

## Our Most Important Relationship

February is the month of hearts and flowers, and the focus for many of us is on expressing love and appreciation for the special people in our lives. But in the midst of all of this, many of us forget about the most important relationship in our lives – our relationship with ourselves. How many of us celebrate ourselves during the month of Valentine’s Day? My guess would be not very many...

As I was growing up, I would often hear the saying, “No one else will love you if you don’t love yourself.” I always hated that saying because I felt I was a very loving person even though I had little love for myself at the time. I still feel the saying is a bit harsh, but there is a vein of truth in it. Although I believe that we *can* love others if we don’t love ourselves, I feel our capacity to love others is greatly increased when we nurture our love and appreciation for ourselves.

It is often hard to love ourselves, particularly for women in this appearance and weight-obsessed society. We often confuse our body image with our self-image and treat the two as if they were one and the same. I am an advocate of improving both body image *and* self-image, but the first step is to stop collapsing the two together. We are not our bodies. There is so much more to us than what we look like.

I have been anorexic-thin, overweight, and in-between, but the number on the scale didn’t change the fact that I didn’t like my body. I never thought I was thin or beautiful enough. Unfortunately, I also read too much meaning about myself as a person from the image I looked upon in the mirror. I thought that if I didn’t fit the societal image of what a woman should look like, I was a bad person, didn’t have any willpower, and wasn’t worthy of the good things in life.

It has taken me a long time to get to the point at which I evaluate my worth as a person separately from the shape of my body. I am still working on my body image, but here are some practices that have helped me feel better about myself and more worthy as a human being:

1. **Gratitude** – I have taken up the practice of writing in a gratitude journal daily. I write down at least 5 things I am grateful for in my life on that day. These items can be people in my life, experiences I have enjoyed, or even something as simple as being able to see the sun shining through the window of my office.
2. **Small Successes** – I also write down at least 5 successes I have experienced that day. No matter who you are or what your day has been like, I believe you can come up with at least 5 things you did well that day – making a phone call, smiling at someone on the street, and clearing the clutter off your desk are examples of small successes that you could celebrate.
3. **Acts of Service** – It is difficult to think badly of yourself when you are contributing to another. Service in its many forms allows you to get outside of yourself and escape your internal concerns through helping someone else. My husband and I used to ask ourselves daily, “What will be my contribution today?”

- This question led to a fun “game” of trying to come up with new ways of contributing every day in small but significant ways. Some contributions we created included: picking up trash on the sidewalk, sending a card or letter to a friend or family member, putting our change in a store donation jar, and clicking on donation websites such as “The Hunger Site” ([www.thehungersite.com](http://www.thehungersite.com)).
4. **Affirmations / Incantations** - Many of you are probably familiar with the practice of writing affirmations, but motivational speaker Tony Robbins takes it one step further. Instead of just writing down positive thoughts or intentions, he recommends that you say them out loud – with feeling and putting your body into it. Some examples of “incantations” (Tony’s word) are, “All I need is within me now,” “Every day in every way, I’m getting stronger and stronger,” and “I easily manifest the life I desire!” It may feel silly saying these things at first, but after you do it for a week or so, you actually start to believe what you’re saying. It helps you to feel better about yourself and your life. Try it!
  5. **Exercise** – I have found that if I do some form of exercise every day, I feel so much happier and more positive. Perhaps it is the endorphins that are released during physical activity, or perhaps it is the feeling of accomplishment I get when I move my body. Regardless of the reason, I know that exercise lifts my mood and helps me to feel better about myself. It doesn’t matter what type of exercise you do or how long you do it! Even a daily walk around the block can do wonders for your spirit. If you can fit in a bike ride or aerobics class, all the better! Exercise not only tones your body, it clears your mind and banishes negativity and the “Gremlin” (that nagging inner critic we all have).

The suggestions above are just a few ideas to help improve your self-image. I firmly believe that if you integrate two or three of these practices into your life, you will gradually start to feel much better about yourself. Another idea is to periodically take yourself on a “date.” Steal some time away to do something you love. One thing I do on occasion is take myself to the movies – even a double-feature! I emerge from the theater feeling relaxed and peaceful and better able to face my next challenge in life. Other times, I go to a café and read a novel, go shopping, or walk on the beach. It doesn’t matter what you do but, as Nike says, just do it! Celebrate the wonderful person that is you!

Happy Valentine’s Day to all of you!