SPECIAL REPORT

It's Time to Do Something About Our Country's Body Image Problem

Experts, athletes, coaches, and parents agree that raising a young female athlete requires careful navigation through many challenges, especially during and after puberty. We're only starting to understand what it takes to help them flourish. Partly, perhaps, because we're only starting to understand what it takes to help ourselves truly flourish. In this two-part investigative report, we examine how to #FixGirlsSports and raise a stronger, healthier next generation; as well as how to re-evaluate our own body image for the better, including the resources you need to rebuild or fortify one of the most important relationships of all—the one with yourself.

ILLUSTRATIONS BY ELIZA SOUTHWOOD

BY ERIN STROUT AND CINDY KUZMA

PART 1 THE DEFINITIVE GUIDE TO RAISING HEALTHY FEMALE ATHLETES

When Sara Hall looks back on how she discovered running, she remembers gravitating toward it because it allowed a sense of freedom that nothing else offered at age 13. A naturally curious child, her parents let her take off on the trails near their home in Santa Rosa, California, unsupervised.

"I would try to do the same loop faster every day," says Hall, now 37 and a top U.S. distance runner. "I won my first race in seventh grade, in a sprint finish against the league champion. I was hooked."

Hall went on to compete in cross country and track through high school, winning the prestigious Foot Locker Cross Country Championships in 2000. Then to Stanford University, where she led her team to the 2003 NCAA cross-country title. But her talent grew organically; her parents and coaches didn't apply pressure. If she wanted to run more (or less) she was given the leeway to forge her own direction. And usually she chose to run farther.

"In middle school, I would run to practice and then I would do hill sprints to failure on the way home. I really loved that my parents and coaches always gave me a lot of freedom to push and find my limits on my own," Hall says. "I don't think it's high mileage, in my opinion, that burns kids out. I think it's being *forced* to run high mileage, because for me, I really loved it. And I was the one initiating it."

Hall's talent was nurtured in a way that allowed her to flourish. She was surrounded by people who helped her make the right choices at each phase of her running career. But Hall also was taught early on that running is a long game. That if she could not give in to immediate desires for wins, she could succeed through a gauntlet that often derails young women in sports: puberty, menstruation, and changing bodies.

According to the Women's Sports Foundation (WSF), 40 percent of teen girls are not participating in sports. Girls also drop out of sports by age 14 at two times the rate of boys. In fact, a WSF study cosponsored by Dick's Sporting Goods Foundation surveyed 3,041 boys and girls between the ages of 7 and 17 (and their parents). Among the reasons that girls lose interest? "Feeling awkward about their bodies and not liking the way they look," according to the research.

Distance running can be especially fraught with problems. The sport's culture has long tied less body weight to better results. And while power-to-weight ratios will always be important to performance, the way in which topics like ideal body composition and nutrition are discussed has to change—particularly when it comes to girls.

MINDING THE SHIFT

A lot happens to a young female runner's body during adolescence—from age 11 to 21, through three stages of development.

When a girl hits puberty, body fat increases to prepare for menstruation. It's not unusual for girls to gain 12 to 23 pounds as an increasing volume of estrogen flows through their systems. With that weight gain can come a dip or plateau in performance. The Women's Sports and Fitness Foundation has found that as girls start experiencing premenstrual symptoms, they may also have a temporary reduction in aerobic capacity and strength.

That's a lot of change for anybody to cope with—in fact, a 2016 study in the *Journal of Pediatrics* found that more than half of 9-14-year-old girls wish they were thinner. And girls who develop a poor body image during this time are of course more likely to diet at a critical period in their growth, which can lead to injuries, low bone density, and a variety of other long-term health problems. Now experts more commonly refer to RED-S, relative energy deficiency in sport, which is the discrepancy between caloric intake and energy expenditure.

Hall recalls the summer before her senior year in high school, when she went to Holland on a mission trip. She indulged in all the European treats and wasn't running as much. This was on top of the normal process of "getting curves and stuff." She didn't see many improvements in her times.

"I was having the slowest times I'd ever had in cross country," Hall says. "Fortunately I had really good support in my life. The coach I was working with was like, 'Just make slow improvements and focus on healthy eating.' It was very incremental, nothing drastic. I finished the season winning the Foot Locker Championships. Even though my body had retained some of that weight, I was learning to be stronger and grow into it."

Soon Hall had to navigate another difficult transition for young women: competing collegiately. Research shows that more than one-third of female NCAA athletes experience symptoms of eating disorders like anorexia.

"I was very, very mindful of that when I was going on recruiting trips. You could tell when there was a toxic culture of eating disorders—and no matter how much I loved a school, I didn't want that kind of environment," she says. "My Stanford teammates were really balanced in their lives of academics and athletics and social, and there wasn't a really cutthroat environment on the team."

That was where Hall met teammate Lauren Fleshman, who would graduate with five national titles and become a 15-time All-American, leading to a professional career where she became a two-time 5,000-meter national champion.

"Lauren was kind of like my big sister

"I DON'T THINK IT'S HIGH MILEAGE THAT BURNS KIDS OUT. I THINK IT'S BEING *FORCED* TO RUN HIGH MILEAGE."

ARE RUNNERS AT GREATER RISK?

On one hand, your running habit can protect you: Exercise generally boosts body image. Even one hour of movement left previously sedentary women feeling better about their appearance, a 2017 study reported. And by and large, many runners find healthy support in the larger community. Still, there are some reasons that female runners may feel dissatisfied with their bodies.

First, there's the notion—oversimplified at best—that weight and body composition are critical to running faster. While they might matter, they're only two of at least 40 factors that play a role in performance, says Riley Nickols, Ph.D., a sport psychologist and eating-disorders specialist who heads up the Victory Program for athletes at the McCallum Place Eating Disorder Centers in St. Louis. Some coaches use this as a basis for abuse, while others are well-intentioned but ill-informed. Regardless, this overemphasis can leave many runners focused on arbitrary body goals, and some devastated if they can't reach them.

There's also the apparel many runners wear. Even if you're not wearing short shorts yourself, seeing images across your social-media feeds can lead some to question whether they truly own a "runner's body." Plus, if you started running to change the shape of your body—in other words, to lose weight—the degree to which that happens, or doesn't, can also send your self-worth on a nosedive, Nickols points out.

and mentor the first couple of years," Hall says. "She was always really encouraging me to have a healthy outlook on food and how it related to running well."

Fleshman, now 38, is retired from competition, but she's become an outspoken advocate for changing how girls and women are coached. She is the coach of an all-women's pro training group called Little Wing in Bend, Oregon, and is currently working on a book tentatively titled *Good for a Girl*.

In 2017, Fleshman wrote a column for MileSplit, a website that covers high school track and field. The piece was a letter to her younger self, "Dear High School Lauren," it began—and it became an instant hit and a tool for coaches everywhere to jumpstart conversations with girls about how to cope with their changing bodies.

"You notice what happens sometimes to female athletes...she is confused; she is working harder than ever," Fleshman wrote. "Clueless adults who are overly invested in her 'performance' will grieve, as if her worth is based solely on PRs. This makes you scared of growing up."

The piece saw a resurgence in November 2019 after Mary Cain, 23, a high school phenom who turned pro as a teen under coach Alberto Salazar, came forth with allegations that Salazar demanded she lose weight and shamed her publicly when she didn't lose enough. Her experience, Cain says, led to depression, suicidal thoughts, stress fractures, and the loss of her period for three years.

Salazar, who has denied wrongdoing, is currently serving an unrelated four-year coaching ban for doping violations, which he is appealing. He is also serving a suspension from the U.S. Center for Safesport, an independent organization that investigates and sanctions emotional, physical, and sexual abuse and misconduct in Olympic sports.

"When the Mary Cain story happened, I thought what we need is a comprehensive guide for coaches and athletes and the running community to fix girls' sports," Fleshman says. "No article or exposé or news hit can get to the heart of why these things are happening and what needs to be different for them to stop happening."

How Coaches and Parents Can Keep Girls Running

Although the issues facing young runners are as old as time, most experts agree that little has changed since Fleshman and Hall were growing up. "I just showed my book proposal to an athlete who graduated from college two years ago," Fleshman says. "I asked her which of the topics aren't relevant anymore for a girl in high school or college. There was none—not a single one. She's 14 years younger than me."

Hall and Fleshman, among other leaders, are now determined to create change. And you can, too. These are six essential ways that all coaches, parents, and supportive adults can help foster a healthier sense of self in young female athletes.

1. Create open dialogue and frame puberty in terms of health.

Nobody can predict how individuals will handle puberty or how it will impact athletic performance, but talking openly about what happens to girls' bodies and the potential temporary changes can help young runners better cope with the rollercoaster ride.

Talking with girls about how getting their periods is a sign of a strong, healthy body reframes the narrative. Melody Fairchild, 46, who was one of the country's most gifted teen runners in the 1990s and now head coach of the Boulder Mountain Warriors kids running club, tries to prepare her girls for what's coming—and that they shouldn't view menstruation as gross or embarrassing, but a point of pride.

"The best thing I can do is talk to them about seeing the big picture, stepping back from this moment where a girl is upset with herself because she got her period and her times have slowed," says Fairchild, who is also coauthor of the upcoming book, *Girls Running*, with Elizabeth Carey. "We need to let them know that running is a journey. It has twists and bends and ups and downs."

2. Equip coaches with tools to talk.

Coaching has long been a male-dominated profession. And not many men are good at talking to female athletes about their periods or changing bodies. So instead of addressing the issues or adjusting training to accommodate girls' unique needs, the topic is often just not addressed at all. That's a huge disservice.

Julie Culley, 38, a 2012 Olympian in the 5,000 meters and director of cross-country and track and field at Georgetown University, remembers a six-month period in college when injuries—caused by rapid growth—and personal issues caused her to start restricting her diet.

"It was probably like my fifth injury in college and I was very conscious of every calorie that was going into my body. I got really, really lean," she says. "I had a female coach who was very instrumental in walking me through that process, talking to me and being very open about it. And I came back to center. So I feel very responsible as a female coach now to help women navigate it."

Part of the solution, of course, is

bringing more women into coaching, but also providing materials that teach male coaches how and why they should approach the topics.

"We need to be expecting and demanding and providing the tools for them to be educated on how to work with women and stop making the most important issues to their development taboo," Fleshman says. "For so many male coaches, using words like period or breasts all gets mixed into this 'Me too' moment in a way that makes even more scared to talk about the female body."

3. Give girls a chance to hit pause.

Culley and Hall were both avid soccer players before specializing in running. Hall, now a mom of four daughters, two of whom are talented high school runners, has encouraged them to explore.

"One of my daughters started running, had great success, but decided she wanted to try other sports for a while and we were really supportive of that," Hall says. "Then she came back to running and actually now has a lot of fire for it, which is cool to see. Sometimes kids take their own time to find it, but I think it's important that they make it their own."

Fairchild took an entire year off from running after high school before starting at the University of Oregon. She had struggled after her mom died of cancer, she hadn't been fueling properly to keep up with the high-mileage demands, and she needed to recover.

"When I went back to school, I started with a new perspective," Fairchild says. "I started my period and I put on weight. I think girls, especially now as the sport gets more competitive, need time to take the foot off the gas pedal and let their body just be. If I could make it mandatory for all women to take a year between high school and college off, I would."

4. Maintain a long-term view.

Fleshman considers herself fortunate that her high school coach was patient, knowing that female runners who remain healthy can reach a peak well into their 30s. But that kind of thinking is hard to come by when high school kids have increasing opportunities to compete at national championship meets—they train hard in the hopes that they'll get scholarships to top NCAA programs.

"We have all this evidence now that your best years begin in your late 20s and up to your late 30s," Fleshman says. "That was what had always been impressed on me by my high school coach, taking the long view, always. He framed disordered eating and forcing you body to be thin as a shortcut—I learned that it was used as a way to get short-term results at the expense of long-term potential."

Nicole LaVoi, director of the Tucker Center for Research on Girls and Women in Sport, says the increasingly common win-at-all-costs mentality is easy for coaches to fall into in a sport like track and field, where results are clear-cut.

> "SOMETIMES KIDS TAKE THEIR OWN TIME TO FIND IT, BUT I THINK IT'S IMPORTANT THAT THEY MAKE IT THIER OWN."

"We know from the data that when that mentality is first, there are a host of problems that will happen," she says. "The health and well-being of the athlete is not the focus; it's winning. Abuse happens to get results."

5. Foster fun and teamwork.

Not every girl is after a college scholarship—some enjoy the sport for other reasons and it is imperative that coaches find a balance between high performance and less competitive goals. When Culley is recruiting for Georgetown, she looks for other attributes aside from fast times. And they want athletes coming from programs where they've been taught to think for themselves and make healthy decisions on their own.

"Are they good teammates? Do they care about the success of the rest of their program? Are their coaches involved where they need to be involved and not where they don't need to be involved?" Culley says. "When we see kids who love relays, we know they love showing up for their team."

6. Read female-centric research and reform coaching principles.

Cases of emotional abuse have put a spotlight on the fact that, as Fleshman says, "we play in a sports system built for and by men."

"We need more female-specific nutrition research, female-specific physiology research," she says. "I mean, we're just so behind on all of that stuff. That's going to take a few years."

LaVoi takes it a step further, though, saying a lot of research is already available, citing the studies like "Developing Physically Active Girls," done at the Tucker Center, but it's not adopted by the people in coaching positions who, just to reiterate, are mostly men.

"Some keep up with the research, but a lot don't," LaVoi says. "You can get results, you can get development, and you can get athletes who think that running is fun and enjoyable. It's a culture that sport scientists know is possible."

And bringing more women into the coaching profession is only going to help, experts say. Hall's oldest daughter, Hana, is off to compete in the NCAA in the fall. She chose a program led by a woman, Sara Slattery at Grand Canyon State University—a move her mom fully endorsed. Hall was coached by Dena Evans at Stanford.

"I felt like [Dena] did a better job of meeting me where I'm at and figuring out how I tick—and how to support that in a healthy way versus just being a scary authority figure trying to make you perform," Hall says. "It's not to say that men can't coach women, I think there's plenty that are doing a really good job of that. But Hana will be in really good hands—Sara understands having been successful all the way since high school. She knows everything the girls are going through." ◆

PART 2 THE DEFINITIVE GUIDE TO STRENGTHENING YOUR ADULT BODY IMAGE

At least once a day, runner Leeja Carter pauses for a minute. She puts her hands on various joints and organs—her stomach, knees, heart, back—and thanks them for beating, bending, lifting, and digesting. "That just reminds me that this body system is working for me every day, even if there are some days when I wish it looked different," she says.

It's a small gesture, but a powerful one in a culture that frequently undermines women's ability to feel good in their own skin. Nearly all those who identify as women have, at some point or another, felt insecure about their weight or the way they look. For some, body-image issues progress into full-blown eating disorders, anxiety, or depression. Even short of a diagnosable disorder, concerns about your size and shape can interfere with your health and hold you back in your career, relationships, and your running, says Laura Moretti Reece, R.D., a runner, triathlete, and sports dietitian who specializes in eating disorders at Boston Children's Hospital.

Even Carter—a feminist sport psychologist with a Ph.D. who runs marathons—isn't immune to negative influences. She sees the images suggesting only women who look a certain way are beautiful or can call themselves runners, and hears the words of coaches and other experts who preach that lighter is faster and leaner is more virtuous. But by grounding herself in gratitude, she's among those defying outside pressures and reclaiming her vision as a strong, powerful, beautiful woman and athlete.

HEALTHY BODY IMAGE, DEFINED

One way to think about body image is the thoughts, feelings, and perceptions related to the experience you have of your physical form: "an inner picture of your body and the way you feel about it," says Marci Evans, R.D., a Cambridge, Massachusetts-based dietitian. Body image is often framed, incorrectly, as a black-and-white issue: Either you feel good about yourself, or you don't. The reality, however, looks more like a spectrum, Nickols says.

On the more negative or unhealthy side, your self-image is distorted and distressing. You may fixate on your flaws, and spend a disproportionate amount of time thinking about the ways you need to change your diet, exercise routine, or other habits to fix them. "Disproportionate" can't necessarily be defined as a number or percentage of minutes or hours, but rather "the degree of interference it has on your thoughts, actions, and behaviors," he says. A healthier perspective, meanwhile, means accepting your natural shape and size, feeling secure and comfortable in your skin, and recognizing that your appearance is just one small part of your identity.

BODY IMAGE IS OFTEN FRAMED, INCORRECTLY, AS A BLACK-AND-WHITE ISSUE: EITHER YOU FEEL GOOD ABOUT YOURSELF OR YOU DON'T.

Another helpful way to conceptualize body image is as a relationship between two entities, says Kara Bazzi, L.M.F.T., a therapist and cofounder of Opal Food & Body Wisdom, an eating-disorder treatment facility in Seattle. Like any friendship or partnership, you and your bod are bound to go through ups and downs—days when you feel amazingly in sync (say, when you finish a hard workout or PR in a race) and others when you're disconnected, frustrated, even betrayed (for instance, when you're injured).

The key, Evans says, is to get yourself to a place where you can weather the storms with confidence. The idea of loving your body stands as a worthwhile goal, and body-positive language—rooted in celebrating all shapes and sizes—resonates with many.

But if you're nearing or full on in the depths of self-loathing, that degree of adoration can feel alien and inaccessible. And for perfectionist, type-A runners, it can be just another opportunity to beat yourself up—to proclaim yourself a failure each time you have a negative thought about your stomach, thighs, or nose.

THE SCOPE OF THE PROBLEM

"Pretty much everybody experiences a little bit of a dissatisfaction with how they look," says Angie Fifer, a runner, triathlete, and certified mental performance consultant based in Pittsburgh. Women tend to be more prone to the problem than men, especially when it comes to thin ideals. In one Northwestern University study, researchers found that about half of all middle-aged women reported being dissatisfied with their shape or size.

These emotions have real consequences. About 20 million women will meet diagnostic criteria for an eating disorder sometime in their lifetime, according to the National Eating Disorders Association. While not every person with an unhealthy body image will rank among them, nearly everyone who does develop an eating disorder starts out with a low or weak body image, Nickols points out.

Athletes are at higher risk, and the issue isn't limited to elites. A 2016 University at Albany study published in the journal *Body Image* found appearance- and performance-related body dissatisfaction was linked to eating-disorder symptoms among women running community races.

While it's not always clear which comes first, experts know body-image struggles are often "the tip of the iceberg," Nickols says, and are linked to anxiety, depression, obsessive-compulsive disorder, and exercise addiction.

THE SHADOWS TAINTING OUR SELF-PORTRAITS

Early experiences form the bedrock of your body image. However, your self-perception continues to evolve over time, and even shifts in different contexts, says Riley Nickols, Ph.D., a sport psychologist and eating-disorders specialist who heads up the Victory Program for athletes at the McCallum Place Eating Disorder Centers in St. Louis. For instance, you might feel self-conscious in your running group but more confident out at dinner with co-workers.

This malleability is good news—even if you're not in a positive place now, you're not doomed to feel awful forever, says Marci Evans, R.D., a Cambridge, Massachusetts-based dietitian. In fact, she's so certain change is possible she calls herself a "body image healer," just as dedicated to revamping clients' self-perceptions as she is to advising on their eating habits.

Dozens of variables influence how people feel about their bodies, she says. Some you can change, while others remain outside your control; still, recognizing them proves incredibly powerful. They include:

PEERS. Friends, coworkers, running buddies, romantic partners—everyone in your orbit matters to your mindset. It's human nature to compare, so if everyone in your social circles is the same size and shape, you're going to feel differently about your body than if you surround yourself with diversity. Plus, the way these people talk about your body, and their own, influences your thoughts and interpretations.

MEDIA. Magazines and TV often portray unrealistic body types or promote "diet culture"—messages that equate weight loss and lean bodies with health and moral virtue. And social networks are double-edged swords, Carter says. Well-curated feeds offer connection and motivation, but many "fitspiration" memes echo worn-out tropes equating thin to worthy and beautiful. York University research found women tended to feel worse after viewing attractive peers on social media or commenting on their posts.

BACKGROUND. In addition to society writ large, scripts specific to your racial, geographical, or other such context also run through your mind. For instance, black women may internalize the idea that curvier bodies are more beautiful, Carter says—sometimes creating cognitive dissonance for runners of color.

BIOLOGY. Genetics influences not only the size and shape of your body, but also how you feel about it, according to a study in *Psychological Medicine*. Hormones, too, play a role; German researchers found women felt more attractive—and spent less time staring at parts of their bodies they deemed unattractive—around the time they were ovulating. Physiological events, such as pregnancy or illness, also may alter your self-perception, says Margaret Ottley, Ph.D., a sport psychology professor at West Chester University.

EVOLUTION. Neuroscientists have located nine brain regions involved in processing body image, Evans says. Interestingly, many of them, including the amygdala, regulate fear and other deeply rooted responses. That may be because we're wired to want to fit in; in the past, the more we look like those around us, the more likely we are to be accepted and protected against threats to our survival.

YOU. Your response to these internal and external forces can amplify or minimize their impact, Carter says. If you're rigid and punishing—for instance, withholding food when you miss a run or not building rest and recovery into your schedule—you're likely to feel worse. On the other hand, if you can tune out the noise and give your body the fuel and movement it needs, your body confidence may rise as a result.

Even if you're not diagnosed with a psychological condition, such concerns can alter your behaviors and relationships, potentially leading you to isolate or underestimate yourself in a way that can affect everything from dates to business negotiations.

"Negative body image takes up a lot of mental space. It's emotionally very, very draining. It kills confidence. And so it really shrinks down a person's full capacity," Evans says.

And, it can interfere with your running. If you line up for a race but find yourself overwhelmingly focused on how your body compares aesthetically to that of the competitors around you, you're unlikely to have the confidence and focus you need to perform your best. Your fears may also then become self-fulfilling prophecies, says Brittany Lash, Ph.D., an assistant professor of communication at the University of Dayton who has studied body image in female athletes.

Insecurities can also affect your motivation, making it harder to get out the door in the first place—a vicious cycle, because physical activity has been shown to help boost self-confidence. When Carter worked with first-timers training for the Chicago Marathon a few years ago, many reported concerns about whether they could go the distance because their bodies didn't look like those of typical runners, a sentiment she spent significant time dispelling. Body fixation also may sap the joy from your miles, she notes. It's tough to stay zen on a run if you spot your reflection in a window and immediately feel disgust or disdain for it.

You might never get to a place where you love every bump, wrinkle, and fold, and that's OK, Evans says. However, with time and mindful, conscientious effort, it is possible for most women to shift away from hatred, far enough along the body image spectrum so you're not consumed by your shortcomings—to a place where a glance in the mirror, weight gain, or a serious setback like an injury won't overwhelm you. Here's how to get there.

IDENTIFYING THE ISSUE

Evans often takes a straightforward approach to assessing body image, asking clients to rate theirs on a scale of one (in the gutter) to five (fab!). But it's not always that easy to be in touch with your own self-image. If you're unsure of where you'd rank, consider this list of thoughts and behaviors. Any one might not be a big deal, but the more—or the more often—you have them (or notice them in a friend or loved one), the higher the level of concern.

Check the box if you:

- ☐ Frequently body-check—evaluating yourself in every nearby reflective surface, or have a certain item of clothing you continually try on to see whether it fits
- ☐ Avoid certain situations, such as group runs or dates, because of the way you feel about your body
- ☐ Constantly attempt to change your body through diet, exercise, or other means
- ☐ Believe you'll be happier or perform better after you reach a specific goal weight or body size
- ☐ Feel motivated to run or do other workouts primarily for weight-loss or body-composition reasons
- ☐ Exercise or run primarily to avoid negative emotions—such as guilt, shame, or sadness—rather than to experience positive feelings
- ☐ Feel guilt or shame regarding the amount of time you spend thinking about your appearance or trying to change it

Eating disorders have a number of additional symptoms, and the sooner you get help, the better. You can call the National Eating Disorders Association Helpline at 1-800-931-2237. For a 24-hour crisis line, text "NEDA" to 741741. These signs include, but aren't limited to:

- Fractures and other injuries (and continuing to run or work out through them)
- Drastic changes in eating or exercise habits or in weight
- Extreme mood swings
- Preoccupation with weight, counting calories, or restricting food groups
- Rituals or secretive behavior around food
- Menstrual irregularities
- Gastrointestinal issues

Even if you don't think you meet the criteria for an eating disorder or other psychological condition, you can still seek treatment to work on your body image, Reece says. Look for a dietitian or mental health provider who has experience with body or eating issues and has worked with athletes.

Your Own Body-Image Restoration Guide

Motivated to improve your body image? First, know that negative thoughts aren't your fault, and you're far from alone in struggling with them. But also know that changing your body doesn't solve the problem—women of all shapes and sizes can have a healthy body image, or a poor one. Instead, work to alter your mindset by developing three key skills: mindfulness (staying in the moment), self-compassion (treating yourself kindly rather than harshly judging), and body attunement (getting in touch with the signals your body sends).

The following nine techniques can help you hone these mindsets. Experts are still learning exactly how to shape body image for the better—so be creative about what makes you personally feel good. Eventually, you can build a toolkit to reduce the occurrence of negative thoughts and minimize the impact when they do occur, Evans says.

Inventory. Examine the people—and messages—you're surrounding yourself with. Phase out any that make you feel ashamed or inadequate. Intentionally seek out athletes of different sizes to follow and befriend in real life.

Thank. Try a daily gratitude practice like Carter's. In addition, place random reminders in your phone that ping you with a message about the strength of your legs or the power of your core.

Correspond. Write a letter from your head to your body, either in a functional approach (listing all your body helps you do each day) or a compassionate one (from the perspective of a loving friend). Just 15 minutes of either tactic boosts body satisfaction, according to researchers.

Defuse. Track your avoidance behaviors—situations you steer clear of due to body fears. Place them in a hierarchy, from slightly intimidating to totally overwhelming. Then, expose yourself to them in small doses or on a short-term basis. For instance, spend five minutes bathing-suit shopping, or tell yourself you'll accept all dinner invitations for a month. Soon, they'll seem less scary, Bazzi says.

Visualize. Pick a quiet time and practice imagining yourself accomplishing goals in the body you have. Both external and internal imagery can work, Carter says: picturing the scene of yourself crossing a finish line, or tapping into the mental and physical sensations of finishing a tough workout strong.

Catalogue. Everyone has moments when they feel strong and powerful. When those occur, pause for a moment and write them on a slip of paper. Put them in a box, and pull one out whenever you have a low moment, Fifer says.

Recalibrate. Another way to handle negative thoughts: Pause and ask where the thought came from. Notice how it makes you feel. Then let it pass, bringing yourself back to the moment by focusing on your breath or using a physical cue, such as relaxing your shoulders and arms.

Connect. Body-shaming, or "fat talk," runs rampant. Resist the urge to respond by bashing yourself or flattering the speaker ("I wish my stomach was as flat as yours!"). Instead, wait until a neutral time and start a dialogue about how that talk makes you feel. Try: "I'm wondering if, as friends and as women, we can find a different way to talk about our bodies so it isn't this shared hating ground."

Rebel. Rise up in rage at the culture that puts harmful demands on our bodies. Instead of worrying about whether your body conforms to an ideal, become a new example. That makes you the one in control, not the environment telling you what we can be, which is far more empowering. ◆