BODY BRILLIANT

A TEENAGE GUIDE TO A POSITIVE BODY IMAGE

NICOLA MORGAN

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Nicola Morgan is a leading expert in well-being and adolescence. For details of her work, events and contact, as well as many resources, go to: www.nicolamorgan.com

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Medical disclaimer

The information in this book is not intended to be a substitute for medical advice. If you have any worries about your mental or physical health, you should discuss it with a qualified medical doctor and follow their advice.

Content warning

This book covers topics which some readers might find distressing because of a personal experience. If any of the topics mentioned in the contents list makes you feel anxious, it would be a good idea to ask a trusted adult to support you.

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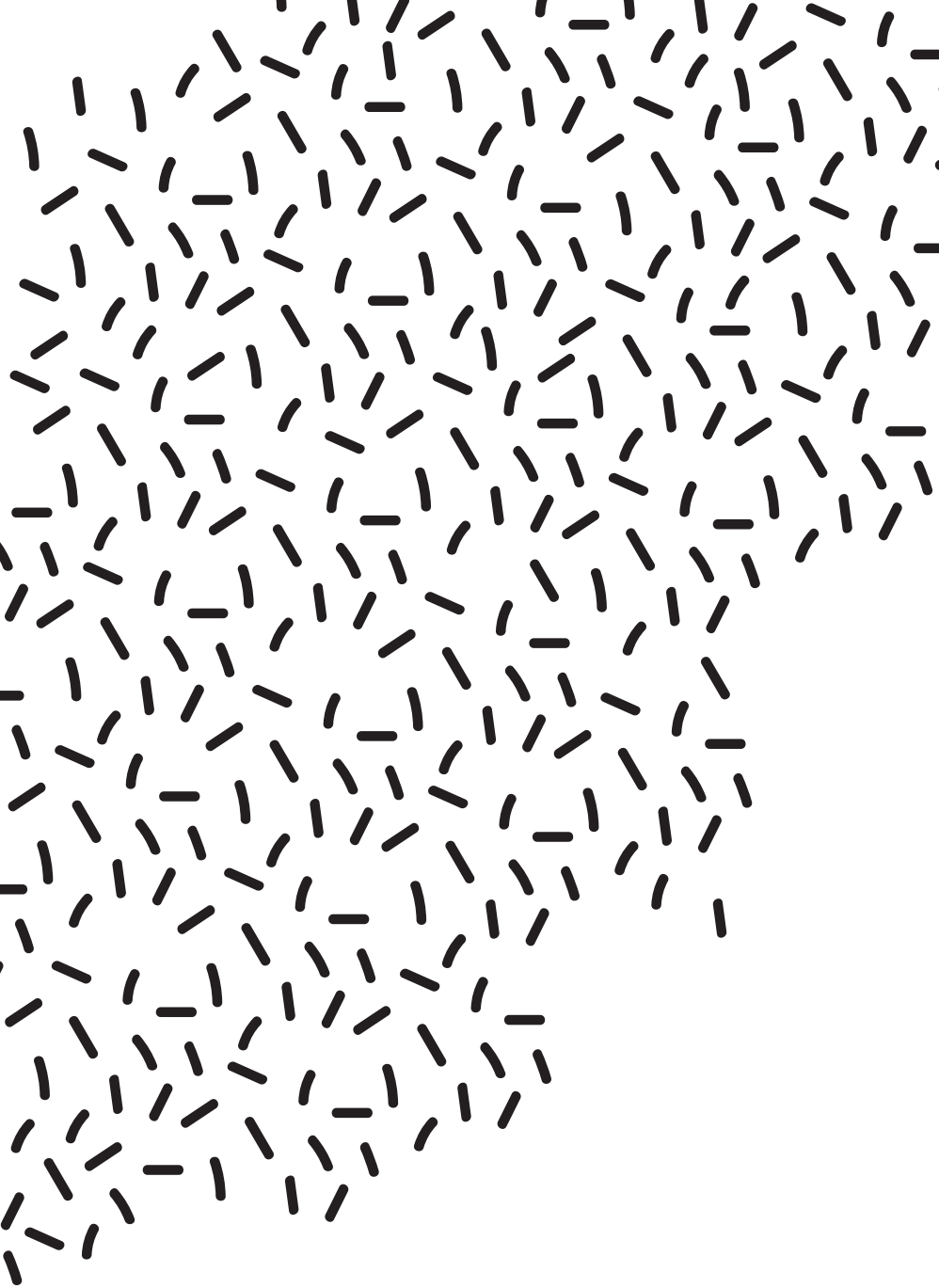
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INTRODUCTION

You already have a brilliant body. I know this, though I haven't met you. I don't mind whether you're tall or short, plump or skinny, darker or lighter-skinned, whether your nose is button-shaped or hooked, whether your eyes are round or narrow, how many limbs you own or what visible differences you have.

None of that makes your body brilliant. What makes it brilliant is what your body can do. And that's a lot. Think about what you can do that you couldn't do when you were born, all the skills you've had to learn and practise. Again, I don't know you, but I'm pretty sure you can do some (but not all) of these: run, skip, swim, play games, draw, write, read, operate a computer, bake, care for people, tie knots, somersault, have ideas, sing, act, dance, jump, throw a ball into a net, kick a football hard, touch a worm or a ladybird, tiptoe, stamp, smile, hug. Those are actions human bodies are capable of and you can do many of them. And you can do a lot of things not on that list, including things I can't.



"I worry how some of my friends think of their bodies. 'My shoulders are too broad' or 'My tummy is too fat'. We aren't 'too' anything! I know someone with anorexia so I know what it can do to you. I am guilty of comparing myself to others. I think we are comparing ourselves to other people more and more. Especially in an all-girls house. We compare our legs, boobs, noses and everything. We need to understand and accept that we all have different capabilities and appearance. Personality begins where comparison ends."

Maddie, 16

What we look like is utterly irrelevant compared to all that. Being taller or shorter or thinner or larger or more typically 'beautiful' than another person doesn't mean you can do those things better. Being slimmer or having whiter teeth does not make you a better or more successful person. Having a crooked smile or back or nose doesn't make you a crooked person. The weight of your body has nothing to do with the weight of your mind and the size of your belly nothing to do with the power of your brain. And if aspects of our physical bodies make some things easier or harder, so what? We can still do a lot with our bodies, whatever they look like.

Your body is the vehicle for your life. It gives you possibilities and choices, ambitions and power. It carries your dreams and allows you to try your best to make them come true.

If that was the end of the story, this would be the end of the book.

The trouble with humans

The trouble with humans is that we can't ignore what we look like. Yes, we can learn to find appearance less important and to have a different opinion of it – one of the aims of this book – but we can't ignore it totally. Body image is something our brain creates. It's there, our mental picture of ourselves, whether we like it or not.

"We all stand out in our own minds more than we actually do."
Rachel, 14

That can cause difficulties. Those difficulties can be small or dominate people's lives.



I want this book to help you see that what you look like is far, far less important than what you *are* like. It's not something I find easy myself but writing this book has helped me so I'm confident that reading it will help you!

Quick Check

WHAT DO I MEAN BY 'BODY IMAGE'?

Lots of people think that body image means what you look like.

No! 'Body image' is not what we look like but how we think and feel about what we look like – how we see ourselves and how we believe others see us.

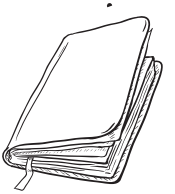
Having a positive or negative body image describes how positively or negatively we view our appearance. It's also about how much mental energy we spend thinking about appearance compared to how much we think about doing and achieving more with the life we've been given. A positive body image means that we respect our body for what it can do. A negative body image means that we see ourselves negatively and we wish we could look different.

BODY BOOST

Throughout the book you'll find 'Body Boost' panels. Some of these are inspirational thoughts; some are ideas for activities to improve your body image or to deal with a negative situation; and some are practical tips for having a healthier lifestyle and looking after your brilliant body. Do as many of them as you can and you'll feel better about yourself.

The Body Boosts help you get the most out of *Body Brilliant*: boost your body, boost your life.

To start with, get a notebook (or open a new document on a computer). This will be your *Body Brilliant* book, where you can record tips, inspirational messages and ideas.



Once we understand how our body image happens, we can start to control it. We can learn to appreciate ourselves for who we are and what we can do. We can learn to respect our body and have a healthy lifestyle that keeps it as strong as possible – as brilliant as possible – so that we can do all the things we want to.





A positive body image is really important to well-being. If we spend too much head space feeling negative about what we look like, we can miss opportunities to live the best, most exciting and most successful life possible. And feeling bad about our appearance sometimes makes us less likely to look after our body. If we don't respect ourselves, we may make less healthy choices. We may veer from self-neglect to self-obsession.

People of any age can (and often do) have negative body image. As I started to talk to people of all ages, including my age, I was struck by how negative so many of us feel and what unhealthy messages we share about weight in particular. The adults around you might fuel your worries about weight and shape by unintentionally sharing their own negativity. I hope this book will help adults see how their own well-meaning concerns can be unhelpful and even damaging. And how focusing on health, not appearance, is always the way to go, whatever age or size you are.



BODY BOOST

Start thinking about positive slogans about body image. Things like, 'My body is my super-power' or 'Beauty is not skin-deep' or 'My body, my life, my business'. Gradually work out which is your favourite.

It can become your motto, which you'll say to yourself any time your body image is challenged by negative thoughts or other people's comments.

"I certainly found myself comparing my body to others and judging myself against them. I would see people and constantly wonder why they were all beautiful and I wasn't. It seemed to me that all the other girls had perfect body shapes and luscious hair, and I didn't. It made me feel as if I wasn't good enough, all because of how I looked."

Iona

Why is this book especially for teenagers if body image affects everyone?

Adolescence is a stage of life that brings enormous changes. The changes can be exciting and positive: more freedom, independence, skills and knowledge. Or they can be upsetting and confusing. I call adolescence a perfect storm of change because everything is changing fast: your brain, mind, friends, environment, fears, ambitions, desires, pressures. And your body, appearance and how you feel about yourself. Many teenagers say that when they were younger they never thought about their appearance, but that it all changed as they reached secondary school.

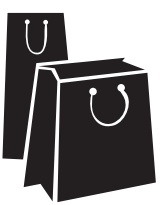
It can be disconcerting seeing your physical changes and confusing as your brain tries to keep up with what you look like.



"My body image is sometimes positive and sometimes negative. In school, I don't think about my appearance because I focus on work. At home, I would like to look fitter. Some of my friends spend a lot of time on exercise and doing their make-up. Some are obsessed with looking fitter or skinnier – boys and girls."
Bella, 15

Not all teenagers have big problems with body image but many do. This book is for you. But, if you're lucky enough not to have worries about your body or appearance, there are two other reasons you might find *Body Brilliant* useful. First, it will help you understand the problems some of your friends (and parents!) may have. Second, it has masses of sensible advice, to help everyone have the most brilliantly healthy body possible. Health is far more important than beauty because health allows your body to do what you want to do.

"Some of my friends spend a lot of time and money on how they look. I don't. Lots of people, boys and girls, are quite obsessed with how they look."
Stella, 15



Different challenges

Some people have more risk of negative body image than others and some people suffer more because of it. People with disabilities or visible differences might struggle more with how they feel about their appearance. Eating disorders and self-harming are often associated with a negative body image.

Questioning gender can sometimes challenge one's body image in a specific set of ways. Being 'different' in any way – taller or shorter than the people around you; having an accident that dramatically changes your body; struggling with fluctuating weight; being teased or bullied because of some perceived 'flaw' in your looks; really hating yourself or something about you – all these and more can make it really, really hard not to focus on appearance.

In addition, growing up amongst people of a different skin colour or ethnic background from our own might sometimes create conflict between two sets of 'ideals'. Anything that makes you look different from the people you spend time with can make you self-conscious of your appearance.

I'll be tackling all those challenges, and more, in this book.

BODY BOOST

In your notebook, write down the heading: 'My body is brilliant because…' – now fill that space with all the amazing things your body can DO.



Is this a modern problem?

It certainly feels that negative body image is a bigger problem nowadays. It's likely that the internet and social media partly explain that, though I'll also show you how they can be a force for good. We are bombarded with images that we're supposed to aspire to, many of which can only be achieved if we have cosmetic surgery or pay a lot of money. It's incredibly easy to feel inadequate and dissatisfied.



"My 20-year-old daughter has just started watching Vampire Diaries and has actually looked up the actresses' BMI as she says watching the programmes make her depressed because the women in it all look so perfect. She is an incredibly bright individual but with very negative body image issues, though she's a perfectly normal shape with curves. My 14-year-old daughter is very feminist in outlook and hates stereotyping so is less concerned about appearance, but she has always had more confidence than my older one. Lower confidence means concern about image comes before attitude/ability/achievement."

Julia

This book aims to help you not feel like that! This book aims to show you that your body is brilliant even with all its so-called flaws. They are not flaws, but part of what make you individual and human, not a plastic doll or robot.

About the word 'fat'

The word 'fat' is often used as an insult. This is wrong! Fat is a natural and important part of our bodies, evolved to protect us and provide fuel. Healthy people come in many shapes and sizes, including curvaceous. And beauty comes in many shapes and sizes, too.

Yes, you can have too much fat and you can have too little of it – both extremes can make you less fit and more likely to suffer various illnesses. But someone who is bigger than another person is not necessarily less healthy (or attractive). Being large can make you strong; and a slim person can be unhealthy. It's all about keeping within sensible boundaries. Only a relevant expert can say whether someone is within those boundaries, as it's not just about what the scales say, but more complex and individual than that. And if they say that you have more fat than is healthy, you need expert support to find a healthier life-style.



"Fat-shaming affects mental health and makes people feel terrible. We should let our friends know how we feel because insults and teasing don't help someone be healthier."

Nana Kwame, 14



Fat-shaming – making people feel guilty or lazy or stupid because their body is larger than someone else's – is cruel, ignorant and unhelpful. Research shows that making people ashamed of their weight is more likely to make them put on weight than lose it. When someone feels ashamed of their body, they may not value it enough to treat it well.



"All my adult life I've had a hang-up about my bottom. I am average height and average build and not particularly overweight, though I'd be happy to lose a bit. When I was about 12 or 13 I was walking home from school when some boys shouted, 'Oi, fat arse'. I was no larger than most of my peers. But the embarrassment stuck and from then part of my brain would not let go of that label. I would tell myself it wasn't true and that they were just being mean, but another voice would repeat their words.

"Later, boyfriends and then my husband told me they loved my bottom, but instead I believe the taunts of some teenage boys nearly 40 years ago. Even now, if I wear tight fitting jeans or leggings, I team them with a long top. It's the feature that I'm most self-conscious about."
Sarah

So 'fat' is not an insult or a judgement. It's part of us. Having some fat covering certain areas of our bodies – and some areas more than others – is natural and healthy, nothing to be afraid of or to wish away. And certainly nothing to be ashamed of.