



UNDRESSING DISABILITY

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What is Body Neutrality and How does it differ from Body Positivity?

During recent years the term body neutrality has been popping up online and the philosophy has been endorsed by lots of influencers, psychologists and life coaches.

It's a different approach to managing our body image through body positivity and some people find it easier and more realistic to practise. To be able to understand the reasoning behind the body neutrality movement, it's important to reflect on body image and the messages behind the body positivity movement.

Negative Body Image

Your body image is how you perceive and feel about your body and how we think others see us. This includes our shape, size, weight and gender identity, but also how we feel about different parts of our body. Our body image and reality are not necessarily the same, as some people have distorted body image because they don't have a realistic view of their appearance. Body image is tied up with social constructs and what we are taught to believe, as a society, is attractive.

It's common (although far from ideal) to have moments of poor body image in certain situations in which you are uncomfortable. Having a negative body image means that the majority of your thoughts and perceptions about your appearance are negative. Some people are plagued by negative thoughts about their body image which stay with them and have a real negative impact on them. Research shows that having poor body image can result in an increased risk of partaking in negative lifestyle behaviours such as harmful diets and over exercising. It can also impact negatively on your self-esteem, sexual satisfaction and mental health as well as lead to isolation.

Body Positivity

Body positivity has its roots in the fat right movement of the 1960s. It's a movement which focuses on the acceptance of all bodies and promotes positive body image. People have different interpretations of what this means to them, but people frequently talk about loving themselves and their bodies and feeling confident with their bodies. It's about enjoying the body that you have. There are criticisms of this movement though. The main ones are:

- It reinforces society's preoccupation with appearance and what the body looks like is still a major component of a person's self-perception. It would be healthier if the appearance of the body wasn't a determining factor of self-worth.
- The idea that you must love and appreciate your body is unattainable for many and can make people feel worse when they fail to do this.
- There is an ongoing debate about whether it's morally right to promote body positivity for people who are what is medically considered an unhealthy weight or BMI. The counter argument regarding weight is often the rhetoric of "I may be plus size, but I am healthy and can still do A, B, C". This promotes the idea that self-worth should be determined by health which is exclusionary and damaging for many disabled people.

Body Neutrality

Anne Poirer, who is often believed to be the creator of the body neutrality movement, suggests that body neutrality is a middle ground on the continuum of body image. The idea that you don't have to love your body, but you also don't have to hate it. The emphasis is based on acceptance and having respect for your body. It's the idea that the body is only a small part of who you are and shouldn't be the determining factor on how you feel about yourself. That your value isn't linked with how you look and your happiness isn't based on what you look like. Body neutrality doesn't mean that you stop thinking about your body at all. In fact, the opposite is true.

It's about reframing how you think about your body and focusing on what your body needs and taking care of it, rather than obsessing on what it looks like. Many of us have spent years ignoring what our bodies tell us, not eating when we are hungry, or working long hours when we are exhausted. The body neutrality movement encourages us to check in with our bodies and respect our body enough to give it what it needs.

Is Body Neutrality Ableist?

This is really dependent on how you approach Body Neutrality. People are often encouraged to think about their bodies and what they do for them rather than what they look like. For example, if someone dislikes the appearance of their eyes, they can reframe that to 'I like my eyes because they allow me to see'. This can easily creep into ableism territory. But the principles that we should have respect for our bodies and our self-worth is not determined by what we look like are most certainly not.

How do I practise Body Neutrality?

Well first of all, it's important to acknowledge that it's not easy. You are having to rethink the way that we are brought up to think about ourselves. It takes time, patience and ongoing conscious work to be able to do this. Here are a few tips to get you started:

Exercise goals

It's important to focus on why you are exercising. To be healthy and have fun are body neutral reasons. To be able to eat something with lots of calories after you have exercised or to be able to fit into that dress one size too small or so you look ripped in your shirt aren't. Rethink your exercise goals with this in mind.

Wear clothes that you like and feel comfortable in

What these will be, will be dependent on your preferences. For some people that may be sweats and a hoodie, for others that could be something with a bit of stretch and fitted. The point is that you should feel comfortable in what you are wearing AND like it. So many of us buy items of clothing because they hide the parts of ourselves that we dislike, even if we don't actually like them.

Listen to our bodies

If you feel hungry don't deny yourself food and realise it's perfectly ok to allow yourself a dessert if that's what you're craving. It's all about balance and ensuring that your body receives the nutrients that it needs and you eat nourishing foods. If you are tired and just need a day on the couch resting, that's ok too! Feeling stiff? Maybe try stretching or having a hot bath or a massage. Try to focus each day on how you are feeling and what your body may need.

Recognize negative thoughts about your body

When you find yourself having negative thoughts about your body, acknowledge these thoughts but then cut them off. Think about whether the thoughts are helpful and choose not to follow them down that rabbit hole and instead think of something more neutral.

Choose your conversations

If someone is holding a body-orientated conversation or wants to talk to you about this, let them know that this isn't a conversation you would like to hold and if you can, steer the conversation onto a different topic or remove yourself politely from it.

Affirmations

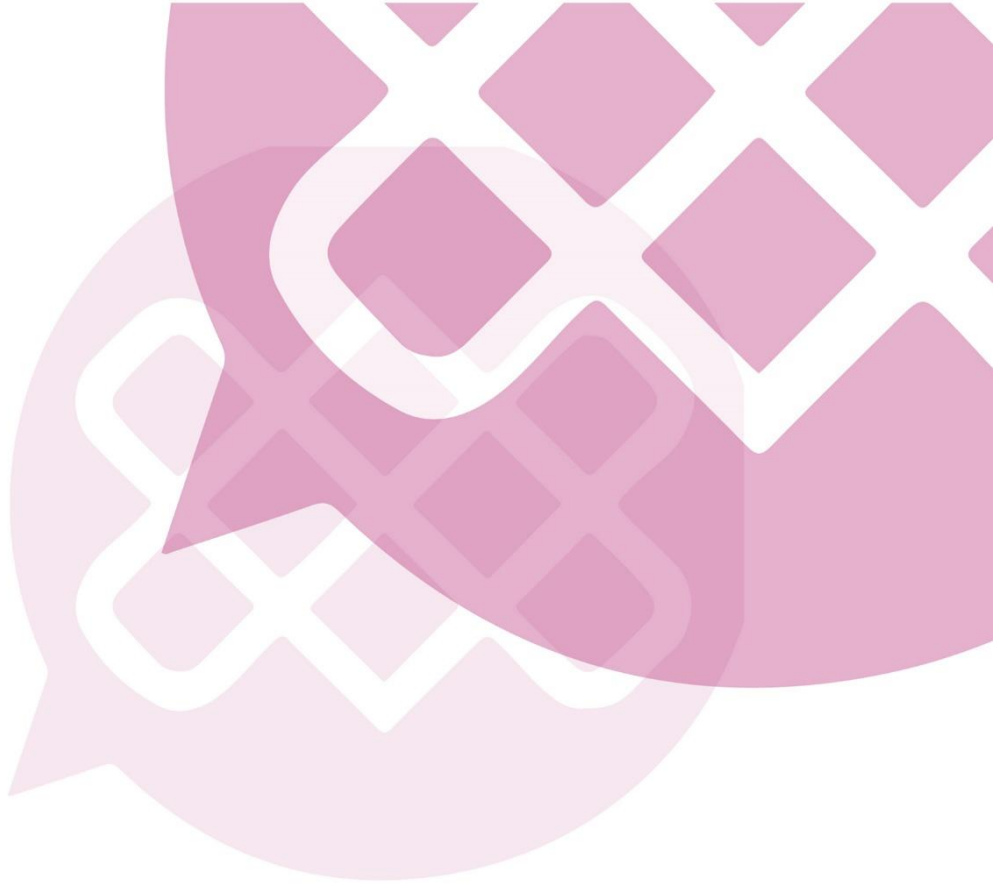
Affirmations such as "I am beautiful" are seen as a crucial tool in the body positivity movement. Being body neutral doesn't mean that you can't still use affirmations, just consider which ones you use, such as "I am more than a body" and "It's ok to rest"

Clean up your social media feeds

Have a look at the accounts you follow. Do they promote positive messages which align with body neutrality? If they don't, maybe it's time you stopped following them.

Encourage and promote representation

Regardless of whether you follow the body positivity or body neutrality movement, it's important that all bodies are represented and that includes disabled people too. Encourage representation when you can and share campaigns which represent a diverse range of bodies.



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CHANGING SOCIETY'S VIEWS ON DISABILITY

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