Katrina Ubell: Well, hello there my friend. Welcome back to the podcast. I'm so glad you're here with me today. I have a great episode for you that I think is actually a really... it's coming at the perfect time, just as we're heading into the new year, when there's usually the biggest push for people to lose weight, all the messaging that comes with that. I think this is a conversation that I've had many times individually with people and in other formats, but I've never really addressed it on the podcast. So I'm excited to talk to you today about body positivity and that whole movement and how that can play into the work that I do with my clients and what I teach you here on the podcast.

But before we get started, I have another amazing book for you. Are you ready? I love this book. I was totally taken aback. I have to be a hundred percent honest, based on the title, I was like, eh. What happened was, I heard about this book from someone's email list that I was on. I think they said that they were having their team all read this book kind of as like a book club, and I thought, eh, I'll get it. I'll see. I'm kind of the sucker that way, and with Amazon and how easy it is to buy things, IU look up the book. I'm like, boom, sold.

So I got this book, and this is another one that I read, I think over the course of two days. And that's kind of how I read. I tend to just kind of do it in spurts it seems like. And I really, really enjoyed this book. I got a lot out of it, and I kind of fell in love with this author. He is great.

The book is called The War for Kindness: Building Empathy in a Fractured World. So what I was expecting based on the title was, the war for kindness. I was like, oh gosh, what is this going to be? But it ended up actually being really positive. I think it explained what's going on really well. And it also gave some other really good information. There's a specific reason in particular why I'm recommending it to you. I'll get into that in a minute. The author's name is Jamil Zaki. He is a professor of psychology at Stanford University and he's the director of the Stanford Social Neuroscience Lab.

And so his story is that he's an only child of Peruvian mother and a Pakistani father, that both his parents had come to the US for school, higher education, had met each other, married. It was just kind of like not a good match at all and they broke up and separated when he was quite young. It was pretty contentious between the two parents, and so Jamil grew up just kind of struggling with two parents who just did not get along. And he writes about how each one would try to kind of pit him against the other, but he really ultimately loved each of them.

And what really helped him was finding empathy for each one, understanding what their motivations were, each one of them, and why they would act in the way that they do, because ultimately he loved them both and he wanted to be in both of their lives. And so it kind of makes sense that over the course of time, this is what he ended up studying and spending a lot of time focusing on. And so I actually have listened to a podcast interview with him too, and I found that really interesting as well.

So the reason why I thought this was helpful is just because so many of us are just trying to be good people and trying to understand what we should be doing moving forward with just the world the way it is. And there's some really great information in here. He really gets to some of the different scenarios and people that he has studied. But the chapter that I thought was most relevant, and when I read this chapter, I was like, okay, for sure, I'm going to talk about this on the podcast, is the one that he does on neonatal intensive care unit and the people who work there. I thought, oh, this is a good one. So he talks to doctors, he talks to the nursing staff. And interestingly, I think it was maybe a year and a half or so prior to him shadowing them in this NICU, his wife gave birth to their first child, and I believe it was a girl. She had some significant health issues, like she had a stroke and was in that at specific NICU for quite some time.

So he had the experience of being there as the family of a patient, and then also coming back and actually shadowing and interacting with some of the doctors who had taken care of his daughter, and it gave him a really neat perspective of both ends of it. And he really talks about how you can have empathy for your patients but not burn yourself out. How do you have that balance? He doesn't write like, oh, I have the answer for you, and this is exactly how it's going to work. It's more of a discussion and just kind of thinking about different ideas.

I thought it was great. I mean, he talks to people who are former neo-Nazis who have now focused their entire life's work on helping to get people out of hate groups, people that it can be really hard to have empathy for and how they do that. I thought it was a great book. I really enjoyed it. So I'm a little bit of a psychology nerd in that sense that I really like reading these kinds of things. He also works with Carol Dweck, who, if you know Carol Dweck, she wrote the book Mindset, which is just this seminal work. It's so good. It's amazing. And I found out she was one of his mentors. I was like, what? Of course. It makes so much sense because both of their work is so great. So anyway, The War for Kindness: Building Empathy in a Fractured World, Jamil Zaki. If you're interested, if you like to read, I thought this was a good one. I really liked this one.

So today I want to talk about body positivity. This comes up relatively frequently, where people kind of ask me, what is my take on the body positivity movement? And how does the work that I teach fit in with body positivity? Or does it not fit in? And how do we think about this basically? What do we do? And so I wanted to just, first of all, give you a little information if you may not have heard of the body positivity movement, or you might not be totally clear on what it is.

In fact, as I was doing some research on the internet, the good old interwebs, to find out a little bit more details about it, I found that there's actually quite a bit of history to this. It actually started in the 1960s when people were pushing back against fat shaming, and over the course of time, it's evolved. I believe it was in the 1990s that the term body positivity kind of was first and attributed to this. And it's kind of evolved, and it's actually evolved to the point where now it's splintered out into various factions. There's people who are still on the body positivity side.

Some people say that people who are thin and small have kind of taken over the body positivity movement and it's leaving others by the wayside yet again. Others are moving toward what's called the body neutrality movement, which I'll explain to you what that is in a minute.

I think that it's a little bit outside the scope of this podcast to get into the history of all of this. If this is something you're interested in, there's lots of resources on the internet that you can explore. There's tons of people who, this is like their main thing that they do, and I certainly would not want to pretend like I can be the speaker for exactly what this movement entails. But I looked up on Wikipedia and verywellmind.com, and what they basically said there was that the main message behind body positivity is that all people deserve to have a positive body image regardless of how society and popular culture view ideal shape, size, appearance, but also race, gender, sexuality, being differently abled.

And some of the main goals of the movement are to challenge how society views the body, promoting acceptance of all bodies, and addressing unrealistic body standards. And I think that that is all amazing. I am a huge fan. I'm all in. I think it's so good. We are living and have been raised in a kind of societal soup, so to speak, where the messaging has been smaller is better, and if you're not small, something's wrong with you and something's wrong with your body. And then the unrealistic body standards. I mean, I've talked about this before, how, when I was in teen years, the kind of model look that was so desired and was all over all the magazines was the waif look, like Kate Moss, like extremely thin, like all heroin chic. That was a thing there, like where you look like basically one step away from being a drug addict, or maybe you are a drug addict. Who knows. Where basically you're just doing drugs and never eating, not having very much muscle mass at all.

And basically, for me personally, my body could not be different. I put on muscle extremely easily. I just do not have that body. So the way that my brain interpreted that was that that was the right way to be, something was wrong with my body, and maybe there was a way that I could create something that looked like that. And that was really an unrealistic standard for me to explore. To look like that, I would have to be like significantly ill in some way, shape or form. So I think all of us to a certain extent can recognize that there has been an impact on us in terms of how we think about our own personal bodies, particularly in relation to what's considered the standard or the ideal. And often that's not very positive, right?

So I have said this many times before on the podcast, but I do just want to say it again, that what I'm a fan of, what I'd like to propose is that no matter what your body looks right now, you learn to change your thinking around it so that you truly love it, you respect it, you accept it as it is, and then you lose weight just because you want to. What so many of us do, and I know I did for so many years, was to try to lose weight so that I could be acceptable, with the idea that once I got to be a certain size or shape, or wore a certain size of clothing that I could finally think positively about myself, but that is not how our brains work. If your brain is convinced that something's wrong with your body, it may decide today that weight loss is going to be the solution. Well then you create weight loss for yourself, but it is not just going to be like, okay, you solved it. We're done. Because there's still this underlying, deeply held subconscious belief that something's wrong with your body. So it will just find something new that is wrong.

This is well reported amongst people who have more than one plastic surgery procedure, right? You can get some sort of body shaping sculpting procedure done on one part of your body and then maybe that it looks better. But then now your attention is just on this other part of your body that isn't acceptable. And same thing with people's faces, right? They get their nose done, but then now their lips don't look good. And then now their chin is a problem. Now their cheeks are a problem, right? This is something that is like, the way we look is not the problem. It is the way that we're perceiving our bodies. It's basically like, something's wrong with you, let me figure out what it is, and I'll try to fix it so that I can stop thinking this way, except the filter still exists. Something is wrong with me. I have to figure out what it is.

So that's essentially what body positivity is promoting, is like, nothing is wrong with you. The reason you think and feel the way you do is because of all the societal messages, and you should accept your body the way it is. So I 100% agree. Now where things get a little more challenging is that I don't actually think that this is sort of a, quote unquote, official part of the body positivity movement, but it definitely comes up, is this a idea that you should accept your body exactly as it is, and therefore, if you try to lose weight, you are no longer being body positive. You're no longer a part of that movement.

There have been several plus size celebrities or models who've lost weight for any number of reasons, and then there's been this huge backlash that they shouldn't have lost weight and they shouldn't have to do that. And here's the thing, there's lots and lots of reasons why someone can take action, right? If you think about the thinking cycle, you have a result that you maybe created. There's weight loss that was created, that someone created. They took actions to create that weight loss. There can be lots and lots and lots and lots of different feelings and thoughts that derive those actions that result in weight loss.

So I definitely do not recommend that you lose weight from the mindset of, I will be finally acceptable. I can like myself. People will like me better if I'm thin. My relationships will get better if I'm thin. I don't think that we consciously think I'll be a different person if I'm thin, but I think deep down, we really often hope that we will be, that all of our perceived flaws will have been handled and kind of will melt away with the fat that we lose, that somehow we won't be us anymore will be this better version. And what I want to impress upon you and make sure that you really deeply understand is that when you lose weight, you are the same person, but with a smaller body. And so the way that you perceive the world will be the same if you do not change your brain. And if you don't think you're acceptable when you're larger, you will very likely not think you're acceptable when you're thinner, or it'll be maybe different things are unacceptable. Maybe you solve one problem, but then there's another one.

It's often actually kind of disappointing for people because they really so deeply, deeply, deeply want to believe that the truth is that if they just lose weight, things will be better. And then they do it, and they find out, you know what? I still am living my life. Ugh. It's really disappointing. And so often, the weight loss won't be permanent because they were losing the weight on the promise that things would be better when it's not better. It's like, what's the point? Why do this work to keep the weight off?

So what I want to impress upon you is that you can be completely body positive. You can totally be a proponent of challenging how society views the body, promoting acceptance of all bodies, including your own, changing, your thinking so that you are no longer beating yourself up for how you look, really learning to love and accept yourself and your body, and still decide you want to lose weight.

So to me, these are not mutually exclusive things. I definitely don't suggest that you lose weight so that you think that society will accept you more. Or, if you think I'm going to lose weight so that other people think differently or have a more positive opinion of me, not a great way to do it. I don't suggest doing that. Hating yourself thin, it's not going to work. You will not keep that weight off.

So I am all about not approaching it in that way, but I also think that there's nothing wrong with knowing that you feel more comfortable in the body that you live in when it is smaller. I was just actually coaching a client today who was talking about how she had gotten to a point where just being active in the sense of like walking, her joints were really bothering her, and then she lost 30, 35 pounds, and she finally is like, okay, now I can finally move again and not be in pain. I don't think there's any reason to judge that. I think that's just as good of a reason to lose weight as any. And I don't think that anybody can say, no, you shouldn't lose weight. You should just accept that your body hurts when you move it. There's a disconnect for me on that. That doesn't connect or really make sense.

So I think the idea that, if you're part of body positivity that means that you shouldn't lose weight, or if you do lose weight, you're no longer a part of that, is actually just another way of judging people. I think there's more layers to that thought process that need to be excavated. And I'm not saying everybody who is a proponent of body positivity thinks this weight. It just is something that does come up from time to of time.

Now there is this other kind of splinter faction called the body neutrality movement, which seems to be smaller. And what they say is, you know what? How about you just don't even worry about your body? How about you just remove your body from being the center of your self image. When you're thinking about you, you just don't think about your body. Some people say you should focus more on what your body can do for you rather than what it looks like. Now, then other people point out, yes, but that's usually coming from people who have able bodied privilege, right? If you're focusing on all the amazing things your body can do for you, people whose bodies maybe don't function in that way are like, well, easy for you to say.

But here's the thing with body neutrality, is I think all of these things can work for you or against you. I read something online with an actress who's talked about this more, and she was basically saying, I just pretend like I don't have a body. She said she's basically like a floating head in the world. She just doesn't think about her body. And I was like, what do I think about that? And you know what I thought to myself was, well that's basically how doctors are all of the time. We just completely decapitate ourselves. We're like, what's going on in the body is not anything that I want to pay any attention to, i.e. any hunger signals, thirst signals, needing to go to the bathroom, being tired, something hurting.

We just push through, push through, push through, and we have to actually learn to repopulate our bodies. That's the way I think about it, to reconnect the head, the brain and the body so that we can learn to feel our emotions. We can learn to process what's going on.

Rather than looking at the body as the enemy that you need to avoid and get away from, instead moving toward it and understanding how to work with it. You and your body are on the same team. And so, I think that with body neutrality, I think the idea that, yeah, guess what? You don't have to think about your body all the time. I totally agree. You get to decide what you think about, and if your brain is consumed by thoughts about your body, you might want to look at that and decide if you want to think differently or focus on different things. I think that it's probably not useful for most people to be thinking about their bodies and what they look like on a, whatever we would call excessive level, more than what is maybe needed or appropriate.

But at the same time, if you are just like, okay, I have all these negative thoughts about my body, and then I'm just going to not think about it anymore, what you're doing is you're just stuffing down the emotions that are created from that. You're trying to pretend like those negative thoughts and the emotions that they create don't exist, but they do. And we know that when we just try to avoid them, they end up coming back.

I guess I should have probably said this in the beginning, but I don't particularly believe that I am a member of any of these movements. What I believe is that there's just no reason to go through your life hating yourself and your body, being disgusted by yourself, no matter what you look like. Because I have worked with women who have very little weight to lose, if any, who have an extremely negative body image. And I've worked with women who have several hundreds of pounds of weight to lose, who actually have a very good body image. Because your body just consists of what your thoughts are about your body. That's literally all it is. So that's what we do here, right? We identify what we think. We decide if we like the results of thinking that way, figuring out if those thoughts, if those belief systems serve us. And then if they don't, we decide to think a different way, and we practice that until that becomes the way that we think.

So regardless with your body, we need to do that work no matter what. No matter what your body looks like right now, no matter what size you are, accepting and loving your body exactly as it is, is the work that needs to be done. I think that if you have these conditions on your love and acceptance for your body, meaning it has to weigh a certain amount or you have to be a certain shape or size in order to feel like you deserve that from yourself, that's only going to come back around to haunt you in the future, because you will age, your body will change. Certain things could happen. Injuries could happen, illnesses can happen, all kinds of things can happen. And then where are you? You're right back to having a negative opinion of your body again.

So like I said, just to kind of sum this all up, I think that body positivity is amazing because I don't think that it's ever useful to be hating on yourself, really for any reason. I don't see what good comes from that. It certainly doesn't make you thinner. Certainly doesn't make you live a happier life. And so whatever your body looks today, absolutely do the work to accept yourself, accept your body, love on it, become a true partner with your body. And then from that place decide, do I want to lose weight just because I want to a smaller body? I'd like to live in a smaller body?

Maybe it's more comfortable. Maybe you sleep better. Maybe you'd like to be able to be active in a different way. I don't think there's a lack of validity to those reasons for losing weight. I think it's completely fine.

So I just want to stress again, I am not of the mindset that thinner is better, that you're only acceptable if you're thin, that there's judgment to people, like we should judge people who aren't whatever ideal. I don't fall into those ideals either. So I'm doing the same work just like anybody else. And so I think that it's just important to decide for yourself what you want to do. If you want to accept your body and not lose weight, I am all in, but just please do the work to stop hating on your body, thinking that something's wrong with your body. Just love it as it is. When there are things that you wish were different, you can get to the place where you're like, you know, I just don't focus my thoughts on that. That's where I'm at. Rather than just being like, I love every little dimple. I'm like, you know what? I just don't think it's really useful for me to spend a lot of brain energy focusing on the fact that there's dimples. It's just like, let's just not think about that.

So you can decide what you want to think about when it comes to your body and that's what creates your body image. And then you decide what you want to do moving forward. And I will tell you that if you've lost the weight and you haven't done this work, you can't skip it, because I just don't know of really any women. I mean, I think for some people it's a lot easier to think positively than others. But there are a lot of women who would be considered... Models, people who are considered to have the ideal body have so much stress and self hatred typically around their bodies and what they look like. So what we know is that this is a brain issue, not what your body shape or size is or what it looks like.

So that's where I stand on this. I think that, yeah, let's be positive, but let's get to the root of the negative first. Let's figure out what this hatred is all about. Sometimes there's some deeper trauma that needs to be resolved, feeling like our bodies let us down. I've worked with many, many women who've had pregnancy loss issues or had a pregnancy issue where their child came out not as expected, and has maybe ongoing issues to be dealt with, so easy for us to blame our bodies, to feel like our bodies are the enemy, or battling against our bodies, no matter what size or shape they are. This is the kind of stuff that we need to work on so that we can release that shame and guilt and anger that we are hanging onto.

Anyway, I guess I could talk about this forever it seems like. I could go on and on, but I think we'll wrap it up now. So think about this as you're going into the new year, as you're thinking about your weight loss goals, I just strongly want to encourage you to really think about, what areas do I have to improve upon, and what do I need to work on first? I think trying to lose weight can often be, like the actual weight loss process, can be a distraction that people use to kind of trick themselves into thinking that they're taking care of the negative thoughts that they have about themselves. Like I'll just change myself and then my thoughts will change. Well, they might, but also you haven't really dealt with what the main problem is, so let's focus on that first. And that's exactly what we do in Weight Loss for Doctors Only, this is exactly what I teach on this podcast. And if that work resonates with you, then you know you are in the right place and you're going to get tons more great help.

All right. I hope you have a great rest of your week and I will catch you next time. Take care. Bye bye.