



Love Your Body

Three kickass girls explain how they learned to measure their self-worth without a scale.

Hey, we've seen the ELLEgirl message boards - we know that everyone kinda obsesses over weight and appearance. With so much talk in the news about super-skinny celebrities and models who may or may not be unhealthily underweight, it's hard not to judge your own body.

But wouldn't it be a relief to focus on more important things than the measure of your thighs? Joyce Marter, Psychotherapist and Co-Founder of Urban Balance, LLC (urbanbalance.org), says that "placing self-worth on physical appearance adds to the pressure to look the way teen culture says girls should, which increases a girl's negative thoughts and feelings about her body." Translation: It's time to measure self-worth by something other than your almost-six-pack.

We talked to three girls who've found a way to avoid body obsession. Their secret: Passion. (Not the boy kind, duh).

Emily Jackson, 16

For 2-3 hours a day, six days a week, you can find Emily Jackson on the water. She has been all over the world in a kayak - from her Rock Island, Tennessee backyard the Zambezi River in Africa. "I love the independence of kayaking," says Emily. "I feel best when I'm pushing myself - like when I learned how to roll my kayak or when I do a flip turn."

Emily says she knows girls who tend to make body shape the topic of many conversations, but she herself thinks "there is nothing better for your self-confidence than pride." In addition to kayaking, Emily takes pride in giving back. Two years ago, she decided to donate all her kayaking prize money to non-profit organizations in Africa. With \$4000, she helped Soft Power (softpowereducation.com) pay for a doctor in their new clinic for a full year, and she raised another \$3000 to refurbish two classrooms. Since her initial gift, Emily has raised \$18,000 in additional funds, mostly from simple \$20 donations through friends and family. In Africa, Emily says, "you will never see a kid without a smile." She adds, "Nothing is more rewarding than knowing we helped make their daily burdens easier."

Talk about confidence-building.

Katharine “Kerry” Close, 14

Kerry Close has always loved words. In fourth grade, the Spring Lake, New Jersey native won a classroom spelling bee and was given a list of several hundred words to study for the school-wide competition. “I thought it would be fun to try to learn them all,” she says. “I ended up winning my school spelling bee, and I realized that I had found a competition that I enjoyed preparing for and that I excelled in.”

Uh, understatement of the decade. Kerry is the 2006 Scripps National Spelling Bee Champion (that means she went to the big one in Washington, DC that’s on TV). To prepare, she studies for at least an hour or two each day.

So what does being an accomplished speller have to do with body image? “It’s helped my self-esteem,” says Kerry. “Spelling bees are undoubtedly a confidence booster.”

Nicole Beckerman, 17

When Nicole Beckerman saw a belly dancing group performing at the Fremont Solstice Parade in her hometown of Seattle, Washington, she was fascinated. “It looked like fun,” says Nicole, who was 15 at the time. “The women seemed so liberated, happy and graceful.”

A couple months later, Nicole looked into taking belly dance classes. She found Delilah, who’d led the parade group, at visionarydance.com, and she signed up for classes immediately.

Now, Nicole teaches belly dancing for about three hours a week, takes classes about five hours a week, AND performs weekly at a Greek restaurant. “I have formed a strong sense of self and confidence,” says Nicole. “Belly dancing is empowering, feminine, beautiful, and accessible at the same time.”

So how does dancing make her feel about her body? “When you really get to know how your body moves and how it feels inside and out, you can’t feel uncomfortable,” says Nicole. “You have to accept it, enjoy it, and love it.”

Like all of us, Nicole knows a lot of girls who obsess about their bodies. “It’s so frustrating to see those people, especially young teenage girls, who are fighting against what their bodies naturally tend towards,” she says. “And let me tell a secret--as a costumer and dancer--any body can look beautiful as long it has confidence and happiness behind it.”

So you’re not a kayaker, a spelling champion or a belly dancer. Yeah, neither are we, but that’s not the point. We love watching movies, writing, making cookies, singing karaoke - get the idea? Emily and Nicole have some tips for finding a passion of your own: “One thing that I learned when I discovered my passion for kayaking is that you can hate something the first time and love it the next,” explains Emily. “I told my dad when I was younger that I would never be a kayaker, but he kept offering to take me out. Eventually I said yes, and LOVED it; My parents haven’t gotten me out of my kayak yet. You have to give things second chances, and trust me, sometimes an experience does turn out to be great. The Eleanor Roosevelt quote I live by is ‘Do something everyday that scares you!’”

“Don’t worry if something hasn’t come along yet; it may take a ton of different hobbies before you hit on one that you care about deeply and want to be more involved with,” advises Nicole. “Don’t be afraid to try something new, you might love it, even if it seems unusual or ‘weird.’ Oh, and don’t always drag along your friends--they often make you too self conscious or silly to fully appreciate and enjoy something new.”

By Melissa Walker