

MAKE PEACE WITH YOUR BODY

Simply put, life is way too short to spend time criticizing your own looks. Of course, stopping that negative self-talk is easier said than done. We're here to help.

BY BRITTANY BURKE

YOU'D HAVE TO BE LIVING UNDER A ROCK not to know that body positivity is a hot topic. From curvy influencers embracing their physiques on social media to brands like Nike introducing fuller-figured mannequins, there have been major cultural strides in accepting women of all shapes and sizes. This is a really good thing. But it can also create a tricky dynamic.

Traditionally in the United States, there has been just one body-type ideal—and that ideal is thin, explains Kathleen Bishop, a licensed clinical social worker and founder of Body Peace and Liberation in San Jose, California. Women who don't meet that standard often feel like they've failed. So as nice as it is to be told you should love the way you look, it's hard to simply shake off years of negative thoughts about your body. In fact, now there are lots of women feeling like double failures—feeling like they're failing because they aren't that cultural ideal and failing because they aren't feeling body-positive.

The good news: There is a solution. Some experts say rather than body positivity, we should all be striving for peace. "Body peace is more about coexisting with your body and viewing it as more functional than aesthetic," says Bishop. If body positivity is the finish line, body peace is the marathon course—it's a process, and one that has a lot of twists and turns. "Body peace isn't loving your body every day," adds Kristina Taylor, a licensed mental health counselor with the Growth & Recovery Counseling Center in Trinity, Florida. "It's recognizing that our bodies are a minute part of who we are as a whole person—and not letting them take up more space in our minds than they deserve."

Like anything else, the bond with your body takes nurturing, but with effort, it can be a healthy one. "The goal is for it to be a peaceful relationship, and free of conflict and hostility," says Meredith Bauer, a licensed professional counselor with Modern Therapy in Houston. To move you toward that place, we asked four women to share their own journeys, and are offering up expert-approved tricks that can lay the foundation for your own body peace.

"Focusing on the good is what got me through."

BY KEAH BROWN

THERE ARE THREE THINGS that I know to be absolutely true in this world: Cheesecake is delicious, Paramore is one of the best bands ever, and women are way too hard on themselves. OK, fine. The first two are just my humble opinions. But the last one I learned through years and years of anecdotal evidence. See, I spent most of my life being too hard on myself.

Here's something you should know about me to understand the journey I've been on. I have cerebral palsy, which means, among other things, that I walk with a limp and have a right hand that balls into a fist and lifts itself in the air involuntarily. People stare at me everywhere I go. Because of this, I used to hide away and apologize for the space I took up. I would even use the sleeves of my shirt to cover my right hand so that no one saw my bent fingers.

Makeup by Bailly Barone



PHOTOGRAPH BY WESTON WELLS

This was just a small sign of the shame and anger I felt toward my body and myself.

Thankfully, I no longer feel that way. How'd I change all that? A few years ago, I forced myself to start every day by looking in the mirror and saying out loud four things that I liked about myself in that moment.

This small addition to my routine made a huge impact. I began to genuinely like the person I was for the first time in my life, and I was inspired to create a hashtag that I started using online. It was #DisabledAndCute, and I encouraged other women to use it. I wanted

others to embrace what they loved about themselves and start talking about themselves in a positive way—the hashtag wound up going viral! From there, I started speaking at conferences, writing articles, and even got a book deal—*The Pretty One* just came out.

I firmly believe that without standing in front of my mirror to say those four things I like about myself, the rest of this would not have been possible. Those positive affirmations are different every day—sometimes they are about a kind act I did, sometimes they are about liking my outfit—but they

all have led to a domino effect that made everything else possible.

One clear sign of how far I've come in appreciating my body and myself? Clothes hold a totally different meaning to me now. I love shopping and have come to realize that picking clothes is about highlighting and enhancing what I have—not hiding. Just look at my book cover! That hand that I used to hide? It's fully on display.

To learn more about Keah Brown, visit keahbrown.com, follow her on Instagram @keah_maria, or pick up a copy of The Pretty One.



LITTLE CHANGES, BIG DIFFERENCE

Waking up tomorrow with a new relationship with your body might be a stretch, but these tips can help you make a lot of progress over time.

1. MOVE YOUR BODY IN A WAY THAT FEELS GOOD.

Instead of forcing yourself up super early for boot camp because “you have to,” think about how moving actually makes you feel. “Exercise can be great, but not if you’re using it as punishment,” says Bishop. “Try to divorce movement from changing the size and shape of your body, and do things that make you feel joyful.” If it’s been a while since *exercise and joy* were in the same sentence, think back to what you liked as a kid. Riding bikes? Go to a spin class. Swimming? Head to the nearest pool.

2. TAKE A BREAK. Whether you notice it or not, you’re inundated with messages in your daily life that shape how you feel about your body. To recalibrate, Lindsay Kite, PhD, codirector of Beauty Redefined in New York City, recommends a social media fast for at least three days. “This can resensitize yourself to the messages you’re allowing to permeate your body image.”

3. DO A SOCIAL MEDIA AUDIT.

Once you’re back on the grid, purge all your social feeds of any images that make you feel bad. Fill it with images that inspire you instead of making you feel like you have to aspire to something. Once you’ve cleared the things that feel triggering, experts recommend creating an inspiration board of things you find beautiful—in all sizes. “Start a Pinterest board or a saved collection on Instagram of people who are your size or larger,” says Bishop. “When you see yourself represented in this way, it can be really healing.”

4. SPEAK UP. It’s hard to feel at peace when your coworkers at lunch are telling you they “can’t” eat that, or your best friend texts you that she can’t find an outfit for the weekend because she feels fat. “Be honest about how hard it is for you to listen to people’s comments abusing their own bodies,” says Bauer. “Boundaries are important. Think about the length of time you spend with someone—you might

love your best friend, but if she’s constantly berating herself, is she the right person to shop with?”

5. STOP NEGATIVITY IN ITS TRACKS.

When you’re shooting for a peaceful coexistence with your body, the goal isn’t to eradicate all of your negative thoughts at once—it’s to recognize them so that you can start to make some headway. So when you feel them coming on, Bishop recommends picturing a white flag waving, and saying, “We are not at war today. We’re not doing this today.” Then replace your negativity with a mantra that makes you feel good, like “I am enough,” or “My body is an instrument, not an ornament.”

6. TAKE IN THE SIGHTS.

If you’re hypercritical of your stomach and you go to the beach, you’re going to be laser-focused on all the women on the beach who have defined abs. So experts recommend making a practice of noticing all of the

people you see—not just those who make you feel inferior. “This exercise trains you to notice that there are people of all shapes out there, and they wear all sorts of different things,” says Bishop. “It creates insulation around you so that you don’t feel so fragile in the world.”

7. MAKE A THREE-OUTFIT MAXIMUM.

If you tend to battle with your body the most when you’re getting dressed, create boundaries. “Set a limit for how long you can stand there and check yourself out,” says Bauer. Let yourself try three outfits, and then you have to go with one of them so that you don’t get bogged down obsessing.

8. CHECK IN.

Negativity is usually a symptom of something bigger. “Ask yourself, ‘What do I need?’ when you notice you’re feeling nasty to yourself,” says Bauer. “Often, our bodies are the easiest things to take our anxiety and frustration out on, so identifying what the real issue is can divert the emotions in a healthier way.”

“I had to quit dieting to find happiness.”

BY SARAH SAPORA

ON MAY 26, 2016, I took my phone out and deleted contact information for every single man I had casually slept with, dated, or sexted in the last 10 years. There were a lot of them.

At age 37, I had spent years in casual relationships but never found anything close to what my heart truly craved—a healthy, balanced relationship with a partner. In a moment of brutal but necessary self-actualization, I saw the common thread in each of these relationships—it was me. At that moment, I made a decision: I was tired of feeling alone and done with feeling invisible.

A few months before this realization, my body had started to give out on me. My left knee had a habit of buckling from underneath me, my feet would go numb, and my lower back was in constant pain. Daily tasks most

people take for granted—like walking through Target or standing to do the dishes at the sink—were becoming really hard. I started to limit what I did, and the orbit of my life was getting smaller and smaller.

If I had told a stranger that I was unhappy, that person would have just said, “If you’re an unhappy fat woman, why don’t you just go on a diet?” As if I hadn’t thought of that before!

The truth is, I’ve been on dozens of diets in my lifetime—and none of them had any lasting success. This time, I decided to take stock of where I was with my body and my life. Once I really started thinking about it, here’s what I knew for sure: I ate at night when I was lonely, in the car when I was bored, and a whole lot of other times—very few of which were actually tied to hunger.

My relationship to food was totally out of whack. My physical body was keeping me from experiencing life the way I wanted. And, finally, I threw myself into shallow connections that were sometimes frenzied, many times oblivious, and more often than not, ended in my wondering why I was wasn’t good enough for guys to want to date me.

How was I going to find a diet that would address all of that? My lightbulb moment was realizing there wasn’t a diet in the world that could fix the emotional pain I was in. I didn’t

know what would heal the hurt, but I had to do something different.

I want to be clear: I am not saying that losing weight is bad—heck, in the years since, I have lost weight and I’ll probably lose more. I *am* saying that a “diet” will never be the catalyst that leads to happiness. Being thinner doesn’t make you better or happier.

Three years later, I’m unearthing a beautifully flawed, perfectly imperfect, eternal-work-in-progress version of myself that I never knew existed. I do Pilates. I strength-train. I meditate. Most important, I do the emotional work that helps me understand why I’ve done the things I did.

Diet culture is a dysfunctional system of beliefs. Weight loss is a tool. But personal growth? That’s where the magic actually happens.

So the next time you find yourself cursing your body and thinking that shedding weight will “abracadabra” your perfect life into existence, ask yourself: “What is it I am really aching for? Am I running from something? Do I need to heal any hurt?”

Start there—build your self-love, and begin your journey from the inside out.

To learn more about Sarah Sapora and her size-inclusive wellness offerings, visit sarahsapora.com.



“Running made me look at my body in a brand-new way.”

BY ASHLEY MATEO

I LOOK EXACTLY LIKE you'd expect a runner to look: tall, lean, legs for days. That's not a weird flex; it's just a fact. But because my body technically fits into a certain positive stereotype, I have always felt as if I am not allowed to have (and

definitely shouldn't admit to) any body hang-ups.

But here's the thing: I'm a fitness writer and editor. That means I work out with your favorite trainers, go on photo shoots with Instagram fitness celebrities, and lift weights and log miles regularly with my coworkers. And since I started running seriously four years ago, I've found that every time I look in the mirror, I end up comparing myself to all the super-fit women I'm surrounded by—and I feel like I don't measure up.

As women, we have become conditioned to compare ourselves to impossible ideals, and our insecurities have become the norm. No one's immune to it, not Olympians, not the pros, and definitely not the people—like me—who dish out fitness advice.

Running has been an interesting thing for me. It has forced me to ask a lot of my body: My feet have crossed six marathon finish lines. My legs have carried me over 157.2 race miles (the training miles are countless). My arms have propelled me forward through more than 300,000 steps on those race days. And my core has kept me standing tall (or at least upright) until I crossed each finish line. This all makes me feel stronger than I ever have before. It takes me around four hours to run a marathon, and I spend the majority of that time just in awe that I've somehow developed the determination and perseverance to keep telling my muscles to dig deeper, even when I've depleted my body of every drop of energy. When I run, I feel in control. I feel proud. Honestly, I feel unstoppable.

The flip side is that running has, at times, bubbled up this body-image baggage. When I picture a runner, I see washboard abs, chiseled quads, and nonexistent body fat. When I look at myself, I don't see the proof I think should be there after all the miles I've run. Even though I know that sentiment is ridiculous, those thoughts still sometimes manage to seep in.

As a way of getting rid of these negative, unproductive thoughts, I focus on the strength I have found in running. When you participate in a race, it becomes obvious that strength doesn't look one way. Distance running is the great equalizer. Whether you're tiny and petite, tall and muscular, curvy, or plus-size, you're using the exact same muscles in the exact same way as the woman next to you to keep moving forward—and everyone, no matter what they look like, covers the exact same distance in a race. No matter the time. It's an equal accomplishment.

Now, when that negative self-talk pops up, I think about how hard I've trained. And if my brain can manage the discomfort of a marathon, I know I can wrestle down the discomfort that comes with seeing a photo where my stomach doesn't look perfectly flat. Running has taught me that the more you put yourself in uncomfortable situations, the stronger you'll be the next time one comes up.

Follow Ashley Mateo on Instagram @ashleymateo for more info on her work.

Hair and makeup by Dawn Brocco for Next Artists using Living Proof (hair) and L'Oréal Beauty (makeup)

PHOTOGRAPH BY WESTON WELLS

“I stopped waiting on my weight.”

BY CECE OLISA

IN NOVEMBER OF 2014, I arrived at the office of my job early. I was going to quit that day. I couldn't afford a printer at home, so even though I wrote my resignation letter on my personal laptop, I needed to use company paper and ink to print and deliver it as soon as my boss walked in at 8:57 a.m. Before I go on, I should rewind to give you context. It was never my intention to work a corporate job. I spent my younger years tap-dancing behind my mother in the supermarket, dreaming of being on Broadway.

I like to think of confidence as a balloon. I had a soaring, full balloon until elementary school. It was during that time that a teacher pulled my mom aside and let her know that, while I was a good dancer, I wouldn't be allowed in the elite dance group because I didn't have a “dancer's body.” *Whoosh*—a little air was let out of my confidence balloon.

Fast-forward to high school, when I auditioned for a school musical. The teacher told me that even though I had a great audition, he couldn't give me the role. The reason: There was a scene where the characters talk about how they had made love in the back seat of a car, and he simply felt it was unrealistic that someone of my size would fit in the back of the car. Yup, there went more air out of my confidence balloon.

My senior year of high school, my classmates voted me “Most Talented.” My teachers couldn't look beyond my body, but my classmates could. That gave my confidence balloon the tiny burst of air I needed to move forward.

After high school, I went to New York City and got a degree in theater and became a working actor. My weight became an issue once again. Audition after audition, casting directors would tell me that they loved my talent, but they couldn't see past my weight.

After so much rejection, my confidence balloon was completely deflated.

Hair and makeup by Nevio Regazzini for Next Artists using Living Proof (hair) and MAC Cosmetics (makeup)

PHOTOGRAPH BY WESTON WELLS

My loved ones tried to boost me up, but no one could revive my confidence. The only person who could do that was me, but I didn't even try. I quit auditioning and got a corporate job to pay my bills.

In an effort to find an outlet for my creativity, I went online to share what it was like to be a plus-size girl living in New York. My Instagram community made me feel less alone, and I found the courage to rebuild my self-confidence.

I had always thought that my life would be better if I were skinnier. I perceived weight as the obstacle that was standing in the way of the life I wanted. In an effort to make myself smaller, I began to live a very small life.

Then one day I wrote in my journal, “Don't wait on your weight to live the life you want.” I began to say it in the mirror each morning. My confidence balloon started filling back up. Once I began to focus on how I felt instead of how I looked, the world opened up to me.

I began to feel confident, so I decided I wanted to support myself on my own terms—and quitting my job was the first step. My hands were trembling, but I gave my boss that resignation letter.

Five years later, I support myself by embracing who I am. One way I've done that is by cofounding theCurvyCon with Chastity Garner. It's a convention for plus-size women that takes place during New York Fashion Week—we are celebrating our five-year anniversary! I have even given a TEDx Talk called “How to Build Self Confidence.”

People always say that everything you want is outside your comfort zone, but I often wonder if it's about what lies outside the comfort zone or if it's simply about having the confidence to leave your comfort zone in the first place.

CeCe Olisa is cofounder of theCurvyCon. Learn more at ceceolisa.com or by following her on Instagram @ceceolisa.

