

# Fat shaming is an all-too-common reality, but why? Frances Lockie investigates.



It seems like everybody has an opinion about fat. Every other day there is a news story about the horrors of the “obesity epidemic” or the latest diet that promises to “drop a dress size in a week” or what kind of clothing is best for hiding those “problem areas”.

But in all these conversations about fatness, fat people are the ones who are left out. How must it feel to be responsible for an “epidemic”? What if the latest diet – and the 10 diets before that – didn’t work? How can your problem areas be hidden when society sees your entire body as a problem?

The word “fat” carries a lot of baggage, and people make a lot of negative assumptions about overweight people as a result. “There is a common assumption that people with fat bodies are lazy, gluttonous and irresponsible,” says Dr Samantha Thomas, a public health researcher at Monash University. “There is also an assumption that you have to be thin to be beautiful, and we rarely see fat women or girls portrayed positively in the media. These stereotypes make people feel ashamed about themselves.”

The pervasiveness of these stereotypes has given rise to fat shaming. Courtney, 17 years old and a size 18, knows this all too well. While waiting for a bus, a stranger began verbally abusing her because of her size. “He was saying I couldn’t sit near him and his girlfriend because I was ‘a fat bitch.’” Jessica, 18, weighs 145kg and says negative comments from her family hurt her the most. “Whenever I order a little extra food or wear a shirt that is somewhat snug, my mother and grandmother always make comments or pinch my fat,” she says. “It makes my heart sink.”

Anne, who weighs 133kg at age 17, has also been fat-shamed by her family. “I’ve had my aunt (who I rarely see) tell me I get no exercise and that I need to stop eating McDonald’s. I had no problem telling her that I do get exercise and I don’t even like the taste of McDonald’s. Unless she actually knows about my daily routines, she should not be making judgements about it.”

The assumption made by Anne’s aunt is pretty common. When broaching the topic of fatness, the most common argument brought up is health. Everybody knows that being fat is bad for you... right? Not necessarily, says Dr Rick Kausman, a medical doctor who specialises in weight management. “It is normal to have fat on our bodies,” he says. “While it is possible for us to be above our most comfortable weight, the focus on getting down to a certain size is over-the-top. We are too concerned with what is seen as ‘normal.’” Michelle Allison, a nutritionist based in Canada, agrees. “Fat is not inherently unhealthy. It is possible to be fat and healthy, just as it is possible for somebody to be thin and unhealthy.”

Dr Rick and Michelle also agree that diets don’t work long-term and may even cause more harm than good. Dr Rick says the negative effects of dieting include a depleted immune system, diminished bone strength and long-term disordered eating. Michelle adds that research has shown only a tiny percentage of people who diet maintain their weight loss; almost all dieters regain the weight lost within a couple of years. Despite the common assumption that this is due to a lack of willpower, research has also shown that even when a diet is maintained, participants still regain weight.

Michelle says a “health at every size” (or HAES) approach is much better for improving overall health than focusing on the numbers on a scale. HAES involves: **ACCEPTING:** Appreciate your own body – it’s much easier to take care of your wellbeing when you think about yourself positively.

**EATING MINDFULLY:** Eat when you’re hungry, savour your food and stop when you are full. Eat foods that your body wants and needs. Try new things, as variety is an important part of nutrition.

**MOVING:** Don’t exercise because you have to, exercise because you want to. Hike in the bush, pump some iron, fire up the dance floor, or kick butt on the basketball court. Find a form of movement that makes you feel good and do it.

In a culture that’s so obsessed with thinness, it can be hard to be fat and confident. “I think there is a huge amount of pressure on teens to aspire to having the perfect body,” says Dr Samantha. “We need to think about how we can celebrate what our bodies can do, not what our bodies look like.”

Michelle says too much value is placed on how we look at the expense of our other attributes. “So many people will make the way you look the most important thing about you, when really it’s not that important. There is so much about you that’s interesting and valuable that has nothing to do with how you look.”

Courtney, who used to be depressed as a result of her low self-esteem, says the road to confidence is a long one. “I studied my body – every stretch mark, freckle and scar – and I appreciated everything [it] does for me,” she says. “Of course, it was extremely tough (and some days it still is), but the struggle is so worth it. I always remind myself that the only validation of beauty and worth I need is from me.”

As Jessica so eloquently puts it: “Once you love yourself, nothing else matters.”

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