

What Size Is Love and Acceptance?

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The single most hurtful comment ever made to me about my body was by my father when I was around ten years old. I still can't repeat exactly what he said, but it ended with "...no wonder you are so fat!" Rather than teach me how to eat proper portions or foods, that was his reaction to what I had chosen to eat on that day at my Grandmother's house. To say that I was devastated would be a major understatement. Even more devastating was when I tried to discuss it with him later in life to bring closure to that pain, and he didn't remember the incident I had tried all my life to forget.

Though his words were like a fingernails scratching on a chalkboard, their very irritation initiated my desire to be happy, to be who I am, and to become an empathetic listener to others who have suffered the blows of degrading descriptions. A few years ago, I began a mentor relationship with a bright, resourceful 15-year-old girl. It was my privilege to be the first adult woman she had met who was happy, even though I didn't fit the typical married with children mold. This young woman was already a size 18 and almost six feet tall when she entered high school. Many of the painful hardships of adolescence she had already endured were related to her size. To say that she felt unlovable would be an understatement.

How did that happen? It is unfortunate, but the source of the bias is all around us in society, in print, in cinema and television.

Week after week, I worked to re-build the confidence of this young woman, assuring her that she was beautiful, special and loveable regardless of the status quo. During our talks, we discussed her size and how she felt when kids made fun of her. Gradually, I convinced her, through both action and deed, that larger bodied women and men can still feel secure about ourselves, our beauty and value despite the media hype and peer pressure. We are completely eligible to make our lives into whatever we want. At first, she found it hard to believe that it was possible. However, through our talks and by observing how I handled myself and talked about my own life as an adult who survived being a fat child and teen it became clear to her.

For two years, we met weekly, each of us learning from the other. At some point during that time, fear took control of me, as I became a victim of the media's definition of ideal body weight and size. The fear-based thinking I had succumbed to told me it was irresponsible for me not to tell her about the long-term consequences of being overweight, as if she hadn't heard it everywhere she turned. My young friend noticed the change in me and she saw me abandon my priority of health and well being for weight loss and appearance. She watched me deny my previous commitment to the things I was already doing to be healthy in mind and body as sufficient to improve my health. She also saw me lose and regain through yet another restrictive diet the same weight I have lost and regained repeatedly over the years as a yo-yo dieter.

Our roles changed and it was she who spoke the words about inner beauty and self love. Clearly, my 15-year-old teacher told me that she was saddened as my focus changed from what was right

and good about me, to what was wrong. My protégé resisted my “Yes, but” comments, instead reciting the lessons that I had so recently taught her about herself. My own fear blocked her messages.

After that diet failure, I finally accepted that traditional methods of weight loss are not effective for me, and I had tried them all. I connected with Kelly Bliss, a lifestyle and fitness coach, who happens to be ‘plus-size’. Kelly works with people of all shapes and sizes to become more fit regardless of their current size or ability. She has been my personal coach for more than a year, guiding me back to the healthy state of mind I enjoyed before fear and body loathing took charge. Unlearning is the hardest type of learning because it requires deleting something you have been doing and replacing it with different knowledge and practices. It takes more time and patience; but it can be done.

Kelly works with adult and children; but she is especially positive about helping children feel better about themselves. She recommends using a three-pronged approach:

1. *Clean up your own act. Change your mind about body size and beauty. Kids can easily tell what you really think.*
2. *Live healthy and take actions to end body loathing in your life and in the world. Kids learn much more from what you do, than what you say.*
3. *Expand your view of beauty to include all sizes, ages and ethnicities. Kids learn their aesthetics from their environment.*

Crucial to instilling these changes is shifting your focus from size and weight to health and fitness. This shift is radical, and requires on-going support and education in most cases.

Although I lost touch with the young woman who modeled this for me, I do remember the lessons she taught. Self care and consistently making good choices that lead to improved fitness and health is the key to self-acceptance. It is this change in thinking that allows us to accept who we are, today, regardless of our weight, size or shape. To help children and young people grow into healthy adults, we must show them how to love themselves now.

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