

Getting Curious with Jonathan Van Ness

Bonus Episode: Love That Story

JVN [00:00:00] Welcome to Getting Curious. I'm Jonathan Van Ness and every Wednesday I sit down for a gorgeous conversation with a brilliant expert to learn all about something that makes me curious. Today is... not a Wednesday! And yet, here I am on your podcast feed! That's because my new book "Love That Story: Observations From a Gorgeously Queer Life" is out on April 12, And I want to share a very special preview with my Getting Curious listeners. Here is Chapter Four, all about overcoming body issues and learning to love my gorgeous self.

JVN [00:00:30] "Chapter 4: Overcoming Body Issues and Learning to Love My Gorgeous Self Or, stop calling me brave! I'm hot!"

I never knew I was body positive. I was positively aware I had a body, but one I found unbearably undesirable to myself and, from what I'd been told, definitely to other people. For much of my life, I couldn't find one thing about the way I looked that I enjoyed. It took me decades to accept my body and eventually celebrate it. As someone who is known for practicing self-love, I'm often unintentionally reminded of the double-edged sword of being associated with body positivity. People are constantly saying things to me like "You're so inspiring for wearing those crop tops and taking your shirt off. I could never do that!" Or "I have an average body too! I struggle with confidence, but then I see you and it gives me hope."

Um, ew? Why does it have to be an act of bravery to wear what makes me feel good? Why would someone see this miraculous body that allows me to live my wonderfully best life and call it average? None of our bodies are average, and our desirability shouldn't be related to how the world at large views and labels them.

Sadly, it took me a long time to realize this.

JVN [00:01:54] The foundation of my eventual body dysmorphia was established early. Those Bowflex commercials left an imprint on me. If you're not familiar with the machine and its marketing evils, do yourself a favor and watch their circa early '90s ads on YouTube. The Bowflex itself is basically just a tricked-out weight bench, but damn, I hope whatever ad agency landed that account got paid a butt load of money because here we are, more than twenty-five years later, and I'm still talking about the fucking thing.

The first time I saw one of their commercials it stopped me dead in my tracks. What were these strange heart palpitations? Why did I suddenly feel faint? I was just looking at some oiled-up Adonis working himself into a hypertrophic ball of testosterone, nbd. There was a female fitness actress too; maybe she could be my fun imaginary babysitter. I liked her tights!

But she didn't give my stomach the same butterfly feels that the oiled-up-to-oblivion man did. It was crush at first sight. When the commercial ended and my desire to hump a pillow went away, a horrifying despair took hold.

Layered on top of my undeniable interest in that perfectly waxed chest and the problems that presented, I looked at my own body and wondered, *Why don't I look like him?*

I mean, it's not like anybody I knew in real life had abs so ripped that I might slice my finger open just by touching those glorious edges. I'd spent time at the YMCA where my dad worked out, and on summer days I basically lived at the pool. I wasn't surrounded by fitness-model bods, but I had come to the realization that when shirts came off, I definitely didn't look like the other boys. I had a belly and extra skin that hung from my chest, but other boys were rail thin, running around the pool deck with buff lifeguards blowing their whistles at them. Any one of those guys could have ordered a Bowflex and whipped themselves up to look like the man on TV in no time. But not me. I felt like a young Chris Farley in *Tommy Boy*, only obsessed with Barbies, figure skating, gymnastics, and beauty pageants.

JVN [00:04:03] Because my negative body image and self-esteem issues developed around the same time when I was beginning to understand my sexuality, I became obsessed with the fact that I did not look the same as the other boys at my school, and this just added to the sense of alienation and shame that I already felt from school bullying, the sexual abuse I'd experienced as a child, and stress over being a generally flamboyant kid in a highly conservative cis hetero environment. Living with the constant anxiety of never knowing what cruel insults would be hurled my way on any given day, as well as the fear that any one of my secrets might become public knowledge, all became too much. Around the age of ten, food became my most soothing coping mechanism, and I threw myself into bags of powdered donuts and frozen burritos.

The fact that decades later I can still remember exactly what I was eating during this period, and why, is a clear example of the insidious intersections of self-worth and a pressure to conform to perfect body standards. I can vividly recall the shame of eating a second box of Thin Mint Girl Scout cookies and then chugging water and doing sit-ups (like that was going to do anything, lol), followed by staring down at my tummy, sobbing uncontrollably, and thinking, *Why can't I stop doing this? When will I ever be hot?*

There was such an intense combination of pain and suffering that led to my disordered eating, but nobody could help me unpack all of that at the time because I was too scared to ask for help. Instead, I had to face the reality of my internal struggle at a routine physical at age twelve, when our family doctor told my mom that I was in the 95th percentile for body mass index (BMI)—*eye roll*—and needed to watch my weight because I was considered obese. And I wasn't even a teenager yet.

JVN [00:05:56] As I entered my early teenage years, I knew I had to try to lose weight. But it wasn't for any of the medical reasons presented to me by that doctor. The driving force behind my fourteen- and fifteen-year-old brain was: *Who will ever want to date me, much less hold me till the pain goes away, if I'm too big?*

Healthy, right?

The "who" went from an abstract idea of a hunky Bowflex man to a very real representative in the form of Fyodor, my high school crush. Fyodor had an impossibly gorgeous body, and he could eat whatever he wanted with no consequences. His six-foot swimmer's body was serving flawless Adonis vibes, and the whole package shivered me to my queer core. I knew that if I ever had any chance of nabbing him, I had to become a swimmer to get a body that matched his.

Oh, also, after watching the made-for-TV movie *Perfect Body* starring Amy Jo Johnson (aka the Pink Power Ranger) as an Olympic gymnast hopeful who develops an eating disorder, I decided to start throwing up all the food I continued to binge in excess. Because, honey, there weren't enough swim practices to burn off all those cinnamon rolls and white cheese dips.

I developed a method for this madness by setting a rule that I couldn't throw up any of my regular meals, only the junk food that I binged in between breakfast, lunch, and dinner. Further justification came from the fact that at least I wasn't doing it daily, maybe only twice a week when I would "accidentally" devour a family-size box of pizza rolls or four boxes of Girl Scout Tagalongs and shortbread Trefoils.

JVN [00:07:35] As the pounds began to come off, I knew that sensible meals and exercise were doing the real work, but since the weight loss happened while I indulged my urge to purge, I convinced myself at the time that it was helping. To reinforce it even more, people started paying attention to my new look, and I loved it.

A few months into my bulimia routine, my brother caught me throwing up. I was puking hard enough to have developed a bloody nose, and he threatened to tell our mom, so I decided it was time to stop. Staring into a toilet full of undigested snacks, blood pouring down my nose, and my brother barging through the door to witness it all shook me up enough to realize I was on the edge of something extremely dangerous, and I didn't want to be there anymore.

So from that moment forward, I decided I just needed to be a workout binger. Again—healthy, right?

Whenever I decided that I'd overeaten after a meal, I'd supplement my already twice-daily swim practices with gymnastics, running, and cigarettes—anything that might control my appetite and/or work off food that I deemed excessive. (Oh yeah, I'd started smoking by then

because I'd heard it was an appetite suppressant. Say it with me, one more time: healthy, right?)

JVN [00:08:52] I hate admitting this, but I fluctuated within different areas of this same routine for the next sixteen years or so. From adolescence until around the time I hit thirty, that was the body-control universe I inhabited. I always had to give myself some sort of food restriction, or binge eat, or overexercise, all with the intention of keeping my body approvable enough to find someone who would ultimately love me. Or at least fuck me until that perfect person came along.

Body dysmorphic disorder (BDD) and shame run deep in the gay community. Deeper than the pit in my stomach when Aly Raisman fell off the uneven bars in the qualifying round of the 2015 World Gymnastics Championships in Glasgow. Whenever I went on Grindr or SCRUFF to find a date or a hookup, all of the horrible language I'd already heard about fuckability standards was echoed once more in reactions to photographs of my body.

You're too fat for me.
Sorry, not into fat guys.
I'm only into fit guys.

The way I dressed and acted was something I could easily change, even if it pained me, but my body took a lot more work, and all of it was fueled by a chorus of hateful words telling me that I wasn't good enough. I had no desire to simply be healthy and make better decisions so I could live a long and happy life—I was compelled to change by the disgust aimed at me.

JVN [00:10:22] I also want to point out that the judgment I faced represents only a white, femme queer's experience before I was HIV+. BIPOC folks often receive worse cruelty in the LGBTQ community, because in addition to the misogynistic attitudes and body dysmorphic culture, racism runs deep. The amount of white gay men who freely talk about not being into Black or Asian men is astounding. A culture that evaluates your total worth based on only your physical appearance cannot connect in a way that sees your humanity. It breeds a lot of buttholes but also a lot of insecurity, shame, and rejection.

I'm still not entirely sure what finally clicked inside me that made me stop chasing the idea of a "perfect" body and searching out other men's validation 24/7. I think I'd just finally seen enough eggplants that I became less interested in dick and more interested in how I felt about myself. The consistent emptiness I felt after casual hookups and emotionless sexual encounters left me numb, and I realized that the validation I was seeking was ultimately only going to come from within.

Recognizing that the good things happening in my career were the results of my own determination and drive likely had a lot to do with it. My work life was clearly changing for the better, but emotional work never happens overnight. I certainly tried many times to change my

mindset to become more self-loving, with briefly positive results, but any time I slipped into old habits, I was able to forgive myself because I strongly believe in a “three steps forward, five steps back, and seven steps forward” type of existence. It wasn’t a light-bulb moment that led me to self-acceptance but a collection of experiences that allowed me to try things a different way.

JVN [00:12:18] There was a point in my life when I included the phrase “body positivity” whenever I talked about my evolving feelings of self-love and care, but I now much prefer the relatively newer concept of “body *neutrality*,” which strikes down the idea that I always have to equate feeling good about my body to feeling good in general. Body positivity is nice in theory, but it’s an unrealistic expectation to constantly uphold because we are all beautifully complicated humans with near-infinite ranges of emotion. Body neutrality allows for a more naturally holistic relationship with these physical vessels we inhabit, and the idea is to focus on what our bodies can do for us, not how they appear. It’s okay for me to have days when I wish I looked a little different, so long as I understand that I can also lead a complete, gorgeous, and fulfilling life separate from those feelings.

I think one surprising benefit of all of those empty sexual encounters from my past is that they prepared me to finally be in a space in life where my heart and mind were open, willing, and ready to meet my person, and to have the confidence to try for the relationship I’d always wanted. But even now that I’m happily married and feeling well into my journey of healing, I still find myself wanting random validation from gay men and queer people. However, now I can look at it as a natural part of being a person. I try to be curious about those feelings and remain compassionate and gentle with myself whenever the need flares up in a way that doesn’t feel aligned with my authentic self.

Usually when that validation need pops up, it’s trying to keep myself separated from an unwanted feeling, and now, most of the time, I’m able to respond to that part and say, “I know you want that external sought-after feeling, but I also know I’m enough.”

JVN [00:14:10] These days the urges feel much less aggressive and frenetic in terms of what that part of me wants to do to get the attention it thinks I want. The specific desires that pop up, like wanting a cute person to send me a torso pic, or having six cookies instead of sixty-five, aren’t quite as harmful as my old ones, because the validation I now seek doesn’t require deeply hurting myself with food, overexercising, bingeing, drugs, or sex.

About that last one. I know this essay started out about body image and self-esteem and then we veered pretty quickly into sex, but it’s impossible to write about healing from my compulsive eating without acknowledging my healing from sexual compulsivity as well. They are, for me, inextricably linked, and I know they are for many others as well. Through two trips to inpatient rehab and years of therapy since, I’ve learned a lot about impulse control, sitting with my unhealthy urges, dysfunctional cycles, and abuse and trauma, and how all of those things interact in my psyche. Particularly, I’ve learned that impulses and cravings are not

absolute commands from the brain that must be satisfied; they just *feel* like they are. Impulses and cravings will eventually abate if I can just sit with them long enough and not identify with the urge. I practice not letting it overtake me to the point where I'd actually do the knee-jerk behavior I'm trying to ride out. Reading countless books and working with multiple therapists to learn how my destructive adult behaviors reflect similar cycles of abuse from my childhood has taught me so much of what I know about how unprocessed early trauma manifests itself in my adult life. Being aware of all of that helps me make better decisions.

But there's a larger picture to explore here. What were *so many* of us exposed to in life that causes us to hate our bodies? Why is it that at such a young age I came to the conclusion that how my body looked would directly influence my ability to feel happy, connected, and loved? Oh yeah, it's that fucking Bowflex commercial.

JVN [00:16:28] Fine, not just the commercial but what it and thousands of other images and messages like it represent. The idea that if you buy this one thing, you will look like these people. You'll be stunning, you'll be happy, you'll be fuckable, all thanks to a handy machine that folds up under your bed when you're done using it for the day. The messaging is everywhere—magazines, television, movie montages—the idea of a quick fix, focused only on the external while ignoring the internal. It took me far too long to figure out that it's all a lie.

In fact, some of my most miserable times in life were when I was at my supposed "sexiest." In 2014, I went through a phase of doing one hour of hot yoga every morning for almost a year. Six days a week, my three daily meals consisted solely of chicken, broccoli, and sweet potatoes. All to get ready for a season premiere trailer of *Gay of Thrones* that had me shirtless on a beach, and I was determined to look smoking hot when that day came.

You know what's not hot? How fucking hungry, grouchy, and unhappy I was for the several months it took for me to get the body I'd thought I'd always wanted. I finally had six-pack abs, and wouldn't you know it, I was no happier than I'd been before. I didn't feel more balanced. I wasn't filled with more joy. The teaser did end up being pretty funny, but the point is that I had to get the body I thought I'd always wanted to be able to finally see the truth: that we are so much more than our bodies.

JVN [00:18:08] They are, of course, important. Bodies are sacred, they are our vessel! But to have love or our worth based on how our bodies look is something we don't deserve. No exercise program or workout machine or diet program can give you a lasting sense of worth and acceptance, and becoming body positive isn't something that just happens, especially if you're starting from a place of trauma. It means working every single day to reject the negative messages constantly hurled our way by advertising and social media, the insidious missives we internalize, sometimes without even noticing that it's happening.

Even the positive messages we get can morph into tiny blows to our self-esteem. Like I said earlier, I get a lot of messages and comments that are basically slightly different versions of

“You’re so brave. How do I get the same kind of confidence?” I know the people who send them mean well, and I’m honored that they feel comfortable reaching out to me. But those messages come across as unintentionally cruel. They make me feel like I *shouldn’t* feel confident or proud of my body exactly the way it is. Those messages subtly—and I hope, again, unintentionally—reinforce the idea that posting images of anything that isn’t an Adonis body ready to win first prize at a fitness competition is a risky proposition.

JVN [00:19:31] I believe that in order for all of us to cultivate more body positivity we need to actively reject the falsehoods inherent in diet and fitness culture. Trust me—you will not be happier or feel more whole if you have visible abs. Fitness companies make their money off creating a mindset of you being just one purchase away from your perfect body, which will bring you the perfect life. Instead, let’s practice emotional and mental fitness, because not being judgmental of our bodies and the bodies around us is the real key to body neutrality, and to a happier life. Think about it. We are all beautiful creatures who, against all statistical odds, have arrived here on Earth as the unique individuals we are. You made it here, out of billions of DNA combinations that could’ve created any person and instead created you, created me, created us.

Your chance to be alive, to chase your dreams, to find your joy, and to pursue your passions is a precious gift. I refuse to waste any more time believing in anything less than my human divinity and my right to love and be loved. I know there will still be days when I don’t feel this way, but in those moments, I will also know it’s because I absorbed some toxic ideas in my past that I’m still unlearning. I’ve promised myself that every time those feelings come up, I will try to make myself release them back into the past. And I hope you choose to do the same, you stunning, fucking queen.

JVN [00:20:18] You’ve been listening to Getting Curious with me, Jonathan Van Ness. You’ll find links to all things Love That Story in the episode description of whatever you’re listening to the show on.

Our theme music is “Freak” by Quiñ - thanks to her for letting us use it. If you enjoyed our show, introduce a friend and show them how to subscribe.

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Our editor is Andrew Carson. Getting Curious is produced by me, Erica Getto, and Zahra Crim.