



Does Size Really Matter?

By Dr. Maura Cullen

I must confess the following:

1. I watch the Biggest Loser TV program and am in awe of what they accomplish.
2. I am rooting for my niece who has recently lost 30 pounds and looking to lose more.
3. I exercise to maintain my current body weight.
4. I have never been bullied or ridiculed based on my weight; in fact, I receive a good deal of positive feedback for being thin.
5. I realize that I have A LOT of issues around size discrimination and it is about time I fess up to them.

We have all grown up hearing the slogan, "Sticks and stones may break my bones but names will never hurt me!" If only that statement were true. Size discrimination is one of the last vestiges of acceptable prejudice and the discrimination goes far beyond the demeaning jokes and stares. In fact, size discrimination is so pervasive that it contributes to negative emotional, social, economic, and physical health issues.

First, it is critical to get an understanding of terminology. What terms are most acceptable today? Are they fat, overweight, large, heavy? With regard to weight, the term "fat" has historically been seen as a derogatory term. However, the National Association to Advance Fat Acceptance has embraced the term "fat" in an effort to reclaim the power of the word. This is similar to the term "queer", long used as a slur towards gays and lesbians, but is now used by gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender activists. Fat activists want the word "fat" to be used as an adjective, just like thin, small or tall and not as a put down. Hence, I will use "fat" continuously throughout this article unless it is a cited source.

The term "overweight" receives mixed reviews. People who take offense to the term say it assumes an average standard of weight. But what is "average"? Let's take a look at the "average" women in America:

- 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 women
- Surveys show 45% of women are on a diet on any given day
- Surveys show 60% of American women are a size 12 or larger

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

In the media, people who are fat or short are often shown for comic relief and are rarely portrayed as emotionally competent and happy. As a result, we have negative images of the experiences of people who are fat and/or short. When discussing issues of size, we most commonly gravitate towards issues of weight, yet height discrimination is equally damaging.

What terminology is preferred with regard to height? Are they short, dwarf, midget, or vertically challenged? The Little People of America (LPA) is a non-profit organization focused on height discrimination. They advocate for the term "little people" and despise the term "midget", which they liken to the N-word in relation to race. "Short" or "short stature" are considered to be acceptable terms along with little people. The LPA with support of other organizations has recently tried to have legislation passed to have the FCC ban the word midget from the media's use. This is similar to the bans on the "N-word" and other slurs.

"HD (Height Discrimination) is as present in our language as is its effect on the everyday life of a short person. One "looks up to" a significant individual, while an "underling" is "looked down upon". One can "belittle" an adversary, to "make him feel small." One might "overlook" a less worthy person, and see the person that "stands tall" being "a head and shoulders above" a "small minded" person."

Understanding and Living with Height Discrimination by Glenn Beard March 2004

Does Size Really Matter?

With regard to height and weight issues, there is a gender difference that should be noted. It is more acceptable in our society to be a fat man and less acceptable to be a fat woman. Tall women, with the exception of models, are viewed very differently than tall men who are automatically given respect due to their height.

Approximately 24% of women claim discrimination by their employer at work last year and 43% of overweight people claim the same. One out of every three fat people experienced being bullied during their school years, and 43% of teachers say they view fat students as lazy, untidy, and uncomfortable to be around.

Time Magazine (2008) published an article by Yale's Rudd Center for Food Policy and Obesity, who conducted a survey to gain perspective on weight and height discrimination. The report ranked weight third behind age and race as the most common form of prejudice. Ranked in the top ten of the same poll was height discrimination. These results show the growing awareness to the importance of reducing obstacles faced by those who experience such discrimination.

In a survey conducted in 2005 and again in 2007, 93% of human resource professionals stated they would hire a thin person over a fat one based solely on weight. ([Personnel Today magazine](#))

- Overweight and obese women have lower incomes (\$6,700 a year less) and higher rates of poverty (10 percent higher) than their non-obese peers.
- Overweight students are more likely to be refused letters of recommendation from faculty members.
- Overweight people are not hired or promoted as often and are paid less than their thinner counterparts. They may be charged more for employee insurance coverage, and are sometimes fired because of their weight.

Airlines are contemplating charging people who are fat an extra seat charge because they take up too much space. Some companies are planning to regularly charge employees a fat penalty unless they meet standards for weight, cholesterol, and blood pressure. One study suggests that fat employees cost businesses more money when taking into account absenteeism and reduced productivity.

Yet the Health at Every Size movement would disagree. Just because someone is thin does not mean they are healthy. In many instances someone who is fat may very well be healthier than non-fat people due to lifestyle choices such as exercise, smoking, drinking, stress reduction, etc.

People make comments like, "you have such a pretty face" to those who are fat as a way to pay them a compliment. Though well-intended, this statement infers that the person who is fat has so much potential if only they were not so big. Adult little people are often referred to as cute, a condescending term that ultimately limits them to one characteristic of their humanity.

Back To My Confession

Being lesbian provides me with a base of experience that offers insight I might not otherwise have. Although size discrimination and heterosexism are different in nature, both forms of prejudice share some commonalities. Here are some shared challenges that contribute to discriminatory attitudes and beliefs.

- Many people see gay people as disgusting and repugnant.
- Many would suggest gay people could change if they really wanted. As a result they blame gay people for the injustice they experience.
- Parents/family, and teachers, who are suppose to support and love you, encourage you to change
- Public displays of affection are seen as disgusting and are not appreciated.
- Gay people are bullied, ridiculed and discriminated every day and as a result, experience higher rates of depression and suicide.

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Whether people want to admit it or not, size does matter. Just as race, gender, ability, and sexual orientation all matter because they are critical elements of our identity. All discrimination should be ban and much legislation has been passed to outlaw such injustice. Yet, very little has been done for discrimination based on

Does Size Really Matter?

size.

In the United States there are only six cities (Binghamton, NY, San Francisco & Santa Cruz, CA, Urbana, IL, Madison, WI, and Washington DC) and one state (Michigan) that have laws intact to prevent discrimination based on weight or height, and these laws focus solely on employment issues.

How You Can Raise Awareness on Size Discrimination

- Put pressure on companies that discriminate against fat people or force employees into weight-loss programs.
- Fight accessibility problems within restaurants, theaters, airplanes and other forms of public transportation. If you are an "average-size" person, your advocacy on this issue will more likely result in change.
- Try to ensure there are programs in schools that teach tolerance and non-violence including teaching that fat kids should not be harassed, put on diets, or denied food.
- Don't let fat or short jokes go unchallenged.
- Do not judge people by their size.

Sources:

"Weight Discrimination: Our Position", Council on Weight Discrimination
Report on Discrimination Due to Physical Size, National Education Association
NAAFA Policy on Employment Discrimination, National Association to Advance Fat Acceptance

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