restrictions have? We lose the capacity to eat mindfully.

Just to put things into perspective, it is difficult to eat mindfully in this hostile culture of dieting and obsessive concerns about only eating healthy foods. There are a large number of people, in fact, who fall into a form of eating disorder (although not yet classified clinically) that involves the obsessive concern about only eating healthy foods (aka health food junkies). This obsession can often be to the point where the person is unable to engage enjoyably and mindfully with anything due to the always obsessing over food. This sort of ‘healthist’ thinking makes the mistake of reducing health to being no more than the sum total of our health behaviours (eating and exercising) and removes the aspects of health which include engaging with others, love, compassion, humour, worldly issues and overall psychological health.

So, in summary, mindful eating is;

1. Eat when you are hungry.
2. Stop eating when you are full
3. Eat what foods your body is telling you it wants to eat.
4. Listen to the messages that your body gives you about what certain foods do, or how certain foods make your body feel.
5. Enjoy every mouthful of food that you eat.  
When you stop enjoying it, stop eating it.
6. Never instill a total ban on any type of food.  
This will simply cause you to obsess over food and not eat mindfully.

# Get Movin'

## THE JOY OF MOVEMENT



Movement has to be something that feeds your soul, something that you enjoy doing, not something that you feel obligated to do.

One of the biggest boosts to body image and self-esteem comes through physicality and movement. I'm going to completely steer clear of the word 'exercise', not because I don't like it, but because it is a word that has become associated with a sense of hard work, pain, weight loss, and guilt if we don't maintain it. Just as we need to move away from a sense of dieting and move to mindful eating, we need to move away from the sense of 'no pain, no gain' exercising, and move towards a notion of enjoyable physicality.

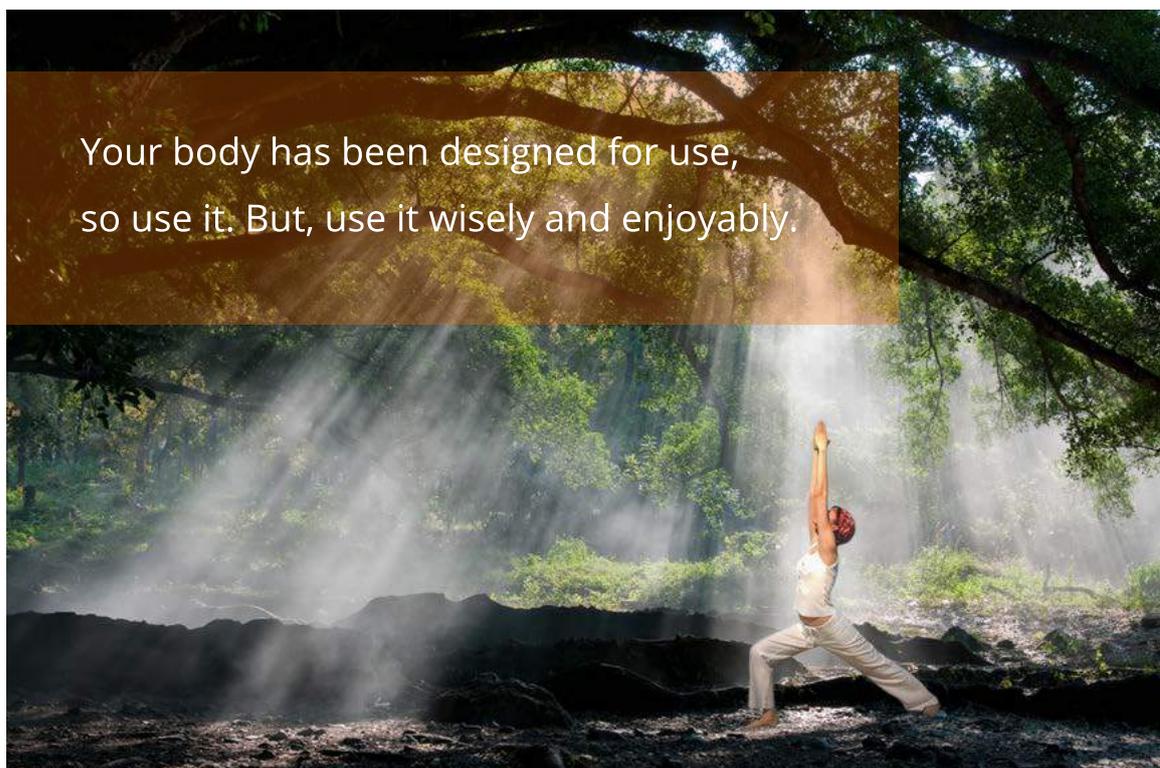
The human body has been designed to move, and it is incredibly helpful to move about a bit for physical and psychological well-being. Movement needs to be something that feeds your soul. Something that you enjoy doing, not something you feel obligated to do. If you enjoy boot camp, great. If you enjoy salsa dancing, great. If you enjoy running, great. If you enjoy walking, great. If you enjoy cleaning your home vigorously, great. Yoga, pilates, swimming, cycling, weights, gardening, tai chi, archery, boxing; fantastic. It doesn't matter what it is that you do. If you just do something physical that you love you will benefit with greater physical and psychological well-being. Don't be put off moving because you believe you are too fat, thin, unfit, old, or busy. Find something that you really enjoy and that fits in comfortably with the current demands you face in your life at the moment, and do that. For some, it may even be walking up the stairs at work every day.

# Movement

Too many times I have seen people with the best intentions embark on a program of high intensity, regular exercise. Then they find after the completion of the 12-week program or whatever, that it is no longer sustainable, nor enjoyable and so they stop. But, after doing regular high intensity exercise, it is hard for them to realise that going for a 30 minute walk is beneficial for the mind and body – it doesn't have to be a 60 minute run!

The mistake is also often engaging in exercise programs with weight loss goals. Exercise, like dieting, is not an effective weight loss strategy. Weight may drop but then naturally plateau, leaving people feeling frustrated and upset that the exercise is no longer effective, based simply on this one variable of weight. They forget that the exercise is still increasing their mobility, strength, fitness, endurance, and most importantly continuing to provide positive mental health benefits. But, if weight loss is the goal, movement won't be sustained. Switch the focus to finding ways of moving that make us feel good and that we enjoy, and this will allow movement to be sustainable and naturally incorporated into our everyday lives.

Have a think about what movements you engage in at the moment. Is there anything you would like to change – to do more of, or less of. Have you found movement and physical activity that you really enjoy? If not, what are the barriers to exploring some options? Moving doesn't have to cost money and doesn't have to be done in public– I have encouraged many people who have a love of dance, to put the music on a home and just dance. Your body has been designed for use, so use it. But, use it wisely and enjoyably.

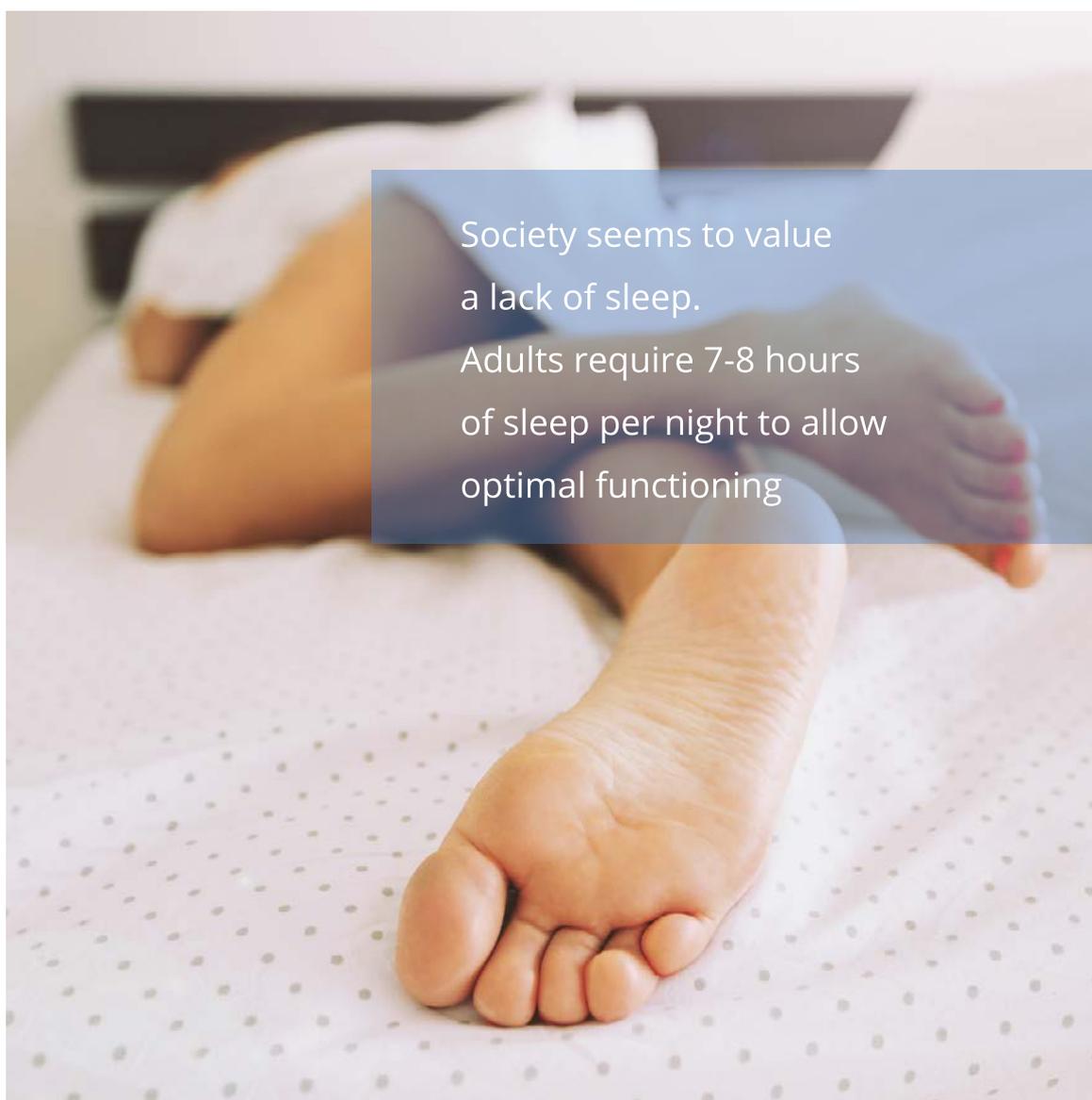


# Down Time

## TIME FOR SOME ZZZZZ's

In any guide about positive body image, it is well worth briefly visiting the area of sleep. Sleep is a vitally important function for the restoration of bodily cells, and growth and repair within the body. During sleep, digestion processes ramp up, growth hormone is released at higher levels and sleep enhances brain plasticity (making learning, memory and general mental performance better). It is still thought that on average, adults require 7-8 hours sleep per night to allow optimal functioning. Research has shown that routinely getting less than 6.5 hours sleep per night or more than 8.5 hours sleep per night (for adults; children and teenagers do need more sleep) is associated with poorer health outcomes. Normal sleep occurs in cycles of about 90 minutes in length, and waking briefly between cycles is completely normal.

Unfortunately, society seems to value a lack of sleep, holding few hours' sleep as being something virtuous, and having sufficient sleep being seen as lazy and indolent. Technology in this day and age also keeps us awake for longer periods of time.



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a lack of sleep.  
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# Restful Thinking

Given the importance of good sleep in overall health and wellbeing, which links directly to body image, I have listed some common sleep hygiene guidelines, adapted from the Australian Psychological Society information on sleep.

1. The sign of good sleep is to awaken feeling refreshed.  
Sleep as much as you need to, to awake refreshed.
2. Get up at the same time each day to keep your biological clock working well.
3. Engage in regular physical activity to enhance sleep, but not within three hours of when you want to fall asleep.
4. If you are worrying about problem, write them down before you go to bed, and spend time thinking about the worries before you go to bed.
5. Use the bed for sleep and sex only. Do not watch TV in bed, or use the iPad or eat. Condition yourself to associate bed with sleep.
6. Don't purposefully try to fall asleep if you are having trouble getting to sleep or if you wake during the night. If you remain awake, get up and read a book and return to bed when you feel sleepy.
7. Avoid long daytime naps, although if you have become deprived of overnight sleep because of external demands, a daytime nap can be a helpful catch up.
8. Try to ensure your bedroom is dark and quiet when you are going to bed.
9. Try to ensure your bedroom is a comfortable temperature for sleep.
10. Eat regularly and in response to hunger, and do not go to bed hungry.
11. Don't drink too much liquid in the evening.
12. Cut down on caffeinated products as caffeine can cause difficulties falling asleep and cause frequent prolonged awakenings.
13. Avoid alcohol in the evening as it helps with sleep onset but can cause more prolonged awakenings.
14. If you are a smoker, don't smoke during the night when you are awake – it acts as a stimulant.



Overall, if you sleep well, then you don't need to be too worried about these guidelines. If you find yourself sleeping poorly, this may be a contributor to poor body image, in which case it is important to identify some aspects of your sleep

# Goal understanding

## THE EBB AND FLOW OF MOTIVATION

What do you think is the question I am asked most when it comes to any sort of change in behaviour or habits? "Why can't I maintain my level of motivation to do things, despite how hard I try and how much I want to make it work?".

Let's normalise this for starters. It is part of the human condition that we are fallible. We make mistakes, we continue to make mistakes and we are very much far from perfect. The faster we can accept this the better. In my professional experience the search for perfection is one of the driving forces behind anxiety and depression.

Let's take a look together at some of the reasons that we lose our motivation (otherwise known as the wheels falling off), despite having sound and reasonable goals and good intentions. Motivation can be a challenge regardless of the goal – be it a reduction in alcohol consumption, moving around more, or spending more time with family.

A goal without a plan  
is just a wish!



## COMPETING DEMANDS ON OUR ATTENTION

Often we develop plans or goals without due thought to the demands on our attention that exist in our lives, and sometimes we even develop goals when everything else in life is running relatively smoothly. So for example, a keen plan to move about a bit more each day may launch well but then something else occurs three weeks in, which throws off the motivation and drive to continue with the goal of moving about more. However it is this very thing – having competing demands and unexpected circumstances – that creates a rich and interesting life, despite

causing certain goals to be surpassed. So how do we cope when competing demands railroad our ability to remain motivated to achieve goals? Logically we might presume that if we become mentally tough and punish ourselves by saying “despite what else is going on I have to meet my weekly exercise goal, there are no excuses, otherwise I am clearly just slack and hopeless” then this would become a strong motivator for changing behaviour and moving us back on track. However research evidence and my own clinical experience has shown that punishing, punitive negative self-talk does not act to motivate. Instead it most often leads to self-punishing behaviours, a sense of hopelessness or even depression.

So in real life, where competing demands do arise, what would increase our motivation? Interestingly the answer is to be more gentle, nurturing and understanding of ourselves. If you don't believe it, imagine what you would say to a friend who tells you that they are feeling guilty because they haven't been walking three times a week because of some other issues going on in their lives. Would you say “stop being lazy, you are just making excuses” or would you say “go easy on yourself, you've got a lot to deal with at the moment, just fit in walking when you can”. If we could learn to talk to ourselves in the same way that we talk to dearly loved friends and family we would find ourselves feeling happier and more content, and in a better position to achieve our goals (whatever those goals may be). So, given competing demands on our attention are almost predictable in their unpredictability, let's embrace the fact that things will invariably get in the way of us achieving our goals, and be gentle with ourselves.

## **FATIGUE**

Another cause of our motivation waning is fatigue. Fatigue can be caused by poor sleep, busyness, excessive stress, depression or health issues. It is also the case that the less moving about we do, the more fatigued we feel, but we also need to see that fatigue plays a role in reducing our motivation. So recognise fatigue when it is happening and try to figure out ways to increase energy levels.

## **LAZINESS**

Let's also be honest about one of the human conditions under which most of us are afflicted at times, and that is laziness. For those of us who do suffer from laziness, let's simply acknowledge and accept it. Embrace our down times when we can get them and then engage with life more fully in other times. We do not have to all be highly driven creatures all of the time, and laziness can be a joyful experience in itself, if we allow ourselves to accept and embrace it. It can be the way to refuel and motivate us. For some, it is a necessary part of life.

## **HABITS**

A lot of our life is driven by habit, and this can be positive, as it frees up cognitive capacity (ie brain space) to think about other things. However, habits can also work against us. In the mindfulness chapters of this Guide we discussed combatting habits by engaging in more mindful or self-aware activities. So habit can lead us to make choices that we might mindfully prefer not to make, such as pouring the third glass of red wine, and not thinking about taking the dogs out for a walk. Or turning on the TV after dinner because that's what we always do, as opposed to purposefully engaging with an interesting program. Recognition of habits helps us realise that habits can sometimes cause the wheels to fall of, and our motivation to wane.

## **NEGATIVE SELF-TALK**

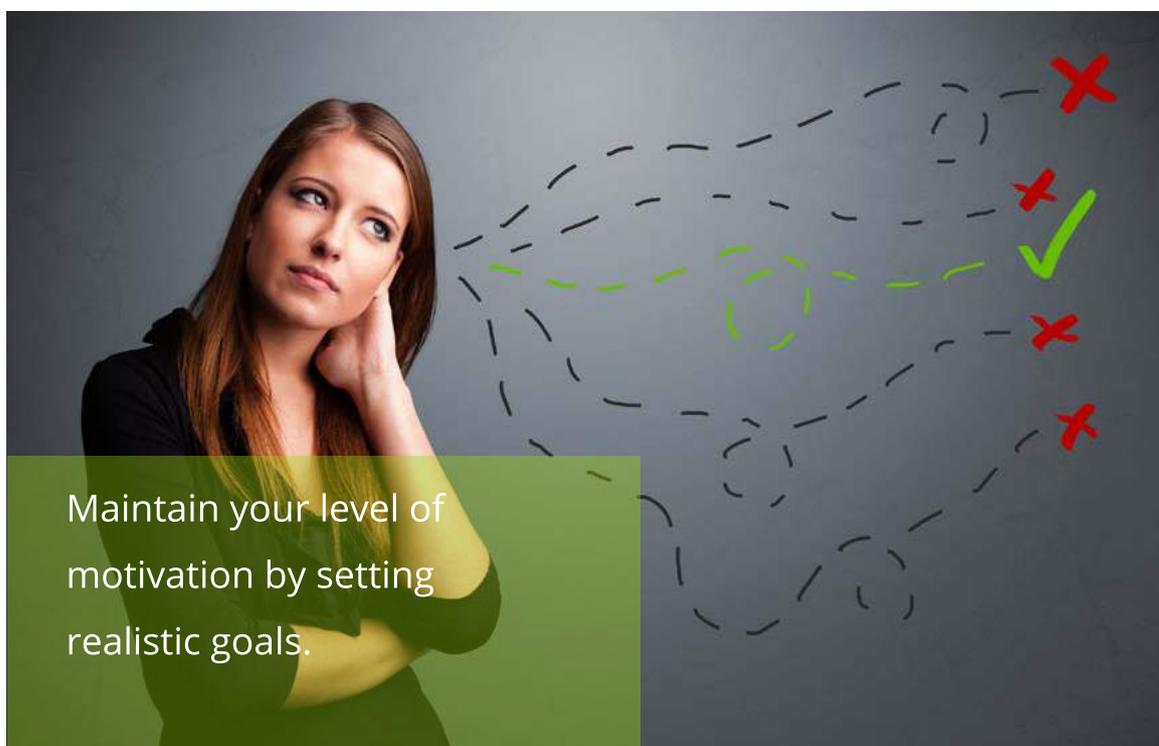
As mentioned, negative self-talk is a great de-motivator . This is one of the reasons that a symptom of depression is decreased motivation (driven both by negative self talk and physiological changes in brain chemistry associated with depression). Whether negative self-talk is directed inwardly “I'm fat, stupid, hopeless, useless” or directed at an activity or situation “this is too hard, I can't do this, it's impossible” negative self talk acts as a strong de-motivator.

## FEAR

Fear is an important explanation for why we sometimes find ourselves unable to follow our goals and maintain our motivation. Sometimes we may experience fear in having to take responsibility to maintain change. This is related to the fear of the unknown. My observation over the years is that despite the level of discomfort that people may be experiencing in their current situation, or the frustration or even hatred of their current situation, the thought of changing the situation can generate more fear than the fear generated by remaining in the situation. An easier way to understand this is to realise that this is the meaning of being stuck in a comfort zone, or rut, no matter how uncomfortable it is.

Fear is an uncomfortable feeling, so naturally we seek to avoid the discomfort. This is why we subconsciously self-sabotage change and talk ourselves into a belief that change is too hard. An understanding of this cycle is crucial to being able to solve it. If a lack of motivation is really driven by the fear of the unknown that might occur if we change, then we need to map out what it is about letting go of our comfort zone that feels so frightening. What is it about challenging our way of thinking about our own body that causes us to feel so fearful? Is it a fear of our body changing in a way we don't want it to, if we let go of the self-hatred. Is it a fear that we will never stop eating chocolate if we throw away the diets and eat mindfully instead?

Letting go of what is going on now is scary, but the more open we can be with ourselves about that, the more chance we have of recognising the unhelpful and negative self talk surrounding thoughts of change, and the more able we will be to combat negativity.



Maintain your level of motivation by setting realistic goals.

## Summary

Overall, there are a myriad of reasons for us to fall off the wagon when it comes to behaviour and cognitive change related to health and wellbeing. This is such a normal experience that we know it can be overcome, once acknowledged. I hope that in reading this section of the Guide you have been able to derive a greater understanding of the issues that may drive motivational dips over time (and be gentle in response to them!!).

# What next?

## WHERE TO FROM HERE

We've covered a lot of ground in this guide, and I very much hope that the information has been of value to you. Essentially, learning how to love and appreciate our body is one of the most powerful actions we can take in our lives. Unfortunately we live in a society where it is far from normal and acceptable to love and appreciate our body. We are constantly told that we need to lose weight, do more squats and burpees, have cosmetic surgery, wear makeup to cover up our blemishes, be skinny, be perfect, etc. It's sickening even to write this because this is what the world is about but it is so destructive and just so wrong.

This guide has been written to help you take the next step – from wanting to love your body, to having the tools and resources at your disposal so that you can start to actually, genuinely learn to love your body. We don't need to change our body, we need to change our perception of our body. We need to sit in a place where we recognise the mental dialogue that we hold about our body is not truth or fact, but just a dialogue. Then we need to learn to let that dialogue go, without becoming invested in it. In other words – let it go!

From this place of recognising the mental dialogue and not buying into it, we can start to truly nurture ourselves. We can start to properly listen to our own body; how it feels when we move about in certain ways, how it feels when we let go of food rules and listen instead to how our body responds to certain foods.

The human body is diverse. We come in different shapes and sizes. No matter what shape and size you come in, you deserve to be loving that vessel that carries you around each day. No individual person is more deserving of loving their body than someone else. No individual person is more deserving of having a healthy body image than someone else. Our body tells a story. Our body has been on a journey. As the inspiring and wonderful Body Image Movement Founder, Taryn Brumfitt says:

*"Your body is not an ornament, it is the vehicle to your dreams."*

# Lets Stay Connected

## CONTACT

To find out more about The Body Image Movement visit the website:

[www.bodyimagemovement.com.au](http://www.bodyimagemovement.com.au)



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