

Is That Mom in the Mirror Really Me?

Accepting your new, postpartum body can be a struggle, but strive to avoid negative self-talk — and remember that self-care is not selfish.

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Pregnancy and the postpartum period can feel like puberty all over again for many women, as fluctuations in hormones, sleep, energy and appetite throw off the body's reliable responses to mood and weight management. Add in new social roles, plus acne and stretch marks, and it's common to feel uncomfortable and awkward in body and mind.

Juggling self-care after pregnancy with newborn care is no mean feat. It's even harder in a culture that provides little social support for moms, and sets an unrealistic bar for mothers to appear polished and at ease with their new role. Studies have shown that the conflicting demands of vigilance and flexibility take a toll on new mothers; as a consequence, many women have unrealistic expectations for how much they can and should control their own postpartum bodies.

Managing your emotional relationship with your body is not only good for you, research suggests it's also healthier for your baby. Maintaining a positive body image during pregnancy may reduce your risk for disordered eating and behaviors like smoking that could complicate fetal development. It may also help with emotional attachment, motivation to breastfeed and overall mood. As a reproductive psychiatrist, it's clear to me that new moms can benefit from extra support to adopt a healthy mental and physical self-image.

Start With Your Thinking

Observe how external, as well as internal, forces influence your attitudes about your identity and your body.

Your body *image* is not your body: “Body image” describes the subjective judgments in your mind about your appearance. It’s influenced by your self-esteem and formative memories, like a history of a parent criticizing your weight (or her own). You may also have grown up absorbing messages from the media and culture, telling a story that if you *look* a certain way, you’ll *feel* a certain way. That thinking can cause damage.

Big is not bad: Early in life, girls and women may learn the cultural narrative that less of you is more desirable. Your body image may be informed by the belief that more space between your thighs, a smaller nose or sleeker hair is more attractive. This thinking may extend beyond the body to include valuing a “quieter” personality and “less aggressive” professional or social presence. During pregnancy, contradictory messages around the appeal of larger breasts and the loaded compliment “you’re all bump” may leave you feeling like only certain types of curves are good (your pregnant belly) but other types of roundness (your arms or face) are bad.

Pregnancy is public: Compliments about your pregnant shape may feel affirming. But unsolicited praise can also feel like a boundary violation if you don’t enjoy attention around your appearance, or want to be viewed in the role of “mother” in the boardroom, bedroom or simply on the street. Then there are the double standards in the postpartum period; one day you’re applauded for the achievement of a pregnant body, the next you’re criticized for having “let yourself go.” The social stigma that weight gain is caused by a lack of discipline can be enraging, especially because hardworking mothers of newborns are anything but “lazy.”

Ambivalence is normal: The changing shape of your body symbolizes the changing shape of your life, and while sharing your body with your baby can feel good, it can also feel like an invasion. It’s a challenge to stay present in your body while it’s

being inhabited by a visitor, but as much as you can, try not to take a “vacation” from your body in terms of abandoning healthy habits around food, exercise and other forms of self-care.

Exercise Self-Acceptance

Progress from thinking to acting in your best interest when it comes to cultivating a healthy body image — here are a few ways to start.

Move forward, not backward: If your goal is to “get your body back,” you might want to ask why you’re putting so much pressure on yourself to perform the magic trick of going back in time. The truth is, your body, and your life, will never be the same as they were before having a baby, just as your knees will never feel the same on the dance floor as they did in high school. Should your goal be to “fit into your old skinny jeans” or is there a new size or style that can make you feel good in your current form?

Recognize that the body is symbolic: Wanting to look like your prior self may be as much about reconnecting with your pre-baby identity as your pre-baby body. Switching on circuits in your pleasure system from your old life may help you feel more like your old self without your body having to do all the work. Try this written exercise: Make a list of the experiences you miss most from your pre-baby routine. Then consider how you might realistically incorporate some adapted version of them into your life today:

- What beneficial activities (for example, getting a haircut or cooking a healthy meal) have you stopped doing?
- Which friends have you stopped seeing?
- What are the ways you used to connect with your partner?
- How did you set up your daily routine or outline goals at work?
- What seemingly nonessential rituals (such as watching your favorite TV show) used to help you decompress?

Paint a mental picture: If body image is created by a picture in your mind, why not try to make a new one? Try looking at your belly and seeing it as the part of your body that housed your baby and brought him safely to this earth. Try viewing your stretch marks as prideworthy “war wounds” or evidence of how hard your body worked. To reinforce and protect this new narrative, consider avoiding certain media and friends who may challenge your evolving positive body image until you’re feeling more confident.

See weight for what it is — a number: Have you ever looked at a photograph of yourself at an “ideal” weight and remembered that you were not feeling beautiful or happy when the picture was taken? Our minds may create fantasies that achieving a certain weight will help us improve our body image or self-esteem, but self-love and self-acceptance are more nuanced than that. For some, it’s helpful to avoid stepping on a scale (you can ask your doctor to avoid discussing the number with you unless there is a medical reason).

Aim to feel good, inside and out: Intuitive eating is a mindfulness-guided approach to food that may help postpartum women with healthy weight management. It’s about tuning in to hunger and stopping when you’re full. Eating in this fashion is guided by your body’s physical cues rather than emotions like stress, boredom or food rules such as “no dessert.” Shifting the focus from deprivation to nurturing can help with exercise too. Try to make the time for physical activity – such as yoga or massage – that is energizing, soothing or strengthening rather than painful. If you’re feeling physically detached from your partner, try introducing touch, whether sexual or pleasurable in other ways.

Practice self-acceptance for parenting: Perfectionists often struggle with body image and are most self-critical about “losing control.” Learning how to tolerate this feeling is good practice for parenting as there will be many situations when you won’t be able to control your child’s body and behavior. If you ever berate yourself, stop and ask whether you would want your child to speak to herself that way. Use your relationship with your body image as an indicator that you may need to learn how to be less critical and more patient with yourself and others.

Repair your relationship with food: Becoming a parent can provide motivation to mother yourself in a new way. If you have a history of being dangerously over or under weight, it's a good idea to seek support to help ensure the healthiest outcomes for yourself and your baby. Ask any health care professional for a referral to a nutritionist. Mental health professionals can evaluate and treat eating disorders and help to address mood or anxiety symptoms that may be at the root of food issues. Talk to your partner about stress reduction, as studies have shown that women who feel more emotionally supported by their partners may be more likely to have healthy patterns of weight gain around pregnancy and postpartum.

For many new mothers, a struggle with body image is intertwined with the desire to reclaim parts of themselves that have been pushed aside by the physical and emotional demands of new parenthood. Have compassion for yourself as you go through this identity transition, and be as gentle with your own body as you are with your baby's. In a culture that idealizes maternal self-sacrifice, remember that self-care is not selfish. The more nurtured and comfortable you feel, the more bandwidth you'll have to give to your child.

[For more advice from Alexandra Sacks, read her guide on what to do when your experience of childbirth doesn't match your expectations.]

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