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TRENDING: BODY KINDNESS

Yes, you can make peace with your butt, hips and thighs. And that may mean a healthier relationship with food too

By Leslie Goldman

“WHAT WOULD YOU DO IF YOU TREATED YOUR BODY with kindness?”

That’s the question registered dietitian nutritionist Rebecca Scritchfield, author of *Body Kindness*, first asks clients when they come to her mindfulness-based wellness practice in Washington, D.C., for help resisting diet culture and cultivating a happier relationship with their body.

In response, she’s usually met with an uncomfortable silence as people realize they aren’t treating themselves with compassion. “Their faces read like they just witnessed their child being teased on the playground,” Scritchfield says. “We all have a gut instinct for how to be nice to our body, and we all know that forcing ourselves through workouts we hate, or denying ourselves cake at a party because we ate too much pizza at dinner, isn’t it.”

But these self-punishing messages are easily in-

ternalized when you reside in a culture awash with cleanses and diet plans, airbrushed ads and painstakingly curated social media, and the message that you must be slim and conventionally attractive to be worthy of admiration or love. More than three quarters of American

are dissatisfied with their bodies, usually preferring a smaller figure than what they currently have, according to recent research out of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Men struggle under the same societal pressures: a 2016 study published in the journal *Psychology of Men & Masculinity* found that only half of the 115,000-plus men surveyed were satisfied with their weight.

Dieting often backfires. Dieters are more likely than non-dieters to end up obese over the next





one to 15 years, according to neuroscientist Sandra Aamodt, author of *Why Diets Make Us Fat: The Unintended Consequences of Our Obsession with Weight Loss*. Besides promoting binge eating, “dieting is stressful, and stress hormones increase the amount of fat stored in fat cells,” Aamodt says.

We all have a weight range, called a set point, where our body naturally wants to be at—regardless of whether our brains are in agreement. “It’s the

weight you always seem to return to when your diet fails, with a 10-to-15-pound range,” Aamodt explains, “and moving the scale below that range takes a serious lifetime commitment.”

So you can rail against your body—or you can learn to treat it with love and consideration. “If body image is a source of pain in your life, you can take the skills learned from different mindfulness techniques, such as compassion and lack of judgment,

and direct them right at that pain,” says Sharon Salzberg, co-founder of the Insight Meditation Society in Barre, Mass., and author of *Real Love: The Art of Mindful Connection*.

Take meditation. You know how when your mind wanders, you are supposed to notice the wandering without criticism and bring your attention back to your breathing? Well, you can transfer that acceptance and patience to your gut. Let’s say you’re comparing your stomach to the six-pack next to you at the gym. First, Scritchfield recommends, simply notice the thought—“Oh, I’m wishing I looked like that 18-year-old with the abs.” Next, reassure yourself, “It’s OK that I’m having this thought. But what I really want is to be the kind of person who . . .” Then fill in the blank with an action you have control over, such as “. . . who loves to exercise for the energy boost.”

This type of mindset can improve your confidence and spur healthier habits. Research published in *Clinical Psychologist* revealed that students who were able to feel present and approached life with a non-judgmental attitude experienced a healthier overall relationship with food, their bodies and themselves.

Salzberg especially likes loving-kindness meditation, also called metta, for nurturing self-appreciation. Focus on your breath moving toward your heart as you silently repeat an inspirational phrase, such as “May I love myself as I am” or “May I be peaceful and at ease.” Don’t be surprised if you notice an uptick in positive emotions. A 2014 Israeli study found that seven weeks of loving-kindness meditation was effective in reducing self-criticism, an effect that remained up to three months afterward.

Yoga for a better body image

Yoga is something of a secret weapon in fighting everything from disordered body image to a diagnosed eating disorder. Practicing yoga for at least 30 minutes a week is linked with higher levels of body satisfaction, regardless of body mass index, according to a 2018 study led by Dianne Neumark-Sztainer and published in the journal *Body Image*.

This benefit doesn’t surprise Beverly Price, a certified yoga therapist and eating-disorder expert in Rochester Hills, Mich. “In yoga, you might find yourself in difficult or awkward postures,” Price says. Learning to stay in these positions and work through the discomfort can help you outside the yoga studio, when you notice negative self-talk creeping in.

Workouts also nudge you to define your body in terms of “what it can do” versus “how it looks” (for instance, being grateful that you have strong legs that can run a 5K rather than focusing on their size). And mindful movement like yoga allows you to tune in to your authentic hunger signals by heightening your awareness of bodily sensations in general.

Why slow meals matter

Mindful eating—taking time to experience the taste, texture, look and smell of food—helps us gauge how much we’re consuming while keeping us in touch with our internal hunger cues. It has been shown to diminish people’s anxious feelings about food and their body. A 2018 review published in *Current Obesity Reports* found strong evidence for including mindful eating practices in weight management. Instead of scarfing down take-out while standing at the counter, mindful eating involves sitting down without distractions (no phones or books, even)

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and noticing, say, the tingle of champagne on your tongue, the crisp sweetness of an apple, the way a pickle makes your mouth water before you even take a bite. It isn’t about making yourself eat a salad when you really want cookies, Scritchfield says. “It means that the next time you’re stressed and find yourself reaching for cookies to cope, you can pause and ask yourself, ‘Is this what I really need right now?’”

Scritchfield also urges us to ask: Is this helping me create a better life for myself? If pounding through a bag of cheese popcorn while checking email leaves you upset or uncomfortably full, don’t stress it, but make the change in the moment to correct course. It isn’t always easy, but mindfulness can teach us to shake off negative thoughts and show ourselves the kindness we’d give our best friend. As Scritchfield says, “You can’t hate yourself healthy.” ■