

# Replace distorted body image by experiencing Christ's compassion

Our deep unconscious beliefs about ourselves, including body image, stem from the shame we feel because of our separation from God and are shaped by past experiences both personal and cultural. Therefore, when trying to replace those negative beliefs, it is helpful to allow clients to experience Christ's compassion rather than just connect with him in head knowledge alone (such as reciting a verse). You can use this experiential exercise to help clients come to an appreciation of the inherent worth of their bodies as God's gift. They can come to see the value in their own bodies knowing that Christ was also embodied and, in that, he knows the struggles of living with its brokenness. Moreover, they can have hope in Christ, for on the cross, he has purchased for us future resurrected bodies.

## An experiential exercise

*Goal - To receive the compassion of Christ and grow in self-compassion and compassion for others. To turn away from looking to the world and themselves for their worth, and toward God, their original source of identity, for value and acceptance.*

### Help people Access Christ's compassion:

1. You or the clients can pick a Scripture passage where Christ shows compassion or heals someone bodily. For example, the stoning of the woman, or the healing of the blind man. Have the clients read the passage aloud and visualize the scene. Talk about what you see in Jesus. How does he approach their physical bodies and weaknesses? How does he come across to the person? What doesn't he do? (Insult them? Shame them?)

### Help people become aware of what their bodies are telling them:

2. Have clients close their eyes, if they feel comfortable doing so, and take a few deep, calming breaths as they settle into their bodies, if they can.
3. Take some time to explore what is coming up for them. You can have them do a quick body scan, focusing on tensing and relaxing different parts of the body from head to toe.
4. Ask the clients to locate an area of their body for which they have negative beliefs or emotions. Ask them to describe what they notice, what negative self-talk they use.
5. Listen attentively and offer compassion and understanding. If after sharing, the client continues to talk negatively, then use the time to explore how they see themselves. Ask questions with curiosity without judgment.

## Help facilitate an interaction with God:

6. Ask them if it is okay to invite Christ into this experience with them. If so, have them remember his compassionate interaction with those in the Scripture passage chosen and imagine Jesus interacting with them in a similar way.
7. Ask them what compassionate words or gestures Jesus may have for them regarding their body, but not confined to that. If they can't think of any, offer some suggestions: Jesus loves them including their body; Jesus giving a healing or loving touch to this part of their body; Jesus does not judge them on the shape of their bodies. "People look at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart." 1 Sam. 16:7
8. Ask them to share any hurtful experiences they've had involving their bodies: e.g., bullying because they were overweight or too thin as a child; negative side comments others have made; feeling like they've failed at dieting or exercise programs.
9. Give them some time to sit with Christ and experience his presence, receiving his compassion. If they are able to, have them interact and dialogue with Jesus in their scripture-informed imagination. Allow them to go as slowly as they need to.

## Help people put into words their experience with Christ:

10. Then process with them how this experience with Christ was for them. Listen attentively without judgment. Some clients may not have had a good experience, and that's okay. Keep being curious and let the client share, asking exploratory questions and validating their experience. You can debrief the client's view of God without arguing with them or note that you may want to talk with them further at a later session. The healing is in the time spent with Christ. The Holy Spirit will use that time as God has ordained, so caregivers don't have to worry if they did this "the right way".

## Help Your Client turn from relying on themselves or the world for their worth:

11. If the client was able to receive comfort and experience his compassion, observe what happens in their heart. Describe the turning away and turning toward that has occurred. Gently help them see the ineffectiveness of their strategy to control diet and exercise to pursue the standards of attractiveness in our culture and reinforce and commit to continued dependence on Christ for their sense of who they are.
12. Ask the client if it is okay to close in prayer. If so, ask the client what they would like prayer for and spend some time praying for the client, trusting that the healing is in God's hands.

\* For an additional resource on addressing body image, we recommend [The Body, Beauty, and Bravery Project](#), which is helpful for starting a group on this topic, as well.