

When you're losing weight, the words that come out of your mouth can be as important as the food that goes in. Here's how to start talking your way to success

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Mind your language

Look at my muffin top', 'I feel huge' and 'I hate my thighs'. Sound familiar? This so-called 'fat talk' – making critical remarks about our bodies – is second nature to many of us. And whether they're out loud or in your head, these seemingly throwaway comments are more powerful than you might think, lowering your self-esteem, sabotaging your healthy eating and making it harder to lose weight and keep it off.

More than 80 per cent of women admit to talking about their bodies this way. And research is showing that the more

negative comments you make about your body, the less happy you'll feel about it, even if you're well on your way to target. 'It's not just a harmless habit,' says body image expert Dr Emma Halliwell from the University of the West of England, Bristol. 'It increases body dissatisfaction and low mood, which make us more likely to avoid exercise, more likely to stress eat, and less likely to take care of ourselves by eating healthily.'

Surprising isn't it? If, like us, you're inspired to cut back on the negative self-talk, here's how to do it...

5 ways to talk yourself slimmer

Stop calling yourself names

Running down the way you look actually holds you back from making positive lifestyle changes, says consultant psychologist Dr Mary Welford, author of *The Compassionate Mind Approach to Building Your Self-Confidence* (Robinson, £15). 'Being hard on yourself isn't motivating – it makes you doubt your ability to change. Would you expect a teacher who constantly criticises their students to get the best out of them?' she asks.

And the more ingrained your name-calling habit, the more unhappy you're likely to be with your body, no matter what your size. That means you might not feel better about yourself even when you reach your chosen target weight. Slimming World's founder Margaret Miles-Bramwell describes the problem as like having two different people inside our heads – one a judgemental, overly critical parent, the other a vulnerable child who believes whatever the parent says. What we need to do, she says, is turn down the volume on the harsh, critical person telling us that we're useless (or fat!) and turn up the volume on a voice we don't often hear – a warm, kind, understanding voice of someone who really cares. 'This magically soothes and calms our self-critic so we can shed the guilt and begin the healing process that is so deserved and so necessary,' she says. 'Forgive yourself and let it be the start of your new life free from guilt and pain.'

Help create a moan-free zone!

It's easy to think that a session of 'you-think-your-bottom's-big, look-at-mine' is just harmless banter, or even helpful. The truth is it's toxic – and contagious. Research shows that our body issues can rub off on our friends in just five minutes, and vice versa. And contrary to what we tend to think, it won't improve our popularity. In studies, women who made negative remarks about their bodies were seen as less likeable than those who said nice things. The good news is, being that more likeable person is easier than you might think. 'One person can change a group dynamic by not joining in with critical talk, or by making positive comments instead,' says Dr Emma Halliwell. So next time you're with friends, give them compliments on their personality or achievements or some other wonderful thing you love about them – and watch the group dynamic change before your eyes!

Talk up your best bits

Hands up who has a mental list of their least favourite body bits, complete with negative labels (legs – too short and chunky; hips – too wide; arms – too wobbly, etc)? And how many of us could give a similarly detailed list of the bits we like?

Switching the focus to your best bits doesn't come easily. If you're trying to lose weight, though, it's more important than ever, says Sarah Grogan, professor of psychology at Manchester Metropolitan University. 'Studies in the UK, America and Australia have shown that focusing on positive aspects of how you look is one of the best ways to reduce body dissatisfaction.' And that has the knock-on effect of boosting your self-confidence and motivation, and helping you make positive lifestyle changes.

On a piece of paper, make a 'best bits' list. Do you have elegant wrists, a great cleavage or beautiful eyes? Or maybe shapely ankles, lovely posture or fantastic cheekbones? Find as many positives as you can – right down to your nice earlobes and pretty toes! If you find it impossible to do, ask a friend or partner to help. They're sure to have a list as long as your lovely arm!

Start your own appreciation society

Our bodies are often neglected, deprived of sleep and a balanced diet, and yet they carry on getting us through the day and occasionally performing minor miracles, like growing a whole new human being, overcoming a major illness or completing a 10K race. So it's time to celebrate your strengths and focus on what's amazing about your body. Did you get through the winter without a sick day? Are you fitter at 40 than you were in your teens? Have you learnt to tango or to do the front crawl? 'Changing your focus from what your body looks like to what it does for you is a great antidote to body dissatisfaction,' says Dr Emma Halliwell.

Even if it feels a bit unconvincing at first, making positive instead of negative comments about your body has a drip-by-drip effect on your self-esteem, says Emma. 'It's one of the most powerful ways to boost your overall feelings of well-being,' she adds. And that's great for your motivation, your healthy eating and your weight loss.

Compare wisely

We're exposed to more images of so-called 'perfect' bodies than ever before, says Dr Emma Halliwell, and it's having an impact on the way we look at ourselves. In a survey by Slimming World and Netmums (www.netmums.com), nearly one in four mothers said they regularly compared their bodies unfavourably with those of celebrities. 'It's easy to buy into the "thin ideal" and think that being super slim is the only way to be acceptable,' says Emma. 'Don't forget that more and more of these images are digitally altered – creating longer legs or slimmer waists, for example – so even these models don't look this way in real life.'

Even fleeting comparisons and feelings of dissatisfaction can affect how you feel about yourself if you experience them often enough, says Margaret Miles-Bramwell, because they sink into your subconscious. 'Subconscious messages can become a script for the way we play out our lives. They can be very, very powerful.' However motivated you are to lose weight, if deep down you believe it's pointless because you'll always be short and pear-shaped rather than a leggy supermodel, sooner or later you'll give up.

One of the most effective ways of switching your mindset and nurturing a healthier appreciation of your own body is to embrace Body Magic. Studies show that getting active can transform our body image even before any physical changes take place. 'Aspiring to be fit, strong and healthy is also a far more achievable and satisfying goal than aspiring to be ultra thin,' says Emma.