

Happy in Your Own Skin

Whether you're doing battle with an eating disorder, have suffered physical abuse, or simply struggle to accept your own shape and size, yoga can make you happy in your own skin.

By Dorothy Foltz-Gray

When she was only seven, Ashley Miller cried because she didn't have a flat stomach like her older neighbor. "I was always aware of my weight and self-conscious about my body," says Miller, now a plus-size 26-year-old who is *Yoga Journal's* marketing manager. "I remember hearing that a Barbie doll was a size 6, and I told my mom when I grew up I'd be a size 6, too." Instead, by the time she entered college after years of dieting and overexercising, Miller had become a compulsive overeater. "My weight yo-yoed up and down 30 pounds, and my self-esteem was on that roller coaster, too," she says.

One day, on the recommendation of a classmate, Miller decided to give yoga a try. "I was so nervous that I wouldn't fit in or be able to do the poses, and that the other students would have tiny, perfect bodies," she says. "But when I walked in, I saw a whole range of people"—big and small, young and old, fit and not so fit.

After three months of practicing three times a week, Miller noticed she felt stronger and more at ease in her body. But more important, the critic in her head began to quiet down. In class, when she started telling herself, "My body's too big to hold this [Revolved Triangle](#)," or "I can't do this," her teacher would remind her to focus on the pose, to breathe.

What Miller experienced was the beginning of a longer process: acceptance of her body as it was in that moment. She's among millions of Americans—most of them women—who struggle each day with feelings of shame and inadequacy about their physical selves. In fact, studies have shown that the majority of American women don't like what they see in the mirror, according to Linda Smolak, a psychology professor at Kenyon College in Gambier, Ohio, and an expert on eating disorders. "For many women, their body is mainly defined as an object to be looked at and judged," Smolak says. "How do they get this message? Through peer teasing, sexual harassment, comments from parents, and of course the media. Women are constantly pushed toward an unattainable ideal."

Taking up exercise can help, but not just any physical activity will do. Although some studies suggest that female athletes feel better about their bodies than nonathletes, others report that athletes in disciplines that emphasize thinness, like gymnastics or figure skating, are more likely to have eating disorders.

Yoga, however, sets itself apart—as a study published in 2005 shows. Jennifer Daubenmier, formerly a research psychologist at the Preventive Medicine Research Institute in Sausalito, California, and now a postdoctoral scholar at the University of California, San Francisco, had noticed the mixed data about the effect of athletics on body image. So Daubenmier, who's also a yoga practitioner, decided to focus her doctoral thesis on whether yoga can help women feel better about their bodies.

She questioned 139 women of all ages (the median age was 37), who were divided into three groups: one practicing yoga, one doing aerobics, and one doing neither. Those involved with yoga not only felt better about their bodies than the other two groups but also had a better sense of what their physical selves were experiencing from moment to moment (for instance, they knew when they were starting to feel tired or sick, sometimes a difficulty for people with body-image problems). Daubenmier also found that the longer the women had practiced yoga, the higher their body esteem.

Accept yourself

Yoga makes a difference because of its emphasis on self-acceptance, something that's largely missing for those of us who dislike our bodies. The program in our heads—I'm not pretty enough, thin enough, tall enough—builds in volume over years until it's practically the only radio station playing. Odd as it seems, the vessel that keeps us alive, that nourishes us, begins to get nothing but our scorn in return.

"Body image has to do with how you feel in your body, how you describe your body, and how you think people perceive you," says Janeen Locker, a yoga practitioner and a licensed clinical psychologist who focuses on eating disorders and body-image problems in her Santa Monica, California, practice. "The core of body-image issues usually comes back to self-esteem."

Retraining your focus and thoughts as Miller did keeps you from chipping away at your self-esteem and realigns your thinking, says Daubenmier: "Yoga disengages you from judging your body and allows you to just experience it. And over time, that changes the program in your head."

Altering that program opens up new possibilities in the space where the critical chatter used to be. Miller, for instance, finds she's much more relaxed with people. "Before, if I was going out with friends, I would be so consumed with the way I looked that I couldn't fully enjoy it," she says. "Now I feel so at ease."

Find your strength

Almost five years ago, Ty Hunter of San Quentin, California, was diagnosed with breast cancer. She had a mastectomy of her left breast and then had reconstructive surgery that required an incision from hip bone to hip bone and moved skin and muscle from her abdomen to her chest. The surgeons sculpted a new breast, but to Hunter, her torso looked like a jigsaw puzzle. Some of the transplanted tissue under her arm died, and that too had to be cut out and healthy skin sewn back together.

"I had hundreds of stitches, I lost my waist, I had a bulge on my rib cage, and I couldn't raise my left arm for a year," says Hunter, now 49 and a designer of yoga apparel. "I was scarred. It was very hard to look at myself."

When her surgeon suggested that Hunter take up yoga, the athlete in her (she's a former swimmer and ski jumper) hesitated: "I thought, 'Oh, yoga. It doesn't make you sweat.'" But she decided it

might be worth a try. What she discovered in her very first class was something wholly unexpected: a profound shift in the way it felt to inhabit her scarred, altered body. "It was so right here, right now," Hunter recalls. "I could just be in the body I had. I was focusing on my breath and my joints and the muscles I was stretching, not on my upper arm that I hated or on thoughts like 'Good God, look at my stomach.' I thought, 'This is powerful.'"

Respect your body

Yoga can even help people trapped in the grip of life-threatening eating disorders. Alice Starr (not her real name), 24, a public relations specialist in Washington, D.C., who has struggled with anorexia and bulimia since high school, began practicing four years ago. Her mother thought it might allow her to befriend the body she'd abused for so long.

Like Hunter and Miller, the last thing Starr wanted was to be in a roomful of people in body-hugging spandex. But over time she began to appreciate her body for what it could do, not just what it looked like. "My instructor would start the class talking about what an amazing structure the foot is, how it roots us to the earth. Then she would guide a self-massage of the foot and encourage us to revel in each sensation," Starr recalls. "She asked us to be conscious of how it felt to walk down the street, where our weight hit, how it shifted, and to recognize the small miracle of walking. All of that allowed me to think of my body not as something that needed to be changed or that had to be punished but as a vessel that could carry me through anything."

Experts say the noncompetitive nature of yoga can make all the difference for people like Starr. "In other exercise classes you're trying to keep up with the music or following the teacher, but with yoga, it's an internal process," Daubenmier says. "You're moving at your own pace with your own breath instead of looking around the room to see how others are doing."

Starr would agree: "Minding my breath and letting my mind go and not having all the worries and static in my head made me more aware of my habits, and my bingeing and purging began to fall away. I had the power to center myself and relax. I began to *feel* what I knew intellectually: Starving, bingeing, and purging was bad for me."

Laura Washington, a naturopathic physician and yoga teacher in Portland, Oregon, has seen many such transformations in her classes on exploring weight and body image through yoga. "Yoga is all about coming into the moment and seeing ourselves as we are," she says. "Instead of wishful thinking or putting on an image we want other people to see, in yoga we get still and quiet, and all that falls away."

Today, Starr can still become preoccupied about her weight when she feels stressed, but now she focuses on replacing thoughts like "I'm fat" with positive ones like "I'm attractive." As she becomes more confident, she finds herself increasingly able to enjoy her work, her city, and her friends, even plunging herself into community activities.

"I feel as though there was this adventuresome, fun person waiting to be let out," Starr says. "Now I'm finally able to be that person."

Yoga isn't a miracle. But it does allow us to recognize the miracle we inhabit, to move from a world that emphasizes physical beauty and ideal body shapes into one that teaches us to honor the power our body offers. Maybe the miracle boils down to the kinds of small moments that Miller can now savor when people comment on her beauty: "Before, when people said I had a pretty face, I always added, '*If only I lost weight.*' Now I just absorb the compliment and say thank you."

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