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Therapy Thoughts

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Welcome

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Hi there! I first want to say thank you for reading. The political climate in the U.S. has been challenging this summer. Much like when the COVID-19 pandemic began, we have collectively been thrown into alarming change and many are personally affected. We are dealing with various social justice issues-gun laws, reproductive rights, student loan debt to name some. None of which are new, but are very much in the current spotlight.

I encourage you to take care of yourself and those around you. It is often our own communities that lift us up during difficult times.

With gratitude,
Maria



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Therapy is Prevention!

All too often do we think about therapy as something to try after an event, crisis, or struggle of some kind. Thinking of therapy in this way is part of the stigma our society generally has toward mental health treatment. It becomes the thing we do when we "can't do it on our own," or "when everything else fails." In other words, it's a last resort and with that comes self-defeat and possibly shame.

Do you go for annual doctor visits even though nothing seems wrong? I hope so! This is preventative care and helps us prepare for future needs. Going to therapy is no different. Participating in therapy can help a person understand how they think and cope, what supports they have, and possibly what they need to improve in their life. Imagine having this information before a major crisis or change. This sense of self is what guides us through life's challenges.

Therapy is prevention in other ways too. Therapists around the world are helping people stay out of the hospital, preventing suicide, improving familial relations, and keeping people safe in many ways. Therapy as prevention for one person is prevention for an entire community and society at large.

Summer: The Season of Body Shame

Written By Maria Antell, LCSW, Certified Run Coach

The summer of 2002 was the first time that I recall vehemently hating my body. I wore sweatshirts to the beach, avoided wearing shorts, spent hours in dressing rooms only to leave tired and dissatisfied with myself, and tried several diets only to see weight come back. I had been bullied about my weight and used to think there was nothing worse than being fat. This is because society told me so. I am choosing to self-disclose this because I know how common these experiences can be and know that summer sends people fretting about their appearance. Although this is a year-round issue for many, summer has a way of creating extra vulnerability around body image as we typically wear less clothing and can feel that our bodies are on display. Here is what I have learned through research and education: body weight does not define who we are, and furthermore, there is a hidden agenda that perpetuates the myth about beauty. This hidden agenda is used as a political weapon against women and the Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) community.

Let's face it, body shaming is everywhere, from the doctor's office to the dinner table. The medical community continues to use the Body Mass Index (BMI) despite the advocacy of dietitians and other experts in the field who claim the dangers of using the BMI as a way to measure health. The BMI was created about 200 years ago and was originally based on white, European male bodies. It does not apply to diverse body types. The BMI leads to weight stigma, discrimination, and often causes overwhelming stress and fear of seeking medical treatment for people living in larger bodies. The BMI also has limitations in predicting mortality, which is the whole premise of the "obesity epidemic." One [2003 study](#) in the Journal of American Medicine Association states, "Although elevated BMI is the primary index of obesity used in most studies, it is a proxy of adiposity and may not provide the best estimate of the association between obesity and outcomes such as mortality or years of lost life." In other words, the BMI is BS and does not do a good job of predicting causation of death. Focusing on the BMI also takes the focus off of other factors that drastically impact health, such as stress, food insecurity, economic inequality, poor access to care, and institutionalized racism.

We also experience body shaming in our own homes. I see variations of how this creeps into families, including comments about what someone eats, how they look, and restrictions on eating certain foods. In many families, there is a long line of women who were taught to hate their bodies and passed this down to younger generations. I would argue that body shaming is now at an all time high given social media and other media platforms. Images of what women are supposed to look like flood our daily lives and this is purposeful. There are entire industries that benefit from people hating their bodies, including the diet industry, cosmetic industry, cosmetic surgery industry, and pornography industry. Additionally, our economy and society have historically depended on women feeling like they are worth less than men in order for men to stay in power. In *The Beauty Myth*, Naomi Wolf writes, "By the time the women's movement had made inroads into the labor market, both women and men were accustomed to having beauty evaluated as wealth. Both were prepared for the striking development that followed: As women demanded access to power, the power structure used the beauty myth materially to undermine women's advancement." I do not see this as a conspiracy, but as a very calculated method to keep women questioning their worth and "in their place". I do want to point out that body shaming affects men as well, but that it generally affects those who identify as men differently than those who identify as women.

We also need to understand the intersectionality of fat issues, meaning that we must consider all of the areas that oppress people, which can include gender, race, class, sexual orientation, physical ability, age, and more. Bodies that are not white, thin, and able-bodied are devalued and stigmatized in our culture. Current ideas about the ideal body is rooted in historical racism, ableism, sexism, and classism. We see this in television, films, and other forms of media. We must not separate body shaming from social justice as they are intertwined and complex.

It can feel as if we are not safe at the doctor's office, in our homes, or the various corners of our lives. There is work to be done on both the individual and systemic level. We can all take certain steps to dismantle body shaming in our society. I have several call-to-action items:

- Recognize that there is a cultural obsession with weight loss and thinness.
- Educate yourself and others with [Health At Every Size® Principles](#).*
- Understand the intersectionality of body shaming and overlapping systems of oppression for the BIPOC community.
- Refrain from commenting on others' weight gain, weight loss, or anything about someone else's body appearance. This places value on body appearance.
- Practice self-compassion and compassion for others who are struggling with body image or body shaming.
- Refrain from posting before and after pictures that illustrate weight loss (someone likely has a similar "before" body and this action sends the message that the "before" body is a bad body. This seems to be a favorite trend in diet culture).
- Advocate for yourself and for others when you see bullying about body weight, size, or shape.
- Set boundaries with health providers by informing them that you are not comfortable discussing weight. Choose a different provider if they do not respect your wishes or if they do not align with your needs. The Association for Size Diversity and Health plans to have a listing of [Health At Every Size® providers](#) in Fall of 2022.
- Set boundaries with anyone who says hurtful words about weight by telling them how you feel AND by following up on your boundary (i.e. if you tell them you are no longer going to talk about weight, then end or redirect the conversation).
- Model behavior that shows others that diet culture and body shaming has no place in conversation by redirecting to a different topic.
- Get angry and stay angry. Not at yourself, but at the patriarchy and oppression that persists.

My final message to you is to wear that bathing suit or shorts. Try to prioritize finding the joy this world has to offer because life is way too short to miss out on summer fun, or any fun for that matter.

*Health At Every Size® and HAES® are registered trademarks of the Association for Size Diversity and Health and used with permission.

Breathwork and Trauma

When you can't help the mind with the mind, go to the body. You can't always think your way out of anxiety or stress. This anxiety or stress lives in the body's nervous system and healing the nervous system can heal the mind. Breathing techniques are one way to help you gain control of your nervous system; however, tuning in to the breath is not easy for everyone and some may need to practice this in a clinical setting if they have experienced trauma. Below are breathwork techniques for you to try on your own while resting, walking, and/or running. Keep reading to get a better understanding of when it is appropriate to try breathwork with a trauma-informed clinician.

Resting Breathwork

Find a comfortable place to sit or lay. Place hands over your belly. Inhale through the nose and exhale through the mouth. Notice how many seconds you spend on the inhale and exhale and see if you can extend the time you spend on each. You can aim for the *4-7-8 method*: an inhale through the nose for 4 seconds, hold your breath for 7 seconds, and exhale through the mouth for 8 seconds.

Walking Breathwork

Lining up your breath with your steps can help walking feel easier, more relaxed, and can benefit the mind. This is known as *breathwalking* or *cadence breathing*! Relax your shoulders as you walk, arms at a relaxed sway on your sides, with your head up gazing at the path in front of you. Inhale through the nose as you take your first step for a count of 4 seconds and then exhale through the mouth for another 4 seconds. Pay close attention to how each part of your body moves and feels from head to toe, noticing the intricate mechanics of your body. Find a rhythm that works for you.

Running Breathwork

Similarly to breathwalking, we can line up our steps with the breath while we run. Try running in place, then count steps on your inhale and your exhale. For example, you may take 6 steps while inhaling and then 7 steps while you exhale. The goal is to find a rhythm that works for you, not necessarily a magic number of steps. Finding a rhythm helps clear our minds, stay focused, and calm. This can also help you keep a manageable pace. Try on a run after practicing running in place. If it becomes difficult to breathe, slow down to a more manageable pace. Seek comfort and joy!



When to seek the support of a trauma-informed therapist:

First, have you experienced a distressing event that disturbed you in such a way that you are having difficulty coping? When a traumatic event occurs, it can feel like putting a square peg into a round hole. You can't make sense of it and if it goes unresolved, other symptoms can develop. Events can include an accident, sexual assault, a distressing loss or death, or various forms of abuse. An event may have occurred many years ago, but the memory can get stored in your nervous system, so the brain can process the event as if it is happening in the present. Something that is traumatic for one person may not be traumatic for another and it is an individual process.

Second, What kind of body sensations do you have when you think about the trauma or related thoughts (i.e. increased heart rate, discomfort, sweating)? Are you able to tolerate these sensations? If you are having thoughts and body sensations that are difficult to tolerate, breathwork may bring up challenges. You may need to work with a clinician who specializes in trauma to help determine appropriate treatment, which may or may not include breathwork in a clinical setting.

How to find a trauma-informed therapist and trauma therapy? A trauma-informed therapist is one who implements safety, choice, collaboration, trustworthiness, and empowerment into sessions. You could start by searching on [Psychology Today](#) by entering your zip and then filtering the search for trauma therapists, but keep in mind you'll want to screen them and see how you feel when talking with them. Ask a ton of questions about the type of therapies they are skilled in and what the therapy entails. Remember, a therapist could have a ton of training and knowledge, but you must feel safe enough and a good vibe for therapy to actually be effective.

There are many trauma therapies available. The Veterans Administration (VA) identifies and rates [evidence-based trauma therapies](#) (this rating does not include complementary and alternative medicine options, such as yoga, meditation, or acupuncture), which can be a good place to begin learning about trauma therapy options. According to the VA, complementary and alternative medicine options are currently recommended to be used in addition to evidence-based treatment.

Therapist Spotlight: Melinda's Music

Melinda Marks Burgard, M.A., graduated from NYU with a degree in Music Psychotherapy. She is a NYS Licensed Creative Arts Therapist, who has been practicing clinical music therapy with a variety of populations for over 30 years. Melinda is currently collaborating with the non-profit, Action Toward Independence, and offers a variety of music therapy groups that may be of interest to you or someone you know. Her groups are free to anyone, living anywhere – and another perk for her clients includes free instruments that can be mailed to them every few months when eligible. Contact Melinda for more info!

Action Toward Independence Presents:

Melinda's Music

Free Zoom Music Therapy Groups
Offered Monthly-Ask about our
Free Instrument Offerings.

SO HAPPY TOGETHER

A music social group for Seniors focusing on socialization and brain health. This hour group usually runs the first Tuesday of every month. This is a non-dementia focused group.

OUR MUSICAL MEMORIES & CONVERSATIONS CAFÉ

A two-part musical social engagement group for People Living with Dementia with their CarePartners. There is music, movement, laughter, lots of love, and support. Feel free to bring a drink and snack, and stay for our CONVERSATIONS CAFÉ group. This is the time to relax and enjoy virtually socializing from home. Conversations Café offers a strong component to enhance the fun time had during OUR MUSICAL MEMORIES session. Let's learn more about one another! The 1 1/2 hour group usually runs the second Thursday of each month.

A WARM MUSICAL HUG

Early Childhood Therapeutic Music/New Parent Support group focusing on how to use music to enhance child development. Babies beginning at 7 weeks, up to preschool are welcome. Groups usually run the second Wednesday of each month.

FOR MORE INFORMATION:

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In the Media

[How People of Color Can Find Joy and Respite in the Outdoors, By Emilia Benton](#)

[Black Women Marathoners on Trailblazing, Breaking Molds, and Putting Themselves First, By Tonya Russell](#)

[Running is Everywhere--Nature Helped Me Discover That, By Rocío Villalobos](#)

[Beyond the Run: "Each Mile Inspires Gratitude," By Vanessa Ong as told to Elizabeth Millard](#)