



Your Body is Your Ally

Even though we are entitled to care and protection, it is painfully easy to blame our bodies for trauma we endure. Perhaps if we had looked or acted differently, the trauma would not have happened. Afterwards, we want the body to just get over it instead of needing a long healing process. We disconnect from our bodies, and then feel surprised and betrayed by their insistent needs.

A large part of healing from trauma is making contact with your body, living in your body, being your body. This body, right now, with its actual size and shape and quirky mix of abilities and disabilities. This body, with its sensations and preferences and needs and desires.

Learned body judgment. Many of us get explicit messages as we grow up that there is something wrong with our bodies. Even if adults expressed delight in our child bodies exactly as they were right then and as they continued to change, society quickly steps in to tell us we are too much of this and not enough of that and (especially for girls and women) our worth is based on being pleasing to look at (by men). We absorb body judgment and body hatred and continue to wield them against ourselves.

If there was abuse or neglect or pain, the body soon feels like an enemy to flee rather than an ally to rest in. When the nervous system screams “danger! danger!” and no one helps soothe it, we learn to dissociate rather than to live in harmony with our physical self.

Buried needs. Some people are lucky enough to grow up in environments where needs and wants were matter-of-factly accepted and mostly met. We all deserve to grow up in an environment where hunger is met with food, distress is met with soothing, and longing for touch is met with cuddles and hugs.

Most of us learned that at least some of our wants and needs were not okay, either through direct punishment or indirect withdrawal. Children learn to prune away or deeply bury the parts of them that do not make their carers happy, even if those parts are essential. Instead of mourning our unmet needs, we judge our bodies as bad for having them.

When we focus on our bodies as an enemy to be subdued rather than an ally to be tended, we skew our whole life experience toward battle and discomfort. In particular, trying to make ourselves physically smaller distracts us from taking up space as our full selves.

Myth of individualism. Mainstream US culture encourages us to look inward to solve problems. There is a myth that we can each individually control our lives and our bodies to resolve any issues that arise. In fact, our lives are tangled skeins of influences from past and present, a mix of the people, culture, environment, and oppressions surrounding us.

We can identify which parts of our lives are under our control by experimenting and noticing when our actions create change.

We can influence our bodies, but they are very much not under our control. Weight-loss diets do not work long-term for the vast majority of people, although they might work in the short term, giving us an illusion of control and

effectiveness.*

Body size is complex. Our body size is the outcome of a complex set of factors, including our genetics, our feelings of safety or threat, our gut health, our available movement choices, and our available food choices. Most of those factors are not under our control. We can caringly do our best to choose movement and food that nourish us in each moment, and let our size and weight take care of themselves.

Even when we make grudging peace with the body we have, we might continue to wish we were smaller or stronger or taller or otherwise more socially acceptable. We are judged for how we look all the time. An internal critical voice repeats those judgments in an effort to keep us safer. It takes time to notice that voice rather than merging with it, and even more time for it to quiet down.

Fantasy of being different. In The Fantasy of Being Thin described by Kate Harding, we imagine that once we are thin, we will be a different, more capable person.† Instead, we can work to accept ourselves as we are now, and take action toward the life we want from that starting point. Similarly, we might have a Fantasy of Being Healed. While a lot gets better in healing from trauma, we do not turn into a different person with a different past.

If our body size does change, we might be physically reminded of other times in our lives when we were smaller or larger. Being smaller can feel childlike, vulnerable and exposed.

Notice what works. You can turn toward your body in a

* "Why Diets Don't Work" by Michelle Allison, November 19, 2013. <https://fatnutritionist.com/index.php/why-diets-dont-work/>

† *Lessons From the Fat-o-sphere*, Penguin Putnam Trade, 2009, by Kate Harding and Marianne Kirby.

friendly way by noticing what works or feels good right now. At the very least, you are breathing. Let your attention rest on the in and out of your breath, and notice what comes up.

When you first reconnect, you might encounter how it feels to be disconnected, or the distress that caused you to disconnect originally. Let that move through, and keep returning to the in and out of breath. Hold the thought that your body is already doing its best and it is okay just the way it is.

Your body deserves care. It might take repeated efforts to connect in a friendly way if you have been disconnected for a long time. Practice thinking of your body as a shy creature that deserves care and affection. Practice listening for and acknowledging sensations and needs.

When you connect, you might feel relief, and warmth, and an answering friendliness. Bodies are generally forgiving and want to feel connected.

Nourish and nurture. Listen for what feels nourishing and nurturing around food, movement, and rest. Notice what already feels good, and what you might want to do in addition. Make a list, and sit with it for a while.

When you are ready, experiment with giving yourself something from the list, and pay attention to how it feels. Sense for what feels good in the moment, and notice how you feel afterward. Some actions might have delayed effects, like delicious chocolate that keeps you from falling asleep later.

Feeling good physically or emotionally might be tied to shame or fear reactions. If brief good feelings were followed by more catastrophes in the past, you might need to build up your tolerance. Make small changes at first and ride out the reactions that are stirred up. Eventually, present safety will overwrite past associations.

Receive kindness. Your body holds your history, and your

body also points faithfully toward what you need to heal. One of the big goals of healing is to feel better, and another is to be treated with kindness. Your body is you. When you tend to your body with generous care, you practice feeling better and receiving kindness right now.