

# Writing away the body image blues

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Body dissatisfaction among women is widespread and can lead to a number of worrisome outcomes, including eating disorders, depression and anxiety. While researchers know a lot about what makes women's body image worse, they are still short on empirically supported interventions for improving women's body image.

Renee Engeln, a professor of instruction in psychology in the Weinberg College of Arts and Sciences at Northwestern University, said positive [body](#) image interventions focused on telling [women](#) they're beautiful the way they are or exhorting them to "love their bodies" are often doomed to fail.

In a new study, Engeln, author of "Beauty Sick" (HarperCollins, 2017), tested the effect of three specific writing exercises on college women's [body satisfaction](#), along with co-author Natalie G. Stern also of Northwestern.

"In the first two studies, we found that spending just 15 minutes writing and reviewing one of three specific types of letters to oneself can significantly increase women's body satisfaction—at least short-term," Engeln said.

In two of the letter-writing interventions, the focus was on self-compassion. One was a basic self-compassion letter; the other was a self-compassionate letter directed specifically at the body.

"To induce a self-compassionate mind frame, women wrote letters to

themselves from the perspective of an unconditionally loving friend who knew them well, saw all their perceived flaws and still responded with kindness and acceptance," Engeln said.

"The third type of letter-writing intervention asked women to write a letter to their body, showing gratitude for all of its functions—everything it does to help you get through every day. Relative to control conditions, all three of these letters increased body satisfaction," she said.

In the final study, the researchers turned the letter-writing instructions into a simpler, faster writing activity that could be completed online. It was the same basic idea, but women wrote a series of sentences instead of a more formal letter. More than 1,000 college women completed the online study, which once again showed that self-compassion and body functionality-focused letters could improve body image.

"The letters women in the study wrote were astounding. They were moving and inspirational, several brought tears to our eyes," Engeln said. "Many participants asked if they could take a copy of their [letter](#) home with them. It seems that even women who struggle with body image can practice a kinder, gentler way of thinking about their body. They just might need a framework to help guide them."

For more than a decade, Engeln has been studying cultural factors that make it difficult for women to have healthy relationships with their bodies.

"We've learned enough to confidently say that it's healthier to avoid things like idealized media images of women, social media comparisons or negative body talk, but this is the first piece of evidence we can use to make a firm recommendation about a positive step women can take toward improving body image," Engeln said.

The letters women wrote for this study were so moving that the researchers hope to create a website where women can submit letters they write to their bodies and share them with others.

"We think this could be a fabulous way to create a source of inspiration and comfort for women who have [body image](#) struggles," Engeln said. "Of course, we also look forward to additional research, testing how these approaches can be implemented on a broader scale, perhaps through using a smartphone app."

"Self-Compassionate Writing Exercises Increase College Women's Body Satisfaction" was published recently in the journal *Psychology of Women Quarterly*.

**More information:** Natalie G. Stern et al, Self-Compassionate Writing Exercises Increase College Women's Body Satisfaction, *Psychology of Women Quarterly* (2018). [DOI: 10.1177/0361684318773356](https://doi.org/10.1177/0361684318773356)

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