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Size Discrimination

Size Discrimination: The Last Acceptable Prejudice Sherill Cantrell-Brown MA. LPC

When was the last time you were with a group of women where the issue of diet or weight didn't come up in the first five minutes of conversation? We are a culture obsessed with weight.

Our sense of worth and self-esteem is so tightly wound up with our dress/pants size that we literally cannot stop talking, dreaming or thinking about weight. The word 'overweight' pisses me off; I would like to know: just whose weight am I over? I am a 42-year-old African-American woman who can honestly say that the hurtful and prejudicial remarks from people concerning my size over the years far outweigh (no pun intended) the issues I have had to deal with as a woman of color. Size Discrimination is the last acceptable prejudice. It is still okay to make fat jokes and hurtful remarks publicly without any repercussions from society. A great many people feel justified in their attitudes since 'all fat people have to do is stop eating'. If it was that easy we would all be thin. It is much more complex than we have been led to believe.

Your size is based on a number of things: set point, genetics, environment, as well as how much you eat. Recent studies have found that weight gain has less to do with what you eat and more to do with who you are.

Set point is the theory that says your weight is determined when you are born. Just as the color of your hair and eyes is determined at conception, so is your weight. That is why initially when you started to diet your weight would always go back within a few pounds of your set point. It is the weight that your body is the most comfortable at and is programmed to protect.

Genetics also play an important role in determining our size. If you have been fat all your life and have family members who are also large the odds are your natural body size is larger than average. Children who have one fat parent have a 40% chance of being large, and children with two fat parents have an 80% of being fat.

In a recent closed study doctors closely monitored the eating habits of fat men vs. average-sized men. They were put on the same caloric intake and exercise plan. At the end of the study what do you think happened? That's right: the fat men either gained weight or their weight remained the same and the average size men lost weight.

The saddest thing is we have all been bamboozled. Diets don't work; we know because statistics show us that 95% to 97% of those who lose weight regain the weight within five years. Would you accept a treatment for any other medical condition that had a success rate of 2%? Yet we continue to search for that right diet. We are convinced every time we start a new one that this is the one that is finally going to solve all of our weight woes. The average person stays on a diet three weeks until they return to their normal eating patterns, usually depressed and feeling like a complete failure again.

We now realize a funny thing about diets, which is that they cause exactly what you are trying to prevent: weight gain. When you go into weight loss mode your body thinks you are trying to starve it, so it slows everything down to hold onto calories. It slows down your metabolic rate and tends to store fat more efficiently. Once you start eating again it doesn't know when you are going to starve it again so it doesn't

completely rebound back to its previous efficiency. Do this over and over again and you have seriously screwed up your metabolic rate. This makes it harder each time to lose the weight and keep it off. We call this 'yo-yo dieting' and it is detrimental to us emotionally and physically.

This obsession with weight is deeply entrenched in our society and the stigma of 'fat and ugly' continues. Take a look at some recent statistics concerning weight and body image.

Let's look at the facts:

- The average woman is 5'4 and weighs 140 pounds

- The average model is 5'11 and weighs 117 pounds

- Most fashion models are thinner than 98% of American woman

- Surveys show 45% of woman are on a diet on any given day

- Surveys show 80% of woman are dissatisfied with their appearance

- Surveys show 80% of children who are ten years old are afraid of being fat

- Surveys show 60% of American woman are a size 12 or larger

- Studies show that girls are more afraid of becoming fat than they are of nuclear war, cancer, or losing parents

These are profound statistics, which show how the perpetuation of self-hate begins at a very early age. I am here to remind people that fat is not a four-letter word; it is an adjective to used describe a size.

Our obsession about fat has created a society where most people on any given day are unhappy with their bodies. We equate thinness with being special or better than. We are teaching our children a very sad lesson. What happened to judging someone by the content of his or her character? It seems as though this has become less important, and that is a terrible reality.

The ongoing argument I constantly hear is that fat is unhealthy. This isn't necessarily true. There are fat and healthy people just like there are skinny and unhealthy people. Good health is not based on numbers on a scale. It's having energy and being able to move. More importantly, it is having the energy and fitness level to do the physical activity you need to have a full life.

So my advice is to stop dieting, right now, today. Throw away your bathroom scale and begin to live in the present. Stop putting off your life until you're the right size or lose a certain amount of weight. If you feel your fitness level is not where you want it to be start moving. You can be big and healthy. Starting today, be gentle with yourself when it comes to your body. When was the last time you thanked it for carrying you around? When is the last time you praised it for giving you the pleasure of making love or holding a child? In one moment we can list all the things wrong with our bodies, but rarely acknowledge the beautiful and positive attributes it possesses. Today you can begin to live a healthier life by making peace with those extra pounds you may carry and by realizing you don't have to feel ashamed, powerless, depressed, or less than because you are not a size 6. Remember that you are unique, fabulous, and blessed. Now live a life that represents that in action and words.