

# OUR RELATIONSHIP WITH THE BODY: A BIG MISUNDERSTANDING

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Natacha Joubert, PhD<sup>1</sup>

*To Françoise and Sandy*

The power we give the body is huge. We give it power to decide on almost every aspect of our lives, from the most fundamental, such as our identity and personal worth to the most superficial such as our daily consumption of multiple products to satisfy our needs. There is not one day that goes by without our seeing the body as the cause of our self-judgments, moods, concerns, choices, behaviors and sufferings. In short, we are giving the body tremendous power over ourselves and our lives and, to our greatest misfortune, we think it's normal!

Nobody doubts that the body is central to human existence and is an important part of our lives. It is also everyone's experience that the body needs care to stay healthy and function properly. Having said that, to believe, consciously or not, that the body has the power to decide who we are and what we become during our lives make no sense whatsoever and has painful consequences.

This article proposes to look more closely at the relationship we have with the body – *the way we see the body* – which is loaded with thoughts and beliefs<sup>2</sup> that wrongly identify who we are with the body, subjects us to its will and make us its victim. The purpose here is to clear up one of the biggest misunderstandings there is: we are not our body! It does not define who we are on the inside.

Clarifying our relationship with the body (body-relationship) helps realize that in fact, it is mainly determined by our relationship with ourselves (self-relationship) – *the way we see ourselves* – or by the thoughts and beliefs we have about ourselves, not the other way round. It also allows us to free ourselves from the control we have given the body over us, to claim ownership of our power to decide who we really are and to change for the better or transform our body-relationship and how we experience it in our day to day life.

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<sup>2</sup> Beliefs are broadly defined here as thoughts and theories we have about ourselves, the body, others and the world that we believe to be true.

## THE BODY-RELATIONSHIP

The body-relationship, or the way we see or think about the body, is the founding principle of what we call the human condition which is our physical presence or experience in this world. Therefore, we can understand the value and attention we are giving the body in our life, from birth till death.

We all come into the world in a body. It is the first object of our experience and learning in the world. We all grow up perceiving our bodies as the main source of our joy or pain, security or fear, love or rejection.

The problem is that as we grow up, the more predominant the body becomes at the expense of the mind or who we are on the inside. For example, we learned to identify ourselves to the body, its gender, color, size, temperament, and other distinctive features which to us represent our self embodiment, individuality and personal worth. We all use our bodies as the object or means to express our thoughts and emotions of love and hate, power or helplessness. We also hold it responsible for our fears, judgments, guilt, doubts, lacks and other internal sufferings, hence our tendency to medicate it to feel better.

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The importance we give the body is such that we have created multiple requirements to make it more attractive, strong, complete, performing and loving to assert and validate ourselves. However, targeting or abusing the body in one way or another does not really allow us to free ourselves from our self-doubts and feelings of emptiness, or increase our self-esteem. Why? This is because the body and mind, or who we are on the inside, are not the same thing. The mind is the source of thought and decision-making (will), the abstract and intangible part of our being where the body, including the brain<sup>3</sup>, is its tangible or material part. The body/brain is nothing without the mind that brings it to life. How did we end up giving our body-relationship such an ascendancy on who we are?

## THE OVERIDENTIFICATION WITH THE BODY AND ITS CONSEQUENCES

In our western culture, the body-relationship is loaded with thoughts and beliefs, or popular and scientific theories, which support our overidentification or excessive identification with the body and confine us to it. The thought/belief system that we relate to and dictates the way we see ourselves or our self-relationship, is very focused

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<sup>3</sup> See footnote 6

on the body: whether it be its features or differences that separate one another, its functions that enslave us, its strengths and weakness that threaten us, its endless needs and pain that monopolize us and of course its death that haunt us. This is how our self-relationship has become dissociated from the mind and assimilated to the body-relationship (including the brain) of which it seems largely dependent on.

The precarious living conditions that have been and still are the burden of many people can explain in part this overidentification with the body. The priority goes to the external or material conditions that protect the body and keep it alive. However, it is more startling to see such a fixation on the body when it is not under any immediate threat, which is the case for most of us, most of the time.

But then again, the numerous thoughts and beliefs we have about ourselves that strongly identify us to the body and maintain us in a constant state of fear and dependency contribute directly to amplify its importance and mobilize our time, activities and resources, individually and collectively. For example, think of the billions of dollars we invest in various industry and business sectors to protect and meet the needs of the body for food, clothing, housing, hygienic and cosmetic products, energy, transport, biomedical and pharmaceutical products or weapons. It's almost the entire economic system!

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Let us be clear. This is not about denying the needs of the body, neither to depreciate nor deprive it. Nurturing the needs of the body is not a problem. However, it makes no sense to focus on the body to the point of giving it the power it doesn't have over us and forgetting our identity and personal value. Such an overidentification with the body can only hurt and alienate us our entire lives.

For example, overidentification with the body among children and adolescents can result in their low self-esteem and self-rejection as well as social rejection and bullying based on body appearances or differences such as being too small or too fat, not intelligent enough, not pretty enough, not "hip" enough. Among adolescents and adults, overidentification with the body often leads to somatization<sup>4</sup> or the projection of fears, inadequacies, anger, guilt, doubts and self-judgments on the body causing ill health such as chronic headaches or back pain, gastrointestinal disorders, skin disorders, eating disorders, weight problems, general fatigue, high blood pressure or cardiovascular diseases. These illnesses will be subjected to various medical assessments and treatments without much results, if only minor symptoms relief, since their cause is not

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<sup>4</sup> Somatization is the conversion of a mental state (e.g. fear, guilt) into physical symptoms.

in the body. Among seniors, the overidentification with the body can create fear and beliefs associated to body aging and death such as the inevitable decay and annihilation of the mind or who we are. In any case, it appears clearly that when the person's identity and personal value are deeply confused and limited to the body, he/she becomes totally subjected to it. It is as if we were victims of our bodies!

And what about the identity and personal value of individuals with physical or intellectual disabilities, either acquired at birth or later in life from injury, disease, or aging? Is it really surprising that they often see themselves or are seen by others as diminished, undervalued, separate or different from others?

However, think of the Stephen Hawking<sup>5</sup> or people that you know (it could be yourself!), young and old, who are fully themselves and in control of their lives who happen to have physical limits or severe disabilities. Are they not clearly showing that the overidentification to the body is nonsensical and that the limits of the body should not be equated with the loss of our identity and personal value?

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### **A BIG MISUNDERSTANDING**

Whether we idolize or despise it, is the importance we give the body really justified? Beyond the beliefs and ideas we create about the body, does it really have the authority and power we give it over ourselves?

Nothing could be farther from the truth! When we look more closely at our daily experiences, like our relationships with others, at home or at work, either pleasant or painful, we can easily see that the meaning and value or importance we give these experiences are not stated by the body but depend on how we interpret them. Contrary to common belief, our perception of reality, such as our experience with the body, others and the world around us, is not the direct result of what our eyes and ears are sending back to us, no more than the cognitive processing of the brain<sup>6</sup>, but depend on the mind's interpretations.

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<sup>5</sup> English astrophysicist severely handicapped who became famous for its research on the Universe which he scrutinize from its wheelchair.

<sup>6</sup> The brain is a physical organ of the body. It can be dissected in laboratory, photographed/ scanned by an MRI or analyzed using an empirical method. It is not to be confused with the mind that is not in the body and has no materiality. The brain works like a programmed computer (following instructions) that carries out the bodily functions such as breathing, digestion or cognitive processing. However sophisticated, a computer is not a decision maker. It doesn't have the capacity to think and decide by itself. The brain doesn't have a will independent from ours. Only the mind or the being we are on the inside has the freedom to think, decide or make choice.

Appearances are often misleading because our perceptions are. As shown by magic tricks that make us see illusions as if they were real or true, our perceptions are not fact but interpretations. It's not our eyes and ears that give meaning and value to things or decide on what they are but the mind or who we are on the inside.

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The body-relationship, the way we see our body based on the thoughts and beliefs we have about it, is also an interpretation of the mind. It's our thoughts and beliefs about the body that are the *cause* of what we are perceiving and experiencing in the body which are the *effects*, not the reverse (see Figure 1 at the end of text).

For example, when we believe in the effectiveness of a medicinal drug for pain relief (cause), there's a good chance of having the anticipated effects even if it's a placebo<sup>7</sup>. Our perceptions are always interpretations or projections of the thoughts and beliefs we have in mind and from which arise our day to day life experiences. This means that in order to change or transform our body experience, it's not so much the body itself we should try to change but the body-relationship or the way we see it or think about it<sup>8</sup>. And the way we see our body mainly reflect the way we see or think about ourselves or the self-relationship.

## THE SELF-RELATIONSHIP

If the body seems to convey our physical presence in this world, it is through our mind that we can understand and experience it, not directly as we have just seen, but as the outcome of our thoughts and interpretations.

It is the mind or who we are on the inside when we come into the world that thinks, decides, interprets and experiences events. It is also the mind that has learned and endorsed the thoughts and beliefs transmitted by our parents, surroundings and society (the thought/belief system) from which we have developed our self-relationship. The self-relationship, or the way we see ourselves, reflects the thoughts and beliefs we have identified with personally, including of course the ones related to the body, with which we have built our identity and self-concept<sup>9</sup>, namely what we think of ourselves or all of our self-beliefs.

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<sup>7</sup> A placebo is medication without active ingredient.

<sup>8</sup> The same principle applies to the experiences we have with others and the world which doesn't result directly of what they are but of the way we see them, namely our people-relationship and world-relationship.

<sup>9</sup> Note that the self-concept being made first and foremost of self-beliefs, it reflects "who we think we are" and not necessarily "who we really are". For a comprehensive discussion on that matter, see my article on self-acceptance. <http://drnatachajoubert.com/documents/Selfacceptance.pdf>

Furthermore, our sense of personal value and self-esteem come from our self-concept. Yet, as we have seen earlier, the overidentification with the body confuses our sense of personal worth and many of our self-beliefs with the body's appearances, needs, abilities, diseases, limits or power over us, which explain why we treat it badly when we dislike ourselves or feel bad inside. For example, addictions to food, alcohol, illicit and prescription drugs, sport, sex, or the internet can be used as to escape our fears or to reduce our sense of lacking or emptiness. We can also deprive or mistreat the body with severe dieting or self-mutilation as a way to punish ourselves or as an attempt to reduce the heaviness of the anxiety we feel inside. However, mistreating our body won't ever be enough to release our internal pain or to increase our sense of self-worth when on the other hand our self-relationship is overrun with doubts and self-judgements.

When our self-relationship (or the thoughts and beliefs we have about ourselves) is confident, calm and caring, our interpretations and experiences of the body-relationship are usually the same, even if the body itself is not as we wish or is not doing well. However, if our self-relationship is dominated by fear, doubt, judgment, anger, conflict, guilt, shame, lack, resentment and other forms of negative thought, so will our interpretations and experiences of the body-relationship that could only be painful.

We are not victims of the body. To the contrary, we are the ones projecting our pain on our bodies and victimizing it as a way to hurt ourselves. The victimization of the body is in fact the victimization of oneself. We're always experiencing our self-relationship or what we think of ourselves, for better or for worse, not only in our relationship with the body but also with others and the world. That is why it's so important to be aware of the negative thoughts and beliefs we create about ourselves, including the ones related to the body, if we want to soothe the inner suffering we inevitably end up projecting on the body. In doing so, we manage to change and improve, not necessarily the body condition itself, but how we experience it.

*Our interpretations are  
always decisions!*

We are direct participants to our experiences because notwithstanding the forms they take externally in the body (or with others and in the word), they all result from our interpretations or the meaning and value we give them internally on the basis of the self-relationship. Moreover, our interpretations are always decisions!

## **TAKING OWNERSHIP OF OUR POWER OF DECISION**

Since birth, we take decisions or make choices every minute of the day. These choices evolve from being very simple, such as the baby choosing to turn his head to the right or

the left or the child choosing between the jar of jam or peanut butter, to more complex ones, such as choosing a university program or a political party. Needless to say, these choices or decisions are not made by the body but by who we are on the inside.

It is not necessary to be fully conscious or attentive to the thousands choices or decisions we make every day, many being secondary or functional. However, some have far greater consequences and deserve our attention. Such is notably the case of decisions that hurt ourselves and make us the helpless victims of the body. Yet, the very fact that we can change the way we see ourselves (self-relationship) and the body (body-relationship) indicates that another choice is possible. Is it therefore important to fully understand that if we have no control on what is the body (materiality), we always have the power to decide or change the way we see and experience it.

Thus, if we cannot avoid pain, illness, aging and death, matter being vulnerable and subject to decay, it's the mind or who we are on the inside that decides how we see the

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body and interprets how we experience it. For example, when the pain<sup>10</sup> of the body results from a choice or a decision we made, such as a sporting activity or an esthetic treatment, we feel pain but the experience of suffering is less or non-existent. However, our experience is quite the opposite when we perceive the pain of the body as the outcome of a situation inflicted on us such as a car crash, illness or body aging. As specified by its etymology, "suffering"

means "to be subjected to or to endure", that is to see ourselves as helpless victims, in this instance, of the body. In other words, the experience and intensity of suffering vary a lot depending on our interpretation of the body-relationship which, we must remember, reflect our self-relationship. Therefore, it clearly appears that our greatness suffering does not lie in the body's pain but in our self-victimization or when we give up our power of decision in favor of the body.

We are not the miserable and condemned victims of the body we have believed we are for so long. We are minds or beings of reason and decision capable of transformation. The same way we have given our body thoughts and beliefs the power to hurt and imprison us, we can decide consciously and deliberately to cease giving them that power. We can all take ownership of our power of decision over who we are, change, even transform, the body-relationship and how we experience it in day to day life.

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<sup>10</sup> The pain experienced in the body is the result of a neurophysiologic process or program.

## TRANSFORMING THE BODY-RELATIONSHIP

To succeed in transforming and soothing the body-relationship and our experience of it, it is important to be aware and recognize that who we are on the inside is a decision-making mind, not a victim. This means we should be open to question the self- and body-relationship we have developed on the basis of the thought/belief system that prevails in our society. All of us have learned to blame and see the body as the cause of our sufferings<sup>11</sup>. If this seems to release us from a certain level of responsibility, the relief is short-lived and the price to pay high. It reinforces the power we have given the body over us, as well as our fear, sense of helplessness (victimization) and suffering.

Again, the point is not about ignoring the body any more than its needs and care during sickness. It is not to rid of our identification with the body but to realize how painful the consequences are when it blinds us to the extent of forgetting that the power of decision is of the mind, not the body.

We always have a choice in deciding how we see oneself (self-relationship) and the body (body-relationship) and consequently how we experience them. And it is either peaceful or painful. For example, dieting to lose weight is not a negative experience in itself and can even be recommended to feel better and healthier. It's the underlying state of mind or the way we see it in relation to oneself and

the body that determine how we experience it. Do we see dieting as a way to take care of oneself and the body or as a battle against ourselves? In the first instance, our experience will be gentle and call on our capacity to be patient and kind towards oneself and the body, with gradual and sustainable results. In the second instance, our experience will be self-judgmental, often brutal and drastic towards the body, and felt as an intolerable deprivation that can fail anytime, which will only increase self-judgment.

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Here are two other examples of common situations, one relating to body aging and the other to illness, to illustrate the only power we really have in this world, yet highly potent, to decide or to choose the way we see ourselves. In general, body aging is seen as a series of losses or a fearful, painful and inescapable slow death. It is not surprising that our experience of it can be so distressing. But are we really condemned to see and experience body aging this way? As so rightly said by William Shakespeare: "There is

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<sup>11</sup> Actually, to be more precise, we have all learned to blame and see the body, others and the world, or what is outside of oneself, as the cause of our sufferings.



nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so.” This statement applies very well to the body of which we can say that it has no intention, either good or bad. However, we always choose or decide what we think of it. It is not a question of denying body aging and death, any more than their impact on our life and those of others. It is rather to remind ourselves that the way we see them determine how we experience them. It can be frightening and painful or gentle and peaceful. People who are aging well are not different from others except for the fact that they have decided to see and appreciate everything that is still beautiful and good in life and to fully enjoy it till the end.

Illness scares us. In most cases, we see it as an insidious, unfair and unpredictable threat. It can take us at any moment, no matter how old we are. We talk of illness as an enemy that we have to fight back, hoping to defeat it. Our overidentification to the body also makes it as a fight against oneself, which only adds to our guilt, distress and suffering. And yet, what we need the most when we’re sick is gentleness, understanding, care and kindness towards oneself. Healing is not a victory won on a battleground. It signifies rather the end of hostilities against oneself and a return to

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peacefulness. In short, the way we see illness and how we experience it depend on the way we see ourselves in relation to or victimized by illness (self-relationship) or the body (body-relationship). Detachment towards illness is not resigned acceptance but a conscious decision to see and experience it with gentleness and at peace with oneself.

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In summary, to improve and transform the body-relationship and how we experience it in day to day life we must first call upon the observer within us (who is also the decision maker) in order to pay more attention to the way we see ourselves and the body, namely the thoughts and beliefs we manifest about ourselves that make us victims of the body. These thoughts and beliefs can vary and take different forms but they all have in common serious concerns towards the body that turns out to be invasive and painful. Second, it is important to recognize, gently and without any self-judgment, those thoughts we believe to be true and to have power over us to simply decide we don’t want them anymore and let them go. We cannot let go of something we don’t recognize as ours.

The aim is to remind ourselves that we (the decision maker) are the ones giving meaning, value and power to our thoughts and beliefs. In other words, through the way we see the body (body-relationship), we are the ones giving it the power to scare us and

decide our own value and life. The same way we have given the body power over us, we can take it back. It is as if we've decided to progressively free ourselves from a program (belief) we've downloaded that hurts us and we don't want anymore. We're doing it to ease our pain and feel better, therefore with gentleness, patience and kindness towards oneself. Lastly, it's by renewing day after day or as needed, our decision to let go of the beliefs that subjected us to the body and the power we have given it that we gradually transform and relieve the body-relationship. Life offers us all the opportunities we need to practice!

## **CONCLUSION**

A misunderstanding arises when we mislead or deceive ourselves about the meaning we have given to something or our interpretation of it. The same can be said of our misunderstanding about the body-relationship. We have wrongly given the body an importance, value and power over our mind or who we are on the inside and we suffer because of it. The good news is once we become aware of this misconception, we can decide to review and change the way we see the body by changing or letting go of the thoughts and beliefs that make us its helpless victims.

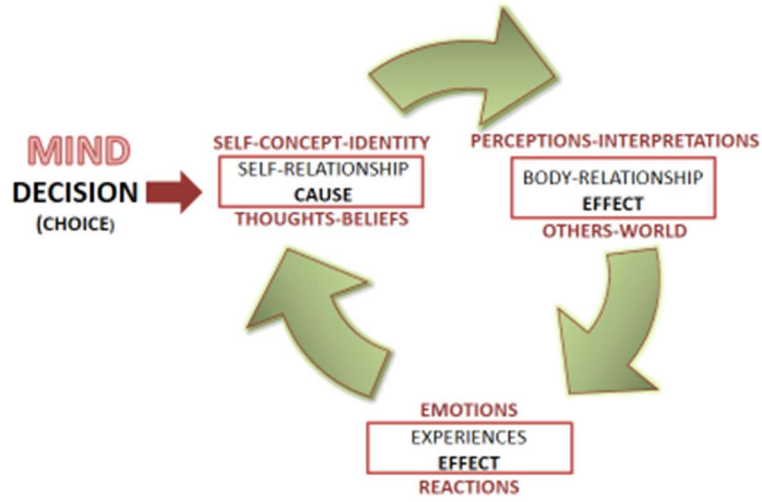
Changing our body-relationship also allows us to change its purpose so as to view it in a healthier perspective. For example, instead of seeing the body as a constant threat we have to fight or protect against, we can decide to use it as a helpful source of feedback that informs us, through its physical symptoms, when something hurts inside or in the way we see ourselves (self-relationship). In other words, we can learn to use the body-relationship and our experience of it to help us be aware of the negative thoughts and beliefs we have about ourselves in order to improve the self-relationship. In doing so, we free the body of the power we have given it over ourselves as well as of the attacks and mistreatment we inflicted on it in return. The more we reduce our identification with the body, the more we are able to recognize the decision maker we are on the inside.

Finally, it could be useful to see the body as the "vehicle" we have to last throughout our adventure in this world. Taking care of the body ensures a proper functioning and extends its life. Besides the body constitution, we are the ones behind the wheels, deciding of its purpose, its maintenance and its itinerary. Safe journey!

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Figure 1

## THE SELF- AND BODY-RELATIONSHIP



WE ALWAYS EXPERIENCE WHAT WE THINK  
AND WHAT WE THINK IS ALWAYS A DECISION.

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