

Self-Acceptance for a Healthy Life



Many times, we are motivated to set a health or weight loss goal by the fact that there's something about our current life or body that we're unhappy with. Who hasn't had a moment of disturbing truth in the dressing room mirror or feeling overly winded after a flight of stairs? But here's the truth: feelings of self-criticism and shame might motivate a few workouts or "good" eating days, but they motivate many more falls *off* the health wagon than on.

Want to create lifelong change in your health? Come at it from a different angle: one of extreme self-acceptance, rather than self-critique. You only get one body, so you might as well love it and take wonderful care of it, in part by incorporating healthy food and fitness practices into your daily life. And here's the bonus, self-acceptance triggers a relaxation response that can help reduce the stress and anxiety so many of us feel about trying to create new healthy habits – and we think that makes those habits even more likely to stick.

Here are a baker's dozen (plus one!) action items for shifting into a self-acceptance mindset in 2016.

Set a self-acceptance intention. Before you do anything else, you have to be willing to release what might be lifelong patterns of blame, doubt and contempt. Once you decide that you're ready to live a life of self-acceptance rather than self-loathing, you can truly begin your journey to a lasting, healthy relationship with yourself, your body and your life.

Stop comparing. There's a wise saying that it's dangerous to compare the inside of your life to the outside of someone else's. Think about it. On the surface, we rarely present the whole truth. If you're feeling down in the dumps and someone asks you how you are, you're more likely to say, "Great!" than tell them how it really is. Remember that what you're admiring from afar may not be as good, or as perfect as it seems.

Discover what makes you unique. Make a list of things you can do that sometimes surprise or impress other people and learn to embrace what makes you YOU.



Appreciate more. So often we dwell on things we don't have, don't think we're capable of or don't like about ourselves. But with a little bit of work, we can train our minds to appreciate all we are capable of. For every negative thought, write down two counter thoughts—like two things you do have for every thing you don't, or two things you love about yourself every time you get hung up on an imperfection.



Surround yourself with support. Distance yourself from negativity—people who put you down and don't support your journey to self-acceptance. Begin to seek out and surround yourself with people who have positive personalities and tend to look on the bright side, including the bright side of you!

Rethink failure. In life, what seems like failure in the short-term can often turn out over time to be a gift of the lessons and course-corrections that make us who we are. And in the endeavor to live a healthy life, the only true failures are: (a) not to start and (b) to quit trying. Everything else isn't

failure – it's part of the journey.

List your achievements. What have you done that you're proud of? Check in with your accomplishments every so often. Sit down with a piece of paper and write down everything you've succeeded at recently—everything from bigger and better career moves to exercising 3 days last week like you resolved to do this year. You'll probably surprise yourself.

Fast forward to the “happy.” When we're down on ourselves, it's easy to get into happiness-deferment mode. “I'd be so much happier if I were thinner/more beautiful/had more money/had a better job, etc.” Do this exercise: think of the people in your life or even celebrities who have the things you think you need to be happy. You won't have to think long before you realize that none of these things, on their own, are a magic ticket to happiness. Now do this exercise: decide to feel as happy *right now* as you think you would be if you had all those items you thought were prerequisites to happiness.

I can!

Try it! If you can do it for even a moment, you can practice doing it every day, and you will gradually learn that your little imperfections and life challenges have no power to keep you unhappy or stuck.

I am!

Intentionally counter negative self-talk with positive words to yourself. In front of the mirror, we often run through a little catalogue of insults to ourselves that we would never, ever say to another human being, cataloguing everything from pimples to love handles to cellulite dimples. And in the gym, forget about it – we should have done more cardio, lifted more weights, stayed longer, or come more often.

I will!

Here's a challenge: get and stay conscious of the times you say negative things to yourself throughout the day. Every time you have such a thought, intentionally counteract it with a positive truth about yourself. Soon, instead of focusing on how little time you spent at the gym, you'll be giving yourself kudos for showing up in the first place, and the whole thing will be much less painful.

Perform acts of kindness. When you sacrifice something for someone in need, whether it be time, money, personal belongings, expertise, or whatever you have to give, it's hard not to feel good about the person you are inside.

Purge your life of things that trigger negative self-thoughts. Junk food, your scale, clothes that haven't fit in months, unflattering mirrors, beauty magazines, old photos—whatever they may be, identify them and say good riddance. And yes, this might include getting rid of relationship patterns that involve criticism, put-downs or shame.



Treat yourself to things that make you feel good. To counter all of those items you purge, replace them with things that make you feel happy. Replace the junk food with a drawer full of fresh fruits and veggies, or your favorite green smoothie. Get off the scale and go for a walk with a friend. Trade all of those ill-fitting clothes for a dress or blazer that flatters your figure and makes you feel good. Trade those magazine subscriptions for a library card and read books that makes you laugh or inspire you. These little things add up and can make a big difference in your mood.

Learn how to accept a compliment. When someone says something nice about you, say, “Thank you,” and give a smile. (In fact, if you want to truly boost your looks, smile more – every smiling face is beautiful, if you think about it.) It's a wonderful thing! Trusting that the great things others think and say about you are true can be a gateway to seeing those things in yourself.

Use your body to have active fun. Spend your spare time doing things that make you feel good physically and emotionally, like taking a long walk with your friends (canine friends count!) or trying new, active hobbies like gardening, hiking or dancing. The more you move your body and use it to enjoy the present moment, even when you're not specifically "working out," the easier you'll find it is to be grateful for that body and how well it serves you – how wonderful it is to have this body that helps you access the various joys life has to offer.

