The NAKED truth

You prioritise your health and want to get the most out of your body – but we want to get to grips with how you really feel about it. So we asked, and more than 1,800 of you told us. The results are in...

WORDS RODJIN DERVISH-O’KANE ILLUSTRATIONS ADAM NICKEL

Q DO YOU THINK YOU’RE BEAUTIFUL?

So, only half of you think of yourselves as beautiful. ‘Honestly, I think that’s pretty high,’ says psychotherapist Hilda Burke. ‘And this is the result you might expect from people who take an interest in keeping fit and being healthy.’ But what about the other half? The majority – thankfully – aren’t basing it on judgement from outside sources, with our research showing that less than 20% had been criticised about their looks. So how do we become more positive? Burke recommends regular meditation. As for positive affirmations? ‘It’s not going to work if it makes you cringe.’ Noted.

Q WHY DO YOU FEEL MORE CONFIDENT NOW?

‘I’m older now and my self-image has improved with age’

Surprised? It makes sense when you think about it – the more years you have, the longer you’ve had to realise how brilliant your body is. ‘Younger people often see their physical selves in terms of appearance. But once they have babies or face illness or stressful life changes, they see what their bodies can do for them,’ says Dr Joanna Silver, psychologist at London’s Nightingale hospital.

Q WHY ARE YOU LESS CONFIDENT NOW?

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How the rest of the world shaped up (spoiler: turns out they consider themselves much more beautiful)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Positive</th>
<th>Negative</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Greece</td>
<td>82%</td>
<td>18%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Turkey</td>
<td>44%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Russia</td>
<td>36%</td>
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<td>Germany</td>
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My body has changed and I think I look worse 77%

‘I’m older and criticism of older women’s bodies feels more personal’

17%

I see a backlash against women with different body types who are represented in movies, TV, magazines, and more

17%

Public figures talking about body positivity just make me feel worse about my own body – now I feel bad for not loving my body

18%

Another reason

17%
‘I’m confident in a bikini...’

Some people have chilly homes, sure. ‘But those who don’t walk around naked alone probably have some internal shame that makes it unpleasant for them to be in their own body,’ says Dr Silver. This negative self-image can happen, she explains, because when we look in the mirror, we hone in on bits we don’t like. The remedy? Take an objective look at your body, naked if you can – but clothed if that’s too much. ‘Describe what each part looks like. State the facts rather than offering judgements. Repeat this a few times a week, adding positive observations when you’re ready,’ Dr Silver recommends.

Q. Do you walk around naked at home?

No: 51%

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Q. What part of your body do you love to show off the most?

Hell, yeah!

Greece 32%

South Africa 25%

Turkey 30%

Germany 22%

Sweden 21%

Not exactly

Butt 21%

Stomach 6%

Shoulders 9%

Legs 29%

Chest 19%

Q. I’d like to lose ___ kilos...

Six kilos – or a whole stone – is a lot of weight to lose. So why are fit, active and health-conscious WH readers wanting to shift that much? ‘Body image worry is like the tip of an iceberg – there is often a lot more underneath it,’ says Burke. The experts’ view: most of us find it easier to criticise our bodies than to identify and express what is really making us upset or angry. If this sounds familiar, consider untangling the problem with a therapist.

Q. Which part of your body would you most like to fix?

(Readers were asked to select all statements that applied)

Visible body hair

Cellulite

44%

Spider veins

14%

Stretch marks

23%

None – who cares!

24%

Follow Clementine’s alternative body-positive platform on Instagram: @fatiseveryonesissue

Clementine Prendergast, 24, lives in London

I don’t have the “ideal” lean and athletic body I aspire to, but I’ve learned to accept it – big boobs and bum included. I’m most confident about my body when I’m naked. While I love clothes, I aspire to the refined aesthetic of a chic French actress – but at 5ft 5in and a size 10-12, those clothes just aren’t made for me. But I’m definitely not plus-size either, and even if I was, I don’t identify with plus-size models who are often portrayed in a super-sexy way. It’s frustrating that I don’t see bodies of my size and shape (and those of the majority of my friends) in the media, and it’s always made me feel conflicted about where I fit in. I think that’s partly why I’ve struggled with body anxieties my whole life – despite never having been over- or underweight, keeping active and, as a result, always having been toned. As I near my mid-twenties, however, I’m much better at managing them. I’ve come to accept my imperfections through therapy and now see my naked self as a blank canvas – not something to be picked apart and scrutinised every time I have to look at it. While I still want to look my best, I no longer weigh myself or count calories. And when I train, I’m aiming to build strong muscles, maintain a healthy heart and promote a steady mind. I will probably never completely love the way my body looks, but that’s okay because I appreciate it for all it can achieve.'

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The call for more representation of ‘in-between’ bodies – and those that have birthed a baby – suggests WH readers are willing to foster body acceptance. ‘When we see a shape that looks like ours in the media it sends the subconscious message that we’re okay,’ says Dr Silver. ‘So wanting to see more “average” bodies shows that women want to feel at home in theirs.’ While UK women aren’t shouting about self-love from the rooftops (we are British after all), our ears are open. Perhaps because we’ve realised that striving to be proud of our bodies – in jeans, gym kit and our birthday suits – is a more rewarding journey than the pursuit of perfection.

Body positivity got big in 2017 and, as almost half of those surveyed, that’s a good thing. But are the messages really hitting home? ‘I don’t think it’s diluting the dominant voices about the way bodies should look,’ says Dr Silver. ‘But it does give women a positive language in which to talk about themselves.’ She’s not surprised that some women see loving their bodies as another pressure. ‘It’s almost like if you don’t, then you’ve failed again. Acceptance is a more realistic goal. If you love your body as it is: great. But if you think it’s just okay, that’s fine too.’