

A woman wearing sunglasses, a black t-shirt, and denim shorts stands on a concrete pier. She is holding a long white string that is attached to a large cluster of black balloons floating in the air. The background consists of a clear blue sky and a calm blue ocean.

Susan Bodiker

# fat girl

*How to let go  
of your weight  
and get on  
with your life*

**FAT GIRL:  
HOW TO LET GO OF YOUR WEIGHT  
AND GET ON WITH YOUR LIFE**



**FAT GIRL:**  
**How to let go of your  
weight and get on with  
your life**

**Susan Bodiker**

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## **Dedication**

To all the women, who still see a fat girl in the mirror  
To all the girls, who wonder if they'll ever like what they see  
To my mother, who always said I had a book in me (although  
perhaps not this one!)

**This is for you.**



# *Introduction*

*“My body is like my life—a work in progress.”*

*—Jessica Simpson for Weight Watchers*



I never expected to write a book. An annual report? Sure. An advertising campaign? Sign me up. As a copywriter, my job is to tell other people’s—and brands’—stories. But, last year, while visiting my cousins to celebrate their B’nai Mitzvah, I came across an old photograph. “Tell my story,” it commanded. “Tell them what it was like.”

*My story.*

And, so, this book. It is the story of one girl—me—who got over her weight and finally found herself. (Spoiler alert: it took many years to get from point A to point B and even longer to stop seeing the fat girl in the mirror.) And while the title may be a little snarky, the words are heartfelt and the information,



I hope, helpful and healing to girls, young women and their mothers, who do so much unintentional damage by putting so much, well, weight on weight. (We'll explore why in Chapter 1.)

You can't "lean in" without a spine. But you can't have a spine without first feeling comfortable in your skin. I wrote "Fat Girl" because I want girls and women to learn from my experience (at a much earlier age than I did) and to overcome (or, better yet, avoid altogether) the weight issues that eat away at their self-esteem and keep them from engaging confidently in the world—in the classroom, at work, in relationships and, most of all, with themselves.

In writing this book, I've had to re-visit painful emotions and experiences I thought I had come to terms with long ago. Not a ton of fun. But by putting it out there, I hope it can connect with even just one other girl or woman and help her change the way she thinks about food, her body and herself. To find healthier ways to nourish her mind and heart. And to give herself the rewarding life she yearns for. And deserves.

*What this book is not:*

A no-fail diet plan

A recipe for the perfect life

A strict nutritionist ideology

*What this book can be:*

A lifeline out of the darkness

A roadmap to greater awareness and self-esteem

A set of tools that just might set you free



# ONE

## *Home is where the heart (ache) is*

*“On ne se guérit jamais de son enfance.”  
(You never get over your childhood.) —French proverb*

Where does it come from, this compulsion to be thin? Is Barbie to blame? The epic fails of Photoshop? What about our hyper-sexualized media that promotes standards no real woman could ever hope to attain? Or perhaps it's the androgynous aesthetic of the fashion industry that sees women as little more than walking clothes hangers.

It's complicated. Yes, society's expectations, social media and pop culture play a (big) role, but like all learned behaviors, the source is closer to home. Much closer. We start to define and judge who we are by what our parents tell us.

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### Written in the body

According to Bernie Siegel, MD (<http://berniesiegelmd.com/>), until the age of six, children are “hypnotized” by what they hear from their parents. And what they hear (and how they interpret and internalize it) remains deep within their consciousness, af-

fecting how they see—and feel about—themselves. For better or for worse. Whether or not it's based on any objective reality.

In my case it was the never-ending refrain of:

“Don't eat that, you'll get fat.”

“You don't need that. You'll get fat.”

“You don't want that. You've had enough.”

*Enough?* Says who? I was starving. Really, legitimately hungry. (For food, right then. For other things, later on.) I didn't want to eat a sandwich on only one slice of bread. I wanted a real bagel, not one with the inside scooped out. I wanted a cookie. I wanted to eat what other kids ate (especially the blond, long-limbed WASP-y girls I'd never fit in with no matter how skinny I got). I wanted to be like everybody else who ate what they wanted when they wanted without being judged or punished.

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## Whose body is it anyway?

Years of doubting my own senses resulted in a skewed emotional proprioception that left me disoriented and confused. I looked to others before I asked myself (if indeed I did ask myself),

“Do *you* like this?”

“Do *you* want this?”

“Susan, how do *you* feel about this?”

I had no answers. And even if I did, I couldn't trust myself.

Therapist Harville Hendrix (<http://www.harvillehendrix.com>) says that when parents routinely deny a child's experience of him/herself, when they override, even with the best of intentions, what the child thinks or feels, it creates self-doubt and self-defeating attitudes that can lay the groundwork for

unhealthy behaviors many years down the road. By hearing I wasn't hungry (when I was) or I was fat (when I wasn't), I became a stranger to myself. Over time, I learned to say "yes" when I really meant "no" (in all the ways you think). I became the quintessential people-pleaser, automatically doing what others wanted because I thought their approval was worth more than my own needs or desires.

By taking away *my* agency over *my own body*, by creating this disconnect between what I thought I knew and what people told me I should think, I lost my sense of (self) control and security.

I felt shut off, isolated and trapped. And, more than once, after a particularly lacerating exchange where my mother would point out all my physical flaws in living color, I'd write over and over again: "I wish I were dead."

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## Enter "Mommy dearest."

She is at the heart of the matter, but she's not the villain of the piece. (As a mom myself, with plenty of faults and regrets, I'm not into mother-bashing.) She has her own issues that she is unconsciously displacing onto you and reflecting social, cultural and familial traditions that have limited and constrained women's potential and personal growth for generations.

The result is a woman in conflict, trying to face down her own demons by creating the perfect child. In her book, "Transforming the Inner Mother," Bethany Webster (<http://www.womboflight.com>), identifies this phenomenon as "the mother wound," an unhealthy enmeshment where a mother thinks, "If I can fix my daughter, I can fix myself." Webster

suggests that this is backwards. Mothers, she believes, need to identify their own problems and *heal themselves first* before they can turn to others. It is only after they have done their own homework that they can guide their child.

Webster calls this process “healing the mother wound,” a phrase that I found physically painful to confront. Its very harshness broke through my consciousness and helped me understand with sudden gut-wrenching clarity why I felt the way I did about my mother and myself and where it all came from. And the more I thought about it, the more I realized, it wasn’t about *me* at all. I was not the problem. I was not the failure. *It was all about my mother and how she saw herself. What she projected onto me.*

The epiphany may have been liberating, but it still didn’t change the fact that I was collateral damage.

I knew from observation she never felt good about her appearance. She wore braces for 13 years. She felt fat and unlovely. She saw flaws where there were none. She surely felt under-employed and under-challenged by not working outside the house (although she had a career before I was born). She felt guilty when she took time to paint or even read for pleasure. (Instead, she found a socially acceptable creative outlet in cooking, something I was never allowed to share or consume considering my alleged “size” and the restrictive diets she put me on. Torture!) She was the consummate “good girl,” who got her validation from her parents’ and husband’s (my father’s) approval. She wanted to be perfect. She wasn’t. (Who can be?) So I had to be perfect for her. (Which, of course, I was not.)

And so she tried to push me to become what she believed she could never be—independent, ambitious, self-reliant. (And

I am all those things—to a fault.) But along with these strengths came that one fatal flaw. She hated her looks and her body and through her obsessive and cruel attention, I grew to hate my own. I became her worst nightmare. I was made to feel guilty that she “had sacrificed so much” and I could never measure up to her expectations.

Instead of love, there was fear and control. In place of empathy, there was anger and resentment. It was only after I deconstructed *why* she did what she did (although her strategy of fat shaming, starvation diets and very conditional love still baffle me—what was she thinking?) that I could finally find compassion and forgive her (long after her death).

To this day, it makes me sad to think of all the time we wasted and what we could have had.

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## Things fall apart

My mother had been dead for less than a year (of colorectal cancer), when I got very, very sick. (Connection? You think?) My intestine ruptured (for no apparent reason and with no warning), my condition was misdiagnosed and between the sepsis and the pain, I was as near death as you can possibly be without the bright white light and hallucinatory visions. All I could think of as they raced me to the operating room was “I never got back to France,” “Where is my will?” and “Who will take care of my son?”

It was a traumatic time but I survived. My recovery turned out to be amazingly quick and uneventful despite the drama that preceded it. An ileostomy was repaired three months after that first surgery and my now repentant and reconnected colon



and I have lived pretty much happily ever after. (The following summer, I took my son to France.)

One memory from my “time of troubles” stands out.

Shortly before I was discharged, the GI team came to brief me on my immediate post-surgical life—ostomy care, doctors’ appointments, Visiting Nurses, special diets and meds. As is usual in these cases, I was prescribed an anti-inflammatory with truly magical (to me) properties. It did not break down as it traveled through the GI tract but instead released its curative properties right where they were needed—the ileum. As a chronic doctor-wannabe, I was so entranced I forgot to be scared.

That was the good news. The pills were targeted and effective.

The bad news was that I’d have to take about eight to ten of them after every meal. And at that point, they *were* the meal. (Nothing like an ileostomy to keep portion sizes minute and food selections really basic and austere. Mmm...mmm, not so good.) And each pill was the size of a pony and just as unwieldy to swallow.

I did not ask:

“How long will I be taking this?”

“Are there side-effects?”

“Will insurance pay for it?”

Or, even, “*Is this available in liquid form?*”

No, my only comment was, “It’s not cortisone, is it? I don’t want to gain weight or get a moon face.”

The doctors stared at me, stupefied. And no wonder. I was skeletal, pale, still tethered to IVs and needed a shower in the worst way. I looked like death warmed over.

Finally, one of the medical students asked, “Um, has anyone

ever talked to you about image disorders?”

Um, yes...why do you ask?

He added gently, “Weight gain is not something you need to worry about right now.”

It wasn't cortisone, they reassured me. I wouldn't gain weight. There would be no moon face in my future. I would be fine.

And, in time, I was.

I was 47 years old.

I had gotten a second chance at life. It was time to grow up and learn how to put the image disorder—that was really a parenting disorder—to rest.

## *What mothers should know about what their daughters need*

**1** **There's no better role model for your daughter than you.** Are you constantly denigrating your body (or others')? Always talking about dieting or exercise? Do you put appearance on a pedestal to the exclusion of everything else? Yes, we all want to look good but don't let aesthetics come between you and your child. Think about the example you set and the lessons she's picking up from all that negative body talk.

Never let her believe (as I did) that because she's overweight, she's unworthy of your approval and support and none of her other accomplishments matter. She will spend the rest of her life hungering for your love and trying to com-

pensate for that lack in all the wrong places and in truly unhealthy ways. She will measure herself against those punishing standards for years to come.

Your compassion and support will go a long way in raising a strong, resilient woman with healthy self-esteem.

**2 Take a positive approach.** Spend some quality time going through fashion/celebrity magazines or websites and show your daughter how to identify photo-shopped or otherwise altered images that distort real women's bodies. (*Hint: a flawlessly smooth contouring line at the waist, hip or thigh is a dead giveaway that there's been some digital plastic surgery going on.* Check out <http://www.bravegirlswant.com/truth-in-ads.html> for more incriminating evidence and action you can take.) It's a great way to have some fun and help her become a smarter consumer in the process.

Find ways to encourage her to develop her own sense of style that will bring out her natural beauty and enhance her confidence. Help her find clothes that fit and flatter—whatever her body type and weight. (*Hint: buying her something in a size too small is not motivating. It's cruel.*) Ask her to join you in a workout or find a physical activity you both enjoy and can do together on a regular basis.

And please, oh please, bite your tongue before you nag, punish or lash out in fat shaming, no matter how frustrated you may get. I can tell you from my own experience it never works. Ever. It will color your relationship long after she grows up and moves out of your house. And it will not have the positive impact you seek. It will only make things worse.

**3 Make meals a celebration not a battle.** Family time is precious. Serve everyone the same healthy foods in healthy portion sizes but don't make an issue of who's eating what and how much. (You can't imagine how demeaning it was to watch everyone else enjoy an enticing meal whose preparation I had seen and smelled all day and all I had on my plate was....an apple, with every bite measured and judged. How was that going to help me learn to manage my hunger or my weight? I felt ashamed and unwanted, as though I took up too much space.)

Sure, clean out the pantry and don't bring junk food into the house. (Seriously, there is not willpower enough to resist it.) But, more importantly, keep the conversation away from food or weight. ([http://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/wellness/great-dinner-conversations-with-your-kids/2014/07/29/32ac6460-0c33-11e4-8c9a-923ecc0c7d23\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/wellness/great-dinner-conversations-with-your-kids/2014/07/29/32ac6460-0c33-11e4-8c9a-923ecc0c7d23_story.html)) Treat the dinner hour as a time for nourishing minds and manners, not just the body.

**4 Be the mother you wish you had.** Nurture yourself (and your children) with the love and support you may not have received but always wanted. Support your self-worth and theirs by learning how to dismiss external judgments and find approval from within. Forgive and let go of the past (you can't change it anyway) and put your energies into what you can influence—the present moment and (maybe) the future.

Take charge of your own transformation. Your daughter will take her cues from you.

**5 Create a safe haven.** Our culture says, “Be thin.” Our commercial interests say, “Eat this. Drink that.” There are mean girls and interfering institutions that do more harm than good with public weigh-ins and institutional shaming. (<http://www.kevinmd.com/blog/2014/07/school-boards-fancy-health-care-providers.html>)

Advocate for your daughter by educating her about what is true and real by giving her the emotional wherewithal to deal with bullies outside the home. (Unfortunately, in my case, the bully was in the house.)

Take a stand against well-meaning but wholly ineffective policies that impose one-size-fits-all metrics on young girls and women. Show her that you’re her champion and that you will work through this together.

**6 Listen for the subtext.** When your daughter comes to you and asks, “Am I fat?” don’t answer right away. Think about the context. Karen Schachter, MSW, who counsels women and girls (<http://dishingwithyourdaughter.com>) suggests that the question may not be about her appearance. She is looking to you for confirmation—not just about her weight, but whether or not you love her *in spite* of it. Maybe it’s her way to start a conversation about something else that’s bothering her about her body or her life and her weight is an easy conversational hook.

Whatever her motivation, listen and find a way to reassure and prove to her that she can talk to you. About anything. Because it’s more than just weight and one day it may be about something far bigger than the numbers on a scale. You want to build that trust today so she can talk to you throughout her life.

## **7 Love means always being able to say you're sorry.**

We always want to do right by our kids and when it comes to weight, we are afraid of saying the wrong thing. Not talking, ignoring the “elephant in the room” is not the solution. It creates more angst and stigma. Sometimes you will say or do the wrong thing and if you do, psychologist Marian Tanofsky-Kraff, a specialist in childhood obesity advises, don't be afraid to say “I'm sorry.” Apologize sincerely and work to find a more loving and helpful way to address the problem (e.g. Health, not weight. Confidence, not calories.)

Don't let the paradox of perfect parenthood be a barrier to being there when your child needs you.

## **8 Outsource the cure.**

We all practice selective deafness. And if you and your daughter seem to be stuck in the same unhealthy patterns, don't hesitate to ask for professional help. (I wish my family had! For all their intelligence and sophistication—my father was a physician, for goodness sake—it never occurred to them.) Sometimes the very same thing you've said over and over again resonates better and is much more palatable when it comes from someone else (i.e. not her mom).

An objective source with the right experience and manner can provide a new perspective and a safe space where you and your daughter can find new, more loving ways to heal the wounds and move forward.



# TWO

## *Filling the void*

*“Life itself is the proper binge.” —Julia Child*

Do you remember where you were when Hostess Cakes (<http://hostesscakes.com/>) declared bankruptcy? Did you even care? I do (driving to a client meeting, listening to NPR) and I did. I hadn't thought about the brand for ages but I felt a pang of nostalgia for the creator of such iconic treats as Twinkies, Ding Dongs and, my binge food of choice, SnoBalls—two mounds of chocolate cake and cream covered by a thick pink blanket of marshmallow and coconut frosting. (My other fave was the equally sweet, evanesce-in-your-mouth Three Musketeers bar. Part of no balanced diet anywhere in the universe.)

Also on the menu: bread eaten straight from the freezer. Salty snacks. And anything else I could surreptitiously forage from my mother's gourmet pantry.

Happily (for the bakery workers if not for the rest of us), SnoBalls and the rest of the Hostess gang have made “the sweetest comeback ever.” I saw their once seductive package the other day displayed near the self-checkout section of a local conve-



nience store (talk about triggering a stealth impulse buy!) and felt...not a thing. Not a flicker of desire. It was rather like running into an old flame that I once couldn't imagine living without but now couldn't remember what I had found so appealing.

Who are you again?

But when I was a teenager, those foods were my refuge. An embrace that softened the cold perfectionism of my household and the harsh expectations—perfect grades, perfect appearance, perfect behavior—I had to uphold.

And while I tried to hide the food, there was no escaping the scale. Or my mother's screaming and verbal (and occasionally physical) assaults when, once a week, my sins were uncovered and the needle crept upward. 120...130...140.

I never said or did anything during her tirades. I just swallowed my feelings and counted the minutes until my mother dismissed me with a cold "Get out of my sight." It was the same script every time.

I kept my mouth shut until I could escape to my room. And then the cycle would begin again.

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## Emotional heartburn

Bingeing. Purging. Anorexia. Orthorexia. (<http://nymag.com/the-cut/2014/07/10-ways-to-spot-an-orthorexic.html>) Obsessive exercising. Irresistible cravings. Self-hatred. Guilt. Bullying. (<http://nymag.com/scienceofus/2014/07/week-in-the-life-of-50-overweight-women.html#jumpLink>)

Toxic, self-reinforcing negativity that starts in childhood and last a lifetime.

This is the legacy of disordered eating. And if you're read-

ing this book, I don't have to tell you what it's like. You already know the "what." Here's more about the "why."

## Plenty of nothing

We live in a world of cheap, abundant processed foods. Portion sizes have exploded. Junk foods are junkier and more addictive. (<http://www.takepart.com/photos/calorie-gallery/next-gallery?cmpid=tpnews-eml-2014-07-19-fastfood>). Food-porn marketing and TV programming are everywhere.

Big Ag's big money and oversized legislative influence have influenced our purchasing and eating habits to an unhealthy degree. (Think the USDA's food pyramid has your best interests at heart? Think again.) And at billions and billions of dollars in sales (and growing), the food and beverage industries contribute big-time to Wall Street's ever expanding appetite for profits.

And it's not just what *we* eat (more processed foods, soft drinks and empty calories, more corn syrup and its sugary derivatives, more salt and chemical preservatives), it is, as Michael Pollan has described it, "*what the food we eat, eats*" (e.g. corn, not grass, antibiotics, growth hormones, diseased animal feed); how it lives (crowded, unsanitary factory farms) or where it is grown (unhealthy, leached-out, pesticide- and chemical-ridden soil).

It's enough to make you sick. And it does—with obesity and all its co-morbid discontents. (There are the usual suspects: sleep apnea, Type 2 diabetes, fatty liver disease, heart disease, hypertension, hypercholesterolemia, osteoarthritis, depression, impaired immune systems. And some unexpected ones: Alzheimer's disease, cancer, asthma, early puberty, infertility.)

From the food in your grocery cart to the biome in your gut, from the nutritional value of this ingredient or that food to your state of mind, there's a direct link between lifestyle and long-term health, a connection that supports or undermines the delicate balance between our biochemistry, brains and bodies.

*Caveat eater.*

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## Refugees in the land of plenty

No one knows calories better than a fat girl. No one knows what she should or shouldn't eat better than a fat girl. I could have told you down to the gram the nutritional value of what I was eating, but *why* I was eating, that was a mystery.

Let us count the ways—

I ate because I was hungry. But I also ate because I was angry. (Was I ever! And I held on to that anger long after I lost the weight.) Anxious. Afraid. At loose ends. Bored. Hormonal. Lonely. Tired. Scared. Overwhelmed. Isolated. Depressed. Fill in the blank (literally).

I ate because I was stressed. Stress and obesity go together like cortisol (the stress hormone) and, well, sugar—evil twins that cause us to crave and self-medicate with sweets. Stress doesn't care if you are a well-off white teen on the Upper East Side of Manhattan or a poor single mom struggling on the “other side of the river” in Washington, DC. It exerts a gravitational pull over the choices you make, and when it comes to stress you are likely to reach for this (dis)comfort food again and again and suffer the metabolic consequences ([http://www.huffingtonpost.com/jenny-c-evans/stress\\_b\\_5724008.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/jenny-c-evans/stress_b_5724008.html)).

I ate to make myself feel better. (<http://www.kevinmd.com/>

[blog/2014/07/contrave-promising-new-approach-fight-obesity.html](http://blog/2014/07/contrave-promising-new-approach-fight-obesity.html))

I ate because I felt I was already overweight and figured “what difference does another cupcake make...another candy bar...another bag of chips?”

I ate because I hated myself. I ate in a fugue state and didn’t even taste—or remember—what I was eating.

But, mostly, I ate to feel *numb*, to bury the pain of my life and make it disappear.

Alternatively, others may starve themselves with rigid diets and run themselves into shin splints with obsessive exercise—all in the attempt to gain control over scary feelings or circumstances: chemical addictions, abuse (physical, emotional, sexual), trauma/PTSD, unhappy, disordered home lives. Or simply to deal with the conflicts and confusion of growing up. (Along with acne, stress eating and eating disorders typically begin in adolescence.)

Eat/not eat to excess, it’s often emotional, not physical, hunger that throws the switch.

Whatever the reason, it’s easier to use food as a stand-in than to address what we’re truly hungry for—attention, love, companionship, validation, comfort, security, hope. For many, food is the potion that soothes a broken heart. A wall to hide behind so we don’t have to put ourselves out there and risk failure or rejection. A tool to beat ourselves up with because we think we’re failures anyway.

So food ceases to be physical nourishment and becomes instead the enemy that feeds our fears, erodes our self-esteem and makes self-defeating prophecies a reality.

## Why we do this to ourselves

1. ***Black and white thinking.*** “If I eat this Oreo, I’m a terrible person. If I lose 25 pounds, I’m a *good girl*.” (By the way, can we permanently delete “good girl” from our vocabulary and aspirations? A “good girl” is self-effacing and self-diminishing—two risk factors for eating and esteem disorders. A “good girl” is detached from who she is and what she wants or feels. “Good” is bad. )

Extreme thinking leads to extreme behaviors like bingeing/purging or other self-harm. It’s also supremely ineffective, imposing unnecessary limits on what you *can* do (taking positive action) by focusing on and magnifying the negative.

*Repeat after me:* I am better than the food I eat; my weight does not make me more or less worthy of love; one setback (or several) does not make me bad, worthless or a total failure. It’s a cookie, not a test of Calvinist purity. Forgive yourself and move on.

*If you think in black and white, cultivate shades of grey:*

- Take some time to think about how you react to certain situations. Are you prone to all-or-nothing-at-all thinking?
- Identify perceptions that make you feel worse about yourself or get in your own way.
- Consider how you can develop more self-affirming and proactive habits. *Then do them.*
- Stay focused and keep track of your progress.

2. ***Wishful thinking.*** “If only I could lose the weight, I would be happy.” Really? Fact is, it may not be about your weight at all. It’s about bigger issues (Job? Relationships? Family?), which

are getting in the way of your happiness. Rather than deal, you avoid the big pain in front of you and concentrate on the one (not so small) thing you *think* you can control (your weight). It's easier to blame the extra pounds or "lose" them over and over again than to risk disentangling yourself from a dead-end job or unhappy marriage.

*If you're living in denial, cultivate self-awareness:*

- When familiarity breeds content (or at least a comfortably recognizable despair), it's easy to stay in a rut. (Change is scary.)
- Challenge yourself to confront what's really bothering you so you can take creative steps to overcome or change it. Self-empowerment breeds success.

3. ***Flawed thinking.*** Tell me if this sounds familiar: "I hate my thighs. My arms are flabby. I'm short. I could never wear that!" Would you talk to friend like this? No? Then why indulge in trash talk to yourself? What does that get you apart from a bad case of depression?

*If you hate your body, cultivate compassion:*

- Show yourself a little love and your body a lot of compassion. It's a work of art; treat it with respect.
- In her book, "Body Compassion," Jean Fain ([jfain@hms.harvard.edu](mailto:jfain@hms.harvard.edu)), a psychotherapist at Harvard Medical School, says developing better body compassion can "transform bad eating habits and body image." Imagine—the better you feel about yourself, the better you treat yourself. What a concept! Try it!

## Mindfulness over matter

How can you overcome the disordered thinking that leads to disordered eating? In a word, mindfulness—what Ronna Katbatznic (<http://www.thecenterformindfuleating.org/ronna-kabatznick>) calls “the medicine that cures the disease of desire.” It means living mentally, physically and emotionally *in the moment* (you can’t multi-task) so you can appreciate what you are doing, eating, thinking and *feeling* in an objective and non-judgmental way.

Mindfulness may seem simple but it is not easy. Much like yoga, Pilates or meditation, it’s every bit as physical as it is mental and requires the same conscious breathing, rapt attention and subtle (mental) muscle engagement. (If you’re just getting started on a mindfulness practice, download the Mindfulness Daily app <http://mindfulnessdailyapp.com/>, which offers easy-to-assimilate tips and techniques for mindful living.)

To bring mindfulness to the table, start by sitting calmly away from any distraction. Take a deep breath and:

- focus on what you are eating (the color, texture, taste, mouth feel) so you can truly savor (and later remember) the experience.

*Why it’s a good thing: Food becomes an aesthetic pleasure (true comfort food), not a drug or the enemy. It fills all your senses.*

- eat more slowly and with greater awareness so you can identify the physical signs of hunger, satiety, satisfaction in yourself.

*Why it's a good thing: You get to know what your body needs (and find you may not need to eat as much).*

- remember how the food makes you feel before, during and after eating so you can separate emotional cues from actual physical hunger.

*Why it's a good thing: You can pre-empt negative emotions (shame, panic, anxiety) that you may feel around food and that fuel overeating and guilt.*

- make your own informed decisions about portion size and servings so you can take control of what and how much you eat.

*Why it's a good thing: You see food as nourishment, not a way to fill an emotional void or satisfy others' expectations.*

By learning to recognize and accept your thoughts and feelings without judgment, you free up precious mental bandwidth to think more creatively (not catastrophically) about the issues that are driving the negative behaviors and what concrete actions—beyond limiting food intake—you can take to overcome them.

When you are fully present in your life, when you develop a more “mindful” mindset, you take the first step in getting to know—and heal—yourself.





# *THREE*

## *What's on your plate?*

*“Food is an important part of a balanced diet.”*

*—Fran Lebowitz*

A modern-day Zen koan: What is the sound of one hand clenching?

Imagine holding a palmful of sand. If your hand is open and relaxed, the sand remains in place. But when you close your fingers tightly into a ball, the sand escapes any way it can.

My home was the clenched fist, a place of absolutist control. What I ate, what I wore, what I did, whom I saw. I truly did not know my own mind. When I was 22, I escaped.

Okay, I did it in the most respectable of ways. I got married. (Never mind that my parents didn't approve.) The fact is, I got out of the house. After years of sheer misery, alternating starvation and gluttony and wars with the scale, I was free at last. And I lost that weight for good.

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### **Lessons learned**

*I lost the weight because I was good and ready to do it. I lost that weight for myself. Not for my mother. Not for fashion. Not*

for anyone else's approval.

Here's something else I learned the hard way: you cannot love, nag, scare or punish someone into doing "the right thing" even if it's in his or her best interest. As I used to say to my son, change, like democracy in Iraq, comes from within. I could never lose the weight when being controlled by relentless parental expectations or other unreasonable external pressures. I succeeded only when I felt motivated from the inside.

When you do something *for you*, the results can be spectacular—whether it's weight loss, going back to work or school or running for office.

*I got on speaking terms with my own body.* I figured out *why* I ate when I did versus *what* I ate. (Without that self-knowledge, no diet can succeed no matter how hard you try. It's just words on a page, without context, and just as unsustainable.)

*I decided there were no good foods or bad foods.* I just ate only half of what was on my plate—a strategy I follow to this day. (I told myself all the calories were in the *other* half.) The result? I could stop denying myself what I liked to eat (and feeling sad and self-destructive when I couldn't have it).

*I ate when I was hungry and stopped when I was full.* (And what I consumed was just food, pure and simple, unseasoned with regret, dread or other irrelevant emotionally freighted ingredients.) I learned how to cook. *I* controlled the portions and servings.

I taught myself, by myself, the basics of healthy eating based on the principles of *balance, moderation, variety, portion size, bio-individuality and choice*. It is a philosophy that I have lived with ever since.

I was basically happy, in love, out of school and into my life.

I had a real job. I had many other things to think about besides my weight and what I could and should/shouldn't eat.

In short, for the first time, I was living beyond the plate. I was off the grid of guilt. I was in control, not living at the not-so-tender mercies of my mother's own *mishegoss* (craziness). And, although the marriage didn't last (another story for another time), I am so grateful to my husband for helping me grow up in my own time and for taking my part, when for most of my life I had felt untethered, unprotected and under siege. Who would have thought it could be so simple?

As it turned out, losing the weight was the easy part. (Surprise!) Shedding the baggage that went along with it took a whole new set of skills.

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## Who's the pretty girl in the mirror?

Walk in to any bookstore and head for the self-help section and what do you see—rows upon rows of books on relationships. Relationships with parents, with children, with spouses, with colleagues. And above all, relationships with food.

There are more diet books than almost anything else. They cover everything from eating according to your blood type to paleo, all promising salvation through eternal thin-ness. And nearly all are directed to women. As an industry, weight loss is, you should pardon the expression, huge. (<http://abcnews.go.com/Health/100-million-dieters-20-billion-weight-loss-industry/story?id=16297197>)

We are hungry for the quick fix and the lasting results. And hungrier still for the wisdom to find the diet that gives us something more nutritious than even food.

Self-acceptance.

Along with Michelle Obama arms, we want to feel comfortable in our own skin. And for many women, that's a life-long struggle. One that begins in childhood—as early as six years old, according to Haley Kilpatrick, CEO of Girl Talk (<http://www.mygirltalk.org>) and author of “The Drama Years: Real Girls Talk about Surviving Middle School—Bullies, Body Image, and More.”

Other experts peg it at a somewhat later age: nine to 14. Karen Schachter (<http://dishingwithyourdaughter.com>) believes that girls reach their peak of self-confidence at *age nine* (Yes, you read that correctly. We. Peak. At. Nine.) as puberty begins to influence their moods and perceptions. It's when even those “good girls” start testing boundaries and stop being true to themselves, taking on the protective coloration of conformity and people pleasing. It's when they hide their intellectual lights and ambition and keep their hands down in class. And between 11-13, it's when many of them first come up against dieting and diet failure, which can set them up for a lifelong pattern of winning and losing the weight game. (How parents support or undermine their daughters during this time will make all the difference in how they move on in the future.)

That was certainly my experience and yours too, probably. I can remember trying on clothes at ten or twelve and being told, “it looks good now, but you can't gain an ounce.” Never occurred to me to ask my mother why. Why were we buying this then? How, apart from starving myself, was I to keep myself from “gaining an ounce.” (That was the point, I guess.) How was I supposed to “control” my changing (maturing) body and keep it from growing? What, other than extreme frustration and

unhappiness over trying to restrict what was out of my hands (i.e. biology), was I to gain from this way of thinking?

It was setting myself up for failure and it made no sense. Not then, not now. It wasn't until I set myself free from this endless, senseless loop that I realized just how destructive it was.

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## DIY transformation

One of my favorite shows—a guilty pleasure, really—is Extreme Weight Loss (<http://abc.go.com/shows/extreme-weight-loss>), a before-and-after visual extravaganza that tracks trainers and “transformation specialists” Chris Powell and his impossibly toned (I-can't-believe-she's-had-four-kids) wife, Heidi, as they coach and cajole extremely overweight individuals to health, fitness and healing over the course of a year.

Granted, the protocol is more “Queen (or King) for a Day” than your standard pedestrian gym. The lucky contestants win three-month stays at a luxurious boot camp in Colorado where they are weighed, measured and given one-on-one exercise training, nutritional counseling, personalized medical testing and months of tough-love follow-up (<http://wellandgood.com/2014/08/19/5-questions-for-celebrity-trainers-and-parents-chris-and-heidi-powell/>). They meet with their favorite celebrities, get hair and wardrobe makeovers and, more often than not, cosmetic “skin removal” surgery.

We should all be so lucky. But bigger than the big reveal at the end is the lessons the participants take away from the experience. Yes, there are the workouts and dietary fixes, so obvious you could figure them out yourself. But more importantly these women and men get to know and accept who they are and *why*

*they do what they do.* They make peace with whatever toxic feelings are driving the punishment they inflict on themselves with obsessive eating and self-indulgence. They make amends with estranged family members. They cultivate the self-assurance to pursue the career they've always wanted or the person they've always longed for. They learn to be accountable to themselves and others (sometimes for the very first time.)

They gain perspective. They find community. They get a life.  
You can, too.

## *Be your own reality TV star*

Yes, "Extreme Makeover" has a Hollywood happily-ever-after vibe. But even without the glitz, the show has a message for every woman who's lost sight of who she is and what she wants. (That would be all of us.)

- *Give yourself permission to follow your bliss.* It's healthy and good to set aside the time to nurture your own needs, emotions and desires. If you've lost touch with yourself, take the time to find out who you are and who you want to be. If you don't advocate for your own interests, you can't expect others to respect them.
- *Help others by helping yourself.* Putting yourself first is not selfish, but critical to your health and well-being, and ultimately, to the health and well-being of those you love.
- *Just say no.* Losing yourself in work, pleasing others, conforming to what society says you *should* do—oversched-

uling, overdoing, over-committing—won't satisfy what you're really hungry for. It won't make your unhappy or guilty feelings go away. It is, instead, a one-way ticket to anxiety, depression, self-defeating perfectionism and disordered eating. (Don't you deserve better?) Figure out what you *want* to do and then do it.

- *Shed the "should."* "What *should* I do?" is a yes-or-no question that usually implies there's only one right answer. "Should" I eat this...go back to work...take on this new challenge...take a stand? *Or not.* It limits your options and can leave you feeling trapped.

Better to ask yourself, what *could* I do? What could I do to achieve my bigger truth and better life? What could I do to eat or feel healthier...find greater satisfaction...assert my point of view? Suddenly, you have choices and with them, the freedom to think and act in new, unexpected ways that resonate with your values and result in more satisfying resolutions you can keep for the long term.

- *Go big.* Live beyond the plate and find new interests that nourish your ambition and intellectual, professional and emotional growth.
- *Treat your gut right.* Learn to recognize the difference between physical and emotional hunger and let food be food. It's nourishment, not a drug or distraction from painful feelings or events.

When cravings attack, drink some water, call a friend, take a walk, go to the gym, write down how you feel or treat the craving as an art project, finding ways to photograph,



paint or otherwise creatively portray the feelings that are driving it. In other words, distract yourself. With a little advance planning and supportive friends or family, you can outwit the siren call of sugary or salty snacks or whatever you're looking for to satisfy the hole in your heart.

- *Let it go.* What's past is past, what's done is done. Don't punish yourself for what you did or did not do or hold on to regret, anger or sorrow from events long ago. Find forgiveness for the person you were and compassion for the person you've become.
- *Reach out and touch someone.* It's easy to get lost in your own head. Fight the natural tendency to isolate yourself and look for someone you can trust to be your sounding board or advisor. For the technically inclined, check out personalized health monitoring tools that provide strategies for coping with stress, body image issues and other challenges. (I particularly like the Rise Up + Recover app <http://www.recoverywarriors.com/> for its easy interface and common-sense affirmations and advice.)
- *Do yourself a favor.* Be your own change agent. Honor your dreams and make them a reality. Because they—and you—are worth it.

# FOUR

## *The confidence game*

*“It’s a question of feeling confident about yourself, being reconciled with your own identity—and your own body.” —Christine Lagarde*

One of the things my father used to say to me was, “You always sell yourself short.” In my head, I’d reply, “Well, considering my childhood, what do you expect?” But, in real life, I’d joke, “Well, what do you expect? I’m only 5 foot 3. Truth in advertising.” That was our relationship pretty much, witty (or not) exchanges passing for conversation, humor replacing connection.

The last time we were together (Thanksgiving 2010, he died the following May), he said it again. And then he added, seemingly out of the blue, “I guess we made you this way... your mother and I. We wanted your life to be perfect so we did everything we could to make *you* perfect. And then your mother could be very cruel...but she did it out of love, I know you don’t believe it but she did... ”

Whoa! That I didn’t expect. It wasn’t an official apology, much less an explanation for why he never intervened or moved to protect me when my mother was out of control, but it was close enough. And, later, considering the timing, it was a poi-

gnant admission that he wasn't as blind to the situation, or as uncaring, as I had imagined.

Still, a less laissez-faire approach on his part would have made a difference in my confidence, if not my state of mind while I was growing up. While moms may have the upper hand in molding their daughters, dads (or other important male members of the family) are just as important in helping young girls define themselves as more than just a pretty face. A father's involvement and, let's be honest, guy perspective can counter-balance the "mother wounds," the mean girls and unrealistic cultural standards that measure a young woman's worth solely by her appearance. By respecting and supporting the *total* girl, dads show their daughters that they are loveable just the way they are—a gift that keeps on giving as young girls grow into women who have the inner strength to take risks, make mistakes and assert their own value.

In other words, to not sell themselves short.

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## Giving credit where credit is due

Back in 2008 when the housing market tanked and the money supply was frozen the world over, sober-suited pundits described the situation as a "crisis in confidence." In financial terms, credit means the belief that the money you lend will be re-paid, debts will be honored. It demonstrates confidence in the trustworthiness (the credit worthiness) of the borrower, whether it's a government agency, another bank, a business or an individual. Without this confidence, global trade grinds to a halt and economies collapse.

As women, we suffer from a chronic deficit of confidence.

We get stuck in old patterns by failing to give ourselves full credit for our intrinsic worth. We overvalue appearance (which is why childhood struggles with weight and esteem leave such long-lasting damage) to the detriment of all the other facets that make us complete, fully realized human beings (which we totally disregard). We invest in others, but default in our obligations to ourselves.

We sell ourselves short. And in so doing allow others to do the same.

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## What do women want?

To be liked. To be perfect. To be valued. To be pretty and thin. A good wife and mother and professional.

How do we feel mostly? Not likable enough. Not good enough. Not smart enough. Certainly not pretty or thin enough. A fraud at work and a failure at home.

For many women, this existential dissatisfaction seems to be a sex-linked characteristic. One where competence (or a perceived lack of) gets in the way of our confidence, holding us back where we want most to succeed. By taking self-criticism to an art form, by underestimating our own abilities and performance, we give others permission to overlook our very real contributions. Because we don't (can't?) see ourselves as we really are, we're all too ready to believe the worst about ourselves. Our mental mirrors reflect not who's the fairest of them all, but who's the most fault-ridden.

So we're scared to bring attention to ourselves. We keep our heads down and play by the rules, thinking our work will speak for itself and raise our profile. (No self-promotion for us, thank

you...we're good girls!) We overthink every single detail rather than leap into action or risk failure. We stay small, with our ambitions and our posture. And then we wonder why we're unhappy and unfulfilled.

We're running on confidence fumes.

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## Get over it

Confidence is the art of taking a risk even when you feel small or afraid or don't think you have all the answers in advance. It's taking up the physical space that is rightfully yours. (Ever look at how most women carry themselves? Folded in and as small as possible.)

When you work to cultivate confidence, you strengthen the emotional infrastructure that supports your bearing and influence in the world. People pay attention.

When you engage the world with confidence, you look stronger. You feel stronger. You *are* stronger. You are your most authentic self—and your most powerful.

It's a simple rule of marketing and political campaigns. Don't let the competition (or your opponent) define you. A lack of self-confidence for whatever reason (biology, parenting disorders, weight issues, culture) silences you and keeps you in your (self-imposed) place. It empowers others to say who you are (and it's usually not great).

When you exert and own your unique value, you take that power back, restore (or create) a more self-confident persona and transform your life.

Like true beauty, true self-confidence comes from within. Get it, use it, be it.

## Seven ways to become a more confident woman

**1** *Have a purpose.* Find out what your true passion is and go for it. Strike “coulda, woulda, shoulda” or “if only” from your vocabulary and state of mind. If you want something bad enough, identify what you need to learn, go out and do it.

**2** *Know your strengths.* Do an personal inventory of your strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats (SWOT) to figure out what you’re good at, less good at or interested in, what’s holding you back or are barriers to success (however you define it), where can you find greater success and satisfaction. When you can look at yourself and your life from the inside out, you can create the blueprint and self-assurance for achieving your goals—itsself an empowering act.

**3** *Display your pride.* Not the hubristic kind, but taking credit for your contributions and making sure you’re not seen as just another team player but as the leader of that team (whatever the playing field—at work, at school, in your community).

**4** *Foster alliances.* Find other women (or men) who can sponsor you, mentor you and help you achieve your dreams and goals.

**5** *Risk failure.* It's not the mistake but the recovery that counts. If fear is holding you back from trying, it's holding you back from succeeding (which automatically reinforces your lack of self-esteem.)

**6** *Dress for the body you have.* Whether you're happy with your weight or intend to lose a few pounds (or a lot), nothing can make you stand taller and feel better about yourself than clothes that fit and flatter your best attributes. (<http://www.wisebread.com/7-style-secrets-for-women-that-flatter-every-shape>)

As Stacy London, host of the long-running "What Not to Wear," (<http://www.tlc.com/tv-shows/what-not-to-wear>), advised on nearly every episode, make friends with personal shoppers (who can help you find your best look) and your tailor (who can work magic). Be ready to shed outmoded styles and old clothes. (And remember, "comfortable" is not a style, it's a cop-out.) It's worth the money. Ditto hair, make-up and accessories. A new mascara or pair of shoes is the best medicine on the face of the planet.

**7** *Practice good "fit-rition" (a word I made up).* Yes, eat the foods that are right for your body composition, food preferences, lifestyle and metabolism. (There's a world of books out there and eating plan just for you.). Better yet: find an exercise plan you can stick with. You don't have to be the best in the class, but you have to go to the class on a regular basis. (And don't worry about what you look like. Nobody cares...they're all too busy watching themselves.)

Like personal shoppers, personal trainers will work with

you to find the best combination of work-outs to help you burn calories, develop muscle definition, build endurance, protect your heart. A good trainer will meet you where you are and support you in getting to where you want to be. A good workout will do as much for your head as it will for your hips. Plus it's fun and gratifying! As your body changes, you will, too. Physical improvements turn into emotional changes that re-mold you into the person you want to be.

Once you get started, you can monitor own body with wearable health devices (<http://well.blogs.nytimes.com/projects/activity-trackers>) that track your activity, sleep and food intake and inspire you to do a little bit more ever day.

I wear a bright pink FitBit™. It's fabulous.





# ***FIVE***

## *Full circle*

*“This is how we change the world. We grab  
hold of it. We change ourselves.”*  
—Ann Patchett

So that’s my story, the tale inspired by a chance encounter with a young girl in an old photograph. I hope I have done her justice.

And I hope her story has given you what you need to start letting go of your weight and getting on with your life.

It’s not easy to shed self-destructive habits, I know. It can be hard to see through the darkness and find your way. But you can do it. And I can help.

I encourage you to reach out and share your stories on our site (<http://onegirlwellness.com>). And together we can raise strong, self-confident women one girl at a time.



## *Gratitude*

“Write what you know,” they say. And if I know anything, it’s what it’s like to be a fat girl. Writing a book, however, is quite another story. “Fat Girl” and I are especially indebted to:

- Joshua Rosenthal, Lindsey Smith and the entire Institute for Integrative Nutrition team (<http://integrativenutrition.com>) without whom “Fat Girl” would never have seen the light of day. You told me to “write, already!” and then gave me the educations, resources and tools to do it.
- My IIN study group—Jill Studley, Sara Solomon, Kara Blank Gonzalez, April Chu, Rhonda Zets, TC Kemp, Marie Pineda and Dana Monsees—true friends and astute critics all.
- My board of advisors: Karen Schachter, MSW (*Dishing with your Daughter*), Eleanor Mackey, PhD (Children’s National Medical Center), Marian Tanofsky-Kraff, PhD, Susan Moore, MS and Kendra Fink, RD, who gave generously of their time and expertise so I could refine my thinking.
- And to Marshall, an exceptional young man and wonderful son—in spite of having me as your mother! Thank you for your encouragement and support. I hope I’ve made you proud.



# *A random collection of inspiration and resources*

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## **Books**

*Raising Girls, How to help your daughter grow up happy, healthy and strong*, by Steve Biddulph (Berkeley, CA: Ten Speed Press, 2014)

*Being a Teen, Everything teen girls and boys should know about relationships, sex, love, health, identity and more*, by Jane Fonda (Random House: New York, 2014)

*How the world sees you: Discover your highest value through the science of fascination*, by Sally Hogshead (HarperCollins: New York, 2014)

*I am that girl; How to speak your truth, discover your purpose, and #bethatgirl* by Alexis Jones (Evolve Publishing: New York, 2014)

*The Confidence Code: The science and art of self-assurance – and what women should know*, by Katty Kay and Claire Shipman (HarperCollins: New York, 2014)

*Dress your best: The complete guide to finding the style that's right for your body*, by Clinton Kelly and Stacy London (Three Rivers Press: New York, 2005)

*The Drama Years: Real girls talk about surviving middle school—bullies, brands, body image and more* by Haley Kilpatrick (Free Press: New York, 2012)

*Food: the good girl's drug. How to stop using food to control your feelings*, by Sunny Gold (Berkley Books: New York, 2011)

*May I be happy: A memoir of love, yoga, and changing my mind*, by Cyndi Lee (Plume: New York, 2014)

*Mindless Eating: Why we eat more than we think*, by Brian Wansink (Bantam Books: New York, 2010)

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## Sites

<http://www.allianceforeatingdisorders.com/>

<http://bewhoyouare.com/>

<http://www.crisistextline.org/>

<http://www.dove.us/Our-Mission/Girls-Self-Esteem/default.aspx>

<http://nedawareness.org/>

## *When you look in the mirror what do you see?*



If you're like most of us, it's not the accomplished woman you've become but the fat girl you used to be. Susan Bodiker takes us behind the (un)fun-house mirror and explores how our childhood struggles with weight and body image eat away at our adult self-esteem and keep us from engaging confidently in the world—at school, at work and with others.

With a little bit of snark and a lot of heart, she shares her own story of self-healing and reinvention, offering actionable, common-sense ways to:

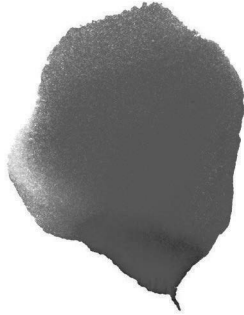
- change the way you think about food, your body and yourself
- find more satisfying ways to nourish your body and mind
- give yourself the rewarding life you yearn for—and deserve.

A former fat girl herself, Susan started One Girl Wellness



to help girls and women benefit from her experience so they can put their energy into building a life, not judging it (and themselves) solely by pounds or calories. To treat their body as the splendid work of art it is. To respect its function and learn to love it.

A long-time advertising copywriter and branding consultant, Susan is a graduate of Barnard College and received her health coach training from the *Institute for Integrative Nutrition* (class of February 2015). She lives in Washington, DC with her son, “the millennial,” two supremely assertive cats and one dog (who needs a little work on the confidence front).



{ One Girl Wellness }

Raising stronger women one girl at a time

[onegirlwellness.com](http://onegirlwellness.com)

# A life-long makeover

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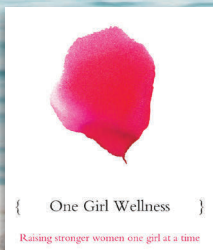
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*Raising stronger women one girl at a time*

*onegirlwellness.com*