

STRETCHED

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*A mother's journey to love her
'flaws' & how you can too*

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British Library.

I dedicate this book to Nathaniel, Jude, Luca and Spencer. You boys made me a mother, we've been through so much together and as you've grown, I've grown with you. My life is sensational because of you and I will be forever proud to be your mother.

I am powerful.

I am strong.

I am fierce.

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Give me strength

My hands start to shake as I turn the tap on to fill my glass with water. I gulp the water down trying to refresh and calm my body.

I look out into the garden with a haze around my eyes and run through the list of everything I have left to do...

- Pump (express)
- Braid my hair
- Glitter
- Make up
- Get dressed
- Pack snacks
- Power bank – lead (must not forget the lead!)
- Apple Watch
- Headphones
- Water bottle
- Change of clothes

My mind snaps back into reality, one of the twins comes running in, takes my hand and points to the cupboard. Luca wants a biscuit but it is only 6.40am; this is a usual occurrence. I say and sign no by taking

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my hand across my body with a flat palm, but he begins to stomp and shout in frustration. Luca has nonverbal autism and the lack of communication is one of our struggles in this autism family household. Jude, twin two, soon follows, rushing in and demands “orange iPad” in his American accent. The “orange iPad” has been broken for weeks, yet over the last few days Jude has remembered and has become obsessed with finding it. Another trait of autism, the obsessive behaviour. “Mummy has black phone or pink phone,” I refer to the colours of the cases... “No I don’t want black phone, no I don’t want pink phone,” he shouts in frustration, yet still in his cute American accent. The feeling of relief I get on a day to day basis as I hear him speak, even if it is only to shout at me. I distract them both with a ‘big orange’, which I ask daddy Jordan to peel as he sits at the kitchen table before he leaves for work.

I continue to do my makeup...*there is no way I’m running 10K in my underwear without any make up on, especially with these bags.* I thought to myself these bags were from not just the regular 4am wake up calls from the twins but yesterday morning it was a 2.45am morning wake up call. Bank Holiday Sundays (or Sundays at all) do not matter to autistic twinnies.

I went back to thinking and running through the check list in my head as my eyes glazed over once again. I must express or my boobs are going to look like I’ve stolen them from Pamela Anderson!

I grab the device from the drying rack, attach it to

the bottle and set a timer for five minutes. *Five minutes and then I'll get ready, that'll do and I'll just deal with them when I get home.*

My youngest, Spencer, almost eleven months old, is terrible for feeding through the night. He stayed with my in-laws so I could get whatever sleep I could without worrying about him. I did, however, get the 5.30am lie in I had hoped for #winning.

I swapped boobs halfway and continued to pump standing up by the kitchen sink. I leaned over and sucked my plant-based protein smoothie through my pink and white striped reusable straw, multitasking at its finest! My dad walked in, my timer went off and I ran upstairs to get changed.

My running number was attached to my blush pink sports bra hanging on my wardrobe. It was next to my statement piece jewelled dress which I had worn a few months prior at the Mums in Business Association awards where I had won an award for 'Rising entrepreneur'. I felt in my element that day (more on that later). I put on my sports bra carefully over my Dutch braids and grabbed my personalised running underwear from *Runderwear*. I had Queen written on it as a reminder of the powerful woman I am and those that I aim to empower.

Shit! I am actually doing this! I looked over to the end of my bed and visions of me sobbing and lashing out at myself last night as I struggled mentally with the lack of sleep and over thinking how today would go.

What had pushed me over the edge was the

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running belt I had borrowed from my friend; it didn't fit my phone and I was panicking at the idea of not having a phone on me while running in London on my own. Jordan had to work and my dad and in-laws were taking care of my four boys. They're not the easiest to handle with autistic twins, so it's not like I can just leave them with anyone. *I could hold my phone, but what if it rains, or slips and breaks? Then you are screwed anyway. Maybe I should just not do it this year. I mean leaving all the boys, having no phone, no one can come with you. You'll be all alone. What if you get lost? Or have everything stolen? What if you get hurt or collapse? What if absolutely everything and anything else that could go wrong, goes wrong?*

Tears streamed endlessly from my face and I melted to the floor in a heap, curling into a ball and holding my head in my hands. *Why am I doing this?* Right now I know why, but, at that precise moment in time, I couldn't see through the fog of being sleep deprived.

I put my Queen pants on and pulled my black joggers over the top. I debated which jumper to wear for warmth, one that I could get over my number without crumpling it. There was no way I was going to be faffing about trying to pin my number to my bra myself, not like I could take it off like a T-shirt and put it back on, hahaha.

I trotted down the stairs, trainers on, check list checked off and ready to go. I hugged my dad goodbye and my eldest son Nathaniel. "Mumma's gonna bring

back a medal just like Wreck it Ralph;” something I have always said since I did my half marathon three years ago. He gave me a big squeeze. I kissed the twins and I was ready to go. But how did I get here? How did the insecure teenager, hating her pear-shaped figure, the new mum of one battling with her postpartum body, the mum of three hating on her over-stretched skin and stretch marks, get to this point where she had had four babies, three postpartum journeys, and gain the courage to take part in a 10K in her underwear as part of ‘Celebrate You’? Well let’s go back a bit...

Let's get one thing straight

What this book is not...

- this book is not a weight loss aid
- this book will not magically make you love yourself
- this book isn't a psychological breakthrough

What this book is...

- this book is a teaching memoir
- this book is about my personal postpartum journeys
- this book is how I have learnt to love and be kinder to myself
- this book has practical steps you can put into place (if you wish) to empower your mum bod and change your mindset

If you are desperate to lose weight, to get rid of the mum tum, loathe looking at yourself in the mirror, whether your children are 1 week old or 6 years old or even 18+ this book is for you. All mums have postpartum bodies, we have all been on the journey

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and now it's my turn to share mine with you and show
you how I've come through the other side.

How it all began

Y*ou're disgusting, your body will never be the same again, you will never be able to wear a bikini, your body is ruined!* I remember looking at myself in a floor to ceiling double door wardrobe mirror where I was house-sitting just a few weeks after having my first child at the age of twenty. These evil thoughts about my new postpartum body popped into my head. I felt so vulnerable looking in that mirror, what I saw was completely alien to me. I was so caught up in the moment of just how different I looked, that I had forgotten what my body had been through. Nine months of carrying the most precious person to me, keeping him safe, growing him strong and healthy, as well as keeping myself alive. Getting through a semester, heavily pregnant at drama school, still being very physical and coming out the other end with a perfect tiny human (well not so tiny at 9lb 5oz). However, all I could see were the raw, dark stretch marks spread across my overly-stretched skin on my stomach, the mummy tum, the pouch, the mum gut (whichever you use to describe it) and the swollen uterus, which was a total surprise. I mean, I never really knew what to

expect from a uterus! I thought my stomach would just deflate like a balloon.

In that moment I thought I was going to look like this forever. Hating my reflection, putting myself down and feeling ashamed of who I had become.

I didn't know about postpartum (to be honest I didn't even know the word "postpartum" existed until I was going through prenatal (also a new word) classes) and how your body changes after having a baby.

I remember the number of takeaways I had for convenience purposes, looking after a new baby and forgetting to look after myself as a new mum. Having grown up around babies and children, being the eldest of four, people told me it would be different when it's your own. Sleepless nights, the constant feeding, the dirty nappies and they were right, but what I wasn't prepared for was that I actually longed for my pre-pregnancy body. The body I had spent most of my teenage life hating, my unbalanced pear shape, big butt, no boobs and constantly calling myself fat. I stood as a new mother staring into the mirror longing for a figure I had spent years mentally and physically abusing.

New mums are shown on television, all over the newspapers, bouncing back instantly into their pre-baby jeans. *You looked fat in jeans before, now imagine how hideous you'll look.* I had meltdowns over what to wear in public, my maternity clothes made me look pregnant, my pre-baby clothes were way too small.

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There was only one option: I had to face buying some new clothes. I bought a pair of black stretchy skinny jeans in a size 16 and I felt mortified. Jeans have always been my worst enemy, finding jeans that fit a pear-shape figure seemed to be impossible.

Looking back at one of my worst body loathing moments before I'd even had children was when I was 18 years old, and my dad took me to Las Vegas. He worked out there and wanted to show me why he loved it so much.

We went to a few shopping outlets and I was dying to go to Abercrombie & Fitch, it's one of those "American dream" experiences and I couldn't wait. I took my time looking around all the "preppy" cool clothes and picked out a few outfits to try on. I stepped into the changing room, closed the curtain behind me and was already starting to fear my reflection in the mirror. I'd picked out some jeans, an iconic item for me. I tried the smaller size, a UK 10 US 14, that I had picked and I could barely pull them up over my calves. *Breathe! It's just American sizing issues, the next pair will be a perfect fit.* I pulled them off and they turned inside out as I rushed to try the next pair on. I grabbed the UK size 12 US 16 off the hanger, I put each foot in and as I wriggled from side to side, jumping up and down, managing to get them over my calves, struggling around my thighs and I was defeated when I got to my bum. That was it, tears began to stream down my face, my head in my hands. I punched my thighs. *You stupid disgusting things. I fucking hate being so fat.* I ripped the

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jeans off. Got my clothes together and sheepishly gave them all back to the shop assistant fearing the words "Was everything alright for you?" I just shook my head and ran out of the shop, past my dad, snapping at him that we need to go and fighting back the tears. A defining moment that still haunts me years later.

And then there were three

When I just began to feel better in my postpartum body, about nine months after Nathaniel was born I found out I was pregnant again. It was a complete shock, the panic of how on earth I was going to cope with two children was shortly replaced with a bigger surprise, it was twins. I was so huge during my pregnancy; it was like I'd stuffed a beach ball up my dress. I had a pretty easy pregnancy physically, but I struggled mentally. I felt alone, isolated, I was totally petrified about the idea of having three boys under the age of 15 months. I spent most of my pregnancy with just Nathaniel or visiting family. I was too anxious to go out to baby groups with Nathaniel, I remember trying to go to a singing group once, heavily pregnant with a crawling curious toddler. All he wanted to do was go through other people's bags in the hallway. I got so fed up I picked him up over my round belly and walked out. I got in the car and sobbed my heart out. *How will I cope with three?!*

I spent most of my pregnancy wishing for it to end so I could go on a diet and be the "fittest, healthiest and slimmest" I've ever been. The twins were born

premature, by five weeks, and although they did well originally, their blood sugars dropped and they had to spend time in special care. In total we spent 16 days in hospital as Jude had suspected meningitis and needed 14 days of antibiotics; it was probably the scariest time of my life. I had never stayed overnight in a hospital until the day I went in to have the twins; with Nathaniel I was in and out within 10 hours. Looking back I think I was in a state of shock for most of our time and it wasn't until afterwards I realised just how serious it was.

I was thrown into motherhood of three pretty oddly. I spent most of the first two weeks of the twins' life away from Nathaniel with the occasionally hospital visit. He was only 14 months at the time and my heart ached for him. But having just had a c-section it did give me a little more time to heal without having a very active toddler to attempt to chase after.

Not long after we were home from the hospital we were due to have a family photo taken. My body and mind had been through a lot having had twins, a c-section, two weeks cooped up in hospital and then coming home to being alone with two tiny babies needing feeding all the time and a demanding toddler. It's fair to say I felt lost being absorbed into motherhood and I'd had no time to take care of me emotionally or physically, my self-esteem was at an all-time low.

In a quick attempt to boost my self-confidence and make myself look like less of a scarecrow I had tried to dye my hair from blonde to a dark auburn red colour,

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but it had turned bright pink. The night before the photographer was coming to our house I put another box dye over it again and it went a very dark red. I instantly felt worse, as white as Casper the friendly ghost. I was completely washed out and on top of that I felt so uncomfortable in my skin, feeling fatter than ever.

The man came to our home and we managed to get some photos of us all together. A few weeks later when they came in the post, my heart sank and my eyes filled with tears, I hated them. *Just look at you, you look awful, I mean I thought you looked bad but this is even worse than I imagined. No, no, I cannot show these pictures to anyone.*

I can't go back and speak to myself, but if any of you are feeling like this then I hope this message will give you a virtual hug...

"Oh mama, you have no idea of your beautiful soul, your body has been through so much, I know you are tired, I know you are unhappy in your relationship, I know you feel unappreciated, but please know that you are loved, you are in survival mode right now, but know sweet Ana that you have every right to live. Your body is sensational and with time you will come to love yourself. Stay strong mama."

Those pictures spurred my obsession to lose weight and get my 'pre-baby body back' the only thing on my mind was getting to 6 weeks postpartum check-up so


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that I could diet and begin my weight loss journey.

Now, what I'm about to talk about may not be what you are used to, I am not about to shed a positive light on the diet industry. If you are ready to learn more about how mentally damaging the diet industry can be to mothers, new mothers in particular, then stay with me, but if you're not ready to hear a few truths on diets and motherhood then stop reading now.

Those that are sticking around, are you ready?

Cardboard burgers

 *have to do something; I can't be this mess any longer. I can't bear to look at myself.* I was literally counting down the days, the hours, the seconds until I was past my 6-week check so that I could start to diet. I'd never done a proper strict diet before; I had dabbled with some slimming club recipes and meal plans but never stuck anything out. Someone I had worked with in the past was selling what I call a 'silver sachet diet' where you mix water with powder and call it food, just 800 calories a day, limited veg and ZERO fruit allowed – I mean come on!!! Alarm bells should have been ringing immediately.

I had in my head if I could make it past 6 weeks postpartum then I was 'healed' and safe to get started. I knew I couldn't breastfeed and do the 'silver sachet diet' and at 8 weeks I decided enough was enough, I stopped breastfeeding. Yes, it was a challenge to feed the twins and look after Nathaniel too.

I actually made my final decision to stop breastfeeding because I was pressuring myself to lose weight rapidly. I hate that I made this decision based on my self-hatred for my body. I stopped something so many women struggle with that comes quite naturally

to me, something that my amazing body can do, all because I felt like I had to lose weight, because I was unworthy of love at the size I was and I was desperately seeking those 'wow you look amazing for just having had twins' compliments. It breaks my heart to think about it and even more to share this.

I actually edited this out of my first draft but I think it's important to share in the hope that it will stop other mothers from making the same mistake I did, it's a massive regret of mine but a huge lesson learnt.

That feeling of starvation is one I'll never forget, the deep gut wrench ache for anything slightly chewy and with flavour!! The mood swings, oh my, I was a moody miserable bitch; I was starving my body by being on a ridiculously low-calorie intake. Yes, this is unhealthy for my body, but also for my mental health too. I had three children under the age of 18 months; they depended on me; they needed me to have energy and patience; which definitely is gained through food. Did they care if mummy lost a stone? Hell no! Did they care if mummy fitted in a size 10? Hell no! My obsession to get to this point of losing these 14lbs in two weeks took away from my happiness.

I remember four of my best friends coming round for dinner. I cooked them all a lovely stir fry filled with bright colourful vegetables, chicken and noodles, it smelt divine and what did I have? I mixed my 'silver sachet' dust with a little bit of water, made them into flat round pancakes and called them 'burgers' with a bit of rocket on the side - no dressing. Burgers? Who was

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I kidding, more like cardboard. Once I'd finished these two tiny imposter burgers, my friends were still eating and I was still hungry. I kept thinking *if I just keep going a few more days I'll "get used to it" and I'll shrink my stomach!* The constant weighing every day to see if I'd lost any weight and then being heartbroken when the scales didn't move, not even a pound, it just wasn't enough.

I did it for two full weeks and at the end of it I had lost a massive 10lbs, that's a seriously unhealthy amount of weight to lose over such little time, but it wasn't my target. I didn't hit my target, I was disappointed, I beat myself up. *If I had just not had the extra veg on this day or if I hadn't had that sneaky piece of chocolate on day 3 maybe I would have reached it.*

The end goal of this elusive diet was an awards evening for my dad's business. It was my first night out since having the twins and I wanted to feel "my best self", I longed for people to say, "wow you look good for just having twins". I hadn't hit my target which meant the dress I had bought in a size smaller was still a little tight, in particular around my boobs and arms. I was so looking forward to getting glammed up and getting out of the house, to just be me for a few hours, but when I got there I felt like I wanted the ground to swallow me up; on the inside I felt like I wanted to curl up in a ball and hide in the corner somewhere where no one would see me. I wished to be invisible.

As I walked from reception through into a crowded corridor which was so elegant and beautiful, looking around at the other ladies' dresses, which probably

cost more than my car, and my dress being bought from eBay, I really didn't feel as if I belonged, I felt completely out of place. I spent the whole evening sitting at the table for the awards hiding my postpartum body as much as possible.

A few people said those magic words I was waiting to hear "you look good for just having had twins", however, I just didn't believe them. I fidgeted in my seat trying to adjust my dress under the arms as I could feel it cutting into my armpits.

As we looked back at photos after the event all I could point out were the negatives. *You can see the dress pinching my arms, there are even sequins missing, Jesus Christ I look as white as Casper the friendly ghost and my hair is so flat and lifeless. Thank goodness the dress is long and hides my hideously large thighs!*

Two weeks after the awards evening, guess what? That 10lbs that I had starved myself and tortured myself to lose, I had put it back on and gained even more! I had two more weeks of the 'silver sachet' diet to get through. I had paid all this money for all of this dust; I was determined to get back on it and hit my target weight. I started again and again and again and again. But I just could not starve myself any longer, I loved food, I needed energy, I had three children under 18 months for god's sake! I was still determined that I was going to make this year the year I was my "happiest, healthiest, slimmest and fittest self" but I could not put myself through starvation any longer. *There must be another way.*

Another one bites the dust

Next, I thought I'd try a well-known slimming club, *it's worked for so many people it must be able to work for me?!*

I couldn't leave my house, I still felt so isolated and alone, after the twins were born at least my time was taken up by looking after them during the evenings, but it meant I couldn't socialise and the slimming club met weekly. I knew I'd never be able to make it and leave my babies. I decided to try and face it alone. I bought the book second hand. I was eagerly awaiting it's arrival, all the promises of eating endless amounts of pasta and still losing weight sounded like my ultimate dream!!

When it came I remember being so excited to get started. I had made a book full of recipes and I was ready to go. The packaging was so gorgeous, it got me even more pumped. I opened it and saw there were two books, I opened one, the writing was so tiny and there was so much of it. My smile turned into a frown, my eyes squinted and my forehead wrinkled as I tried to read the information. I was instantly confused and felt lost the more I read. So many different rules, for different days, different types of food and counting

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this and that. I'm dyslexic, reading alone is a challenge and trying to understand, what seemed like a complex set of rules, what I can and can't eat confused and frustrated me, so much I gave up before I had even begun.

Finding a lifeline

My extra baby weight was seriously getting me down, three months postpartum and still in my size 16 jeans! *You are disgusting, you are ugly, you are fat and now you are a failure too! Who are you kidding? You are never going to hit your goal. Look around you everyone else is already in their pre-baby jeans. You are such a let-down.*

I remember thinking there must be a way I can eat real food and still lose weight. Later that week, it was like my prayers had been answered or the universe was listening, I saw a friend post about a new “healthy lifestyle”, she was posting pictures of all this amazing food and then posting her weight loss results. I messaged her for more information and to find out how difficult it was. I didn’t want to get all hyped up for a new way to get my ‘pre-baby bod’ back if I wasn’t going to follow through with it this time. She shared her information with me, lots of online support groups, simple recipes for the whole family to eat and the plan was super straightforward!

Once again I was hooked and I was all in. I started what they call a “detox” before my products arrived, shakes to have as breakfast and/or lunch. Within my

first week I not only lost 5lb but also felt amazing, my energy levels were boosted and I wasn't starving myself, this was before the products even arrived. I loved the buzz from the online support and everyone's food inspiration, it made one lonely single mum a little less alone!

I joined the business side because I genuinely loved the product, the plans and the social life. This didn't last forever but it helped me get through a tough time when I was on my own. Helping to motivate others helped motivate me and keep me on track, limited 'cheat days' and sticking to the '80|20 rule', it was straightforward, even I understood it.

Between the products and the plan as a family we grew more health conscious, learnt more about fruit and vegetables and not just eating the same 5 a day everyday but getting a variety of colours each day as different colours contained different vitamins and minerals - who knew?! Well I know I didn't. I became a lot less fussy and still to this day take the product for health reasons and use the knowledge I have gained from doctors and health professionals, which I am very thankful for. However, once again I became addicted to the scales, weighing myself most days and sometimes twice a day! The need for validation was still there.

Although I had grown this massive support network, like a second family online, the day to day living with myself was still a battle, the pressure I was feeling to do more and be more, as well as being a mum to three boys under two.

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You are disgusting! Just look at that! How will anyone ever love you when your stomach looks like the face of a ninety-year-old! You'll never have sex again! No one will ever find you attractive as long as you have that hanging down! Who would ever want to look at you naked when you can't even face the mirror without crying!

I remember thinking this daily, as I changed, exercised, bathed, went to the loo, caught myself in the mirror, so many things reminded me of how ugly I was and how my mum bod was unattractive, but it made me more determined than ever to do something about it.

Obsessed on another level

Over the first 6 months of following this plan I lost a massive three stone, I had originally only planned to lose a stone/stone and a half, the fact that three stone dropped off me should have felt amazing, right? Wrong! It wasn't enough, I needed more, it was like a drug, an addiction. Weighing myself on a daily basis and getting frustrated that the scales weren't budging.

Then I started to find exercise. I had always hated exercise at school, running, competitive swimming, rounders, netball, gymnastics, yep I hated it all. I always felt unfit and I lacked confidence in myself when it came to sport. On my dad's side of the family, when we all got together, we'd go out onto the back field playing football with my uncles and cousins and being the only girly girl I was the odd one out. I felt even worse about myself when my uncle made snarky remarks about me having two left feet.

I began a 10-day HIIT challenge and actually found that I made progress over the 10 days. The endorphins, like validation and a feeling of achievement that I got from the scales, were being mirrored in my fitness. I started to exercise more and more, not excessively,

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5 mins here, 10 mins there, whenever and wherever I could fit it in around the boys. I liked the idea of weights, something that I'd never really tried before and we had a "Slim down for Santa" exercise plan written for us that included dumbbells and barbells, whatever they were.

I decided to get a set of weights for home, as leaving the house with three small children to get to the gym was near impossible. I fell in love with the feeling of strength and again, the progression of my fitness made me feel good. Although my body was feeling stronger and I was worrying less about the scales, as I built my strength up, it was apparent that the shape and size of my body was still a massive issue.

I looked in the mirror and criticised myself yet again. *You still need to do more. It's not enough, look at all those other mums with six packs, if they can get rid of their mum tum then so can you, stop being lazy.* I was on a mission. I was still single and had the occasional date (most definitely all disasters) and feared that my body would stop me from being loved ever again.

The only way is Marbs

During my second year as part of this business there was a trip to Marbella planned. I was invited to stay in a villa with lots of the top leaders in my team. These were all extremely beautiful women and muscular men. I originally turned it down, I was worried and didn't feel worthy, but I changed my mind and decided to go for it.

Leading up to it I had been preparing myself, trying to buy some clothes which didn't make me look like a frumpy mother type. I was so anxious that I was going to be the fattest one there, I was going to look like an elephant compared to the rest of them. We were there for just shy of a week and it was the most luxurious villa I had ever seen, let alone stayed in!! If you've ever watched the X-Factor it was literally like being in a judge's house! All of the other ladies who were staying were so glam, they'd had their hair done, fake tans, lashes, brows, the works, it was like an episode of 'The only way is Essex'. *Shit! Why didn't I think of this! Not only are you fat and disgusting but you look like a ghost compared to everyone too.* The idea of getting a tan beforehand, getting lashes, brows and the rest done, never even crossed my mind, just goes to show

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how 'out of the loop' I really was. I braved wearing a swimsuit to begin with, I had brought a high-waisted bikini with me, but I definitely wasn't ready for that on my first day.

As I'm lying on the white-cushioned sun loungers next to the glistening pool, in front of this Spanish mansion, an overwhelming feeling that I'm a complete imposter washes over me. *I am definitely not good enough to be here, I'm a mother, I have three kids, what was I even thinking?!* Either side of me were women who looked perfect in every way. I felt so uncomfortable and I didn't know which way to look, how to sit and kept fidgeting in my seat. I only knew a few out of the 20+ people that were in the villa to begin with, but the girl next to me who was absolutely stunning and had the perfect balance of boobs and bum (I later found out she was also a model) turned to me and asked if I would take a picture of her. I nodded and got up to take the picture. I of course spent the whole time taking the picture thinking a million different ways to compare her to myself, she definitely looked the part of a model posing for the camera and I was in awe of her confidence.

She thanked me and turned her head to the side. "Your turn." It wasn't a question; it was a direct statement. I was shell-shocked, *what?!* *She wants to take a picture of me?* I literally had no idea how to pose for this type of photo, I feel like I'm lying there like a big potato, a very pale and wide potato. She takes a few snaps and then tells me to arch my back a bit.

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"That's better." I looked back at the photos and with her direction I actually didn't look half bad, *okay I'm no model but with my stomach covered up I can get away with looking half decent.*

As I walk around the villa overwhelmed by the beauty, abs for days, bikinis, bling and fake boobs galore I look at them in awe, as if it were the first day of secondary school and I was intimidated by the sixth formers who ruled the school (although back then it was definitely not as glam and a lot less silicone). I spent the days by the pool relaxing and nights dressing up, having cocktails and felt like Ana, not just Mum. I made friends some which lasted, some which were fleeting, but it was an experience where I came away actually feeling better about myself, I had time to remember who I was again and that I deserved to have fun and not just be in survival mode all of the time. Although I still had the little demon, my inner voice talking to me. *Next year you can come back better, fitter, stronger, hotter, I must work harder.*

Mamma Mia! *Here we go again*

A year later I was set to go back to Marbella. A few weeks before, I looked in the mirror and those thoughts overwhelmed me once more. *You're disgusting.* Even though I had upped my fitness game, my figure had changed a lot, I was still of course a pear shape, I still battled with feeling unbalanced, longing over the idea of having boobs that balanced out my booty. I knew this year I wanted to go back more prepared, not just wearing hand-me-down swimsuits, but brave it in a bikini. But what bikini? I tried so many on, none would fit both halves of my body, I wanted to make sure my '90-year-old face' for a stomach was covered, but all the high waisted bikinis were boring, black and cut into my butt and bikini line leaving bulges everywhere. Plus all the tops were too baggy and left me feeling even worse about my lack of breasts.

I came across a website where you could literally custom make your own bikini, you give your measurements, choose the cut for top and bottom, choose the print and hey presto it's yours. I went for it,

it was a lot of money, more than you would normally spend on a bikini, but I put all my faith in this bikini giving me confidence for Marbella. It arrived! *This year I'm going to look on trend and fashionable.* I was so excited as I ripped open the packaging to find my new gorgeous balconette strapless bikini top and matching Brazilian style bottoms. I had chosen the shapes specifically for my body shape and to cover my over-stretched skin on my stomach (*no one wants to see that*), the print too, white with green palm leaves and pink flowers. I'd given my exact measurements so it would fit perfectly.

I undressed quickly, eager to try it on, my face beamed as I popped the bikini bottoms over my thighs and it sat perfectly over my "mum tum" overhang and hid my stretch marks, *finally a two piece that actually fitted my "out of proportion" pear-shaped body!* Next I twisted the bikini top on, did the clasp up and turned it back round to the front, as I turned it up to go over my breasts, it felt completely empty. My heart sank. *What? How can I have given my exact measurements for it not to fit? I've paid all this money and still it doesn't fit?* Tears started to fill in my eyes and my heart sank to the bottom of my stomach. I slumped on the end of my bed and hung my head. *No one will ever love me with my flat chest. How can I ever expect anyone to find me attractive when I haven't even got a "handful" for anyone?!*

I sat for a few minutes feeling totally miserable and wrapped up in the worry and anxiety of going away in a few weeks. I looked back up to the mirror sheepishly

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and pulled at the empty cups on the bra. *It's not like I can even pad it out, it's a goddamn swimming suit!!* I felt so self-conscious, having had "no boobs and all bum" all my life, even before I had had any children I had spent endless hours searching the internet for boob jobs. I knew how much it would roughly cost, I got suckered in to the adverts of "we're happier now we have bigger boobs" and I genuinely believed that too. I believed that I wouldn't be happy with my body until I had bigger breasts. *Not massive ones, just a C/D cup.* I'd trick myself. *I'll feel so much more confident going out on dates, it'll make me feel more feminine and sexy.*

I found a solution, a seamstress who could help fill out my expensive customised ill-fitting bikini top, and even though it looked amazing, deep down I knew I was a "fraud" and that "imposter" feeling still hung over me. I was reminded every time I climbed out of the pool and felt the weight of a 1/3 of the water soaked into the extra padding of my bikini top, I squeezed it out and the water ran dripping down my stomach, legs and back into the pool where it belonged.

This time I was in a villa with only women, including three who were confidently sunbathing topless showing off their new perfectly statured boobies, no amount of wind, no hurricane or twister was going to move those bad boys. I ached over their confidence and their pert breasts making me feel even more desperate and in need of breast augmentation.

In my room as I got dressed for the day, even though I had spent a year bettering my body, working

out, eating clean, sticking to the 80|20 rule, I still looked in the mirror and felt disappointment. *You're fat. You could have done more. You really don't deserve to wear a bikini. You don't even deserve to be here. You're a mum of three, who do you think you are?!* I spent the whole trip with a fog over my brain, I was there but I wasn't really "there". I was severely unhappy but I painted that picture of "happy Ana" life and soul of the party, dancing away, loving life.

Each morning I went for a run, it was actually so refreshing. I quietly snuck out of my room, early in the morning sneakily dressed in my purple 3/4 length trousers and luminous yellow tight fighting vest with my trainers in hand. As I jogged gently through the numerous villas, my adrenaline started pumping as I began to smell and then see the sea in the distance. As I reached the sea front I felt calm, I felt relaxed. I hated running but there was something different running up and down the sea front, it made my soul shine. I came across a collection of trees on the beach and I could make out a shape within them. It was an elephant, no, no not a real one in San Pedro but a life-size statue of an elephant looking out into the sea.

On my run on the last day of our long weekend I decided to take some selfies of me in my new happy place by the sea. I took a snap of me on the edge of a wooden walkway into the sand, with my head facing out into the sea as if I was longing to be swimming amongst the mermaids, as I looked back at the picture all I could focus on was my boobs. I held back from

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posting the picture on my social media, *what if they compare this photo to my bikini photos and then they wonder where my breasts have disappeared to?! I fought the demons in my head and the happiness that running by the beach brought me was enough courage to post it and of course no one made any comments about my boobs. I conquered my demons with one picture but there were many from that holiday I did not post because I felt too self-conscious of my body, not just self-conscious but truly disgusted. Oh my god!! I gasped. I didn't realise my cellulite was that bad!?! Who on earth would want to look at that?* I felt like the only person in the world whose bum and thighs were fully covered in these dimples.

Let's face it, you never see it in the media, in movies or magazines and every music video displays perfectly smooth-skinned tanned models with just enough boob to bum ratio. On the last day of the trip I also filmed some workout videos, I was loving my fitness and feeling strong and thought maybe my workouts could help other people. I felt powerful as I did my push ups, struggled through burpees and the numerous ab exercises. I even posted on social media a selfie of me and how I was going to be uploading some workout videos very soon. However, as I watched them back I was haunted by the overhang of my mummy tummy where the excess skin came from my over-stretched twin belly held me back, the videos were never even edited, never posted and the demons won this time round.

Obsessed to addicted

proceeded to fill my time with fitness and build my strength, my obsession had turned into an addiction, more of a stress reliever, but I was still obsessed with my body image. I loved seeing physical changes in my body as the slight muscle pops on my leg. I was never ever going to be a body builder and that's not what I wanted but I was on a mission to get rid of my mum tum. *It's just stubborn fat that's left over in this mummy pouch, if I work out and eat really clean I can get rid of it, I can do this.* I truly believed this and even if it is true that it's the most stubborn fat that's left and you have to eat really clean to get rid of it, denying myself having a few drinks with friends, eating a pizza during a sleepover and indulging in my favourite, a huge bar of Cadbury's dairy milk during my time of the month, without feeling the guilt and beating myself up for failing, was it worth it?

I soon decided that I wanted to pursue a qualification in fitness instruction and signed up to do a level 2 course part time over 6 months. The first day I drove to the college my hands were shaking as I held on to the steering wheel down the A34, *what if they're all younger than me, prettier than me, bet they'll all be skinnier than me.*

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Oh Jesus I'm definitely going to be the most unfit. I doubted whether I should even turn up, just turn around, go back home and just be a mum. I glanced into the rear-view mirror at my eyes, I had taken the time to do my hair nicely and put my face on and I was sporting my best gym gear and Nike trainers. I've come this far, let's give it a go and we can always make up a child-related excuse if I don't want to come back next week. I walked into the classroom and it was a mix of ages between 19 and 60, I couldn't have been anymore wrong. The group of people I met were warm, friendly and probably felt just as anxious as I had, it was an even split of girls and boys and absolutely zero egotistical characters. I sat down and breathed, feeling relieved I hadn't listened to the demon in my head.

Choking on air

During this time, my home life was a struggle. Still a single mum to three boys, the twins were now 2 and a half and Nathaniel was just 4. The twins had been flagged that they were delayed in their speech and communication and we'd had various tests and appointments to figure out what was going wrong. My mental health was pretty rocky. I tried not to tell anyone but the worry and the frustration of not being able to help my boys, to not be able to understand what they needed and wanted, was heart-breaking, soul-destroying.

The twins had started going to preschool with Nathaniel so I could go to college on a Monday and I remember filling in the forms for them, you know the usual contact details, where you live, date of birth, etc., and I came to this one question towards the end of the form, normally a question that I would skip, that most parents get to pass over. But this time I didn't get to skip it. "Does your child have any special needs or have a disability?" I froze. I felt like I was choking on air. *How is that even possible?!* As I was standing in the side room of the preschool, clipboard in one hand and pen in the other, my body began to shake as I tried

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to hold my emotions in. My shoulders drooped and I paused for 30 seconds staring at the question. I raised my head, sucked up the tears and swallowed them down, for now. I checked the box. Then I had to go through it all over again for Luca. "Does your child have any special needs or have a disability?" I checked the box again.

Towards Christmas we were expecting to hear when Jude and Luca would have a series of hospital appointments for what's called a Multi-Disciplinary Assessment (MDA) - no it's not a drug, that's MDMA, I got confused too. I was sitting in class at college as we were studying the skeleton and different bones in the body, which I was bloody awful at. My phone buzzed as a text came through; now normally I wouldn't look at my phone in class, I mean it's not like school school, my phone wasn't going to get confiscated, I'm a fully grown adult, but just out of respect I didn't like to look. However, I was drawn to look this time, I pulled out my phone and it was from our Health Visitor.

"Hi Ana. I've contacted Dr Gill's secretary. She says it's likely to be the middle of next year, June/July time..."

I really wish I hadn't read that now. It left me in a foul mood the whole rest of the class and I could not focus for shit. We had been told that it would be 6 months after our appointment in August, so to hear this left me feeling frustrated, angry, furious - I know they're all the same emotions but I really felt them. I felt alone. I had no idea what was going on with them or how to

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help them. My babies' frustration was building up, I hated the idea of putting them in a box, but I needed some kind of answers so I could research and find some support, someone to tell me it's going to get better. *Will it? Will it get better? Will there ever be an answer?*

Terms and conditions confident

finished my college level 2 fitness instructors and was now fully qualified. I gained more confidence in myself to be able to help people and guess what, I beat the little demon and I filmed, edited and posted workout videos online. I still had him sitting on my shoulder though, I mean being confident in clothes is one thing but what about being naked? The idea of actually having s...e...x was terrifying. It'd been almost a year, sure I went on dates, some horrendous, some not so bad.

I kept telling myself *I don't kiss on first dates*, but really looking back I think it was a barrier, I think I was holding myself back from letting my guard down to find anyone attractive enough to even consider getting intimate with them. *Dad, Mum, any family members if you're reading this, maybe skip this bit?!* The thought of getting naked with anyone and them seeing my 90-year old's face for a stomach was gut-wrenching. *What if they laugh? What if they can't... you know 'perform' because they're repulsed by my naked body?*

I finally felt body confident in myself but it was

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an “if” confidence. *I’m confident in my body as long as my mum tum overhang isn’t showing. I’m confident in my body as long as I’m wearing clothes that cover my cellulite and stretch marks. I’m confident in my body in clothes until I’m around a load of other slim perfectly proportioned girls. It wasn’t a confidence that came from being happy within myself.*

An allergy to a man

locked myself in the toilet and sat down, I clenched my stomach feeling genuinely sick. *Jesus Christ is this the quickest food poisoning ever? Am I ill? Or maybe I'm allergic to this date!* I sat for a few minutes, breathing and rubbing my stomach clockwise in circles trying to pass this overwhelming feeling that I was about to puke my guts up. *Doesn't help you're wearing the tightest pair of jeans you own, good move Ana. Note to self, bin all jeans, you look fat, they're definitely way too small, your butt is not made for jeans.*

I gathered myself together, unlocked the door and splashed some water from the basin over my forehead and temples. I shook my hands dry and proceeded towards the door. As I reached my date, I apologised for my absence and explained how I felt poorly. He didn't take much notice and continued to talk about his semi-pro-wrestling career stories. I sat with one hand on my stomach, *is he still talking? Did he not hear me? Or is he choosing just to carry on talking about himself while I sit here swallowing the puke that's trying to creep up my throat?! Maybe he thinks it's just an excuse to get out of this date!?*

The waiter came over finally to take our plates, "I

guess we won't be getting pudding then?" he asked. "No! Sorry, I really need to get home, I feel awful," still holding on to my stomach. The waiter brought over the bill and left it in the middle of us, "I guess I'll pay then, even if you didn't eat yours..." he 'joked' and laughed, *haha*, I nervously laughed and tried to shrug it off. He walked me over to my car, there was absolutely no way in hell I was going to be kissing this dude, he can think again. Maybe I'll just stop holding back the sick and let it hurl out. "Thank you for tonight, sorry I'm not feeling well. Make sure to text me to check I get back without crashing the car from being sick *haha*." I joked and tried to make light of the situation, he stepped forward, *oh for fuck's sake* I quickly offered the side of my cheek as I lightly placed one hand on his shoulder. I opened the car door, jumped in and shut it as quickly as possible.

I'm no Cilla Black

As I drove down a horribly tiny country road, not knowing where the hell I was going, I was reflecting on the evening. I clenched my stomach at the thought of the dodgy Thai food I had eaten and gulped hard. *I'm done! No more online dating. I hate this 'blind date' type of thing. I want to meet someone who I already know. A friend of a friend maybe? I need to know how they act around people, what they sound like, how they treat people, before I agree to go on any more dates!!* I deleted all of my dating apps; I'd had enough.

A few weeks later, I found myself so bored that I decided to "play" Tinder... *yes if you hadn't noticed it's a bit of a weird and socially acceptable game, Tinder itself actually says, "keep playing?"* I was scrolling through, looking at profiles not just faces, taking into account the type of person they are, *remember Ana you've got three kids there's probably a very slim chance that any of these guys are going to want to be with a mum who has three children, not to mention twins who have special needs. Even if they do just want a 'bit of fun', once you take off your clothes they're hardly going to want to 'do the deed' with your saggy old mum tum.* I continued to look through the pictures and profiles of men who were potentially "too good" for me.

Then, as if by magic, as if the universe had been listening to me after my dodgy date, I came across a familiar face. This familiar face had 'super liked' me – this means I know that he has liked me, whereas with other matches, you only find out after you've decided if you like them or not, you only get one of these a day, so it made you feel kinda special. This tall, dark and handsome man was not a stranger, he was the brother-in-law of one of my friends, I knew exactly who it was, I'd met him a year previous at my friend's Sten do (stag and hen do) and we'd actually had a bit of a light-hearted, heated debate about nutrition. He was best man and had had a few drinks, I was driving so wasn't drinking and in training for a half marathon. All the girls at the party fancied him, to me I saw him as a massive player, ladies' man and that wasn't usually my type of man.

As I looked through his profile and pictures, I paused and debated whether to match with him or not. *I know he's liked me but does he even remember who I am? He probably has completely forgotten and not aware I have three children. I can either just say no and leave it or I can say yes and just have a bit of fun and tease him about our debate from the Sten do while he's trying to chat me up? Hmmm *swipes right* what have I got to lose?* I had nothing to lose, but what did I have to gain? Everything and I did. A few minutes later he messaged me and from the minute we started talking he was a completely different guy to when I had first met him. He was kind, caring and he actually messaged me back

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and seemed interested. Yep, he remembered who I was and that I had three children. I was still super self-conscious and unsure that this would go anywhere, *you know what, I deserve to have some fun, let's just go with the flow and see what happens.*

We talked nonstop via text (and when we spent time together) but it wasn't until our first official date a few weeks into talking to him that I knew I wanted to be with him forever. I looked at him, standing in his grey suit jacket and black jeans with brown Chelsea boots and I felt so much love for him. It was a bit of a whirlwind romance but he was thrown in at the deep end and he swam upstream with me, my absolute rock.

Disclaimer - any family members or under 18s please skip this section!!

The first time we 'went to get acquainted' I was so nervous, I'm pretty sure we both were but for different reasons. I was petrified of rejection. Scared to my bones that the minute he saw what I was hiding underneath my clothes he would leg it down the stairs and through the front door, that imposter syndrome feeling was kicking in again. I was natural with my boobs, there was no padding to my bra, so he could tell that I wasn't packing upstairs, but I did make up for it with my booty.

I was consumed with all these worries, fears and anxiety about how I looked, but when it really came down to it, the parts I was so self-conscious of, my stretch marks, my cellulite and most of all my mum tum,

all of my 'flaws', never came in to play. *Haha literally.* He made me feel so loved, so safe and secure from day one, that I didn't need to pretend to be anyone else. I didn't feel a fraud. As we came to know each other, being fully exposed stomach, boobs, bum and all it still felt strange. I still flinched at the thought of letting myself be 100% natural and that demon was still there sitting on my shoulder, *don't go putting on any weight, just because you're in a new relationship doesn't mean you can put on that 'honeymoon' period weight.* I started to notice my trousers getting tighter and it made me feel uncomfortable and panic that I was "letting myself go".

Finding Jordan, a partner, someone to share life with, to be open and honest to, to have someone to accept me for who I am, the mother to three boys, was a blessing. During the first few months of our relationship I got the letter for the twins' MDA appointment, a week after my birthday. *Finally a chance to get some answers.* It was a highly emotional week. On the first day the Speech and Language therapist did an autism test on both the boys and they were literally right in the middle of the spectrum, just one point away from one another. It was a huge shock, the word 'autism' hadn't been mentioned previously, I really had no clue what autism was before that day. The shock was huge but the relief of having some answers made such a huge difference. It meant I could go and research, find support, look for ways to help them progress. It felt like a huge weight had been lifted off

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of my shoulders. We still had three full days of tests to get through, it was exhausting for all of us, but when I got home Jordan was there to raise my spirits and to show love and support in all ways he could.

Watching his relationship grow with the boys has been one of the most beautiful things. Most days I still watch them playing together and loving one another and I am thankful every day for finding him. I loved that we had a relationship where we wanted to be with one another, there wasn't a need, it was a partnership, we worked together through whatever came at us.

Our next chapter

It all came down to Spencer, it all clicked after having our beautiful boy together. I was around 6 weeks postpartum when I was driving through the next village and I just suddenly admitted to myself out loud, *You know what? I actually love myself; this sounds bizarre but I love my body as it is, hell I may be a size 16 but I'm actually okay about this! My body has produced four human beings now, how insane is that? If I'm going to be this size forever, then I can handle that.*

I said no to dieting, to rules about how much I have to eat of this and how much I should eat of that. I'm going to eat chocolate when I want to, I'm going to eat a huge plate of spaghetti with olive oil and cheese and have absolutely zero guilt about it. I'm no longer a slave to the gym after having a 'naughty weekend'. There's no more need for good foods and bad foods, all food is good, all food helps us to survive day to day. No more cutting out food groups. No more weighing myself, no more putting myself down and definitely no more longing over my 'pre-baby body', no more, nope, no way, nahhhh.

I love my body for what it is. And do you know what? Once I took away all of those rules, all of those

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restrictions and ate what I wanted, I naturally returned to my pre-baby weight (*well I'm guessing because 1. I had no idea what I weighed previously and 2. I still don't as I don't have any scales haha*). I fit in the clothes I wore before Spencer and if this isn't proof enough that intuitive eating can work for you (even a massive chocoholic like me!!) I bought a box of Guylian shells on a Wednesday, and by the Friday and I hadn't even eaten half the box yet!!! This is a big deal because back in my disordered eating days when I was "restricting" what I ate, I'd eat it in one sitting, or max two sittings in one day.

Giving yourself the freedom to eat what you fancy and not set yourself limits is scary but it doesn't mean you'll end up just eating chocolate, pasta with cheese and pizza forever (my personal favs). You can trust your body, it just takes time to learn to once again, just like anything else. I looked in the mirror and smiled, what did I see? I saw a mother, I saw a body that had carried her fourth baby for 9 months, kept them both healthy and thriving, I saw true happiness because even though I was wearing a size 16 and weighed god knows what, but probably one of my heaviest times of my life, I was happy, truly happy and my weight didn't affect my emotions.

Just a wobble

The first day back to school for Nathaniel and the twins after I'd had Spencer, I walked in front of the pushchair which daddy was proudly pushing, holding a twin in each hand, still a little sore, wearing granny pants and massive pads, but as it was the great heatwave of 2018 I was wearing a floaty black dress and I felt good about myself.

This time round I was prepared, I knew full well my uterus was still swollen and would take some time to go down, but I overall felt good about my postpartum body. I was so excited to show Spencer off to the other mums and staff at preschool after dropping off Nathaniel at his classroom. We were about 20 feet away from walking into the twins' classroom when a mum shouts over to me "Poor you, when are you going to have that baby? I'd thought you'd have had him by now?" I was confused for a second and stopped in my tracks, I moved to the side and said, "He's in there," pointing to the carry cot on the buggy behind me. Her face dropped like a sack of potatoes and she muffled something and quickly carried on walking past as we walked into school.

Even though I was feeling amazing and so positive

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in myself, it did shake me up and make me think, it made me a little self-conscious for a few minutes and question myself, *do I really look that pregnant still? I mean I was massive before, my uterus isn't that swollen still, is it?!* I talked it through with Jordan and my mum later, it did bother me, hello of course it did, I'm only human, but if that had been my first or second postpartum journey, it would have shattered my world, it would have left me feeling sick with worry and had me drowning in tears. But instead it was just a wobble and then I went back to being kind to myself.

I look back to a year ago now and think of how different my mindsets truly were comparing my postpartum journeys with Nathaniel, the twins and now Spencer. I want more women to be kinder to themselves, feel understanding and accepting of their bodies after baby, we need it now more than ever.

The catwalk

My face lit up as I read a message. *Wow they trust me and think I'm confident enough to lead this, me? Really?! Working with the Mums in Business Association has been an absolute honour over the past two years, but my highlight has to be running the Body Positive Fashion Show. I remember doubting myself to begin with big time, this is a huge responsibility, can you really pull this together Ana?!*

I spent so much time working behind the scenes, trying to patch every piece together, models, outfits, the sponsors, etc., that I didn't pipe up much as a person of influence until a few days before it happened. As you can imagine with 20 females pushing themselves out of their comfort zones, our group chat was buzzing. Everything from *I'm gonna pee my pants* to *I'm going to need a big drink* – not to mention one of our models had not long found out that she was pregnant.

We hadn't all met yet but we all felt as if we knew each other, there was a bond that was formed in the vulnerability we were about to experience. The idea of strutting my stuff in my underwear in front of over 200 people didn't really cross my mind until it came to the night before. I was so busy hustling around everyone

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that my own nerves were pushed down to empower the nerves of the others. I remember leaving a voice note for the MiBs a few days before, *just know ladies that you walking across that catwalk in your underwear is not just going to leave you feeling amazing but it will inspire other women in the audience to think "if they can do it, then why can't I" just focus on that, you've got this!* That was my main focus, our courageous acts will go on to empower so many others, we need more representatives of different bodies and we had models size 6-22 who were all very different, *I know this is going to be one hell of a show.*

I arrived anxious as we were running 15 minutes behind *thanks traffic!* Leona and Estelle were flittering around I could feel the nervous energy and manic panic of being behind schedule - Estelle is a bit of a mini Hitler (*am I allowed to say that in writing?! Haha just did*). I strode in, clipboard in hand and knew that I needed to take the reins to ease some tension. The carpet, oh my god, what a nightmare, a new one was being fitted as the previous one that was laid down had dead bugs all in it *hand face palm moment*, the kid (and when I say kid he was probably about 18) trying to fit a new red carpet and he was literally attempting to stick it down with masking tape... no I'm not joking. "How long do you think you'll be, because we really need to get on with a dry run?" he looked up at me from the floor and sheepishly replied, "I'll be done in 20 minutes." *Okay, I can cope with that, people still need to arrive, we can get as many through hair and makeup as possible before we do the*

dry run. Those 20 minutes flashed by and guess what – he definitely wasn't finished and the carpet looked like it had sand dunes in it or like the rolling hills in the Sound of Music.

I start doing a 'roll call' or just a plain old register, like a bloody primary school teacher, from my clipboard and have to shout at the top of my voice to get everyone's attention, then repeated by mini Hitler – aka Estelle – definitely need a megaphone for next year. One by one we check off who's here and who's left to come, then it's instructions, "If you haven't had hair or make up done jump in a chair when it's free, we're going for a dry run in 5 minutes and if you're in the chair someone will fill in for you." I turned to look at the lad trying to tape down the carpet, "Can we have it a bit tighter please? I've got 20 women walking down this catwalk in heels and I do not want anyone falling!" He looks so stressed it's unreal. So down I get on the floor in my leopard print skirt, "Right I'll pull it tight and you tape." You know what they say – if you want something done well, do it yourself. After a few attempts we get it down and straight. Thank the lord. We're dry run ready *hallelujah!* We need to time it with the music as close as possible, no speaker, *I'll just play it from my phone and sing loudly!!*

We got as many girls down the catwalk as possible, there's actually an amazing video of me, with an interview in the beginning – which was really, really strange filming and watching back, it made me feel uber important, *I'm just a mum, just Ana and I'm being*

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interviewed, hang on, I'm running this whole catwalk, this is going smoothly because of me, wow I'm proud, I know it's weird to say about yourself but I am! In this video, there I am absolutely loving life, dancing, raving, shaking my booty and singing along to my phone as I support each MiB strutting down the catwalk for our dry run.

A few hours later, everyone has hair and makeup on, in our evening dresses ready to greet the guests before we sneak off to get ready. I remember seeing my man waiting outside, we weren't letting anyone in yet, but the girls said Jordan could come in, Estelle shouted out of the front door for a few people to come to the front "...and Jordan who looks FIT!" And boy he did, my guy knows how to dress up in a three-piece suit. The glamour was unreal, the whole place had come together and you wouldn't even know any of the hiccups had even happened. The drinks were flowing - bit of Dutch courage definitely never hurt anyone, downing a prosecco and my boobs were absolutely bulging full of milk, it was literally like having a free (well if you can call pushing a baby out of your foofoo free) boob job. May as well take advantage of them while I can. Before we went backstage to get ready was all a bit of a blur, I remember just feeling on edge, wanting to get on with it and get it done so I could relax after knowing it had gone smoothly.

Our cue came and all the models snuck out of their seats and made their way backstage to get changed, it was absolute chaos, 20 women in a tiny room trying to get dressed out of ball gowns and into jeans and

T's for our first outfit change, as quietly as possible as the door wouldn't even close properly . There were booties, boobies and bellies everywhere, by this point everyone was so high from the anxiety of what we were about to do, no one cared what the other models could or couldn't see while we were changing. We were all ready and waiting in line, the adrenaline was pumping and the girls' nerves were starting to get the better of them, there was definitely a bottle of sambuca flying around the place, *yuck!* "Next time get tequila and I'll join you!" The music was blazing and the presenter introduced the beginning of the catwalk, down went our first brave MiB strutting her stuff and we were off. I had purposely put Leona, Estelle and me last for the ending. I felt so proud watching all the girls from backstage, we were whooping, cheering and shouting, the whole crowd felt alive. We did the first two outfits in a breeze and the MiBs were so amazing, their faces were beaming with excitement.

Then it came to the final change, the underwear, big finish, remember?! More sambuca was passed down the line and swigged. I hadn't really given much thought about my nerves and how I would feel walking out in underwear, I also hadn't taken into consideration that the outfit I had chosen was see-through around the boob area and apart from a strip across my direct nipple (if it stayed in place), you could pretty much see everything. I had zero choice, there was nothing else that fit me, there wasn't time to stick plasters on or find a way to hide them, it was suck it up and do it.

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My hands shook as I got to the front of the queue and was next to go, my whole body pulsated, excitement, nerves? Who the hell cares! I walked towards the steps, holding my head high, *come on Ana you've helped create this, you've helped these women break through their comfort zones it's your turn to show them exactly how it's done.* I waited for the fabulous Heather, holding my hand out to high 5, smiling wide to hide my nerves. As I walked past her I raised my hands in the air almost like a 'yep this is me, literally pretty much all of me and who gives a fuck what anyone else thinks' kind of statement. I let me hands fall to my sides, I stepped down the stairs on to the carpet, *just look straight ahead, do not make eye contact with anyone, look towards the lights and go for it.* The audience were on their feet, clapping, dancing, cheering, I couldn't see exact faces I just knew I had to get on with this. I posed at the end, turned and danced my way back, feeling slightly relieved as my nipples were currently on show. Leona was waiting hand in the air *high 5* and I went backstage, *phew that's it, we did it! Oh no wait, the big finish!!*

I waited at the top as Leona came back and Estelle had her turn, then we were getting ready for the three of us to go down together, we walked towards the steps and Estelle joined us, we posed and strutted down to the end (there's an amazing picture where we literally look like 'Charlie's Angels'). After we paused for photos and boogied our way back to the steps, the rest of the girls were waiting for us and we all walked down together. The faces of the models were a picture,

everyone felt so empowered and it made me feel proud of what we had achieved. Our big finish ended with our singer blaring out 'I'm every woman' and we all joined in singing before having an incredible group photo, which I will treasure forever.

The response since the catwalk has been amazing, it was everything I wanted and more. Women who were in the audience and even women who weren't and had just seen pictures, used it to give them the courage to go out and get whatever it was that they wanted. One woman entered a plus size beauty pageant and is going to be competing in August! *How frigging exciting!!!!* Others had the courage to start businesses, to feel more sexually empowered, to accept their bodies and begin their self love journey. People looked at us and thought "If they can do that, then what is stopping me?" and that's exactly the purpose of what I do. Empowering others.

Back to the future

As I stepped off the train and on to the platform I could feel the adrenaline pumping through me. I was desperate for the loo and hated the thought of going in a porta loo (yes I'm a toilet snob) but it was 30p and I literally had zero cash on me. I got some cash out and went to M&S, I grabbed a bottle of coconut water and some Percy pigs to take home for the kids and got some change. I went to the toilet and when I got to the turnstiles there was an older lady shoving her huge suitcase underneath and jumping over. *Clearly I am not rebel enough – why didn't I think of that?!* I popped my 30p in and spent my penny.

As I got to the end of the escalator my heart was pumping faster and faster, *right which way, North or South bound*. My dad had sworn to me that the Bakerloo line would take me straight to Green Park where I needed to get off. I looked back and forth through both lists of tube stations, baffled as my dad never gets this stuff wrong. It wasn't there. My hands start to shake and my breath quickens, *fuck, fuck, fuck, no signal, how on earth am I supposed to know where to go?! I knew I should have downloaded the tube app*. I walked back towards the bottom of the escalators as I noticed previously I still

had signal there. I checked and no bars. *Come on come on come on, please.* I checked my Apple watch; it was already 9.20am *the talk is starting right now and I have no idea where I need to go.* I turn my phone on airplane mode and off again. *Yes, signal, thank god. *types green park tube lines* Victoria, Jubilee, Piccadilly. Okay so if I go here one stop and get on that one two stops I'll be there.* I rush back down towards the tube stops and consult the lists again and steer towards the left, I run for the train as the doors start to shut *damn it!!* But the doors reopen, *hallelujah the universe is clearly on my side.* One stop and I'm off again, *now North or South?!* *They're in opposite directions, try North... nope back to South then. People are probably looking at me thinking what the hell is she doing but I literally don't give two shits anymore. I need to get there.* The tube takes a minute, it pulls up and as I step on I see a man sat down with the same vitality running bag for the kit drop off, we nod at each other, like this mutual runner's respect, *yeah I'm a runner!* I look down and notice his cheeky tag on his shoe like mine, then I scan the seats nearby and see several other cheeky tags too. *Well, at least I know I'm heading in the right direction.* I glance at my watch, *okay I'm gonna miss some of the talk but I'm going to make it.*

As we come up from the tube station, it's absolutely heaving, the tube station links right out on to Green Park and there is not one single person swimming upstream, we're all slowly shuffling forward like penguins off a David Attenborough documentary, *waddle, waddle, waddle. Right so on the map it said we're*

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in the charity tent... wow! As we reach the park I look up and turn my head from side to side in awe of how many people there are around me. When I first signed up for this race I thought it was only for Celebrate You, I thought it was only a race for people to run in celebration of body positivity and diversity among shapes and sizes. I didn't realise it was open across the board and I definitely didn't realise just how many people were running it up until now. Now I am completely overwhelmed by the sea of people and the only reason I'm still moving is because the flow of the crowd, the other penguins, are pushing me forward. I head towards a giant pink sign with a map on and I just so happen to catch the sight of the charity tent to my right. I make my way over as I hear the voice of Bryony Gordon who is one of the celebs who organised the event. *Fuck, everyone's already in their underwear.* I get to the tent and get stopped by several female stewards, "Bands only in this area," *oh sweet Jesus, you're so under prepared Ana, for god's sake come on.* I quickly whip round my rucksack and unzip the front pocket, "I have them here, see." I wave them. "Well make sure you put them on." *Alright babe, keep your pants on I'm just about to.* I tear off the sticky labels and put both of the bands on my left arm. *ew this feels weird* I never normally wear anything on my left but I didn't want to disrupt my Apple watch.

I pause for a moment, looking around at the women, feeling slightly panicked and self-conscious by the fact that most people appear to be in groups, laughing,

joking and comforting one another. Bryony continues to talk and I can barely hear as it is but the mind fuzz of the event is taking over my brain too. *What now? Well come on. What are you waiting for? Oh yeah let's do this... I guess.* I am nervous as hell and slowly begin to take off my trousers, I had a plan, these joggers were just loose enough to get over my feet, *I can do this without falling over, come on Ana!* It was probably the least graceful thing you'll ever hear. I try to listen in on the talk and give the occasional "WOO!" as I undress. Off comes the top and as I'm bending down piling all my clothes into my bag, so inelegantly, I hear a voice from above "Do you have any spare breast pads?!" *What the hell? Who's that? And how on earth do they know I'm feeding?!* My instant reaction is, "Oh my god, yes I actually do." I look up, I have no clue who this woman is and no idea how she knew I was feeding, "Oh actually I'll probably be alright, I've just fed," she says. "Here you go, here's one, one second," I reply as I reach into the front of my bag for the second time. "But how did you know?" She points to my boobs, as I look down I see my breast pad poking out. *Brilliant! But hey, conversation starter, let's make a friend out of what could have been an embarrassing situation!!* We talk and soon find out our boys are almost the same age and stick together as we find the long queue for the kit drop off. Once we get there we have to part ways as we are opposite ends of the alphabet when it comes to our last names, but we did manage to swap Instagrams before we go our separate ways.

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I head towards the bag drop and leave mine with other "B's". *Okay, here I am again, on my own.* I walk with the crowd, not having a clue where the start line is, keeping my eyes peeled for anyone else in their underwear. *I can guarantee you there are people who have never heard of Celebrate You and are looking at me thinking what the hell is this girl thinking. Stuff them, this is all for the greater good, for women's bodies all over the world. Oh yay people!!* I came across a group of women in their Runderwear stretching and warming up. I stand there watching *why the hell am I just watching?!* *You're running this race too!* I start to join in, we lunge, we squat, we stretch our calves, our shoulders and I start chatting with a few other women. One decides we need a group photo, *hell yes we do!* We all face with our booties out and as we face the Queen's Palace I throw my hands up in their air and make the peace sign. *Yes, yes, yes, all my worries, my tears and my stress are worth it just for this moment alone.* It really is an amazing feeling, a massive sense of community, of "we're all shit scared but we're in it together... no woman left behind... and no one should feel ashamed." I looked amongst the group of women I was with and felt completely empowered to be within their presence and so grateful I was there to be a part of it. *Next year I want to come with a huge group of women, to do our own warm up and to have a group photo feeling empowered and raring to go.* The group dispersed, after we'd all swapped Instas of course *I need that photo ASAP!!* I started to walk with the crowd again, eager to get to the starting line and

get going, *I might be in my underwear but I've still got that 10k to run, oh Christ.*

I drift through the crowd, seeing more women braving it in their undies, some didn't seem phased, some in groups excited and bubbly, some completely in the zone on their own, ear plugs in and ready to go. I look to the right *oh my!* It was the Queen's Palace, I really didn't realise how close the race was going to be, okay confession, I really didn't know where the race was going to be at all until the day before and I talked it through with my dad! I pulled over from the crowd to look over the wall and admired the view of the palace, it was breathtaking. In all my life and even having lived 20 mins out of the centre of London I'd never been this close to the palace. *You know what, this is the perfect photo opportunity to have a picture with my Queen pants!! I need to get someone to take a picture, there's no way I'll manage a selfie of my butt with the palace in the background, that would be another level of impressive.* I saw three women attempting a selfie with the palace in the background, *ahaaa we had the same idea, maybe if I offer to take their photo it won't be so weird if I ask them to take one of me?!* Previously I would never have even dreamed of asking anyone else to take my photo, I'd have got to the end of the day and felt sad wishing I'd had more photos taken and been brave enough to ask someone to take my photo. However, I knew I couldn't miss this opportunity. "Do you want me to take your photo?" I piped up. "Oh yes please, that would be great!" they replied. I proceeded to take a photo and a

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few extras for good luck. "Would you mind taking one of me?" I asked a little sheepishly. "Of course," one of the girls replied instantly. Butt on show, hands in the air making the peace sign (or actually swearing from behind, but hey who cares!) I thanked her and quickly clicked on my photo album to check the photo... *wow that's amazing, the Queen has returned to her palace.*

The crowd grew closer together and then dispersed again as we got towards the end of the start line. We were supposed to meet at the orange marker but people had already started moving forward. I looked around me and started to panic a little *okay I'm the only one in underwear right here, I literally can't see anyone else that's half naked.* I pull back a bit, looking around trying to not look too obvious like I'm lost or something but perhaps just looking for someone. I spot a few ladies and gravitate towards them, we get chatting and start to cheer each other on, then the music starts to kick in and the whole crowd starts to sing and boogie (some of us more than others). It's actually much more nerve-racking waiting to start than it is to do the actual race. The music did keep us going though, perfectly picked songs, the only one I can really remember right now is 'I would walk 500 miles and I would walk 500 more, just to be the man who walked a 1000 miles to fall down at your door' *you sang that didn't you? Haha me too babe.* The atmosphere was electric. Throughout the whole race the atmosphere was alive and so high vibe, from all the stewards cheering us on, to the crowds calling out 'Queen' *thanks for that guys, that made me smile and*

kept me going! I ran most of the 10K with an inspirational fellow *Celebrate You* runner and she definitely helped keep me going, hopefully I helped her too. We got a few of the other runners saying how proud they were of us for braving running in our underwear which totally melted me and made me feel amazing. We even had one gentleman steward who had obviously seen us at the beginning and as we lapped round towards the end he noticed us again and said, "Well done, it's great to see you again! Keep going!" I was all of a daze and clearly in the zone on the way round but it was so amazing that he remembered me - I'm guessing maybe the face glitter had something to do with it!!

I paced myself well, *slow and steady and never give up* was my motto for the day. When the signs came up starting to count down in metres, it felt like it was dragging for days on end... 1000m... 800m... 600m... *Jesus Christ can this be over now?!* It soon got to 200m and I started to pump myself up, *right here we go Ana, this is it, big finish!!* As I had had a complete meltdown last night about not having a running belt, I had to hold my phone in my hand the whole way. I really did not want to be on my own in London without it. It actually wasn't as bad as I anticipated, I didn't notice it after a while and it was great to take photos (I wouldn't have my amazing Queen and her castle picture without it!). As we headed towards the finish line, I turned my phone on video, *come on quick, quick it's time to finish this bad boy.* I put it on to video and then I built up my pace, faster and faster, my heart rushing

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and adrenaline pumping so fast through my veins. I felt like an actual cheetah from *Blue Planet* going after my prey, but in reality I was probably more like the prey than the predator. Crossing that finish line felt so good. My breath was catching up with my feet as I paced slowly forward, mind spinning and having no clue where to go next. Then *ping!* I checked my phone and I had a text “Congratulations! You finished the Vitality London 10,000 in 1:21:40”. *Whaaat!?! Isn't that fancy and speedy – the technology I mean, not me. Although I am super proud of that time, but more importantly proud of me for sticking to my word, battling my inner demons and standing up for what I believe in. The belief that all women are beautiful and can move their bodies, no matter what shape their body, “flaws” and all baby!*

On the train home I reflected upon how goddamn awful I felt last night, how my fears nearly stopped me from doing something so totally empowering and left me feeling sensational, and also inspiring for others. I looked through my Facebook post and all the comments of congratulations and ladies saying they wished they were brave enough or even saying they'd join me next year. I am 100% going back May 25th 2020 so if anyone else wants to join us then let's do it, can we get 100 of us campaigning for body diversity!?

So how did I get here?

keep asking myself that!! I've gone from loathing my 'unbalanced' body, beating my thick thighs, emotionally abusing myself for having loose skin on my stomach, torturing myself over how much I weigh, with my happiness levels completely dependent on the results from the daily weighing on the scales, to running 10K in London in my underwear, to running a workshop at a retreat for an international company with one of their CEOs and organising a body positive catwalk empowering 20 women to go out there, strut their stuff in underwear and inspire others to love their body exactly as they are (shout out to all my MiBs over at Mums in Business Association, I love you guys). It hasn't been a quick journey, it hasn't been an easy journey either, hey it hasn't even been simple, but I do recognise the steps I have taken to get to where I am today and this next part of the book is where I share my personal experience and knowledge with you to help guide you on your self love journey. *Are you ready to conquer your body image issues? Yes? Then let's do this babe.*

12 steps to a positive postpartum body image

 I have thought long and hard about these steps, I always like to give practical tips which you can take on and use in your everyday life and not things that you have to wait days, weeks, months to use. Stuff that you can get on with today or tomorrow and start to make small steps in the right direction. So my beautiful, take one step at a time, read through, highlight, take notes and don't feel like you have to start everything right now. Read through it all and start with the one you feel most drawn to. Are you ready? Let's go...

Here are the 12 steps we're going to be tackling together...

1. Microwave minds
2. Survival mode
3. Practical self care for mums
4. Would you say that to your baby?
5. Switch your attitude
6. What to do when you're hungry

7. Flip the script
8. Fat is not an emotion
9. Move your body
10. Comparison's a bitch
11. Do not be defined: a look at numbers & flaws
12. Honour your flaws

1. Microwave minds

We live in the world where we've been brought up with microwaves... want a burger? Don't wait 20 minutes for it to be cooked, have it in a fraction of the time (*and only tastes just a tad like cardboard*) pop it in the microwave for 2 minutes and you've rustled up a burger. Want some yummy fried rice? No need to spend hours boiling it on the stove, pop a bag in the microwave for 3 minutes and boom just as good as Uncle Joe's. The fact that we've been and are being brought up around this microwave lifestyle means that everything we want, we want it now and if we can't then is it even worth having?! I know I'm a complete sucker to this guys, trust me! As I scroll through Amazon if it isn't on Prime then I ain't buying it. (I always imagined I'd be one of those Pinterest mums, but in the cold light of day, I'm really an Amazon Prime mum and I know I'm not alone.)

This is the world we live in, everyone is expecting more from people, from industries, from themselves, in a smaller time scale and most of the time for a fraction

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of the cost too. Microwave lives and Amazon Prime lifestyles don't just project on to wanting to buy things and cook things but also transpires upon ourselves. We expect us to lose the baby weight within a few days, for our bodies to bounce back and to live our lives seamlessly fitting a new baby into our everyday life like our vaginas just didn't expand by 10x the size and squeeze out a tiny person or even have a surgeon cut us open to evacuate our baby/babies out of our body and into the big bad wide world. Oh and god forbid there would have been any complications that we've had to deal with too so just brush under the carpet like it's never happened. The world might expect this of you but this needs to change and you should not be expecting this of yourself.

You need to take time to settle into your new role, your new life, your new family, everything is new and it's so exciting and lovely but it's also challenging, learning on the 'job' (so to speak) and being in a hideous amount of pain while trying to enjoy every minute. The reality is, we don't bounce back, as my survey confirms. I asked 10 questions, one of them being "Did you bounce back after pregnancy?" and out of 553 mothers 77% did not bounce back. Therefore, the majority of new mothers will be in the same position as you. You are not alone and I know that those evil thoughts of comparison (we're going to address that later on) pop into your head because another question in my survey was "If you felt pressure to diet and/or exercise after giving birth where did the pressure

come from?" and the biggest response was 37% saying "Comparing myself to other postpartum friends" and more saying all of the above. Here come the evil thoughts... *how come her stomach is almost flat and I still look 5 months pregnant? How did she not put on any weight but I put on two stone? How come her feet look fine and mine have swollen so much I can only wear flip flops?* (Yes that can happen! In some cases it can be a sign of more severe problems so if you're concerned always make sure you get checked out.) These thoughts may buzz around your head and you begin to torture yourself, but what you see on the outside is what they want you to see, we don't walk around life advertising our most self-conscious parts, we each have our own battle to deal with inside. So always be kind and never assume someone has 'bounced back'; even if it looks like it from the outside, they may not have "bounced back" internally. That is the reality, the 'microwave life' that is all around us for the majority of the population does not do any favours to new mums and their new post-baby bodies.

In a world where we can order pretty much anything and get it delivered to us the next day or even within a matter of hours, one thing that can't be ordered is our body before babies. No amount of shakes, pills, diets, running, weights, oils, creams, etc., are going to magically return you back to 'normal'. What I want mothers to know across the globe is that this is okay and why would we want to erase the story of our growth? Growing as a human being and blossoming

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into a mother, the stretch marks, the cellulite, the scars, they all play a part in the beautiful story that created life.

I was suckered into the 'microwave life' after I had the twins and I was so desperate to lose the weight, when I started the 'silver sachet diet' I totally bought into the idea that in 2 weeks' time I was going to feel amazing because of weight loss and be back to my pre-twin body. As I said earlier my mindset throughout my whole twin pregnancy was set on losing weight, 'getting back my body' and that weight loss would make me happy. I was already thinking of losing weight while pregnant, *how sad is that?!* It literally breaks my heart a little to know that I was that obsessive, going through my memories and writing this book has been a big eye-opener. Mothers shouldn't have to worry about what their body looks like, we should be able to enjoy the process and appreciate the journey we're going on; it's time to start sharing the message that your body will change after baby, it is still beautiful and it is still worthy of love, it's all part of the story of your life.

Stretch yourself...

Each step will have a challenge for you to 'Stretch yourself' that will help you move forward on your journey, something practical for you to do, to take a courageous step towards self acceptance, self

compassion, self-discovery, self-confidence and self love.

Now in order to enjoy life as it is and stay away from the 'microwave mindset', take time to really notice your body, get in front of a mirror babe, you can start with clothes on, move to underwear and then move to being naked. It will be completely out of your comfort zone and for most it will get you very emotional but this mirror therapy exposure is needed for you. Start just for a minute and build it up by a minute each day, do whatever you can but really start to observe yourself.

In time you can grow to love your body simply by beginning with even just noticing it, taking in all the elements that have changed, that have got bigger or smaller, that have stretched out and sunk back in, that have new markings and scars, take it all in, look at it in a mirror, acknowledge what's there and just know that you're not alone, it is normal and all a part of your life journey. The challenges to come will help you find this easier too.

2. Survival mode

There are some things about becoming a mother that aren't spoken of while you're pregnant. They're generally not the prettiest part of birth or your postpartum journey but all the same should still be talked about. I mean I'd rather be more prepared than

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surprised, am I right? Now, don't worry I'm not about to get gruesome with you and dish out all the gory details, I'll bring you in gently (for now *enter evil laugh*). But in all seriousness there are some things that could do with being shared to prepare the new mum and for us experienced mums to not feel like we were the only one going through it at that time. Are you ready? It's time to talk about survival mode.

I was 20 years old when my eldest was born, Nathaniel James Taylor Russell. I had an amazing birth in a birthing pool, I didn't need stitches and my pregnancy had gone pretty smoothly too. I'd moved back home from drama school and my partner at the time and I were living with my mum, stepdad, sister and two brothers. Throw in a cat and a dog too and it was an absolute mad house. After I had Nathaniel I didn't realise the type of underwear I was going to need: 1. They must hold everything in and 2. They've got to be giant pad friendly. My mum sent my stepdad to the supermarket to get 'sensible black knickers'. He rocked up home sporting a packet of what I can only describe as either granny pants or 'Bridget Jones' pants, they were bloody massive and along with my mum we laughed (*not too much though or I might pee myself, come on, I've just had a baby - yes that's a thing too*). Jump forward almost 7 years and whilst at the time we laughed 'Oh men are useless at shopping' those bad boy big black granny pants have been used more than I'd probably like to admit. They've seen me through 3 postpartum journeys, many a period, those days when

you've run out of underwear because you always wash the kids' clothes and forget to chuck any of your stuff in and those days where I just want to be comfortable because I need to survive the day ahead. So well done Jerome, that was probably the most useful shopping trip you've ever taken in the whole of your life, well in particular your purchases for me.

So let's discuss this 'survival mode' when you're a mum. You wear so many different hats, cook, cleaner, laundry lady, referee, etc., you've got to balance everything going on in your life plus keeping however many humans you have alive, happy(ish), healthy(ish) and clean(ish). Being in 'survival mode' is doing whatever you can to get through the day, here's my message to you...

It's also okay to be unsexy, to be comfortable, to wear the big granny knickers and the comfy bras. It's okay to dress down and have no makeup days. It's okay to have a day where you do anything just to make it to bedtime. It's okay to get to the end of the day and have a glass of wine, or two, or have a piece of chocolate, or ten! It's okay to be in this 'survival mode' where there's no time to think of you, the house is a tip and you haven't had time to brush your hair let alone put make up on. It is okay! What's not okay is to spend your whole life in this state, you can be a mother and a real person too. You're allowed to have passions and hobbies - we do totally forget this being a mum, can you actually think of any hobby that you enjoy off the top of your head? Wiping bums and having ninja skills

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at nappy changing cannot be one of them!! (*I always say if there was an Olympic sport in nappy changing I would win a gold medal!*) We need to remember that we are people aside from being mothers.

Being a mum is the most amazing feeling but it's also stressful as hell, seriously exhausting and majorly time consuming. Having time out to do what you enjoy, going on to pursue your career or work towards your dreams are not selfish. I repeat this is not selfish. Not one bit. You can be the stylish woman, you can be the superstar sports lady, you can be the career girl, you can be the sexy partner and you can be the doting mother. You can be it all, or bits of whatever you choose. Remember who you are and reclaim your identity.

For me the biggest time when I was in 'survival mode' was back in 2014 when my twins were born, they were 5 weeks premature, we spent 2 weeks in hospital and I also had a 14-month-old. When I came out of hospital probably for the first 2/3 months of the twins' lives I lived each day to survive. We hardly left the house, we had the same routine every day, definitely watched too much telly, but I was doing everything I could to get through life at that period of time in my life. I remember getting this anxious feeling in my stomach before bedtime as I washed and prepared 14 bottles to get me through the night shift, wondering if I could make it through another day. But I did and we came out of it the other end. The moment I started to find my identity again and stop living in survival

mode was when I had the courage to do something for myself by starting my own business. I loved having the purpose of being a mother and raising my children but I am the type of person who's in it for the hugs, for the friendship, for that 'feel good' feeling when you help someone else and that is what starting my own business gave me, an even bigger purpose in life.

Now, new mums, don't panic, you need that survival mode right now, take each day as it comes, soak up that beautiful newborn smell and embrace the learning curves as they come, I always used to tell myself when the twins were newborn "time will pass, the good and the bad, enjoy the moment as it will soon be a distant memory" and I would give any new mama the same advice.

Stretch yourself...

For us experienced mums, think back to something you really want to do for you, maybe it's to train for a half marathon, maybe it's to go back to school, maybe it's just to go and get your hair done and feel like you again. Have the courage to ask for help from your family, your partner, your friends to take care of the kid/s and go and do something for you, no matter how big or small. Another great idea to continue your motherhood journey is to keep a journal, acknowledging how you feel, the highs and the lows and getting it out on paper is a satisfying release and

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can really help with a positive mental state of mind. We will be discussing other things that you can write in your journal later on.

3. Practical self care for mums

Self care and self love often get mixed up, which actually really bugs me, I know it shouldn't but self love is a whole different ball game. Self care is super important, it's about putting you first and making you a priority but too often people label that as self love. Yes self care is a big part of self love but in reality self love is about accepting and learning to love yourself for who you are, an act of self love and self care could differ but could also share some similarities.

It's being brought to the limelight a lot more these days, with "Self care Sunday" being a common theme on social media (we use this in our VIP group too), but what does it actually mean and why is it important? You see as a mother we wear many roles, cook, cleaner, nanny, mother, partner, etc. We put everyone and everything to the top of our priority list and there we are sitting at the bottom, by the time we reach the end of the to do list (if that's even a possibility) we don't really feel like having a bubble bath or doing a facial, all we want to do is collapse in a heap on the sofa and pray the kids stay asleep. Am I right or am I right? I know I'm right because this is me most days.

But what happens if we don't take time to partake

in self care? Well this is an analogy I use a lot but it's a great one, so if you've been with me for a while now you've probably heard this a million times but I'm not going to apologise because it's super-duper important (yep I just said super-duper instead of a swear word, I'm in mum mode still). Imagine this, your house is the ship and you my friend are the Captain. *I, I captain *salutes**. If you the Captain of the ship run yourself ragged, wear yourself down to the point of mental break down and "I'm about to lose my shit with everything and anything", then the whole ship sinks with you and chaos breaks out. It's like when you're on an airplane and the air hostess does the demonstration before take-off and they tell you to put your mask on first before helping others. Now, as a mother every instinct, muscle and bone in our body instantly wants to go and help their child, but if you aren't getting oxygen in and aren't safe then how are you going to be of any help to your family? Ladies we really need to start putting ourselves first.

Some ideas of self care are completely out of reach for us mothers, we do have a tribe to look after and keep alive and they take up a lot of love and attention that we may have used to put on ourselves. However, it is important and vital to keep you sane, to stop you from sinking the ship and balancing your mental health. That's why I have come up with 10 ideas of practical self care practices for mums and busy ladies. Ideally we'd all love to spend every Sunday at a spa or have our hair blow dried daily but self care doesn't

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need to be lavish, you can recharge your batteries in the smaller actions of self care.

- Get breathing – make sure the kids are occupied and safe, lock yourself away in the kitchen or the bathroom, close your eyes, count to 10 breathing deeply in for 5 and out for 5, repeating 6 times through. If you have an apple watch there's a 60 second breathing exercise you can do. This may sound stupid but if you've got a lot going on in your mind or had a stressful day, this is really great to catch your breath.
- Get outside – whether it's in the garden, going for a walk in the woods or just to the park, get some fresh air and appreciate the surroundings that you have, find the positives, take time to really engage with the world around and breath in that fresh air.
- Get clean – okay I know we said baths are longgggg and take too much time, so even if it's a shower, do it in peace, with no kids knocking on the door asking for another drink or for you to put their shoe on that's fallen off, so you're hanging naked over the bath with the shower running and dripping everywhere as you squeeze the shoe on your child's foot (just me?). Do it in peace, wash your hair, spend time really nourishing your hair and body, getting clean, make the most of the peace and take in the drip, drip, drip of the running water.
- Get buying – treat yourself! It doesn't have to be a Chanel handbag (in our dreams, right?) but buy

- yourself something that makes you feel a little bit extra, maybe it's a glossy magazine (that won't make you feel bad about yourself) or that book you've been wanting for ages or those slightly more expensive chocolates that are your favs and you only get on special occasions, something that makes you feel a bit special (hide them from the small people though).
- Get a massage - now it would be great if we could go get a massage every week, so time and money are going to be an issue, but there's nothing to stop you from doing it with your partner, your children or even yourself. Take it in turns to smother your body with cream and really look after your skin by hydrating and moisturising it.
 - Get daydreaming - I love the idea of being able to meditate but for where I am right now in my life I find it difficult to fit in. I used to get up every morning before the kids to do it, but now if I got up any earlier I'd never actually sleep. I also find it super hard to shut out the noises. If you struggle with this too and meditation is your thing then maybe try a guided one and go for it but if this isn't something you can fit into your daily routine I have a practical alternative. We often daydreamed as a kid and most teachers would tell us off for staring into space and letting our imagination run wild but I'm here to tell you that's a good thing. Reconnect to your childhood, be more childlike, where we cared less about what others thought and we were a lot more fun loving and spontaneous. Take time in

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your day to daydream, visualise all the good stuff in your life that can and will happen. Don't dwell on the past or think of the negative, only positive, happy daydreams.

- Get clearing out – whether it's your wardrobe, your random draw of wires and shit or the kids toys, if it hasn't been used within a year, it's nothing special/sentimental and doesn't bring you joy anymore, it's time to say bye, bye! Get a binbag, give it away to charity, recycle it, sell it if you like, but you'll be amazed how much clearer your mind feels when you have a physical clear out too.
- Get moving – got a feel-good album or playlist? No?! Get making one, blast that music loud and dance like nobody's watching! We do this on the daily, me and my boys, it's so much fun to do together and it really relieves any tension and stress built up for myself or for the boys if they're feeling frustrated by something. Showing our children that we can dance like wild things and be free is empowering. Go for it!
- Get forgiving – holding on to something can cause massive tension in your whole body and your mindset too. Is it time to forgive yourself for something from your past? Is it time to forgive someone else? I always say “you can forgive, but you don't have to forget” depending how serious a situation it is, but there may come a time when the emotional baggage you're carrying takes its toll on you. Now I'm not saying you have to ring them

up or meet them for coffee to apologise, what you can do is write it down on a piece of paper, get it off your chest, send them love and set them free, either bin the letter or burn it!

- Get celebrating – this is probably going to be your hardest task, we are so quick to compliment others and we are our friends' biggest cheerleaders but when it comes to celebrating our own successes we sweep it under the carpet, we put ourselves down and don't see the true importance of what we do. Start to write a list in a notebook or on notes on your phone, somewhere you can refer back to and add to. Take a few minutes to think of at least 3 small or big wins. It can be anything from surviving the day, to taking part in practical self care, to getting out of the house, to having a shower on your own (that is regularly one of mine). We are all winners babe and it feels so good to celebrate.

Stretch yourself...

To take these and make them a part of your everyday life, a little self care each day goes a long way.

4. Would you say that to your baby?

When we become mothers our whole world is literally in the palm of our hands. Now they don't stay that little for

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very long, we care for them, we worry for them, we talk sweetly to them and about them and we love on them like there is nothing else in this world that matters. Yet when we look at ourselves in the mirror, what do we see? What do we say to ourselves? Is it as soft as the sweet nothings that you whisper in your baby's ear? Or is it harsh, critical and mean? Would you repeat how you talk to yourself to your child? No?! Then why are you filling your mind with this poison? The image of your body you have is distorted, from media, social media, what we think we should look like, how we think our bodies will react, but it's not necessarily what you see staring back at you in the mirror. We forget that our bodies have just taken 9 months (approximately) to carry this tiny human(s) and kept them safe. What a sensational job your body, this priceless machine, has achieved; of course your body is going to change, you have become a mother, this is the beginning of a journey into the unknown and your body is a trophy for all you have been through.

In order to find self love, we need to watch how we talk to ourselves. Next time you catch yourself in the mirror or just putting yourself down calling yourself "stupid" or "dumb", think how would you feel if your child was saying that to their own reflection in the mirror? What would you say to them? I wrote a post on Facebook once and it got a huge reaction, I'd love to share it with you now:

You walk past your child's room and see them sitting in front of a mirror with their head in their hands

and their body shaking as they cry... you walk in and comfort them...

"What's wrong sweetheart?"

They look up at you with sore red eyes and a damp face...

"I'm ugly and fat... my stomach is disgusting, it's too big, none of my clothes fit, I'm such a mess... I don't want to leave the house ever again... everyone else is so much better looking than me."

Your mouth drops open, you can't believe what you're hearing! You respond...

"How can you think that? You're so young, there's not an ounce of fat on you and you're stunning."

Your child looks back at the floor, shoulders slumped and they say...

"But everyone tells me I look like you and you always call yourself fat and ugly and say how everyone else is better looking than you."

You look at the reflection in the mirror and see a broken little girl staring back... you are that broken little girl who has a negative body image and if you aren't careful you're going to pass it on to your children too.

How we value and talk to ourselves is replicated from those who admire us, our children especially! Learned behaviour begins at home. If you can't face loving your body for you, do it for the future generations. It doesn't matter if you have boys or girls, any child is

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impressionable, think the next time you talk badly of yourself would you repeat this about your own child? Let's make a positive impact on our children by putting self love at the top of our priority list.

Stretch yourself...

To start changing our vocabulary we must focus on the positive. A way I like to do this to emphasise my self-belief and self love is to use affirmations. An affirmation is a positive mantra that you repeat over and over again and eventually it will sink in and you will begin to feel mentally more positive and happier. Here are a few of mine that are my favourite...

- I am present in every moment.
- My mind is clear, positive and focused.
- My body deserves to live not just survive.
- I am powerful. I am strong. I am fierce.
 - * this is a special one because I have done this with my children every day for the past two years, we have actions that go with it and even though my twins were both non-verbal at one point, it's one of the first sentences that Jude ever said and seeing Luca engage in the actions is just magical. Jude can shout it out loud and proud, but doesn't always engage. However, it brings so much joy to Luca's face every time we do it, he does the actions with so much passion and has even started to

lightly sound the words. This is a special one, use it and love it like we do.

Repeat every day, use your journal and get the kids involved too, make it fun for all the family all while making a positive impact upon your children's mindsets, you can never start them too young.

5. Switch your attitude

We spend so much of our lives worrying about what others think or *have I done this right or have I done something wrong?!* We waste so much of our lives living in the shadows because of how we see our bodies, we paralyse ourselves with anxious thoughts that take over our lives. This is again more common than you think and mental health concerns are at an all-time high. There is no magic pill, no 'microwave' quick fix but there is an attitude we can begin to switch to which will make a positive impact on your life. Have you ever heard of gratitude? Or perhaps just plain old being thankful? Manners were hugely important in our household growing up, rightly so too, it was always 'Don't forget to say thank you to your nan for paying for dinner... don't forget to say thank you to so and so's parents for having you at the party... don't forget to say thank you to your aunty for the present (even if you don't like it)'. I said all these thanks but the idea of being thankful had never really crossed

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my mind until I worked on developing myself. This is something that yes is taught at home as we grow up “we must have manners” but no one really explains why being thankful is important.

To thank someone is important not just because it's polite but because it makes the recipient feel appreciated, it's important to feel appreciated, it makes us want to give more or again (not necessarily money wise) and leaves them feeling happy (and you'll probably feel happy too). But actually being thankful for something that hasn't just been given to you but by thinking about what you have in life or what you've been through is a great reminder of just how good you've got it. Now, you could be at an all-time low place in your life, but you still have plenty to be thankful for, there is always someone else worse off than you are. Do you have a heart that beats? Do you have oxygen in your lungs? Do you have legs that walk? The majority of us will have all of those things and more. A roof over our heads? Food in our fridge? Safe clean running water? Sometimes we get so caught up in life that we forget to appreciate the small things.

Being a mum and running a household and all the other things that I do can easily get me wound up to be near a *coke can shaken-up exploding* type of moment. When I do feel like this or feel down or anxious, I take a few seconds to breathe and I start thinking what I'm thankful for in life. Had no sleep? I am thankful for the sleep I will have in the future and for the bed I get to lay my head in. Had no baby-free time? I am thankful

for the precious time I get to spend with my child/ren because one day they'll be grown up and they won't be so (physically) close to me anymore. Had a rubbish day with your body image? I am thankful for my legs that carry me through life. I am thankful for my body for carrying my children so safely and that it is still going strong. There really is so much to be thankful for, the grass, the birds, the rain, the sun, the laughter around you, your family's health. I could go on and on about the small things and of course there are bigger things to be thankful for too. You see when we come from a place of gratitude, it's really, really, almost near impossible to feel negative, to be fearful, to be anxious, to be in a place of comparison, when we come from a place of gratitude, it switches our attitude and we nearly instantly feel more positive and it raises our mood, even if only slightly to start with. I love to start and end my day by just listing off a few things that I'm really thankful for, I definitely advise you giving it a try and next time you notice your mood is down, get thinking what you're thankful for.

Stretch yourself...

To help you in those moments, use your journal or notes on your phone to write down as many things you're thankful for as possible, I'd aim for 100 because by the time you've read through 100 reasons to be grateful, your frown will have turned back to a smile.

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Here are some categories to use as prompts to help the gratitude flow...

- Colour
- Food
- Sounds
- Nature
- Places
- Books
- Taste
- Holiday
- Textures
- Touch
- People
- Songs
- Challenges
- Creative
- Expression
- Small things
- Talents
- Skills
- Memory

6. What to do when you're hungry

This is going to be controversial to say the least. I'm not about to give you a list of ideas to battle your hunger, suppress your appetite and stop you from feeding yourself. The straight answer for what to do when your

hungry is just eat! But this concept has become so alien and so fear-induced that the idea of just eating what we feel like is a radical mystical fairy-tale for women who long to have the perfect body and eat carbs for days. Well ladies, it's time for a wakeup call. Our bodies, they're amazing, they function all day running off energy, that energy is provided by guess what? *Food*. Food is fuel, we need food to live, to survive, to stop being hangry and having major mood swings. Food keeps you from fighting with your partner and having more patience with your kids. Food should be enjoyable; food should feel good. Now before the food police try to have a pop, I'm not saying go out and live on McDonalds 3 meals a day, 7 days a week, but I am saying if you fancy a Big Mac, large chips and "fat" coke then you go for it babes and don't you feel guilty in the slightest, enjoy it. I mean really enjoy it, live in the moment, enjoy the food you eat and don't regret a single bite. Recently I have learnt more about intuitive eating and I have been reading a book called '*Just eat it*' by PhD Laura Thomas.

Throughout all of my research into body positivity, self love and ditching the diets, I have had so many 'aha' moments, like a light bulb pings above my head. Disordered eating is one of them, now I'm not talking about eating disorders – that is a serious subject and not to be taken lightly, if you feel you are struggling with an eating disorder please seek professional help and we will all support you on your journey as much as we can, but disordered eating is actually something that

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80% of the nation have been brainwashed by. 'It's not a diet it's a lifestyle', 'oh I can't eat after 8pm at night', 'I must only eat these certain foods on this day', 'how many points is that', 'I'm cutting out all carbs', if it's cutting out food groups, restricting what you're eating, counting points/syns/calories, basically it's the diet industry in disguise trying to steal your money from you. **Disclaimer** - I have absolutely nothing against any particular diet, network marketing company or slimming club, I think different things work for everyone, I buy from several health network marketing companies and believe there are amazing products for health, what I do not like is how some people market themselves, don't give two shits about their customers and I believe a lot of network marketers are not taught in the correct way, which is the company's fault not the people who are on the battle grounds.

This is a controversial way of thinking and it took me a while to get my head around it but having 'cheat days' and putting foods into 'good' and 'bad' food categories when you think about it is actually kind of weird and a bit crazy!! For years I would hardly touch a normal potato because I believed it to be a 'bad' food, actually it's only since I've been with Jordan that I have had white potatoes in the house again. You see putting these foods into categories is instantly putting the 'bad' foods on a pedestal and making them even more desirable, like that whole if you tell someone not to push the red button all they want to do is push the red button, right?! Therefore,

by restricting these foods and making them naughty, once we give in to the cravings, we don't just have a bite, we have several and then we move on to the next thing on the naughty list and think 'fuck it' we've unleashed the beast, might as well finish it off in style and we eat and eat and eat and eat until we can no longer move, we're in a food coma and our food baby looks bigger than the real baby we had 11 months ago. Restriction is going to lead you to disaster and it also plays a massive part in eating disorders too. So what, we just let ourselves have free reign at the shop and buy whatever we want?! *Visions of supermarket sweep enter my head as you've-been-tangoed Dale commentates over the tannoy, haha.* This is where the diet industry has succeeded, it has successfully led you to believe that you cannot be trusted to eat whatever you like. Does the thought of having the free range of the supermarket aisles make your palms start to sweat and your pulse begin to race? Yeah, no me neither *insert eye roll* I lie, at first the idea of just adding cream cheese into a recipe felt as naughty as sneaking out of your bedroom window at 16. Like for god's sake Ana it's just cream cheese!! (Funny fact I didn't actually know that cream cheese and Philadelphia were the same thing.) But do you get what I mean? When you've been programmed a certain way for so long, like you'll get fat the minute you eat cream cheese, it'll go straight to your hips darling so let's use boring, disgusting quark instead. *Puke.* The diet industry may have won on that but we can come back

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fighting. It's time for us to step aside from the bullshit rules and restrictions and time to learn to trust our bodies once again. Now, I am no expert on this, I'd really suggest you do your own research on it and/or read *Just eat it* but to give you more of an outline here are the 10 principles of intuitive eating:

- Reject the diet Mentality – say no to fad diets and rigid rules around eating. Have you had disordered eating your whole life? I have!
- Honour your hunger – keep your body fed with adequate calories. Don't ignore your hunger cues! It's okay to eat when you're hungry, you're hungry for a reason.
- Make peace with food – restriction often leads to overeating, so give yourself permission to eat all foods.
- Challenge the food police – stop equating your worth to the “good” or “bad” food you are today.
- Respect your fullness – tune in to your body's signals for fullness. A hunger scale can help you listen to your cues and avoid that over-stuffed feeling.
- Discover the satisfaction factor – food is an experience meant to be nourishing, joyful and satisfying – if you let it be.
- Honour your feelings without food – find ways to comfort without food. Try calling a friend or having a relaxing bath.
- Respect your body – learn to accept your body by

remembering your worth does not increase as your size decreases.

- Exercise – feel the difference – exercise doesn't only count when it is at the gym. Walk your dog in nature, swim, etc.
- Honour your health – anti-diet is not anti-health. Choose nutrient-dense foods most of the time while allowing for some indulgences without guilt.

Stretch yourself...

If you want to do your own research on intuitive eating to learn more about it, read up on it, follow Instagram accounts or watch videos or actually start implementing some of these principles into your life. Stretch into trusting your body again. Whether it's stopping restricting your food intake or reintroducing certain food groups, start with one and let the others follow through the journey but keep being curious.

7. Flip the script

Every day we are faced with situations that could send us over the edge, overthinking every little detail obsessively, over and over again, going around and around in our head. What am I talking about exactly? *So and so is looking at me, oh my god she must hate my new hair colour, I knew this was too radical. No, she's looking at*

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my top clinging to my stomach and wondering why I haven't been to the gym in the past 7 months and 22 days. Or maybe it's because I'm not wearing enough makeup? Does my foundation match my skin? Is my neck a completely different colour? Have I got mascara goop?! The little demon in our head that decides what other people think about us. As soon as we leave the house we put ourselves into the world for others to make judgements, we walk down the street and feel the eyes of our neighbours, the school mums on the run, the young stylish teacher, the lollipop lady, the man in the post office, mums who are rushing to walk, mums who are going to walk the dog, mums who are off to the gym, mums, mums, mums, mums and more mums (and even the occasional dad too)! We feel eyes burning in the back of our head, yet when we turn around, is anyone actually staring? Is anyone actually there?! We let the demon take over our minds, we let our insecurities, our low self-esteem and lack of confidence rise over anything good about ourselves and we write the story that everyone must see your insecurities shining as bright as a high vis jacket and those light up batons that air traffic assistance use to direct the plane... And to your left you have my muffin top overhanging from my trousers and to the right you have oh again more muffin top peeping over the side to say hello. The exits are straight ahead at the school gate or perhaps a person-shaped exit in the bush behind me. We overthink, over-worry and become completely contained by these insecurities, we almost instantly assume when someone is looking at us they

see the worst in us. However, 9/10 you're never going to know exactly what these people are thinking and if they're strangers you'll never see them again either. It's easy to say "who cares what they think, strut your stuff and be yourself" but it's another thing actually doing it. Here is what I suggest you do...

It's time to flip the script, when you start to notice that you're letting the little demon's voice get louder and louder and start to tell you this negative story, breathe, smile and celebrate, be proud that you have noticed this pattern and now it's time to flip the script. Rewrite the story. Rewrite the story that the little demon is telling you, find a positive, focus on your best feature and tell the story that whoever is staring is admiring your sass, your big booty, your beautiful eyes, your free flowing hair, your cute new top, your beautiful long nails, whatever attribute you have use that as part of your story to flip the script.

Stretch yourself...

I want you to sit now and write out a list of no less than three of your favourite things about you. They can be physical, they can be to do with your personality or your attitude, aim for five, three as a bare minimum and if you really struggle ask your best friend, your mum, your dad, your partner or ask us in the Self Love Detox VIP group. Collect the list, write it in your notes on your phone or on a piece of paper in your wallet

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and if you struggle next time you feel the eyes burning in the back of your head and the little demon starts to appear reeling off a list of your most insecure aspects, get your list out, smile to yourself, take a breath and flip that script girl. You'll never know what they're really thinking so why worry and make it bad? Time to start thinking the best of yourself.

8. Fat is not an emotion

Put your hands up in the air if you've ever said or thought "does my butt look big in this?" okay it might not have been exactly those words, but that is the classic line right? The one all the movies and TVs highlight and use as mainly part of a comedy scene probably between a couple and the man never knows what to say. Well I have 110% been guilty of wondering if I look "too fat" to wear this, mine was mainly my lower half for the majority of my life and after babies my stomach became a big issue too; even though I was massively self-conscious about my stomach as a teen I now look back and think what on earth was I worried about?

'Fat' used to be a swear word in our house, I kid you not, probably for the first 5 years of Nathaniel's life if he mentioned the word 'fat' I would be shocked that it left his lips and ask him to never repeat it. There have been a few occasions where Nathaniel has said about his tummy being too big or having bit of extra

weight (which is madness because there is literally nothing of him, he's only 6 as it is now and this has been mentioned a few times in the past couple of years). It breaks me that he's aware of this, crushes my soul and makes me question if my past experiences of dieting and wanting this "microwave" body and being obsessed with the scales had an impact upon him and his mindset? But I have reassured myself, time and time again, that he was so small at this time, it's unlikely my journey has wholly affected him and how he sees himself, although I still feel it may have contributed a little, but the majority of it will be from life. We live in a world obsessed with thin, with diet culture, slimming club banners are being displayed on school gates, there are posters plastered over Drs surgeries in the waiting rooms, near the kids' books and toys, in shop windows, adverts on the radio, on buses, on TV - even adverts on children's channels between shows, it's shocking. Now I'm all for being healthy, but healthy does not come with a size, you can be healthy at size 18 and you can be unhealthy at size 8. Health does not always come with weighing less.

As for 'fat' being seen as a swear word, I was so fearful of this word because I didn't want to become or seem fat, I had 'fatphobia' - (which can be one of two things, either someone who insults fat people or someone who fears being fat) I was fearful of becoming fat 'again' or worried I still was 'fat' and I attached an emotion to it. My emotion was a mixture of fear, anxiety and self-loathing. I can guarantee I'm not the

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only one who feels like this, especially when having just had a baby, the idea of putting on weight and being seen as fat rather than pregnant (during or after baby is born) is terrifying. Remember that moment I talked about previously where a few days after Spencer was born a school mum asked me when I was going to have the baby? *palm to face moment* if that had been back when I attached emotions to the word fat and I would have probably broken down in floods of tears, ran (well waddled) home, locked myself up and starved (or attempted to) for days upon end and sort out the next fad diet which was going to promise me to get my pre-baby body back. But it didn't and that's because I have learnt the difference between being fat and having fat. You see, we all have fat, we all need fat to live, to survive, if we didn't have fat we'd be dead, so for all these years I've been fearful of something that I actually need to live my life! 'Being fat' has only become something to be feared because it has become an insult (a really lame insult at that). Therefore, next time someone is insulting you by calling you 'fat' remember you all have fat, *so what?* I'd reply, *so do you*. I bet you that would stop them in their tracks and they'd stutter, maybe come up with some other lame insult or look confused, *bless their tiny little brains* and slope off.

The word is not an emotion, it can only affect you emotionally if you choose to let it. Just like all other insults, none of them carry an emotion, we choose how they make us feel. Now I know it really is easier to

say than do it but the more we put it into practice the better. Have a 'go to' line that you can respond calmly back to them, for example "I am not fat, I have fat, just like you do, we all do or we wouldn't be alive right now." *beams a big smile* I believe that hate should not be met with hate, *two wrongs don't make a right* and all that jazz! So smile, be polite and let them think about it. If they still come back with more mouth, I advise walking away with your head held high and repeating your affirmations to yourself. I admit, this takes strength, courage and confidence to say this out loud and respond to these fatphobics but if we begin to get comfortable in our own skins and truly accept our bodies for who we are we can proudly stand up for our bodies and those alike.

Stretch yourself...

It's time for you to spend time with your mirror, this might seem extremely scary, but if you really commit to this with me, getting comfortable in front of the mirror will come with time. How often do you get out of the bath/shower and just rush getting dressed, completely not even looking at your reflection, certainly not giving a thought to moisturising your body? In order to start accepting our bodies we need to take different aspects that we've learnt and put them together, I'm talking about self care, self talk and gratitude right now. Set yourself up with a mirror (full length if you can), stay

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in your underwear if you feel more comfortable or go completely naked (work your way up to this if you need to) and have your favourite smelling moisturiser, one that you really love and when you smell it makes you glow from the inside out. Now, what I'm going to say next might sound really simple but stay with me. Take the moisturiser and lather your body with it, start with the feet, legs, thighs, booty, work yourself up to your stomach, your chest, arms, hands, and everything in between. As you do this, think about how truly amazing your body is and how grateful you are, *I am so grateful for these amazing feet for walking me through life, for these strong legs that power up when I play tag with my children, for these thighs that my children sit upon to read stories and cuddle, for this booty for helping me shimmy when I dance in the kitchen with my boys, for this stomach, these stretch marks and stretched skin for being the home to my beautiful children, thank you. I am thankful for this chest, for keeping my babies warm as they snuggled in, for these arms to catch my children when they fall and these fingers to tie their laces.* Spend time in a place of gratitude, with positive self talk, seeing your body for the beauty it is, 'flaws' and all. I'd love to say do this every day or do it once a week but realistically we don't have time. However, do the whole ritual at least once, it's important to make the time to do this, sacrifice 30 minutes of TV and spend some quality time doing this when it's quiet. If, like my house, quiet is impossible, don't be afraid to ask family or friends to mind your kids while you have time out taking a bath/shower as

you deserve this time to nurture yourself physically; it also has a massively positive impact on your mental health. Once you've done it in full once, just take the time to moisturise after washing quickly if you don't have the time and remember how you bravely sat in front of the mirror and were thankful for all that you have and how kind you talked to yourself. You'll look at yourself differently afterwards and hopefully it will continue for you into the future as you remind yourself the next time you caress your skin with cream.

9. Move your body

Exercise is a touchy subject, for so many of us it is one of the most terrifying things we could ever experience, the idea of stepping into a gym and feeling the eyes of everyone burning into the back of your skull is soul destroying. *What will they think of me at my size trying to exercise? I'll be laughed out of there. I have no clue at what I'm doing, I'll probably fall off the treadmill like one of those funny videos and I bet knowing my luck someone will catch it on video. No I'm not going that's it. I can't even exercise at home, I have no clue where to start. Oh maybe I'll get so-and-so's exercise video, but I do have four of those already and they got boring after a while. Maybe I should just stop kidding myself, I'm too fat, too unfit, I don't know why I'd even bother trying to get in shape, I'm such a mess I'll forever be like this.* Sound a little familiar? What I really want you to know is that you really are worthy,

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there is no one too fat or too thin to exercise, no one too unfit either, we all have to start somewhere.

There is a big difference (for me) between the word exercise and movement. When I hear exercise I imagine men and women pushing themselves to the max, breaking those boundaries and going over their comfort zones to change their physical shape or lose weight. When I hear the word movement, I hear fun, laughter, passion, love and more good vibes. You can do exercise/move your body and have fun at the same time. I liked to say *if you're not moving your body to have fun then you are doing it wrong*. There are now more than ever so many different ways to get moving, whether it's through classes, different online programmes or hobbies that you reconnect with. Personally I love weights, running is my least fav (although I still do it but to raise money and awareness, I enjoy races, the training I find boring) and although I love weights and going to the gym, right now with having a small baby going to the gym is not top of my priority, I like to move my body and get Spencer involved too. We go to sling dance, I wear Spencer in the sling and dance, we both love it, I often go to Zumba where children can play while you shake your booty and I run when I have him in the running buggy. Movement is beneficial in so many ways, when you repeatedly do something and then you come to do it again and you feel stronger, that's an amazing feeling, a win to be celebrated. For me it also is a sociable activity, it gets us out of the house and meeting new friendly people. I have met

some amazing friends since having Spencer from going to classes. Also don't forget all those good endorphins that release into your body every time you exercise and trigger positive feelings in the body, similar to morphine. There really is an endless amount of ways you can move your body, go and try three different things to get your body moving, find something that makes you all happy and smiley and eager to go back, that will keep you motivated and feeling good about yourself.

If your demon inside starts to talk to you and bring back those negative thoughts of unworthiness, remember our step on *Flip the script* and we're going to be talking about comparison for step 12. Our next step may help too, but just an extra word of comfort for you right now, however you're feeling inside I can bet you that a lot of people who walk into the same room as you to the gym/class/hobby are feeling just as self-conscious as you are. Remember we don't know what's going on inside their minds.

A great way to start your day is by exercising, I mean I used to get up an hour before the kids, have time for tea, to journal, to exercise and have a bit of peace; now with my twins' sleep problems and breastfeeding Spencer, if I got up an hour earlier, I'd probably never sleep *haha*. Even something as simple as dancing in your kitchen - yes I do talk about this a lot but we have so much fun, make a morning playlist that will get you stomping your feet, swaying your hips and your booty shaking, pump up those good endorphins to set

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yourself up for the day. Why not? What have you got to lose?

Stretch yourself...

Go out there and move your body, keep trying new stuff and find something that you enjoy. If you like the look of these go along to a class or if you haven't got the confidence take a friend. If you really struggle, the beauty of the internet is that there are probably videos out there that you can try before you commit to going to a class. Remember everyone starts somewhere and there are others in the class that are possibly just as anxious as you.

Here's a list of different activities that will get your body moving, I may have missed some out but hopefully it will jog your memory, get out there and move your body girl.

- Spin cycling
- Aqua
- Body pump
- Kettlebells
- Pilates
- Yoga
- Body Attack
- Circuits
- Clubercise
- HIIT
- Sling dance

- Boxercise
- Sh'Bam
- Pole fitness
- Burlexercise
- Zumba
- Bootcamps
- Tennis
- Hockey
- Basketball
- Football
- Cricket
- Swimming
- Martial arts
- Running
- Netball
- Badminton
- Weightlifting
- Wrestling
- Squash

Head to www.thisgirlcan.co.uk to find classes near you.

Remember movement isn't about losing weight, it's about having fun while getting fit.

10. Comparison's a bitch: the highs and lows of social media

When you walk into a room filled with women, you pause for a moment before your brain starts taking

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mental note of every single woman, what they look like, what they're wearing, how their hair is, how small their waist is compared to you, etc. *Oh she's much prettier than me. Her hair is shinier than mine. My skin is awful compared to hers. Her stomach is so flat and mine can barely be contained in this outfit.* We raise everybody else's beauty above our own. I'm here to tell you this is not your fault. We have been programmed this way and it starts from a very young age. From the moment your child has their 9-month assessment they are put into a box, whether they're underperforming or over-performing and this either gives parents something to boast about or others something to feel completely shit about their parenting abilities. Now, being a mother who has twins that have a disability I completely understand how important these can be, but most of the time when a child is a little behind it's because they're still growing up, every child develops in different ways but I hate the fact that babies are compared from such a young age. It carries on all throughout school, again necessary in some areas but all these weight charts determining whether kids are underweight, overweight or obese is absolutely ridiculous. Firstly, BMI is utter rubbish, as stated by Megan Jayne Crabbe aka @bodyposipanda in her book *Body Positive Power*: "...people whose BMI fell within the "mildly obese" category had no higher risk of death than people within the "normal" category. The increased mortality rate came at the extremes, either side." So if you're classed as underweight or

overweight you're actually not any more likely to die from cancer or heart-related diseases as you are if you were in the 'perfect' weight category. (Yes I'm aware it's not called that – but isn't that what it feels like to you?! It sure is to me.)

We move forward from school and into our teen years. Secondary school is the worst for being in with the 'it' crowd, wearing the latest trends which, if you don't, is the end of the world! Through to motherhood, *well she bounced back so why haven't I? She doesn't have any stretch marks; how come I do? Why hasn't she put on any weight but I still look 6 months pregnant?!* Comparison is a bitch. I did a survey where over 350 mothers took part, and these are the results from 100 of those women, 32% felt pressure to lose weight and/or exercise due to comparing themselves to other postpartum friends. Say it with me ladies, comparison's a bitch!!! But, it is not your fault, it is programmed into us from day one. Another interesting albeit sad statistic from my research, 68% of these mothers felt pressured to diet and/or exercise after they'd given birth and 53% said they felt this pressure after just a few weeks of giving birth. Viewing these results brought me to my knees, I could feel the heartbreak and pain of these mothers pouring through the screen. So how can we move forward? How can we stop ourselves from walking into a room and bringing down ourselves due to someone else's beauty? There is room for us all to be and feel beautiful.

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Stretch yourself...

Now, I'm not saying we can cure this and stop all thoughts of comparison but what I am saying is that we can learn to recognise when these thoughts come into play and with my next tip you can change how you feel in this situation. Firstly, you're in a public situation or maybe you're scrolling through social media and the voice from your little demon starts to get louder and louder... *she's much more beautiful than I am. I wish I could have a figure like hers...* **stop!** Take a big deep breath and count to 3. Repeat to yourself "I am beautiful as I am, my beauty is no more or less than hers. There is room for us both to be and feel beautiful." Now you don't have to remember this word for word (although it might be a good idea to repeat a few times in the mirror daily, if you feel like comparison is a massive factor in your negative body image) but understanding that there is no limit to how many beautiful people there are and that everyone's individuality is a part of beauty, is so important. Next time you see someone who is beautiful, smile at them and compliment them, because do you know what, what you are looking at may not be what they see themselves. Everyone has their own insecurities and even if it looks like they've got their shit together, I can guarantee you, for 9/10 it'll be a completely different story within their own mind. *Treat others how you wish to be treated* – anyone else's mum used to say this to them all the time? Well it's 100% true, go out there

and don't be precious on giving out the compliments, be generous, there is no limit on beauty in this world. Let's make an impact with ourselves and spread it to others alike.

I spent most of my life comparing myself to others, the fact that I had a pear shape and I longed for an hour glass figure, this was before and after children. "The only time I ever have boobs is when I'm pregnant or breastfeeding." I still say this line to this day. As I write this, I'm still breastfeeding my almost one year old, therefore I have boobs! But I have no idea how they'll be after I stop feeding, I'm aware it's going to be a massive adjustment but I know that I have all the tools to learn to love them as they are. My dad actually joked the other day, "Does that mean you no longer want a boob job? Haha," laughing as he said it, he hates (and when I say hate I mean with a passion, as if it were Hitler and we were Jewish) the idea of me getting a boob job. Invasive surgery, putting me under, which he always reminded me would knock 10 years off my life and stuff my body filled with poisonous substances. "Yep, I haven't felt like I need one for a while now." His draw dropped a little, "Really?" he questioned me. I am all for pro-choice and if women who are sound of mind and at peace with their bodies still want to get a breast augmentation then you go girl, but who would I be to be empowering women to love their bodies as they are if I was going to go and get plastic pillows popped into my chest? I really am happy to be in my own skin

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and so goddamn thankful too. I will accept my boobs post-breastfeeding as and when they come.

11. Do not be defined

I spent way too long living my life according to numbers, numbers on the scale was my daily battle, constantly weighing myself, needing that validation from the scales decreasing and when they didn't it dictated how I felt. It took a hold of my emotions, a bit like fat. But they weren't the only numbers that dictated my life, there were the numbers on my clothing label, my height, my foot size, hell even my age. We are a world obsessed with numbers and not just any number but being the right number.

I let my 'dress size' stop me from wearing what I wanted. I felt like I couldn't wear certain things. *Oh no can't wear shorts, no one wants to see your thunder thighs. Don't be silly you can't wear a body con dress; you can see your rolls. Are you joking?! Jeans! No way will I stoop down to buying size 16 jeans.* I was ashamed of my size. Why was I ashamed? Because I wasn't the perfect size 10, I wasn't the size of the model on the billboard on the mannequin in the shop and I actually wasn't the same size as the majority of the people in the shops. It doesn't help that in one shop I'm a 12 and another I can be as big as an 18, shops and their obscure sizing seriously have a lot to answer for. Stepping into shops can be daunting enough as it is but stepping into a

changing room is a whole other level of fear. Hands sweating, heart racing, breath quickening, as you step into the changing room, close the curtain and face the mirror staring back at you that you know is going to highlight every angle in its worst possible light. Am I right or am I right? There is some kind of voodoo magic that goes on in a changing room with a shop mirror.

Another thing we tend to do that holds a massive grudge over ourselves is our “one day clothes”, you know those clothes from way back when that we’re holding on to and make us feel bad every time we glance at them and make us feel completely unworthy every time we try them on and we still can barely get them over our thighs let alone around our booty. What does carrying this baggage do for you? Like really? I used to use it as a “motivational tool” to keep me on target, stop me “cheating” and push me towards my goal to drop weight and slim down.

Purposely buying a size smaller for an event you’ve got in a month so you have no choice but to lose this weight? Well what if you’re on your period and you’re bloated to duck anyway? What if you have health problems and it slows down your weight loss? Changed your contraceptive pill and it imbalances your hormones and you put weight on? What if no matter how good you are, you don’t lose that weight, you don’t fit in that dress, what if? How will you feel about the event? Will you be pumped and ready to go? Will you completely refuse to go and be distraught

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and tearing out your hair because you have nothing to wear all while emotionally abusing yourself... *you're such a ducking failure, you're useless, you can't even lose a few lbs for a big event how will you ever lose weight? You'll be fat and disgusting forever. Everyone will be staring at you and thinking 'what on earth is she wearing' because I'm going to have to wear an old dress because you've failed and don't fit in your new one. You're ugly and fat and you don't deserve to go to the ball. This is no fairy tale.* Which one do you relate more to? I know for me I have definitely been the latter.

A motivational tool or a torture tool? That is the question my friend. All because of a number that we deem to be the ideal, the perfect size, we let our mental and emotional state deteriorate and take a beating. I have been in this position way too many times, holding on to suitcases and drawers full of "one day" clothes ;they weren't just taking up my physical space but also emotional space too. I was literally carrying around this extra baggage and paying extra for every kilo over (metaphorically speaking). You might not realise how much it's actually weighing you down.

Stretch yourself...

Now it's time to ditch the diet mentality and head towards self love and accepting yourself for who you are, this might be a big task, okay here it goes... bin it, no actually give it away to charity, sell it if you want but get

it out of your house. In a nicer, less frantic way of saying it, take a note out of the Marie Kondo technique and get all your clothes together, now if it doesn't "bring you joy" or, as I like to say, if it doesn't serve you set it free. Marie Kondo would tell you to thank it for its service and send it on with love. Once you've done this and you've actually got it out of the house (no leaving it in black bin bags in your under the stairs cupboard, shed, hallway or even car!! Actually shift it on to the next home to fulfil its purpose ASAP) it's time to go shopping - I know this is shit scary. But hopefully by now after the first set of steps we're feeling more empowered by our bodies? It's time to leave old feelings in the past, try on clothes that look fabulous and make sure that they make you feel fabulous too! Buy the size that fits, don't be ashamed of your body, sizes in shops are obscure, know that every woman (and maybe men too, I don't know much about men's clothing) go through the same experience! Take a few different sizes in and choose the one that fits and makes you feel fabulous, do not let the number in the back of the item dictate to you whether you should or shouldn't buy it, at the end of the day babe, you're the only one who knows what the number on the label is. If you don't want to haul all the different sizes in, ask for help! Has a shop assistant ever said to you, "If you need any help let me know." I bet they have and I bet you've brushed them off with a polite nod and smile and never asked for them to help. Maybe you're too embarrassed to ask for a size and worried what they might say, can I just remind you, it is their job to serve you and give

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you good customer service, if they aren't doing their job you can report them, do not suffer at the ignorance and insecurities of others.

Don't have any money? No one said you had to commit to buying anything, face the fear of the changing rooms, try sizes on that are true to fit, ignore the numbers just try "the next one up or the next one down" you don't have to give it a value. Go for a test run, try on what you love, get it to fit and when you've got a bit of extra cash, go and treat yourself and you'll be all ready to pick what you want.

12. Honour your 'flaws'

I could literally write a whole book on this topic (okay watch out this may be my next title!!). There are so many things I could talk about that are connected to postpartum bodies but for me the main ones that are the most common among new and experienced mothers are stretch marks, stretched skin and cellulite.

What are stretch marks?

Stretch marks look like lines or streaks across the skin, they can be pink, red, brown, black, silver or purple. They usually start off darker and fade over time. Stretch marks are most common on the tummy, chest, upper arms, legs, bottom, hips or back.

– www.nhs.uk

Did you know that 80% of people have stretch marks, that's way over half the population, what does that show us? That they are nothing to be ashamed of because they are part of life and we should not let them hold us back from doing what we want, for example, wearing shorts? Do not let stretch marks stop you from wearing clothes that make you feel comfortable in warm weather. I have known some women to completely cover themselves up even in the boiling hot summer or on holiday because they're worried what people might say about their stretch marks. Now remember what we've talked about? Remember we need to flip the script from negative to positive, next time you feel self-conscious about them, just remind yourself that 80% of the people around you will have stretch marks too.

But if so many of the population have stretch marks on their body why are we so self-conscious of them and why do we let them stop us from doing things and wearing items of clothing? Why do they hold us back? Keep reading.

What is cellulite?

Cellulite is a term for the formation of lumps and dimples in the skin. Common names for cellulite are orange-peel skin, cottage-cheese skin, hail damage, and the mattress phenomenon. Cellulite can affect both men and women, but it is more common in females, due to the different distributions of fat,

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muscle, and connective tissue. Between 80 and 90 percent of women may experience cellulite at some point in their lives.

- www.medicalnewstoday.com

Did you know that 80-90% of women have cellulite!? That's almost all women!! I personally didn't even know what cellulite was for a hell of a long time, I remember noticing it on my bum and thighs and wondering what the hell it was, why did no one tell me about cellulite?! I mean if the majority of women have it, why isn't it talked about? Cellulite is a part of growing up, a part of growing into your body, it doesn't mean you're 'fat' or 'overweight' or even 'obese', even the skinny models on boohoo.com get it too (they're starting to show less edited pictures and more marks of life, which I love), therefore it is nothing to be worried about, but why are we so self-conscious of it on our own bodies?

The other day before I bathed my youngest who at the time was 11 months old, he was standing holding on to the side of the bath with his little naked butt out wriggling about with joy and excitement. I took a quick picture for the memory box of his little booty and as I stared at my baby and thought about his little wrinkly butt that was dimpled and so squishy, I realised his butt looks not to dissimilar to cellulite on women, that 'orange peel' look. We look at babies and think how cute they are but we look at our 'orange peel' look and are ashamed and disgusted?! Why is it any different to a baby? Continue reading and I'll soon tell you my thoughts.

What is stretched skin?

Stretched skin or loose skin is generally where you've either had a baby or had dramatic weight loss, basically where the skin has been stretched and after birth or weight loss the fat or baby has gone and the body has downsized but the elasticity in the skin has gone. They say 'younger' skin is more likely to bounce back than 'older' skin but I was 21 when I gave birth to my twins and skin is loose and has definitely not, and won't ever, 'bounce back'. It's all related to how much collagen your body produces and we are all different.

I felt so self-conscious of my stretched skin for so long, it prevented me from wearing crop tops, from wearing anything that wasn't high waisted and it fuelled my fire to my obsession with the scales, with working out, with my disordered eating. It led me to emotionally abuse my body, calling it a '90-year old's face' (sorry to all the fabulous 90 year olds). The more weight I lost the worse it actually became and the more obsessed I was with getting rid of it. I tried wraps, I tried a whole load creams, I tried a lot of exercise, I tried corsets, I tried the majority of what was available at the time. I must have invested so much money and so much time into trying to change something that was a part of the process of nurturing and creating my beautiful boys.

Yes, there are ways that you could 'reduce' or 'prevent' from getting any of these 'flaws' but anyone else just so fucking done with it? I have tried some bloody ridiculous stuff to try and get back my 'smooth'

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skin, one being a suction cup that I ran up and down round and round my legs, butt and hips for 10 minutes a day on each leg!! If I did that every day for a year, that's 20 minutes a day, 122 hours a year, that's 5 full days... we could do so much more with that time, we could go on holiday with that time, we could go on days out with our kids, we could just be a little more present in their day, play with them, read with them, run with them, get creative with them, laugh and love with them for 5 full days a year more.

I want to give you back those 5 days, those 122 hours, that 20 minutes a day. Think about it, if instead of investing our time in trying to fix our 'imperfections', how about we spend 20 minutes a day looking after ourselves, putting ourselves first, loving ourselves, being grateful for what we have, telling ourselves affirmations to affirm our beliefs in ourselves, imagine how different our mindset, our emotional state, our mental health would be if we spent those 20 minutes differently? Now, most of us will say we do not have the time to spend 20 minutes a day making ourselves a priority and I would definitely be one of those people *but* at one point in my life I found 20 minutes a day to use this stupid little suction cup and rub it up and down my legs getting numb hands - I made time for that because I felt so uncomfortable in my own skin that I felt I had to change myself.

Now I know how common stretch marks are, how many mothers struggle with loose skin and how normal it is to have cellulite, it reminds me that it's

just a part of life, it's a part of growing, growing as a woman, growing into motherhood. All of these marks, these 'flaws' are just a part of our journey, they are the words on our body of our story and they should do nothing but fill you with love and gratitude.

So, why do we feel this way about our 'imperfections'? In my personal opinion it's due to lack of visibility. When you scroll through your social media feeds, you see the best of someone, you very rarely see the whole truth and nothing but the truth, you see what people want you to see and most probably they have their own insecurities and don't want to flaunt them on social media, fair enough *but* by doing this it makes the everyday women gazing over the perfectly smooth skin, washboard abs and glowing tanned long legs, feel bad about their own body image. *Why haven't I bounced back like her? How has she already got abs and I still look like a potato? What about my stretch marks and cellulite, how come I've got it all and she doesn't even look like she's had a baby?!* These sound familiar? Thoughts that have maybe gone through our head while we scroll through the latest celebs or 'Insta models' as they use #postpartumbody and literally look the same as they did before they had a baby. Remember - they probably have a PT on tap, someone to meal plan, shop, prep and cook for them, they could also have clothes specifically made for them instantly making them a better fit and more flattering, plus they could be airbrushed and photoshopped to fuck. Just a few things to reassure and calm your mind when these

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thoughts enter your head. We see all of these 'perfect' bodies and we don't see the reality; we don't see a true representation of you and me, there's a massive lack of variety in sizes, shapes, people of different abilities and 'flaws'. Even though there are fewer, there are people out there who aren't afraid to show their true unedited selves, I suggest you go find them and stick to them like glue, rid your feeds of those that make you feel insecure and find brave, courageous, powerful women sharing their truths to empower and inspire you.

How can we begin to love our bodies 'flaws' and all?

A few of the steps in this book will help you begin your self love and self acceptance journey but right now to really make a dent, to really make an impact in how you see yourself, now is the time to step out of your comfort zone and to step up to be courageous. What item of clothing that you've always wanted to wear but you've held yourself back from because you thought you shouldn't or were too self-conscious? Maybe you haven't worn shorts in years because you're worried about getting your 'chubby' knees out? Perhaps you haven't dared wear a mini skirt because you don't want people to see your cellulite or stretch marks? Or how about printed trousers, because you've been told it will just highlight your 'problem area'? Fuck it ladies, are you ready?!

Stretch yourself...

It's time to get it out, yep, get it out! Get it all out if you're feeling mega brave and get in a bikini. Get your cute 'chubby' knees out, rock that mini skirt and flaunt those beautiful marks, lumps and bumps, wear those trendy printed trousers and strut those thunder thighs! Just do it. Even if it's just for you! Even if you just do it for you and take a picture and send it to your best friend, your partner. *Smile* and embrace that empowering feeling of being courageous enough to go against the little demon in your head and feel goddamn fabulous.

Memories: making or missing?

There's not many things that we do in life that we don't regret these days, it seems we spend too much time either in the past worrying about what we could have done better or done more of or we shouldn't have done that! Or we spend too much in the time worrying about what could go wrong, what could so-and-so say or think about us. We don't spend enough time living in the now. I know there are plenty of moments that I have held back from and watched from the side lines when I could have been making memories. I'd love for you to read this and think about what it could mean to you...

A mother in her late 50s is sitting on the sofa drinking a cup of tea and watching her grandchildren play together. Her child, now a fully-grown adult, comes to sit next to her with a photo album in hand. As they begin to flick through the pictures and fond memories of baby pictures one of her grandchildren runs up and sits on her lap, "Can I see, can I see?" she begs excitedly. "Of course dear." She pats her lap and her grandchild climbs up her legs with a little help.

She soaks up this time with her loved ones, her heart flowing with joy and pride.

They come across photos from a holiday, memories of dinners out filled with pizza and mucky faces from ice creams, rides on the Ferris wheel, late night discos, sandcastles on the beach and lastly a photo of the family jumping in and out of waves, soaking up the sun and enjoying the sea breeze. The grandchild turns to the woman and says, "Nanny, why didn't you go on holiday with everyone else?" puzzled but laughing she says, "Of course I did." The child turns back and points at the photo album. "But you're not in any photos, where were you?" The question takes the woman's breath away as she looks deep into the eyes of her grandchild and wonders where was she? "Well I took the photo." The child replies, "Ooooh I see and then you got in the water afterwards and played?" She nodded, but knew that wasn't the truth. She thinks back to the beach and how she took the photo and watched them have fun and make precious memories as she sat on the beach covering herself with a towel, looking around either side to check no one was staring at her after sitting back down, feeling overwhelmed in self-conscious thoughts and almost frozen with fear of looking 'too fat' to be on the beach. Tears began to fill her eyes and her breath quickened. The child quickly turned round. "Nanny, why don't we go to the beach and take pictures of us jumping in the waves?" Her heart pounded, her smile widened, "Do you know what darling, that would make me very happy!" She

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kissed the top of her grandchild's head and knew that this time she wasn't going to let her inner demon stop her from missing out on anymore memories.

What will you choose this year, these next few years that your children will still be young enough to want to play with you? Will you sit back on the sidelines letting your little inner demon take over and dictate how you live? Will you be making or missing memories?

Yes, we all do have insecurities, I bet you when you're sitting on that beach wishing you looked as fit as that mum, had that woman's flat stomach, this other woman's long legs and the woman at the seafront's perfect skin, I can bet you they all have their own little demons that they're battling. It might not be the same as you, but we don't know what happens behind closed doors, behind the scenes, deep in our brains. Everyone wishes they could be a "little more this" or a "little less that" but when it comes down to it and your children, your grandchildren are looking back through memories and they can't see or remember you being present, will your child know the reason? If you were in the frame with them, would they see your insecurities? I can guarantee they wouldn't. I can tell you now, what they would see was a mum who was playing and having fun with their children, being present in the moment and making memories.

I know, I know it's one thing saying it and another thing actually doing it, my advice to you is to start small, start with something that you can manage. Get

yourself a pen and paper and somewhere reasonably quiet and peaceful to do this, you can listen to music if you'd like, we don't need complete silence. Sit in the moment and be present in your life right now. Now I want you to write yourself a letter, a letter apologising to yourself, apologising for missing out on moments you won't get back, but instead of starting to regret what you've missed, thank yourself for being here today and start to promise what you're going to do to change this.

For example:

Dear body,

I am so sorry for the pictures with my children I have missed out and the ones I have thrown away that I will never get back because I hated how I looked. I am so sorry for the days out I have held back from and watched from the side-lines because I felt unworthy to get involved and worried what people may think. I am so sorry for how I've treated you, bad-mouthed you, emotionally abused you for being something that I thought was ugly and disgusting. I am sorry for all the outfits I have thrown on the floor and dismissed because I felt 'too fat' in them. I am so sorry. I am so thankful that you have stuck by me, so thankful that you are healthy and strong. I am so thankful for having my legs to run, my arms to hug and my eyes to see. I promise from now on I will start to live in the moment, I promise I will be kinder to myself when I see photos or look in the

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mirror. I promise to get inside the frame more often and actually ask other people to take pictures of me. I promise to learn to turn down the little demon inside and start making memories with my loved ones. I am sorry but I'm thankful and I promise to work on loving myself for who I am.

With love & gratitude,

Ana Louise Bonasera

Let me ask you again, what will you be doing this year, missing or making memories?

Is this the end?

No way! This is just the beginning my love. I mean yes, it is the end of the book, but it's just the beginning of your journey. I want this to be your bible to loving yourself, your go-to book to keep on hand to have a quick flick through when you're feeling low and you need a pick me up. I would also love you to lend it to a friend who might need it or gift them their own copy if yours is too valuable to share. These steps don't have to be done one day after another, you can focus on one a week, one a month, one a year if you need to. This is your journey and you're in charge but read back through as and when you need. I am so proud of you for getting to here, I am so proud for all you have done so far and all that you are going to do. And you should be **so** proud of yourself too.

I hope if anything this book has shown you that you are not alone, you are not in the minority, you are in the majority. We all have a warped sense of body image - you could say it's been stretched, of what we look like and how we should look. There is no such thing as perfection and I hope you will join me in sharing with the world the truths of postpartum body

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image, it doesn't have to be your own pictures of your body, you can share anything I post and you can share this book. This book is a voice for women, a voice for mothers and our bodies that are beautiful because of our marks that some see as flaws. I hope that this is truly the beginning of your journey to love and accept who you are and I am thankful you have trusted me to be a part of it.

I'd love to hear from you, hear your findings, your progress or your humps in the road. Feel free to share through social media, to our VIP group or in an amazon review (I'd really, really appreciate that!).

I wrote this book quicker than I ever imagined I could, after ridiculously early mornings and completely sleepless nights with my autism twinnies, through teething boob monsters and the normal motherhood duties, because I felt the need. I felt the need for women to hear my journey, for mothers to know these steps and facts about our bodies. This is our time to step out of the darkness and into the light. Step out of self-loathing and step into self love. I wish you all the happiness and peace in the world.

With love & gratitude,
Ana Louise Bonasera

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Ana Louise Bonasera

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My last thank you is to you for having the courage to take a step towards finding true happiness and peace within yourself.

