

Embracing body image in motherhood

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The changes of motherhood can make women vulnerable to negative body image, but experts at Flinders University are encouraging women to embrace body image interventions to combat this.

A [new study](#) published in *Body Image* says focusing on the impressive

feats of motherhood, such as conceiving, carrying, giving birth to, and feeding a baby—and all the other things our bodies can do every day—is better than focusing on any unexpected or unwanted physical changes.

"We encourage mums to reflect on these positive sentiments, and even journal or write them down in a diary, to record both your maternal experience and your child's remarkable growth and development," says lead author Philippa Granfield.

"Along with what our bodies can do in relation to motherhood, we can also be grateful they allow us to do other things, like engage in our favorite hobbies, recover from illness, or socialize with friends."

The study, which was a collaboration between Flinders University and Maastricht University, asked 143 mothers of children aged 10 and under to complete two short (15-minute) online writing exercises.

One exercise called Expand Your Horizon, developed by Dr. Jessica Alleva of Maastricht University, was adapted by the researchers to be specific to motherhood. Women who completed this task wrote about everything their bodies can do, and why these things were important to them.

This could be either in relation to being a mother, such as conceiving a baby, or, unrelated to being a mother, such as engaging in a favorite hobby.

The other writing exercise involved writing about what everyday objects can do, and why these things were important to them (e.g., using a smartphone to take photos of their children, or a coffee machine to make a really good coffee).

Compared to writing about everyday objects, Expand Your Horizon's

focus on appreciating what the body can do improved body image to much greater effect.

"Expand Your Horizon's accessibility and brief time commitment offer a convenient way of reflecting on, and appreciating, what our bodies can do, during what is often a very busy, time-poor stage of life. The vast array of things that the body can do make the intervention accessible to all mums, regardless of whether or not your maternal experience has been what you expected."

"Its effects were particularly strong for mums low on self-compassion, which is the practice of being kind to oneself. We believe it offers mums a new, more balanced perspective on their bodies, that goes beyond the pervasive focus on physical appearance."

Co-author Associate Professor Ivanka Prichard, director of the Embrace Impact Lab at Flinders University, says [social media](#) and society put a strong focus on women's physical appearance.

"The experience of [motherhood](#) comes with many physical and psychological changes that can leave women vulnerable to [negative body image](#)," says Associate Professor Prichard.

"Given our western culture's strong focus on [physical appearance](#), it's important to find ways to counter negative feelings and consider more positive perspectives on our body. Body appreciation of one's functionality, health and other features can help reduce body dissatisfaction and move our focus away from weight and shape."

Maternal body dissatisfaction is often associated with negative outcomes such as [postpartum depression](#), excessive exercise or reduced breastfeeding. Body appreciation is a practice that tends to increase throughout a lifetime, and can help people of any gender, age or culture.

More information: Philippa Granfield et al, Enhancing body image in motherhood: A randomised controlled trial of Expand Your Horizon among mothers of young children, *Body Image* (2023). [DOI: 10.1016/j.bodyim.2023.101648](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.bodyim.2023.101648)

Provided by Flinders University

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