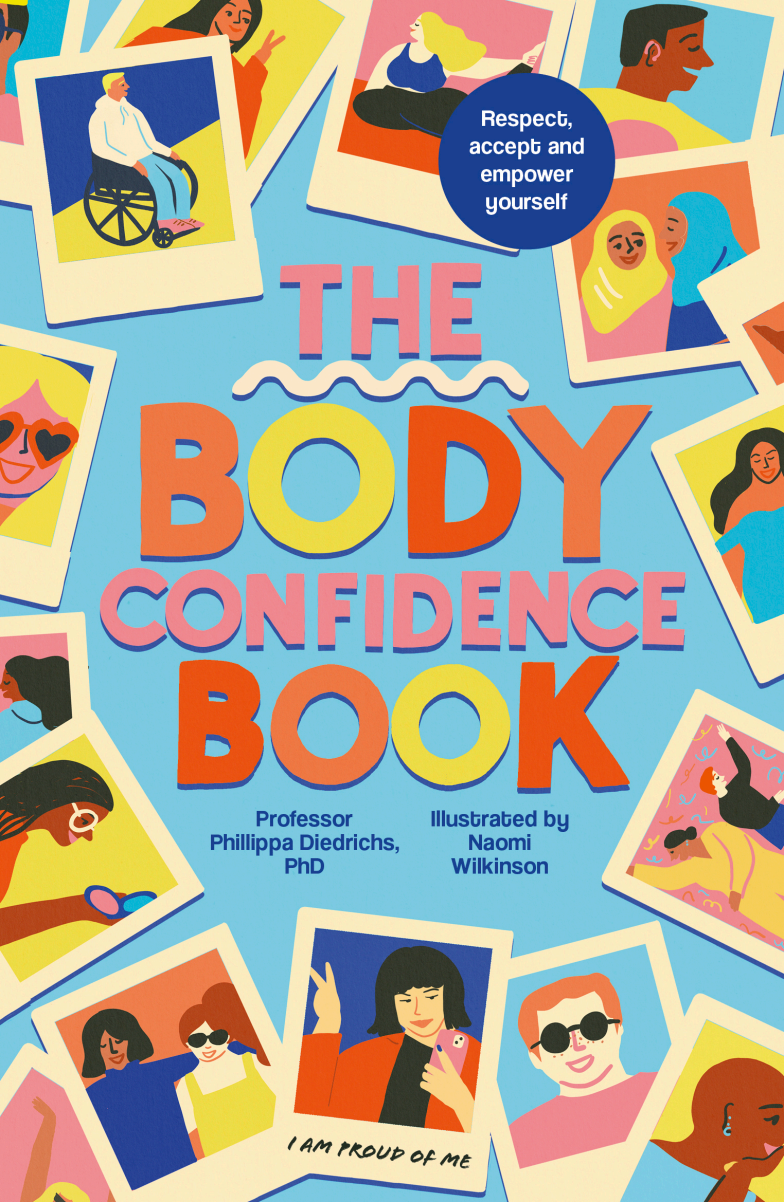

Respect, accept and empower yourself
THE BODY CONFIDENCE BOOK
Professor Phillippa Diedrichs, PhD
Illustrated by Naomi Wilkinson
I AM PROUD OF ME



Chapter 1:

Body Confidence and Respect

Before we get started with helping you to develop a safe, comfortable and enjoyable relationship with your body, it's always a good idea to define what we mean by the terms 'body image' and 'body confidence'.

Body image is a term used to describe how we feel and think about our bodies, including what they look like and what they do. For example, we might feel pride or shame about the way we look. We might think our body should look different from how it is naturally or think about how grateful we are for the way it healed from an injury.



Two people who look similar may see or feel about their bodies differently, while two people who look very different may both feel positive about their bodies. **Our body image also changes over time.** It can change throughout the day and during different times in our life. For example, before giving a speech at school, you might think a lot about how you look, the clothes you're wearing and what your hair looks like. When you're at home relaxing, you might not care about what you look like and instead just focus on feeling comfortable. Similarly, the way we think and feel about our bodies when we're teenagers can be different from our body image when we were five years old or when we're sixty.

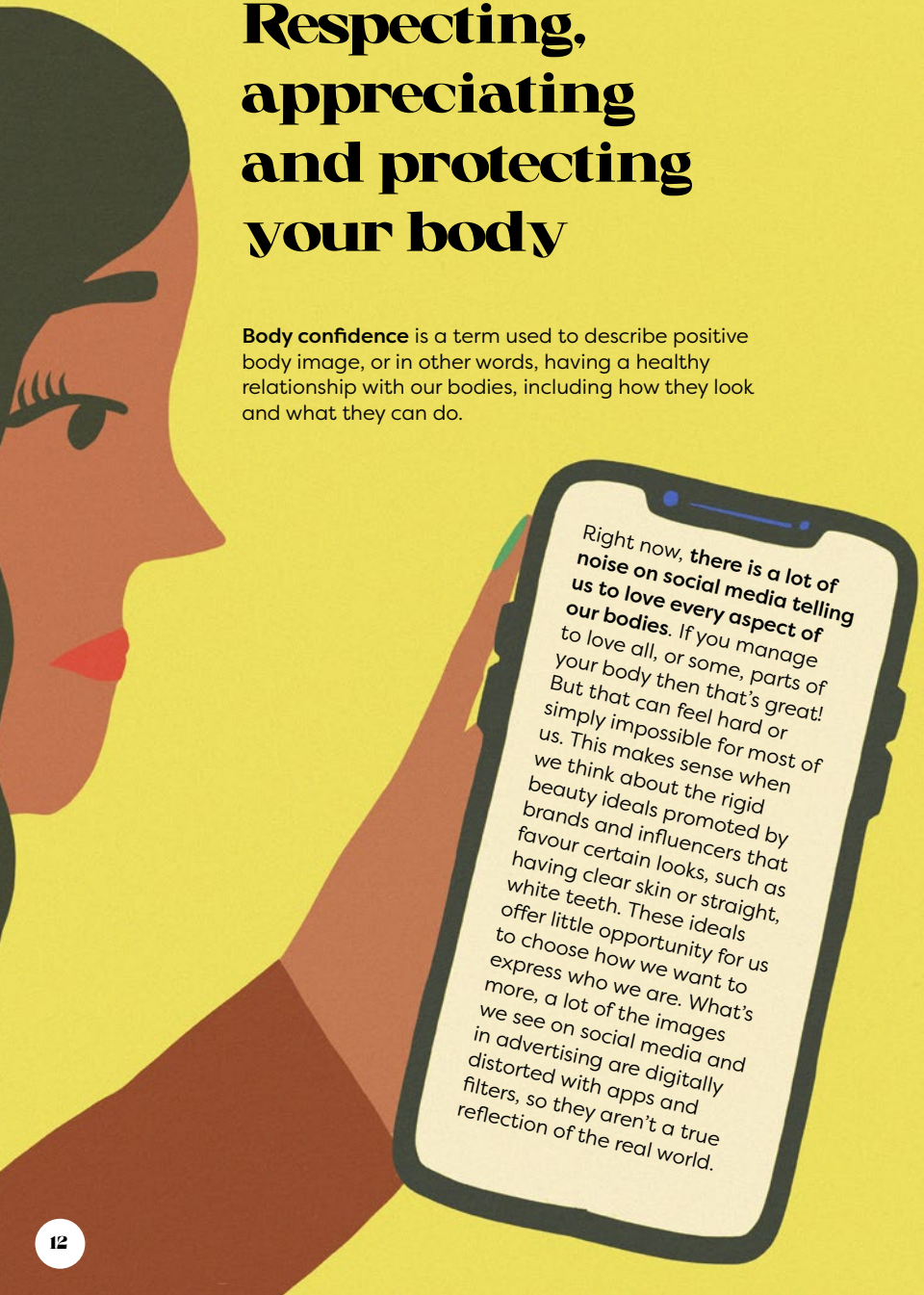
Unfortunately, it's very common for young people (and even adults!) to feel anxious, stressed and ashamed of their bodies. They may do things to change the way they look that are unhealthy or expensive, like extreme dieting, using skin-lightening creams or taking supplements. Many of these behaviours are dangerous and can lead to more serious problems such as eating disorders, depression and digestive problems. A study by Dove with over 5,000 teenage girls across 14 countries (from the UK, US, Turkey, Brazil and China to name a few) found 50% struggle with low body confidence.[4] Another study in 2019 by the Mental Health Foundation in the UK showed a quarter of boys are worried about body image.[5] Gender-diverse teens, including **non-binary** and **transgender** people, can also experience low body confidence. They may struggle to feel at home in their bodies in societies that see gender as either strictly masculine or feminine, rather than as a wonderful spectrum of identities.



But remember, **our body image isn't fixed**. The helpful thing about realizing that our body image changes over time is that it means with the right mindset, skills and support we can learn ways to feel better about our bodies and develop body confidence. We can also begin to challenge what society tells us we should look like, so that **we can feel comfortable expressing ourselves however we choose to, and focus more on what our bodies can do**.

Respecting, appreciating and protecting your body

Body confidence is a term used to describe positive body image, or in other words, having a healthy relationship with our bodies, including how they look and what they can do.



Right now, **there is a lot of noise on social media telling us to love every aspect of our bodies**. If you manage to love all, or some, parts of your body then that's great! But that can feel hard or simply impossible for most of us. This makes sense when we think about the rigid beauty ideals promoted by brands and influencers that favour certain looks, such as having clear skin or straight, white teeth. These ideals offer little opportunity for us to choose how we want to express who we are. What's more, a lot of the images we see on social media and in advertising are digitally distorted with apps and filters, so they aren't a true reflection of the real world.



It's also important to remember that it's unrealistic to feel happy and content every single moment of every day. Feeling sad, lonely and unhappy sometimes is a natural part of being human. Take a deep breath and relax. **You don't have to love every part of your body to have body confidence**.

A more realistic and helpful goal is to focus on body respect. **Body respect** is when we care about and look after our bodies, irrespective of whether we like how they look or how they change as we grow. Our bodies will evolve over time; it's a part of life and growing up.



Respect is often the first step to taking care of something.





Think about something that you always wanted and that you saved up to buy or were lucky to receive as a gift. It could be a musical instrument, an item of clothing, a piece of sporting equipment or your mobile phone. Chances are that **if the item is important to you, you try to take good care of it**. You take care not to break it, you're careful who you share it with, you clean it and put it in a safe place when you're not using it. On the other hand, if you have an object that you don't like or care about, you might forget where you put it, leave it about for anyone to use and not care if it gets broken.



Our bodies are the same. If we have low body confidence, we might try to hide them with baggy clothes, ignore them when they're hungry or aching, and try to change them after listening to what other people say. On the other hand, if we respect our bodies, we're more likely to take care of them by rejecting unrealistic beauty standards, getting enough sleep, moving so we feel strong and flexible, and eating food that makes us feel nourished. **We can appreciate the things our bodies allow us to do**, like dance, make art, hug our friends, read books and learn new things. We'll also find it easier to ignore pressures from other people to look a certain way.

Going forward, **try focusing on being curious and open-minded.** Experiment with being kind and gentle with yourself and take small steps towards accepting and respecting your body. Over time, these small steps will get easier, and they'll add up to creating a headspace where you see your body as a positive part of your life. And, if you're already feeling comfortable with your body and your looks, we're going to cover how you can share this with your community, so that everyone gets the opportunity to feel body confident.

Your body is an instrument, not an object

Often when people think about their bodies, they focus on how they look. This isn't a modern concept – **there have always been beauty trends and norms** that society has pressured people to conform to. For example, women in Victorian England wore corsets to make their waists narrow and bustles to make their bums rounder as this was fashionable at the time.

These appearance pressures are everywhere and come from multiple sources, including the media and friends or family, so we can sometimes start to see our bodies as objects to be looked at by others. We focus more on our outer appearance and our bodies become a shell. This is called **self-objectification**. When this happens, we forget that our bodies are wonderfully complex and do lots of things for us; they move, grow, digest, heal, feel, think and allow us to express ourselves. **Recognizing and appreciating that our bodies have lots of different functions is an important part of developing body confidence** and rejecting social pressures, because it reminds us that our body's value and abilities are not only tied to how it looks.

One useful way to think about your body is to start to picture it as a tool or instrument that you use to help you do the things in life that are important to you.

Expressing yourself through your looks

Throughout history, people have used their appearance to express their culture, gender, sexuality, **identity** and the causes they care about. For example, Ancient Egyptians shaved their hair and used different wigs to represent their status and wealth, and Maori people from New Zealand use tā moko tattoos on their face to reflect their tribal heritage and identities.

As well as thinking about your body's functions, I invite you to think about how you can **play with your appearance as a source of creativity and self-expression** in a way that is comfortable and a reflection of who you are at this stage of your life. This could involve wearing certain colours and clothes that you like, styling your hair to reflect your culture or sense of style, wearing jewellery that shows your spiritual, political and social beliefs, or using make-up to experiment with different looks.

The key is to play with your appearance in a way that brings you joy and feels good, not because you feel that you need to change the way you look to please someone else. It's also important to play with your appearance in a way that respects and takes care of your body – both important parts of being body confident. For example, the bustles that Victorian women wore prevented them from being able to sit down properly and led to backache. Similarly, buying lots of make-up or spending hours every day at the gym will cost you a lot of time and money, which may take away from the other important things in your life.

The tips and action checklist on the next page will help you to nurture body respect.

Tips and action checklist: How to practise body respect and appreciation

Mirror exercise

- We spend a lot of time being critical of our bodies. Instead, spend some time practising being kind to yourself.
- Stand in front of the mirror for a few minutes each morning for a week and list five things you like about the way you look and another five things you like about your personality and identity that have nothing to do with how you look.
- It can feel hard at first to find things we like, but don't worry, it gets easier over time.







Body appreciation writing exercise

- Grab your favourite notebook or the notes app on your phone. Spend 10 minutes writing a list of all the things you are grateful that your body allows you to do.
- Think about all your body's different functions: internal processes such as digestion, immune responses that fight illness, sleep that helps your cells rebuild, stomach sensations that let you know you're hungry; senses (touch, smell, taste, sight or hearing); movement such as walking, dancing, hugging, smiling; your mind that lets you learn new things.
- Do this a few times a week and read back on these lists when you're having moments of low body confidence.





Symbols of your identity

- **Play with your clothes:** what colours do you like to look at? What fabrics feel good on your skin? Playing with different types of clothing can be a fun way to express yourself. You could try wearing different styles, colours and patterns to work out what feels good to you. Get your friends involved and do a clothes swap to see how different looks feel for you.

- **Culture:** how can you reflect your heritage and culture in your appearance? For example, Sikh men wear a 'kara', a steel or iron bracelet to represent their connection with God. Namibian women might style their hair in braids, a tradition that goes back thousands of years and can reflect their tribe, relationship status and other characteristics, as well being a way to connect with others in their community while their hair is braided.



- **Hobbies:** what symbols or things can you do with your appearance to reflect your hobbies? I sometimes wear Metallica t-shirts because they're my favourite band and they remind me of the awesome moments I've had at their gigs with my brothers and friends.



For Kash, Bella and little Laura – P.D.

**Dedicated to my wonderful kids,
Polly and Arthur – N.W.**

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