RADICAL SELF LOVE
BOOTCAMP

BY GALA DARLING
BODY IMAGE:

AWAKEN YOUR DORMANT GODDESS, AND THROW CONFETTI ON YOUR SOUL
“Find the goddess inside yourself instead of looking for the god in someone else.” —Francesca Lia Block

When it comes to the battle of radical self love, the first place it plays out is in the mirror. How many of us truly love what we see when we look at ourselves? Even those of us who have a generally non-combative relationship with our bodies can easily find facets to criticise and features to nitpick.

Many of our attitudes about our appearance are learned. Our mothers are our first role models, and from watching them relate to their own bodies, we learn how to treat or mistreat, love or loathe our own. If your mother harped on about her dissatisfaction with her bum, her belly, or her hips, that will seem “normal” to you. If your mother had an unhealthy connection to food -- seeing certain foods as “good” or “bad”, feelings of guilt around dessert, a diet obsession, or even a full-blown eating disorder -- you will have picked up some, if not all, of it.

It is heartbreaking that the notion of women having healthy, happy relationships to food is considered exciting. At the same time, that’s one of the things that excites me so much about radical self love. I can’t help but think that if you can rework your relationship with your body, your daughter will have a truly revolutionary connection to her figure. She will see her body as a tremendous miracle, rather than something to fight or find fault in. She won’t fixate on her appearance. She will see herself as strong and capable. That’s why radical self love is so important, and that’s why we need to start practicing it immediately. It stretches way past us as individuals: it can literally change the world.

Our bodies, the way we feel about them, the things we say about how we look do not exist in a vacuum. It affects our best friends, our families, our work, our creativity. Obsessing about your weight or the sum of your parts is simply a distraction from whatever it is you were put on this planet to do.
You are not your body. You are not your nose. You are not the thickness of your hair or the colour of your skin. All of this stuff is inconsequential. You are beautiful purely because you are here, you exist, and you are the doing the best you can.

In my interview with Kitty Cavalier, she mentioned that some of the greatest seductresses in the world were not regarded as traditionally beautiful. Many of them had hook noses, hunched backs, and yet, they were able to beguile the world. Contrary to popular belief -- and her portrayal by Elizabeth Taylor -- Cleopatra was not a great beauty.

Plutarch indicates that “her beauty, as we are told, was in itself neither altogether incomparable, nor such as to strike those who saw her.” Rather, what ultimately made Cleopatra attractive were her wit, charm and “sweetness in the tones of her voice.”

Cleopatra employed her charm, intelligence, humour, and voice to captivate others. She may not have been beautiful, but Cleopatra ruled ancient Egypt for 21 years, and seduced the world. In fact, she is still seducing the world today! Cleopatra was busy; she had things to do! She was not staring in the mirror worrying that her belly didn’t look flat today.

Cleopatra demonstrates that you do not need to adhere to traditional beauty standards in order to have an impact. You do not need to conform to do good. You can have great influence, leave an incredible legacy, and be a person of immense substance without ever shaving your armpits!

Succeeding in art or business is difficult enough; there is so much to contend with! But trying to master these disciplines when you are also battling with your appearance is an almost insurmountable task.

Worse than that, there is no “winning” when you’re fighting with your body. You cannot battle biology. We all need a decent amount of food every single day so that we can stay happy and healthy, and so that our brain will operate at its highest possible capacity. There is a certain size that fits your height and frame, and the only way you’ll get there
is by moving your body regularly, and eating unprocessed food. Anything else is a zero sum game. Trust me!

When I think back on how much I used to hate how I looked, I feel really sad. I can’t help but think about what an enormous waste of time that was, when I could have been doing any number of things instead. My negative body image was so pervasive that I found it almost impossible to be present in my life. I was always outside myself, judging how I looked.

If you’re struggling with an eating disorder or with your body image, know this: this is not your “fault”. However, from here, you have a choice. You can decide right now that you want to end this negative cycle, and start taking positive steps to remedy it, or you can stay exactly where you are now.

The first thing to do is look at everything that is influencing you. Grab a sheet of paper and divide it in half vertically. On the left-hand side of the page, write down anything external that makes you feel bad about your body. Your list might include your friend Jane who always talks about cleanses and diets, that really skinny girl you follow on Instagram, your thinspiration board on Pinterest, watching E! Entertainment Network, your subscription to US Weekly, and some of the pictures on your walls.

Once you’ve made your list of influences, start to write solutions on the right-hand side of the page. Perhaps you could talk to Jane and say hearing about cleanses and diets is triggering for you, and that she’s welcome to have those conversations, just not around you. Maybe you can delete that Pinterest board, and unfollow that skinny girl. Cancel your tabloid subscriptions, take down those photos.

You get the idea. It’s so simple, but it’s so effective! For every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction. If the things you’re doing are not making you happy, and are not adding to your quality of life, stop doing them! Do something else! What do you have to lose?

There is a wonderful CBT (Cognitive Behavioural Therapy) technique
called STOPP 3 which is an ideal way of dealing with any thoughts that are distressing or upsetting to you. Whenever you realise you are having a thought that is counterproductive, harmful, or unsettling, you can practice STOPP. Each letter represents one step of the technique.

Stop and mentally step back from the situation. Don’t do anything rash or act impulsively. Just pause.

Take a breath. Be here in the moment. Slow your breathing if you can: try to make your inhale and exhale the same length.

Observe. This is all about taking stock of where you’re at, so ask yourself, what are you thinking? What do you feel? What words is my mind using, and are they true or untrue? Are they helpful or unhelpful? What am I focussing on?

Pull back, and put it in perspective. Look at the situation objectively. What would a stranger see? What would your best friend see? Is there another way of looking at it? If someone came to you with this problem, what advice would you give them? How important is this moment, and will it still be important in six months’ time? Is my reaction in proportion to the actual event?

Practice what works. Ask yourself, what is best for me and most helpful in this situation? If you have techniques or methods that help you when your thoughts are spiralling, use them! Listen to music, dance, do EFT, go for a walk, call a friend. 4

“You can search throughout the entire universe for someone who is more deserving of your love and affection than you are yourself, and that person is not to be found anywhere. You, yourself, as much as anybody in the entire universe, deserve your love and affection.” —Buddha
The simple truth is that reading something will never change your life. What really shakes things up is when we implement and put into action what we’ve learned. Here are some suggestions to help you feel better about your body, and in turn, improve your body image.

Move your body. This is not optional! Our bodies are designed to sweat, move, and be active. A lot of us have sedentary lifestyles, and recent evidence suggests that sitting too much can kill you! Go for a good walk every day. Do some yoga before you go to sleep. Dance as soon as you wake up. It doesn’t matter what you do -- it can be absolutely anything -- but you have to do something physical. It changes your brain chemistry, and in turn, makes you feel good about your body.

Wear clothing that is truly comfortable, and makes you feel good about how you look. Trying to squeeze yourself into a too-tight pair of jeans is anguish: don’t do that to yourself! Work with yourself, rather than against yourself. Get rid of anything that doesn’t fit you properly, including underwear. I recently went on a mission to find the best seamless underwear, and it seems so inconsequential, but it has truly improved my quality of life! (In case you’re wondering, Soma’s Vanishing Edge collection is amazing.)

Appreciate what your body does for you. When I started working out, I dreaded the days when my trainer would take me into a particular room that was full of mirrors. I could think of nothing worse than watching my thighs jiggle while I did jump squats. But after working out for a few months, something changed in my mind. Instead of staring at my thighs, I was simply amazed by what my body was doing. I was stronger than I had ever imagined. Nothing changed in that situation except how I thought about it! Focus on what your body can do: laugh, dance, orgasm, dream, or even kick a big hole in something! It’s truly incredible.

Become a critical observer of the media. Cosmetics, health food, cosmetic surgery, and fitness is a multi-billion dollar industry, and they buy the advertising that we see everywhere. Billboards featuring size 0 lingerie models, full-page ads in magazines, and insane
commercials are everywhere, and if you think they don’t have any impact on how you feel about yourself, you are mistaken. These companies make money when they convince us to feel bad about ourselves! Self-hatred fuels capitalism. Your self-loathing helps some old white guy with no integrity buy another enormous yacht to sun himself on. Remind yourself of that next time you see a commercial which makes you feel bad. View it all through that lens! Sometimes it makes me feel better to write on and deface ads that I find really offensive. If that helps you, do it!

Get rid of your scale. I don’t have one in the house, because the temptation to stand on it and obsess is too great. The numbers don’t matter: what does matter is how you feel in your body, whether you’re eating nutritious food, and that you’re happy.

Remember that you are not your body. Recently on Facebook I asked, “What do you do that makes you feel good about your body?” Hannah Schenker replied, “Since getting hit by a car I have realised that who I really am is something that walks around in a body, but I am not my body. Recovering from injuries puts things in perspective. This is kinda the best thing ever, to be alive. And my body’s capacity to heal is the most beautiful part of it. I don’t need to look a certain way to feel good anymore. Just being here with all bits functioning and mostly pretty healthy is enough to light my fires.”

Regularly make lists of 10 things you like about yourself which have absolutely nothing to do with anything superficial. Focus on your character instead. This is a great practice to bring into your routine: write a list every Sunday night, read it every day, and then make a new list next Sunday. Keep them somewhere for easy access on bad days.

Think about the people you admire who have achieved great things. The odds are excellent that they are not all supermodels. You don’t have to be perfect -- or even a dazzling beauty -- to make a difference in this world, to contribute something meaningful, to inspire others. Remember that carrying yourself with confidence and making an effort to be kind are what really makes somebody beautiful. Beauty is a state of mind, not a state of body!
Filter your friendships with care. Some people are simply not good for us to be around, no matter how long we’ve known them. It is so much easier to feel good about yourself when the people around you like themselves! We mirror our friends and family, so be mindful of who you spend time with!

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If you’re feeling panicky about food, or you’re having issues with eating, here are some techniques to get you through it.

♥ Help someone else. Reach out: make a phone-call, volunteer, give away clothes, donate canned goods, foster an animal, offer to babysit for a friend. These are some of the easiest ways to completely flip your feelings, and heighten awareness of your own immense blessings. Put on upbeat music, and either sing and dance along, or just listen to it mindfully. Music is an incredible therapeutic tool and is a great way to pull yourself out of panic mode. I remember once being so anxious in a taxi that the only way I could deal with it was by singing, loudly, along to the radio. I don’t think my driver minded that much, and it helped me a lot!

♥ Learn meditation, and practice it in the mornings, or whenever you’re feeling anxious. A regular practice actually changes the brain! It’s easy to learn, too. The phone app Headspace offers a free 10 day guided meditation program, and is a fantastic place to start.

♥ Go and see a friend. Don’t isolate yourself -- talk to someone. Ask yourself, ‘If my best friend felt like I do right now, would I want her to suffer in silence, or would I want her to reach out?’ Be with others. Make conversation. It helps you get out of your own head.

♥ Morning pages -- as espoused by Julia Cameron in The Artist’s Way -- are a great way of clearing your mind of all the muck that tends to accumulate. Her Basic Tools PDF explains exactly how to do it.
♥ Do something creative. Work on your Radical Self Love Bible, a journal, or a scrapbook. Do cross-stitch, paint something, or dye your hair! Clean your room! Reorganise your closet or bookshelf. Get the tiles in your bathroom to sparkle!

♥ Focus your attention 100% on some other activity. It doesn’t matter what this other activity is; as long as it’s not harmful, it’s fair game! Remind yourself that this feeling -- like all feelings -- will pass. You have been here before, and you survived. You will be okay. Breathe deeply. Remember that you are safe.

♥ Prayer is another technique to help reduce panicked thoughts and worry. You don’t need to be religious for this to work, either. There’s something about giving your problems to a higher power -- no matter whether it’s the universe or God -- that brings enormous relief.

♥ Employ The Work by Byron Katie. (See last week’s essay for the details!)

♥ Gratitude, gratitude, gratitude. What are you thankful for right now?

 saldo

In 2010, I wrote a post called Empty Bellies Do Not Beget Genius. It’s one of the most meaningful -- and angry -- things I’ve ever written, probably because in a lot of ways, I was writing to an earlier version of myself.

**Excerpt:**

“A hungry girl is an ineffectual girl. A hungry girl is a girl sapped of energy, strength, life-force. A hungry girl can’t achieve anything, fix anything, come up with a bold, brave solution. Choosing to go hungry is a way of subjugating your own strength, your own power. It is a way of making your-
self small and useless. It is asking someone else to take care of you. It is about giving up, giving in. … Being hungry and sad is not sexy. It’s not cool. It’s not dramatic or mysterious. It’s a way of putting your life on hold. It’s procrastination. It’s you not wanting to prove yourself in any real way. It’s you being afraid of growing up and taking risks. It’s you putting off the important stuff. … Eating disorders are not a choice but HOW YOU DEAL WITH THEM IS. You can choose for it to dominate and completely ruin your life, or you can decide to take control, LOVE YOURSELF and live the amazing life which is waiting for you.”

When I think about people who are not eating, or binging and purging, or so enveloped with self-loathing that they cannot see their way out, my heart breaks, and then gives way to pure, white-hot rage. I have managed to overcome my eating disorder and my disgust for my body, but I am furious that it robbed me of so many years, and so much time. I cannot stand the thought that so many others are going through that right now. I would not wish it on my worst enemy. I feel equal parts livid and nauseated that the talents and spirits of so many incredible people are so dampened by self-hatred that we will never know who they could be or what they could create. It makes me want to scream.

We all have the right to a wonderful life, and one thing’s for sure: as long as poor body image takes centre stage, there’s no room for anything else.

Of all the things I believe, one of my most fervent views is that we cannot be creative, love unconditionally, or explore our lives with wild
abandon when we deny ourselves food. It is simply impossible. Eventually it comes down to a question of, ‘Do I want to obsess over how I look, or do I want to live my life?’

Food keeps us going. It is essential. When we refuse to nourish ourselves, we refuse to take part in life. When we place so much emphasis on what we are or are not eating, we are no longer involved in the world. We reduce ourselves down to a mathematical equation, constantly measuring and calculating, the figures ticking over in our brain. We no longer notice a beautiful, crystal-clear sky, or majestic architecture pointing upwards, or the love being offered to us by friends and family. We are disconnected, shut off. Our life is half-lived at best.

The problem with not liking your body, no matter how far along the spectrum you are, is that it turns everything else in your world down to half-volume. The quality of each day is dictated by whether you feel fat or not. The numbers on the scale in the morning control your life. Disliking your belly seems like a small thing, but if you added up all the time you spent thinking about it, you’d be horrified.

The world is desperate for you to contribute your unique genius. When you’re stuck in a cycle of starving, binging and purging, or quietly hating yourself in the mirror, you are robbing yourself of energy that you could use to do so many incredible things. You could start a magazine, you could travel the world, you could dance your way across every continent, you could learn how to cook a culinary masterpiece from every culture that exists! But your life will be on hold until you manage to extricate yourself from your unhappy loop.

The thing is this. Your body is beautiful just as it is, right here, and right now in this moment. You might have pimples, stretchmarks, wobbly bits, sticky-outty bits, fuzzy areas, a rare belly-button... It’s all wonderful. You might have the physique of a ballerina or be more of the cuddly type, and guess what? It doesn’t matter! It’s all great! Learn to love what you have.

As Carrie once said to Charlotte in Sex And The City, “The problems is not your thighs, sweetie. The problem is your head.”
Stop obsessing over what you don’t like, and focus on the parts you can appreciate right now.

Radical self love means making a concerted effort to pour as much love and appreciation into ourselves as possible. CHERISH your body. It is such a miracle, and is capable of so many things!

You deserve to feel amazing, and the only way to get there is by taking everyday actions that make you feel good about your body. Total body love is possible. You can do it! I believe in you!
RESOURCES

If your thoughts about food and your body are becoming unhealthy, please seek help. It is extremely important that you seek some kind of treatment. The Mayo Clinic outlines the various types of treatment available here. Eating disorders do not have to be a life sentence, I am living proof.

In the USA, NEDA (National Eating Disorder Association) have a toll-free, confidential hotline if you just need someone to talk to. Their number is 1-800-931-2237. They also have forums if you’re looking for support.

We Bite Back is another forum for people looking to recover, and is filled with people who will support and understand you.

If you’re looking for ideas to help you feel good about your body, this post on Facebook has hundreds of excellent comments. (I’d love for you to add your own, too!)

 Fucking Awesome Bulimics I Know is full of interviews with bulimic women, and their stories are totally inspiring.
ENDNOTES


[5] Lifehack

