

Coming full-circle

Rising to fame for her body confidence Instagram posts, influencer, presenter, and feel-good guru **Chessie King** is here to tell you: it's about time you loved yourself. But the journey to the brighter place she is now hasn't been without its twists and turns.

Scouted by a modelling agency at just 17, and then going on to enter a bikini competition and pushing her body to its limits, it has taken Chessie some time to find a sense of equilibrium with her body.

But through the challenges, Chessie has learned many lessons. From building up empathy and discovering the things that bond us, to channelling her voice into causes that support others, Chessie is leading the way to a kinder, more bubbly future. Here we talk about her biggest lesson to date: unearthing unconditional self-love

Interview | **Kathryn Wheeler** Photography | **Paul Buller**

It began when she was 16. Before that – Chessie King tells me, as we settle down on a sofa in the corner of the photography studio – she saw her body as a vessel that carried her head around.

But then something changed. It started with anxiety about her height – at 6ft she was much taller than her friends – which moved on to other areas, and then her clothing size.

“Then, when I was 17 years old, I really started focusing on my body,” Chessie explains. “I became wildly addicted to what I looked like.

“I focused on every single part of me that I hated. I became fixated on other people and trying to look like them instead of becoming myself, which is really weird because, at that point in your life, you're going through so much change.” >>>







But things were about to get a lot weirder...

When she was 17, Chessie was scouted by a modelling agency. This was 2010, the year that French *Elle* released a special edition featuring plus-sized women on the cover, leading *The Guardian* to declare that fashion's last taboo had been broken. In hindsight, it may have been a premature assertion – but as Chessie recalls, even at the time, the reality for those on the other side of the camera was far from a revolutionary celebration of diverse bodies.

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“They said they would only take me on if I lost weight,” she explains. “And then at every casting, they would hand me a size zero skirt. All of them would watch me try to get into it, but I wouldn’t be able to.”

During this time, the features of Chessie’s body that couldn’t be changed by diet and exercise were quickly altered in post-production while still on set. She recalls a time when she was in Ibiza shooting for a swimwear company, and she watched her body being edited and distorted in front of her eyes.

“They shrunk me to half the size,” she explains. “They smoothed all of the back of my legs out, which is

something that I felt self-conscious about anyway. I was watching this happen and thought: ‘Are they doing this to test out a few things?’ But when the photos went out, that’s how they looked. I was like, that’s not me... That is definitely not me.”

As Chessie explains how these days we all have the ability to airbrush our photos beyond recognition with just our phones, she cuts off to sing along to the song playing over the studio speakers. It’s Lizzo’s self-love anthem ‘Good As Hell’, and despite fighting through the jet-lag after her flight home from Bali the day before, today Chessie is “feeling good as hell”.

Sitting crossed-legged on the sofa, after kicking off her boots as soon as we began our interview, Chessie radiates the confidence of someone who appears to be completely at ease with themselves. But, as she explains, she didn’t get to where she is today without a fair few bumps in the road.

In 2015, Chessie embarked on what she refers to as a “science experiment”. Having spent some time immersing herself in the fitness community after interviewing individuals as part of her work as a presenter, Chessie found herself drawn to bikini competitions.

A highly competitive community, where women train intensely to showcase their physiques to a panel of judges, bikini competitions expect participants to dedicate themselves entirely to the demands of their physical categories, and they are judged on muscularity, condition, symmetry, and presentation.

“I was going to all the fitness classes and working out, and then people were like, ‘You should do a bikini competition, you’re a performer!’ I said, ‘I would never do that, it’s too extreme,’” Chessie recalls. “But then I thought it would be a good science experiment – it would be interesting to see how my body would change from eating well and working out strictly.”

With just 18 weeks to transform her body, things got very intense very quickly.

“I was taken places I never thought I’d go,” Chessie reflects. “Sometimes I would be training at five in the morning, crying on a treadmill. People at the gym got to know me because I was there so much, and they would be like, ‘Oh God, she’s on her low-carb day.’”

What began as a light-hearted inquiry into the limits of the human body, quickly became a life-consuming obsession. And despite drastically transforming herself, when the day of the show arrived, Chessie didn’t meet the standards of the judges.

“My feedback afterwards was: ‘Chessie is too big, she’s carrying too much weight.’”

Coincidentally, the day of our shoot was exactly four years since that bikini competition. It’s a huge milestone, particularly considering how Chessie says it took her two years after that to return to normality.

“People talk about the 18 weeks leading up to it, which is obviously so physically and mentally exhausting, but then you’ve just restricted yourself every single day. And I rebelled against everything – I literally went into rebellion Chessie mode. >>>

“I couldn’t understand why everyone had willpower and I didn’t, even though I had such strong willpower before. If there was a tub of chocolate, I would eat until I was sick. And then I would be like, how is everyone just eating one?”

“Bigger support is needed after competitions,” she continues. “It’s masking disordered eating, it’s masking problems that you have covered up in the past – for me that’s what it was.”

For three years following the competition, Chessie didn’t want to speak about it. She was hurt by the feedback, but also didn’t want people to think that it reflected who she was. Turning the tables on that mindset wasn’t easy, but it began with addressing negative self-talk, calling herself on it, and taking steps to be kinder to herself.

“I catch myself on days when I am feeling negative and putting myself down and I think, would I ever let anyone else say that about me? Would I let them say, ‘Your thighs are huge and they look really bumpy?’ Would I ever let anyone say that to me – a stranger or a friend? No. And would I ever say that to someone else? No.

“When you truly are your own best friend, you speak to yourself calmly, and kindly, and you speak to yourself with love and respect.”

For Chessie, thinking about her body in very literal ways helps her to break away from external pressures. Thanking her lungs for breathing, her heart for beating, and her legs for carrying her where she wants to go, grounds her in the reality that her body is so much more than a prop.

“You don’t need a PhD to know your body. I know the functions of all of my organs – and once you strip it back to that, it’s so amazing,” says Chessie. “Sometimes I literally just put my hand on my heart, and I think, ‘Thank you so much for keeping me alive.’”

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And the capability of our bodies to create new life is something Chessie is in awe of. Motherhood is a challenge that she’s desperately excited about embarking on, eventually. For now, she’s gone back to school to train as a doula – a non-medical person who offers emotional support to women through childbirth.

“Female bodies are phenomenal,” Chessie declares. “Womanhood, for me, is connecting with women all over the world and having that understanding that we’re all similar. We’re deficient in community and friendship, we all crave that sense of belonging, but if you open your eyes to being connected with women worldwide, it’s so powerful.

“When we were younger, if you saw someone on the road with the same car you beeped at them! Womanhood is like that. It’s a sisterhood; if you use your voice on your own you can be heard by

10 people, but if you use your voice with other women around you, you can be heard by millions of people. I think that is so empowering.”

When women raise each other up, the sky’s the limit. But on the flip side, it’s all the more painful when we tear each other down.

Online trolling is something that Chessie is, sadly, all too familiar with. But, deciding to take a stand against it, in April 2018 Chessie worked with a group of digital experts to create a version of herself that had been altered to reflect the comments she received. Criticisms on everything from her face to the size and shape of her body were collected, and a photo of her was edited to match each comment.

The result, shared on her Instagram, was an unsettling, uncanny version of Chessie. With huge, bug-like eyes, swollen lips, cinched waist, and impossibly thin arms, she looks barely human.

“I shared my first body confidence post three years ago, and that wasn’t from a place of ‘I’m going to start a massive trend’ or whatever, it was just that I felt it needed to be heard,” Chessie explains, as she reflects on why she decided to use her platform to promote a body confident message. “At the time, I was sucked into a sea of perfection, because that was all I knew and all that I saw: filters and editing.

“And then I was like, actually hold on. I can’t see anyone on Instagram that I can relate to, there was no one being ridiculous and silly, it just wasn’t a thing. Then I posted back in 2016, at the start of the year, that this was the year of body confidence – this is the year we embrace our bodies.” >>>





It was a New Year's resolution of sorts; something that Chessie threw herself into, and she hasn't looked back since – regularly posting 'Instagram vs reality' images, as well as candid, unposed moments that show her body in its natural state. Though as natural as they may be, the decision to push past the pressure to be perfect was not easy.

"The more I opened myself up, the scarier it was," Chessie says. "Back then, it was being quite vulnerable. But now I don't care, I will share anything as long as it's helping someone – and I'm trying to do that offline as much as I am online."

In June 2019, Chessie launched Dedicate to Educate – a campaign that calls for an additional hour of lessons on mental health, body image, and sex education topics, to be included in the school curriculum each week.

"When I want to do something, I will do it straight away. One thing I pride myself on is being brave and fearless, and taking risks," Chessie says, when asked why she embarked on this project. "But I'm not taking this risk for me, I'm using my voice and my platform for the people who need it, and the future generation. I put out a post saying I was going to do this, and got 6,000 messages in one night saying this needs to happen. So that was when I realised people are on board!"

Of course, changes to the national curriculum don't happen overnight, and so in the meantime, Chessie regularly visits schools to speak to young people about mental health and body image. So often she sees herself in the people she speaks to, picking up on the same anxieties and concerns that plagued her adolescence.

"I didn't have a role model to look up to," Chessie continues. "I want to be that role model that I didn't have, and to speak out for those who don't have a voice.

"When I'm at schools speaking and telling my story, girls say they don't want it to take five years. I'm like, it's a process and it's not going to happen overnight. And when you have to go through that and then come out the other side, you do appreciate your body even more."

I try to take what I lost, like my hearing, and I look at what I gained, like an awareness of what other people are going through

This idea of building empathy through adversity is something that Chessie has experienced in other parts of her life. When she was just 23, Chessie partially lost her hearing following a heart episode, which doctors suspect may have been a mini-stroke. Today, Chessie wears a hearing aid.

"That's amazing to me because it opened me up to the deaf community, and I was connecting to people online who I wouldn't have in real life," Chessie explains. "I'm more aware of invisible illnesses – I'm more empathetic. I think it made me a kinder person. I try to take what I lost, like my hearing, and I look at what I gained, like an awareness of what other people

are going through. Of course, when it first happened I was like, oh my God I'm 23 and I've just lost my hearing. But it taught me something.

"Now I'm so liberated and alive, though I do feel like I lost five years of my life," Chessie says, before checking herself. "Well, not lost it, because it made me who I am – but now I believe in myself and I support myself as much as I support everyone else. I've always been everyone else's cheerleader and struggled to be proud of myself."

It's a common yet true concept: everything we go through stays with us, and comes together to make us the people that we are – experiences are the puzzle pieces that create an ever-evolving portrait of you. Sometimes those experiences are painful, as Chessie recognises, but through them we learn about our limits and strengths, as well as the things that connect us to others.

"I think I've come back round in a circle," Chessie says as we reach the end of our chat. "When I was younger, I was so free and my priority in life was to make everyone smile and be happy. And then I went through a stage when I was 18 to 23 of just hating myself. And now I've come full circle and I'm back to being free."

So, if 18-year-old Chessie could see herself today, what would she say? Chessie doesn't pause for a second: "Go on, girl!"

For more from Chessie, follow her on Instagram @chessiekingg

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