



UK Extension's
**Universe of
Possibilities™**

SKILLS FOR CREATING HAPPINESS AND BLESSING OTHERS

Accepting and Loving Your Body

Our society's preoccupation with living up to media-portrayed body images is out of control. Add to that the fact that most of us already struggle with an inner critic that too often sends messages such as "You're not good enough" or "You don't quite measure up." Is it any wonder that dissatisfaction with our bodies is so prevalent in today's society that it's practically considered normal?

How might we better support one another in firmly saying no to unrealistic media messages and to the negative inner critic? Realizing that we come in a delightful array of shapes, sizes, and colors and that each of us is perfectly okay just the way we are, how can we more effectively model and teach the art of accepting and loving our bodies?

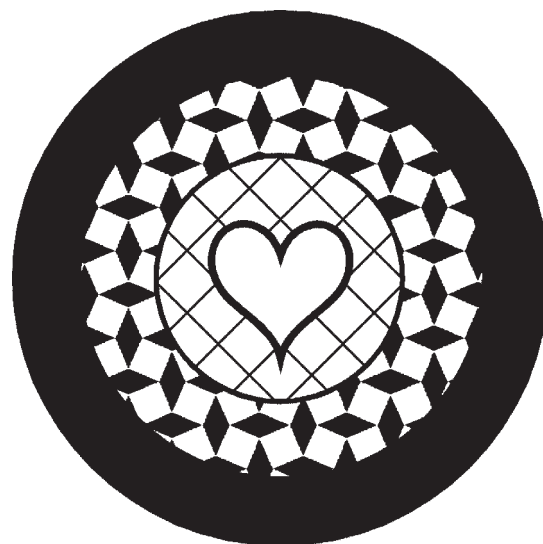
Suppose you had a close friend whom you had known from early childhood—a friend who supported you in all kinds of wonderful ways, a friend who never hurt you and was always quick to forgive your transgressions, a friend who continually gave you his or her best and, no matter what, was there for you through thick and thin.

How would you feel about such a friend? How would you treat him or her? How might you show your gratitude? Well, this friend is your body, and it's never too late to express your love and appreciation.

7 Core Principles

- 1 If you truly accept and love your body as it is, and if you treat it as a dear friend, you'll find it much easier to eat, exercise, and rest in balanced and healthy ways.
- 2 Honor your body's wisdom by listening to its signals of comfort and discomfort, by creatively responding to early signs of stress, and by paying attention to what makes you feel healthy and full of vitality.
- 3 In addition to enjoying a variety of healthy foods and regularly drinking plenty of water, intuitively sense the kinds and amounts of food your body prefers and honor your early signals of approaching fullness.
- 4 Similarly, when exercising—and particularly in taking sufficient time for sleep and relaxation—trust and follow your body's wisdom as much as you possibly can.
- 5 Have fun and be creative in discovering a manageable fitness program that you enjoy—one that includes aerobic conditioning, strength building, and flexibility exercises.
- 6 As a gesture of friendship and respect, go out of your way to give your body what it needs to thrive, perhaps a good massage or a leisurely walk in the woods; and, of course, take advantage of appropriate health screenings and medical care.
- 7 Remember, the more centered you are on the Target of Life, the greater your well-being, the wiser your choices, and the more effective you are in everything you do.

Put yourself in the center of the heart of the Target of Life. **Notice that the heart of the Target is clear, unobstructed, full of light.** From there, you see clearly and make choices that are good for you and those around you. You are attuned to your inner guidance and best judgment. You feel at peace, strong, compassionate, joyful, energetic, and creative. Your reflexes are sharp, your immune system strong. You stumble and fall less often, and you handle life's inevitable challenges with more confidence and skill. Your ability to endure prolonged hardship increases. You are naturally more sensitive to others—more patient, generous, and understanding. You more easily express the richness of your authentic self. The more deeply centered you are in the heart of the Target of Life, the more love you feel and share. **You are at your best—physically, mentally, and spiritually.**



Target of Life

Although you undoubtedly have experienced being relatively centered, often little and big things happen that go against your desires and expectations, and you are likely to find yourself thrown off center and pulled out of your heart's wisdom into the surrounding web of minor frustrations and energy-drainers. Your vitality, peace, and sensitivity begin to fade, and little tensions, doubts, and fears start to emerge. Stress creeps in and things bother you more easily. You are more critical of yourself and edgier with the people in your life. Your effectiveness, spiritual attunement, and physical health start to slip.

All of this can pull you even further away from the center of the Target of Life into the area of increased darkness and sharp edges. When you are in this portion of the Target, you have strayed still further away from your center—your heart of hearts, your home of love, wisdom, and joy. Stress levels are high, and it's much more difficult to sense your inner guidance. You're far more likely to become irritable with co-workers and friends, to yell at family members, and to make poor decisions in every area of life. Tension, disharmony, and fatigue take their toll on your creativity and physical well-being. You and everyone around you are affected negatively.

Beyond this portion of the Target of Life is the outer darkness. Here you can't see well at all; it's a terrible place to be. Insecurity, doubt, confusion, and selfishness are rampant. Stress soars to dangerous levels, and good judgment plummets to an all-time low. You feel heavy and burdened and make decisions that hurt yourself and others. You are driven by fear, blindness, and anger. In this outer darkness your health suffers tremendously, and all kinds of abuse, destruction, and violence flourish. Despite your inherent goodness, you may find yourself saying and doing horrendous things. Truly, it's a living hell.

Every individual has a Target of Life as does every relationship, organization, city, and nation. Even the world as a whole has a Target of Life, and when the world moves too far from its center of love, an array of major problems erupt, including disease, poverty, environmental disasters, international strife, and war.

It is our individual and collective choices that move us away from our intuitive wisdom at the center of the Target of Life into varying degrees of stress, confusion, frustration, and conflict. **Fortunately, by making wise choices at any time, we can move back toward the center of the Target into greater levels of peace, vitality, kindness, and opportunity.**

In the gift of choice lies our greatest power—a power that can be used to uplift or destroy. The Target of Life is a helpful way to understand our individual and collective well-being. **With awareness and practice, we can become highly skilled at detecting and creatively responding to the early signs of harmful stress.** We can gradually learn to stay more deeply centered with increasing frequency, saving ourselves all kinds of trouble and our society billions of dollars in unnecessary health care costs.

If you have a strong spiritual orientation, you may find it helpful to think of being centered as being in the heart of the Divine Presence—the source of all goodness, harmony, abundance, and creativity. As temptations confront you and you allow yourself to be lured into making less than optimal decisions, you stray from the center of Divine Love into varying degrees of fear, pain, and self-defeating behaviors. To move toward the center of Divine Presence or toward a self-created hell of outer darkness, to go more deeply into love and joy or to separate yourself from the Divine and become lost in fear and confusion—these are decisions that you face each day. By staying centered and honoring your intuitive guidance, by remaining alert and choosing wisely, you can be at your best more frequently and help to create a world of marvelous possibilities.



Why are so many of us, in one way or another, dissatisfied with our bodies? Why does our culture put such overemphasis on an extremely narrow view of physical beauty, and why do we buy into such thinking? Why are we, as Americans, eating ourselves into a major obesity crisis while millions and millions in our world family are severely malnourished or dying of starvation? Why do we repeatedly ignore our bodies when they beg for sleep or scream with needless stress and strain?

Fortunately, the answers to such questions mostly have to do with truly listening to ourselves and to one another and getting back in touch with our common sense, our intuition, and the enormous, life-changing power we have within us individually and collectively. ***Together we can create much healthier and far more satisfying possibilities.*** One step in that direction is learning to accept, respect, and trust our marvelous physical bodies.

YOUR BODY IS A MIRACLE

Regardless of your physical condition, age, or limitations that may challenge you, your body is an incredible machine—in fact, most scientists consider it astonishing almost beyond compare: A hundred trillion cellular citizens that live in an amazingly complex and harmonious kingdom; 60,000 miles of blood vessels; a formidable immune system that skillfully eliminates many kinds of unhealthy invaders; an unbelievably efficient heart pump that beats non-stop 2.5 billion times in an average life; and a three-pound supercomputer with up to 100 billion nerve cells of lightning-fast memory. The more researchers study the human body, the more awestruck they become.

There's no question about it—you are a miracle!

LET GO OF NEGATIVE IMAGES AND ATTITUDES

It's well-documented that our thoughts influence our physiology. ***Don't carry around negative thoughts and attitudes about your amazing body; it's bad medicine.*** You might want to make beneficial lifestyle changes that will nourish, strengthen, and tone your body, helping it function at a more optimal level.

That's wonderful, but if you have negative thoughts and feelings about your body, dump them; they're self-defeating. And don't complain about your body in front of others.

One of the most difficult challenges that human beings have is to look into the mirror and say, "I love you with all my heart, just as you are."

Gerald Jampolsky & Diane Cirincione

Consider your body a dear friend and ask yourself, "How would I respond if a so-called good friend frequently felt negative about me or, worse yet, was embarrassed by me and complained about me in public?" Accept and love your body just as it is now, and go out of your way to care for it in the best possible manner.

REGULARLY APPRECIATE YOUR BODY

Saying thank you to your body for all it does is a wonderful way to express your love, but your feelings of gratitude must be truly heartfelt and sincere—a depth of feeling that, for many of us, may only develop fully with time and continued practice. Well-known physician and author Christiane Northrup strongly encourages gratitude of all types. She reminds us, "No matter what's going on in the world, the economy, or the news, you have the power within you to create the biochemistry of gratitude right now." Dr. Northrup explains that when you hold feelings of thankfulness for at least 15 to 20 seconds, a variety of subtle and beneficial physiological changes take place in your body:

- ◆ Levels of the stress hormones cortisol and norepinephrine decrease, producing a cascade of beneficial metabolic changes, such as an enhanced immune system.
- ◆ Coronary arteries relax, thus increasing the blood supply to your heart.
- ◆ Heart rhythm becomes more harmonious, positively affecting your mood and all bodily organs.

- ◆ Breathing becomes deeper, thus raising the oxygen level of your tissues.

MIRROR TALK

In the morning when you get up and look in the mirror, think kind thoughts. If you are a person of religious faith, it's a great time to thank God or the universe that you're alive and to express gratitude for your blessings and the gift of a new day. Pleasantly greeting that face in the mirror will help to start your day on a positive note.

This next idea might not interest everyone, but if you want to develop a more positive attitude toward your body, perhaps you will find it beneficial. Before stepping into the shower or sliding into the tub, stand naked in front of a mirror and say with conviction, ***"I fully accept and love myself right now just the way I am. I'm grateful for my wonderful body and for the gift of life."*** If negative thoughts counter your affirmation, ignore them and continue daily using your affirmation.

The goal is not to build false pride but to acknowledge your body with appreciation and love. ***Genuine acceptance not only feels good, it also helps us make positive lifestyle changes.***

LISTEN TO YOUR BODY'S WISDOM

As poignantly expressed by philosopher and theologian Paul Tillich, "The first duty of love is to listen." If we are to love our bodies, then listening to them is paramount. Attend to your body's signals, and, several times a day, pause briefly and mentally scan your body from head to toe. Release unnecessary tension and see if your body is trying to communicate anything in particular.

"Listen" to hunger signals and food preferences. When you notice signs that you are beginning to feel full, let that be your cue to stop eating. Become aware when your body wants to stretch, hug a friend, take a break, or have a drink of water. Recognize when to bless your body with some lightheartedness or the invigorating joy of play.

Journaling can be a great way to tap into your body's wisdom. You might, for example, note your experiences in working with the suggestions above. Or you might ask your body questions

about its food and exercise preferences and what makes it feel really good. Listen carefully with pen in hand.

*The body is a sacred garment.
It's your first and last garment; it is
what you enter life in and what you
depart life with, and it should
be treated with honor.*

Martha Graham

HEALING OUR HEALTHCARE SYSTEM

Our current health care system in the United States is largely a "sick care" system that focuses on treating problems and covering up or diminishing symptoms from the outside-in. What we need is a shift to a true health care system that teaches, supports, and rewards self-responsibility, positive lifestyles, early prevention of disease, and creative support of the body's natural healing capacities—an option combining the best research-based alternative approaches along with the invaluable capabilities of traditional Western medicine.

Accepting, listening to, and lovingly caring for our bodies can assist us in making this leap to a far more enlightened and cost-effective health care system that will creatively and strongly emphasize wellness in conjunction with direct medical interventions.

MAKING POSITIVE LIFESTYLE CHANGES

There are many superb books and other materials available on taking good care of your body. In this publication we will briefly touch on a few key points.

Sufficient Rest. Give your good and faithful body an abundance of high-quality rest. Many Americans suffer from inadequate sleep, which compromises their health, contributes to tension and edginess, subdues creativity, and is a factor in a wide range of mishaps and accidents. When your body sends legitimate signals that it wants to rest and rejuvenate, heed that wisdom.

Good Nutrition. Don't take food for granted. It is a gift. Honor it. In a spirit of thanksgiving, eat a moderate and balanced diet that feels good to you—

a diet that includes a variety of wholesome foods that meet your nutritional needs. ***Also, be sure to drink plenty of water and other healthy liquids.***

Realizing that the optimal number of servings will vary with gender, age, and activity level, the U.S. Department of Agriculture suggests the following set of dietary recommendations: Each day, eat at least six helpings of grain-based foods, such as breads, cereals, pasta, and rice. Whole grains are always a great choice. Fruits and vegetables are of prime importance; eat five or more servings each day. Eat several servings of protein-rich foods, such as beans, soy, nuts, fish, low-fat dairy products, poultry, and lean meat. Consume only small amounts of fats, oils, and sweets. Learn to enjoy eating well, and remember that the serving sizes mentioned above are small.

Besides helping to ensure a balanced intake of nutrients, foods with a broad range of tastes, textures, smells, and colors add to the pleasure and adventure of eating. Have fun experimenting with new foods and recipes. To help fine-tune your eating habits or to decide if dietary supplements are needed, check with a registered dietitian or other qualified health care professional.

Enjoyable Exercise. What are the benefits of regular exercise? You feel better and tend to enjoy life more. Exercise also helps to keep your heart, lungs, muscles, and bones strong; reduces your risk of heart disease and stroke; and helps keep your weight and blood pressure at healthy levels. Healthy movement promotes mental alertness, improves circulation, and increases energy. It also reduces stress, depression, and sleep problems. Regular exercise may even help protect against certain types of cancer.

Three important components of a well-rounded exercise program are: **aerobic conditioning**, those forms of exercise, such as walking, swimming, and bicycling, that comfortably speed up your heart and breathing rates; **strength building**, such as safe forms of weight lifting and resistance training; and **flexibility exercises**, the gradual, gentle stretching of muscle groups.

For many reasons, walking is a superb form of exercise! It's essentially cost-free, it's easy and enjoyable, it's a great stress reliever, and it can be

done almost any time and anywhere. People of all ages can benefit from walking. It's a good way to enjoy nature and peaceful solitude, and it's a wonderful activity to share with family, friends, and co-workers.

*The more I can love
everything—the trees, the land, the
water, my fellow men, women, and
children, and myself—the more
health I am going to experience.*

Carl Simonton

Be creative in finding the types of exercise you enjoy and make them a part of your daily life. Try something that's new for you, perhaps a class in Tai Chi or water aerobics. ***Moving our bodies in healthy ways feels good. Tune into that joy!***

Of course, it's always a good idea to touch base with a health care professional before starting an exercise program. Also, keep in mind that the more centered you are on the Target of Life, the more accepting and loving you will be, and the easier it will be for you to follow through successfully on your healthy lifestyle goals.



QUESTIONS TO PONDER AND DISCUSS

One good question can be worth a shelf full of books. ***Think about the broad topic of accepting and loving your body, then write down several related questions.*** Ponder your questions and discuss your responses with a friend or with a small group. Here are two starter items:

- ✧ In recent decades, obesity has risen alarmingly among both children and adults. What's causing this trend, and what can we do to reverse it?
- ✧ Imagine that you've just been given a one-year grant for \$100,000 to improve the health of your immediate community. How will you spend the money?



SKILL BUILDERS

Skill builders help you exercise your creative muscles to give you the strength you need for success. *In addition to the two skill builders below, create some of your own on the topic of accepting and loving your body.* As with physical fitness workouts, benefits come from actually *doing* the exercises.

- ◆ Ask your body if there is a favor you can do for it—maybe a soothing warm bath, more time in the great outdoors, an afternoon nap, or some enjoyable snuggling with your spouse or a significant other. Then follow through.
- ◆ Do some exploring: Visit a yoga class and talk with the instructor about the benefits; check out that new gym; enroll in a vegetarian cooking class; or talk with a friend about ways to simplify and enrich your lifestyle.



A NEW POSSIBILITY

Bringing a dream to life is a journey. It begins and continues one step at a time. Think about all that you have learned from this publication and how you might put it into practice. Then choose one small goal that you want to accomplish in the next few days. Move toward a new possibility that is important to you—one that you are enthusiastic about and are confident you can achieve.

Take a card or a piece of paper and at the top, write “A New Possibility.” Under this heading, briefly state what you will do and by when. Sign this action plan and put it where you will see it often. Tell a supportive friend or family member about your goal, and frequently visualize yourself following through. Be prepared just in case doubts or roadblocks crop up. Know that you can always draw upon faith, firm resolve, and creativity to overcome any obstacles that may arise.

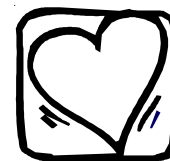
When you put the deepest desires of your heart into action, it naturally benefits others, either directly or indirectly. Have fun with your action plan. Dare to envision new possibilities, and then create your dreams one step at a time.



POSITIVE THOUGHTS

You may find the following brief thoughts (or similar ones that you create) to be simple yet powerful inspirational tools. You might, for example, memorize and, with deep feeling and concentration, mentally repeat one of these seed thoughts or write it on a card and place it where you'll see it often.

- ♥ I accept and love my body. Good food, exercise, and plenty of rest give me radiant health. As I listen to my body's wisdom, I enjoy increased peace and energy.
- ♥ I appreciate all the ways in which my body serves me. Today I shall take excellent care of my irreplaceable body, listening with respect to its signals of comfort and discomfort.
- ♥ By my example, by my caring thoughts, and through gentle words of support, I cheerfully encourage all those around me to enjoy the innumerable benefits of a healthy lifestyle.



LOVE MADE VISIBLE

Together, let us envision and build a world where all people enjoy optimal well-being. Let us strive to awaken fresh thinking, new enthusiasm, and abundant love. Let us create a world of unimagined possibilities. It can be done!

10 Educational Modules

UK Extension's Universe of Possibilities™: Skills for Creating Happiness and Blessing Others is an educational series containing 10 modules. Each module is accompanied by a Macromedia Flash® movie, a PowerPoint® presentation, and other teaching tools. All these resources, along with a Facilitator's Guide, are available free-of-charge in camera-ready format at the following website: www.ca.uky.edu/fcs/possibilities.

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| <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Your Vision Map 2. Making the Growth Choice 3. The Way of Peace 4. Heart Intelligence 5. The Freedom of Self-Discipline |  | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 6. Embracing This Present Moment 7. Accepting and Loving Your Body 8. Healthy Relationships 9. Unleashing Your Creativity 10. Gifts of Gratitude and Blessing |
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(For a variety of materials on healthy living, including camera-ready copies of publications and other educational resources, visit the Wildcat Way to Wellness website at www.ca.uky.edu/fcs/wildcat.)

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