

## CHAPTER 1

# Body Hatred and Wholeness

When we pick up a book like this, it's not usually for a light reading experience. It's because we are in deep distress and looking for help. This workbook is designed to offer practical help for relief from body hatred, which can wreak havoc on our inner and outer lives.

When I was in the thick of body hatred, I could not fathom feeling at peace with my body. Before I was in recovery from body hatred and food stress, I had a recurring fantasy:

*I am sitting in an armchair by a window. I have a cup of tea. I am okay...*

That's it. That was the fantasy. My fantasy was that I could sit still, in a quiet moment, and be okay in my own skin without wanting to jump out of it. What I didn't realize at the time was that the ability to sit still and be okay would only be achieved after I allowed myself to be deeply not-okay, feel my emotions deeply, grieve what deserved to be grieved, and long for what I long for, instead of simply hating my body. My body hatred masked the depth of feelings that I now experience as a sacred tether to the world around me and to life itself.

When I work with clients struggling with body hatred, I hear differing refrains of this fantasy, but the underlying desire is similar. We want to feel at ease in ourselves in quiet, alone moments. "Confident," "sexy," "embodied," and like feelings might come eventually—but the first longing is to feel at ease, not in struggle or in an endless parade of worry about our bodies.

This ease is not the same thing as unaffected. It is not the same thing as detached. I think of the longing to feel okay when we are okay as the call towards wholeness, the calling from our souls to come more deeply into ourselves and reside in our bodies. It is a sacred calling to live in our bodies peacefully so we can live in the world more effectively.

People who have not suffered from body hatred may not understand how important it is to feel at ease in their skin. But most people I know are quite familiar with constant anxiety about their bodies. If I could offer a magic pill to create instant body peace, most would gladly take it. Unfortunately, no such pill exists. But the insights and reflections in this workbook will give you

an entryway to a different relationship with your body. They will offer explanations for your suffering and actionable tools for you to begin paving a new path within yourself that does not require changing your body physically in any way.

Did I lose you at that last part? *Not* changing your body? This is the hardest piece, I find, when helping people suffering from body hatred: it is not through changing the body that our feelings about our bodies change—at least, not in the long term. (Note: I am not referring to body changes related to gender identity, which is its own nuanced journey.) This idea is a hard sell for people who want to heal their relationships with their bodies through weight loss or toning or a new food plan, rather than the work of relating to our bodies respectfully, which is an inside job—the result of working with our emotions, unmet needs, and deep longings.

I am not surprised when clients who come to me wanting to heal their relationships with their bodies expect support for their weight loss efforts. Most people in their lives (and social media) will encourage them to try to lose weight, or get “fit,” or make other body-change efforts. It’s an ever-present cultural value to be in control of one’s body. When I work with these clients, we consider how previous attempts at body change have worked for them in the long run. Usually it’s a grim picture, filled with shame that they can’t just stay on the exercise plan or the cleanse, frustration that their attempts are short-lived at best, and a fair amount of hopelessness that they might be stuck with the bodies they have.

Then we consider the possibility that they might create a new relationship with their bodies just as they are now. We consider that perhaps their feelings about their bodies might distract from deeper longings and needs (their own and the world’s), and that turning their attention to those longings can be life-giving. Our work together occurs in an unusual space of body neutrality, even body ambivalence, where sustained weight loss or fitness is not considered the elusive holy grail of relief.

In this space, our bodies are reckoned with, but not forced into change. Our bodies are allowed to be what they are—the sacred vehicles that we are given upon birth and that we will all surrender at the end of our days. The process is uncomfortable and often unsettling, as with all real change, yet leads to a new way of living in our bodies with respect and attunement rather than control and force.

This is not to say that our bodies don’t or won’t change as we transform body hatred. In fact, the one thing we can assume in the course of our lives is that our bodies will change. They will age; they will get bigger or smaller; they will die. Our bodies change in each phase of life, even the phase of the month. What this book offers is tools to ride the wave of change, whatever it

happens to bring, rather than forcing our bodies to conform to body ideals we have internalized (usually standards imposed on us from outside) so that we can feel more whole.

Healing from body hatred through listening to our bodies and cultivating a relationship of acceptance toward them does not mean that we don't take care of our bodies. In fact, it's the opposite. Because of the cultural pressure to control our bodies, when we talk about listening to our bodies instead, many people imagine that means being out of control, hedonistic, or languishing on the couch. But listening to our bodies for cues around hunger, fullness, satisfaction, need for movement and rest, and touch is really about exploring how to take cues from our bodies in order to be good stewards of our bodies and ourselves.

## Where We Begin

The journey to recover from body hatred is as personal and varied as there are bodies on the planet. Yet there are common themes and markers for the journey, and we can ground ourselves in the journey by beginning to understand which themes have influenced our lives and how.

Do you relate to any of these starting points?

- Thinking your body is wrong
- Feeling the need to control your body so it looks a certain way
- Feeling somatically disconnected from your body— not knowing what your body feels
- Feeling stressed about your body
- Feeling—maybe a bit paradoxically—protected from eating disorders through privilege or healthy rebellion against certain body pressures or dictates

Here follows a more in-depth explanation of each of these points.

### *Thinking Your Body is Wrong*

When you start the journey of recovery from body hatred, usually there is a feeling that your body is wrong in some way; perhaps a specific body part or your size, weight, or shape. The feeling and belief that your body is wrong and in need of alteration is often motivated by the instinct to

conform socially, in order to belong and to feel accepted by others. The instinctual need to belong, to feel safe and accepted in society, is distorted into anxiety about the body being wrong, with a corresponding belief that if the body could be made to conform to social ideals, you would be accepted.

Consider Alina's experience, for example: "I always felt like my body was wrong and in need of change. I was never the right size and I was always comparing myself to others. I never felt like I was good enough, and I was always trying to change myself."

Alina identifies an overarching feeling that her body is not what it is expected to be, either by herself or those around her. The anxiety Alina describes around her body not being what she thinks it should be is a common driver of body hatred.

Body size is often a primary concern for people who hate their bodies, but sometimes there is a specific body part or proportion that causes suffering. Lily is a mother and lawyer who, when she began her recovery from body hatred, described feeling as though her body proportions were wrong. And despite cognitively understanding feminist theory on body hatred, she continued to see and feel her body as wrong. She was regularly exposed to ideas about the impact of the current iteration of patriarchy on women's relationships with their bodies, but she still viewed her own body as the problem instead of the cultural conditioning that caused her to see her body in certain ways. Lily's story highlights that cognitive understanding alone is often not enough to help us feel calm about our bodies. While she could understand the social influences that make people hate their bodies, she couldn't get over her sense that her own body was "out of proportion."

You too might cognitively understand the function of body hatred in your life—where it comes from, the systems of oppression that fuel it—but that understanding is not enough to change how you feel. For Lily, her recovery did involve sorting through the cultural influences that had led her to the place she was, but more than that, it required an emotional and spiritual journey of learning who she really is, why she is here, and how to relate to her own body differently.

### *Feeling the Need to Control Your Body*

Paradoxically, the feeling of accomplishment when your body is controlled in terms of weight, shape, and appearance can make overcoming body hatred challenging, because that feeling is so often followed by feelings of failure and shame when the regimen cannot be maintained or when

your body does not respond to dieting, exercise, or other overt change attempts. Attempts to control the body are hard to change because often they work in the short term, but they can fuel body hatred in the long term, leading to a vicious cycle. It's also true that over time, your body might begin to resist change due to the metabolic adjustments it makes in response to inadequate nutrition, lack of rest, or overexercise. This vicious cycle can lead to an experience of crisis when your body isn't responding to attempts to change it the way it used to, and yet you feel that your body *still needs* to change.

For example, Maria is active and enjoys bicycling regularly. Her body appears to be what many would describe as “fit,” but she still feels compelled to monitor her body. “I look at myself in the mirror every day and I pinch myself every day to see how fat I am and how much I need to change my eating.” Maria illustrates how pervasive body anxiety can be—no matter her fitness level or body shape, she feels the need to constantly adjust her eating to control her body. This vigilance serves as the focus for her day. And it's been this way for so long that Maria struggles to imagine what her life might be like without it.

### *Feeling Disconnected from Your Body*

At the beginning of recovery from body hatred, usually there is a sense of disconnection from your body and internal cues such as hunger, fullness, and even physical pain. It's not uncommon for people to become aware of long-standing physical needs (for example, back pain) when recovery begins, because the body has for so long been disconnected from the mind. Rather than *feeling* your body, body hatred has you *thinking about* your body.

For Julia, disconnection from her body had roots in inaccurate and inadequate emotional attunement from adults and caregivers. Julia grew up in a chaotic household and, as a result, felt very anxious. For most of her life people commented on how confident she was, yet rarely asked about how she might be feeling. She states, “And that created a disconnect. I felt like my body was the part of me that was holding all that anxiety, like I'm watching myself from the outside. It didn't feel like the same as my mind. From a young age, I can remember feeling dissociated from my body.” Ultimately, her body was where she felt the anxiety she did not know how to cope with. Under her anxiety ran deep emotions and reactions to the chaos around her, but instead of feeling those emotions and reactions, she learned to hate her body. She substituted grieving the state of her body for grieving the breakdown of her family. This eventually led to more pervasive body hatred and further disconnection from her body and feelings.

Disconnecting from our bodies is adaptive; it is a way we cope with emotions or experiences where we did not get adequate support. Like Julia, if we did not receive enough guidance in emotional awareness from our families or caretakers, we might learn to disconnect from our bodies—which register what we feel even when our minds do not—as a way to cope with overwhelming feelings.

Sarah remembered starting dieting at eight years old and going on and off diets well into her adulthood. She explained the cycle she endured before recovery:

*I went through phases that are so typical—starting a diet, losing a little bit of weight, feeling out of control, going off the diet, gaining weight. I felt very disconnected from my body. I tried to ignore the problem, but it would come up when I had big family events, or when others started to diet and I would too.*

For Sarah, the cycle of dieting and body hatred impacted her life by consuming emotional and mental energy, but also by disrupting her felt sense of her body.

Feeling disconnected from the body is a primary marker of body hatred. Rather than feeling the body and attending respectfully to body cues of hunger, fullness, and need for rest or movement, we miss cues altogether, or we end up pathologizing them, treating them as signals that we need too much and are wrong on a deep level. The feeling that the body is wrong leads to feeling that we ourselves and our needs are wrong.

### *Feeling Stressed about Your Body*

People who suffer with body hatred usually feel incredible stress about their bodies that they can track even into early childhood. Sarah described the stress and sense of scrutiny she felt living in her body as a child thusly: “My body has always been under some sort of stress. I was never running around as a kid and not caring about my body like I think kids do.” This sense of precariousness, as though the body needs to be managed and watched, creates a sense of tenuousness and stress in life. Additionally, self-consciousness about being witnessed by others, including family and medical providers, often creates an atmosphere of body stress and self-consciousness.

We learn to attune to our feelings and our bodies by example and by reflection. If we lived in an environment with people who did not know how to feel and cope with their emotions and, thus, couldn’t help us tend our own, that often predisposes us to anxiety. From there, anxiety can

be easily turned into body anxiety—especially in a culture that is swamped in unrealistic body ideals already. We will talk more about this triangle—hard feelings turn into anxiety, which can lead to body hatred—as we go.

### *Feeling Protected by Privilege and Healthy Rebellion*

Unfortunately, body hatred often coexists with eating disorders, disordered eating, or similar concerns. But there are some protective factors that can keep people from moving from body hatred to overt eating disorders. Privilege in all its forms often protects from more severe forms of suffering. Body privileges include thin privilege, which is the social benefit of living in a body that conforms to some degree to idealized social standards. Healthy inner rebellion against family and cultural values can also support people in resisting body hatred. For example, Julia described rebelling against her mother's own body hatred by refusing to exercise like her mother did, which was more about atonement for eating than movement itself. Rebellion towards her mother's body hatred did not make Julia like her own body, but it supported her in creating a boundary between herself and values that she did not want to emulate. Cultivating rebellion is a necessary tool along the body peace journey, and glimpses of rebellion can often be seen at the beginning of the journey.

Which of these themes resonate for you? Have you had any of these experiences—thinking that your body is wrong, feeling the need to control it, feeling disconnected from it or stress about it? Conversely, are there any that feel strange to you? The idea that privilege or rebellion can be a protective factor masking body hatred seems strange to many.

Whatever comes up for you, take some time to journal about your thoughts now.

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## The Light at the End of the Tunnel

Deep down, maybe you know body hatred is an inner problem. It's also psychological, familial, and cultural. The all-encompassing nature of the problem can make it seem overwhelming to address—particularly because physical solutions, like dieting and exercise, are constantly being marketed as long-term solutions. But if a diet or new form of exercise were all you needed, you would have succeeded already. I'm here to say it's okay to feel overwhelmed by the magnitude of this problem, much of which stems from systems that are often out of our control (including the wellness, fitness, and beauty industries). But there is also a light at the end of the tunnel.

Here's what I know:

1. Body hatred is complex. We hate our bodies for a plethora of reasons that stem from impossible beauty standards; family beliefs around health, weight, and appearance; racial, sexual, and gender bias and discrimination; and our own internalized expectations of our bodies.
2. Overcoming body hatred will require you to feel your feelings and trust your body. Body hatred involves thoughts and projections onto our bodies that stem from beliefs we've absorbed from those around us: our bodies are too big, too small, too messy, too untamed, and so on. Underneath these projections and self-attacking thoughts are emotions, instincts, and intuitions that want to be felt.
3. Overcoming body hatred will ask you to protect yourself—internally and externally—by setting boundaries around how you think of yourself and how the world projects its problems onto you. These boundaries keep in what is life-giving and defend against what is life-taking.
4. Overcoming body hatred will help you feel more like yourself, because you will actually *feel* yourself from the inside out, rather than *thinking* about yourself from the top down.
5. Overcoming body hatred will make you more powerful, because all that energy you once used to hate your body can be channeled into meaningful work in the world: activities that are enlivening, relationships that feed you, and effective action around causes that are important to you.



Take another moment to consider and write down what these aims—feeling your feelings, trusting your body, becoming more powerful, living a life that truly nourishes—mean to you. Do they resonate for you? Do they feel challenging, even impossible? Anything you feel here is okay; the point is to recognize it and be curious about what’s emerging.

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## Recovery as a Path to Soul

The work of overcoming body hatred is inner work; it’s about relating to who we are and who we are becoming. It’s an invitation to relax the hold of the dominant culture for a moment and go within. It may help to think of body hatred not as a problem to solve, but as a doorway to becoming more yourself. In other words, the journey through body hatred is one of recovery and individuation.

In Jungian psychology, *individuation* is the journey of settling into soul and living out the destiny you were born with, in relation to the times you’re in. The analogy of an acorn growing into an oak tree may be useful. When the acorn is born, it is a little thing; it’s not aware of the oak tree it will become. It becomes conscious of its destiny as an oak tree through living life. And it’s not the acorn guiding the process; it’s the unformed oak tree that beckons the acorn to grow, change, surrender in the face of all kinds of disruptions—which makes the oak tree unique, wise even. Similarly, your growth will occur through embracing your longings, moving through the griefs of life, and facing limitations and frustrations, all of which is a deeply human endeavor. Put another way, the acorn represents your small-s “self,” the conscious self or ego. The capital-S “Self” is a larger vision for who you are and could become, akin to the oak tree acting as a blueprint, guiding the acorn through life. Another way to think of the capital-S Self is as the soul.

Right now, your relationship with your body might feel broken. Maybe you don’t feel that you can be trusted in terms of your hunger, longings, or needs. Maybe your body is not the body you believe you should have. Maybe you feel a sense of urgency to simply solve your body problem so

you can get on with your life. As you repair this feeling of brokenness, weaving together bits of self-trust through the choices, both big and small, that you make throughout your days, you will eventually notice that, yes, indeed there has been repair—and also that you have woven together an entirely new life. This life will likely be one that is rich, textured, and meaningful. This new life will be a departure from a life ruled by body hatred, which is often quite boring, guided by the same recurring thoughts and attempts to change your body that never really stick. Ultimately, by making peace with your body, you will be able to reside in your deep Self or soul.

There is a paradox here. On one hand, preoccupation with the body—how it looks, how much it weighs, how “healthy” it is—is a distraction from soul. When the body is the center of attention in our mental and emotional life, there tends to be little room for deeper questions and life experiences. However, the journey to recover from body hatred—which involves a different sort of contact with the body, contact with it just as it is—is itself a journey of deepening into soul. So preoccupation with the body and its state and perceived flaws is a hurdle—and also the path towards the deep Self, life calling, and connection with true values.

Through my own journey and work with people overcoming body hatred, I have found several themes that are present when people feel free of body hatred:

1. Engaging in life purpose: Often the work of overcoming body hatred leads to focusing on what we are passionate about and are motivated to change in the world. This emphasis on life calling and purpose is part of a deeper psychological change in which the ego is more consistently oriented toward the deep Self, or soul. Ultimately, we gain a sense of purpose in our work in the world.
2. Using one’s voice: We learn to use our voices to set verbal boundaries, express ourselves, ask for what we need, disagree, and connect with others.
3. Gaining a sense of relief: Rather than feeling stuck in constant stress around our bodies, we feel a sense of breath and relief living in the bodies we have.
4. Making generational meaning: Through the work of recovering from body hatred, we come to understand that body hatred is larger than ourselves and that our problems with our bodies are not ours alone. Both the problem of hating our bodies and our work to make peace with our bodies extends beyond ourselves—to our children, families, and communities. Inner transformation is part of larger generational and ancestral healing.

5. **Emanating rather than performing:** When we are present in our bodies, we emanate a sense of who we are rather than acting or performing like a person in a body. Inhabiting our bodies fully keeps us connected to our genuine selves. We don't *try* to act a certain way; we naturally convey who we are.

The journey to overcome body hatred can lead to being in an attuned, respectful relationship with our bodies. This attuned relationship helps us live with purpose in our communities and the larger world.

Often people who have recovered from body hatred find that there is meaning in offering to others pieces of what they've learned from their own process. I've experienced this shift myself in my own journey of recovery. In the course of the journey, we develop the ability to live more in line with our values and to speak our needs or opinions more assertively, and we acquire a wide arsenal of coping strategies, internal and external, that we can model for others. Ultimately, overcoming body hatred is an initiatory process of becoming more in tune with our bodies, emotions, and soul longings, and even helping those around us do the same—a process you'll begin in this book.

## **True Hunger: Soul is Your Guide**

*True hunger* is a term I use to describe the impulse from the deep self to individuate, to orient to soul and a more meaningful way of living our lives. Our true hungers pull us into the next right steps on our path.

Hunger, in this context, refers to what we long for—and as such, it changes with life seasons and developmental needs. During my active recovery from body hatred, my true hunger was to feel okay, to be able to sit still in a quiet moment without running away from myself. Years later, my true hunger was to birth and mother a child, which came to me in a flash, breaking through to consciousness one day. During the COVID-19 pandemic, my true hunger was to merely survive and learn something as a new mother. At other points in my life, my true hunger has been to deepen my marriage. Whatever the specific desire, true hunger is the calling from our souls—not from our waking, ego consciousness—and it speaks in longing, wanting, a gut-deep pull. It is not the same as striving, pushing, or “mind hunger,” which is what we might think we want as a result of what we've been conditioned to believe we want or need. True or soul hunger is from the deep Self; it's purposeful and it wants to be heard.

We all have longings that come from deep within the soul. Longings that come from the soul level are organizing and healing. They lead us to make changes that can enable our most important life transformations. At the point in my life when I had the recurring fantasy of simply being okay in a simple moment, this fantasy was my true hunger. My life began to revolve around it and, thankfully, it led me onto the path that allowed me to become a therapist, teacher, writer, and mother. But there was no avoiding the mental and psychological work needed to get there.

Listening to true hunger is central to recovering from body hatred. It helps you remember that what you are deeply hungry for is something only contact with your own body and soul can satisfy. Soul hunger is a longing that is difficult to name, but when you feel it, you know it. You also know that no amount of body alteration, external achievement, or products can entirely fulfill this longing; it's an expression of inner hunger connected to the world's hunger. So often what we're hungry for, what we deeply long for, is an expression of a need of the collective. Longing for places for safe expression of our selves might be connected to a collective need for increased equity and inclusion that fosters safety for all bodies. Longing for relationships and connection might be related to a collective need for community and increased social contact in a technological world. Honoring our personal soul hungers can help us feel connected to the needs of the world—in which we're all deeply embedded.

When we disconnect from our bodies and physical hunger through suppression of appetite, being too “in our heads,” or trying to manipulate our bodies to conform to socialized standards, we also disconnect from our inner wisdom and the deeper longings of our soul. Many people struggle with satisfying their true hunger. Many don't even know what it is. But in our day-to-day lives, we might grapple with the feeling that no matter how hard we work, how much we accomplish, it's still not enough. And while this feeling can be attributed to individual psychological patterns, family values, and social conditioning, this is also a pattern for people who struggle with body hatred—the same people who are cut off from knowing or satisfying their true hunger.

Ultimately, the work you are invited to do in this workbook is designed to support you in connecting to your true hunger as a pathway to embodiment and body peace.

## EXERCISE: Exploring True Hunger

What we long for in our lives can help us understand what we value, which is a compass for our lives. Body hatred often interferes in listening to these deeper values. Understanding what we long for is necessary to refocus attention from body hatred to building a life of meaning.

In the columns below, identify what you are hungry for physically, emotionally, spiritually, in relationships, in your work, and on a collective level. For example, in the physical column you might write “I am hungry for a more organized home so I can relax.” For relationships, “I am hungry for more time with friends who are exploring new ideas and trying new things.” For the collective, “I am hungry to see changes in social policy so our environment is protected.”

Physically	Emotionally	Spiritually
Relationships	Work	Collectively

This practice of self-inquiry will help you begin to sense what is tugging at you. What you are hungry for is tied to what is important to you, which is often lost in the pain of body hatred.