

# ***Please Try This at Home***

## ***Monthly Tips for Increasing the Joy in Your Life***

### **What's the Purpose of Your Body?**

It's the first week of New Year's resolution season, when the guilt of holiday overindulgence lurks thick in the air of crowded gyms and fitness clubs. Encounters with the bathroom scale or mirror are followed by growing despair at how much further away we are from resembling the glittering Hollywood people after yet another year of aging, spotty nutrition, sporadic exercise, insomnia, stress, pregnancy, child rearing, or medical conditions that cause *real* impairment.

It's almost depressing enough to make us want to give up the idea of physical beauty and perfection altogether, throw up our hands in surrender, and shout, "Whatever will be will be!" Except that the media and not-so-secure-or-helpful people in our lives have forever drilled into us that if only we look just right then we will be popular, happy, rich, famous, and worthwhile and if we don't, we're nobodies. That's a pretty hard message to overcome.

If you look around, though, we're not exactly alone in this never ending fight between the ideal and the real. Not that many people seem to fit that magazine ideal, without serious photoshopping. It's almost as if whoever designed us was not that interested in our being, on the whole, thin, tan, tall, ripplingly muscular, flawlessly skinned, young, and able to jump tall buildings in a single bound. It seems like our DNA was programmed with a lot more visual variety in mind and a range of functions that goes way beyond looking svelte while posing.

### **Valuing Function, Not Just Appearance**

In fact, I wonder if this same variety that we fight in our efforts to conform to the narrow media ideal actually offers another way for us to genuinely appreciate our bodies as they are and are becoming. After all, think about how many things that we appreciate, not for how they look, but for what they are able to do: tools, rescue equipment, plumbing, oxygen, electricity, etc. Sure, it's nice if their design is visually appealing, but what really matters is whether they serve the purpose we are using them for.

Think of the countless things that we use our bodies for that add great meaning and variety to our lives that don't require us to look any particular way at all: moving and grasping, seeing and tasting, adjusting to various climates, growing small persons, fighting illness, hugging a loved one, speaking, dancing, carving small objects out of stone. In fact, the vast majority of things that we do do not require a wedge-shaped, symmetrical jaw line or cellulite-free thighs.

Isn't it about time that we balanced out the self loathing that follows thoughts about our bodies' "imperfections" with some gratitude for how well our body does the things it can *still* do, even if we are in our later years? I wonder what would happen if every time our thoughts turned to our stretch marks or less-than-rock-hard pecs, we found five things to be grateful that our body could do that day. Hopefully, that whack of healthy perspective could take our self loathing down at least a few notches.

## How Does Your Body Uniquely Serve Your Purpose?

But I also get that the part of us that seems driven to compare ourselves to others in hopes of feeling that we've come out on top, we won, we're lucky, distinguished, and therefore *finally* worthwhile does often resist general gratitude as a strategy for self worth. "If I can run and so can everyone else," that part argues, "Where does that leave me? I'm just like everyone else." We can talk till we're blue in the face about how we shouldn't be comparing ourselves to others and we should just have good self-esteem, not in-comparison-to-others esteem. But there's still a part of us that wants to be unique, special, and noticed. This part is often what's behind our struggles with body image, in particular, so we can't totally ignore it. If we're going to find ways to appreciate our bodies that don't involve torturing ourselves into a pre-set ideal, we need to account for our need to feel unique and distinguished.

So my nod to that part of us would be the question: What is it that you love to do or are good at doing that your body, in particular, warts and all, *uniquely* equips you for?

We can probably think of certain famous people's answers to this question: Michael Phelps could point to his giant feet, helping his swimming propulsion; Lance Armstrong might say his large heart gave him the edge in the Tour de France; Danny DeVito could note how his physique distinguished him as the perfect comic sidekick. But what about the rest of us non-famous people? Here are some ways I've heard everyday people talk about this:

- A youth minister describes how his pitted, acne-scarred face helps teens who are shy or unpopular open up to him and accept his help. His non-ideal appearance allows them to feel more comfortable not "having it all together" with him.
- A trauma victim counselor talks about how her large stature that exceeds the Hollywood ideal and her soothing low voice helps victims to feel protected, but not threatened during the trust-building part of their care.
- A woman shares that her few extra pounds and stretch marks help her husband feel okay that he has imperfections, too. He's said that it would be harder for him and for their relationship if he felt he was the only one with some non-ideal physical attributes.
- An emergency worker with Adult Attention Deficit Disorder shares how the same mental processes that undermine his ability to organize things in low-pressure situations help him to stay alert and effective for days in high-intensity situations, rather than getting overwhelmed.
- A woman who was too tall, gangly, and undeveloped to get boys' or popular girls' attention in middle school talks about how that deficit created a buffer from peer pressure. After all, she'd never fit in, no matter what she tried, so why do things she didn't want to do? It led her to pursue compassion for outcast people and hard academic work instead, traits she still values and pursues years later.

How about the out of the ordinary or non-ideal parts of your body? Are there ways that they actually equip you to be more effective at some of the activities and relationships that you value? Does your prematurely graying hair give you credibility in important situations that a person who doesn't show their age misses? Do those extra pounds and slightly limp hair protect you from the jealousy and exclusion that women who more closely fit the Hollywood "ideal" experience? Does your Santa-like belly and obvious laugh lines draw folks to you who have had a hard road and need a second dad who feels soft, joyful, and safe? Do your big bones and uneven teeth make you a more intimidating bouncer? Do your small stature and mousy features allow you to slip through crowds and tense situations unnoticed, accomplishing what you need to without making a stir? Let's start being grateful for these "flaws" that actually support us.

## Balancing Improvement with Appreciation

I know it's difficult to go against years of programming and so many messages that if we don't fit the air-brushed standard, we are nothing. Of course that's not an easy fix. There are billions and billions of advertising dollars against us! But this January, in between hitting the gym and getting those pesky, ever-growing eyebrows waxed, I invite you to buck the system with me and:

- 1) Find some things about your body, especially non-ideal things, that actually equip you in accomplishing things you love to do and relating to the particular people you value as well.
- 2) Write these down and put them in a place where you will see them regularly, like the bathroom, your smart phone, your computer, a post it note on the fridge, etc.
- 3) Notice when you start to beat yourself up because your body is not ideal and it never gets younger.
- 4) During those moments, bring to mind the general and specific things from your list that you are grateful for about the ways your body brings you joy and supports your unique lifestyle, as a counter-balance to the barrage of negative self messages.
- 5) Enjoy the gradually-growing confidence in your body's effectiveness in bringing you a meaningful life, not just an impressive image.

If you or someone you know would like help appreciating and accepting your body, feel free to call me at 303-931-4284 for a free 20-minute consultation or email [info@jenniferdiebel.com](mailto:info@jenniferdiebel.com).

Thanks for reading!

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