breaking up with diet culture: unpacking anti-fat bias

Content Warning: This infographic discusses specific examples of diet culture. please take care.

people of all sizes can and do struggle with negative body image and eating concerns; however, folks that live in larger bodies also face a specific oppression that people in thinner bodies do not, regardless of body image: anti-fat bias

what is anti-fat bias?

Sometimes referred to as "fatphobia," "weight bias," or "sizeism," anti-fat bias refers to the attitudes, behaviors, and social systems that specifically marginalize, exclude, underserve, and oppress fat bodies.

how does it show up?

Anti-fat bias shows up in lots of ways, with the most dangerous being medical anti-fat bias that can lead to folks in larger bodies not receiving adequate care. This can happen when a medical professional assumes their concerns are weight-related.

It can also appear in a person's internal belief system, which can lead to them viewing fat as "bad" and thin as "good." This is reinforced in media, medical systems, and even in the way the world is built for thinner people.

what are the impacts on health?

- Increased stress levels
- Increased vulnerability to depression, anxiety, poor body image, and low self-esteem
- Increased chance of disordered eating

BREAK THE BIAS

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"It is in letting go that we gain control." – unknown

what is diet culture?

Diet culture is an entire belief system that associates food with morality and thinness with goodness. It is rooted in all sorts of other oppressive systems, such as colonization and anti-Black racism, that can lead to the vilification of foods from non-white cultures. Diet culture is also behind "fad" diets, society's obsession with a "perfect" body, and the pressure many folks feel to attain an unattainable body type.

what is health at every size?

Health at Every Size is a framework designed to affirm a holistic approach to health and end weight stigma and discrimination. What does that mean though?

It means our well-being and healthy habits are more important than any number on the scale! A person can be healthy, regardless of their weight or size. Most importantly, ALL people deserve unbiased and compassionate medical care regardless of their health status, size, and shape.

so what can we do about it?

No one person can change an entire system, nor can they control the beliefs of those around them. But one person can examine their own beliefs, do some unlearning, and call out anti-fat bias and diet culture when they see it. If everyone does a little, it means a lot.

read on for some tips!

breaking up with diet culture: unlearning & relearning

"This is it: This body is home…" – Marya Hornbacher

identifying diet culture

For many of us, diet culture has been ingrained in us since we were young, and it may be even more prevalent based on our culture. So how can we recognize when it shows up?
A good rule of thumb is that if anything is attaching morality to any one food or body type, it's probably diet culture. Remember, the only "bad" food is food that's past its expiration date. And, there are no "bad" bodies.

challenging anti-fat bias

Think about your associations with words like "fat" "skinny" and "fit." Reframe that inner critic who might be telling you that you're less than for not being as small as possible. Humans aren't meant to all be the same size, and we don't have to shrink ourselves or fit a certain mold to be worthy. Start challenging yourself to call out thoughts you have about yourself that align with anti-fat bias.

how else does it show up?

- a fitness instructor talking about a "beach body" or "earning" your weekend
- foods labeled "guilt-free," "skinny," or "clean"
- "what I eat in a day" videos on IG or TikTok
- folks sharing fitness journeys that focus on weight loss or the appearance of muscle
- a celebrity's meal plan that they used to prep for a role or show

Some of these may seem harmless, and the folks participating in them might intend no harm. But all of this reinforces the idea that thin = good.

ready for the next step?

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using mindful language

Avoiding harmful anti-fat language is a key part of breaking up with diet culture. Start with yourself.

Here are a few things to start removing from your vocabulary:
- Saying "I feel so fat" when you don't love how you look
- Phrases like "I'm being so bad," "cheat day," & "guilty pleasure" when eating
- Any talk of "earning" your food through exercise
- In general, don't comment on anyone else's food choices

Eyes on your own plate!

calling folks in

As you're going through this diet culture breakup, you might start to notice friends and family saying classic diet culture phrases more often. If you feel comfortable and safe, you can gently call them in by letting them know you won't be participating in conversations about dieting, weight loss or gain, or even food in general. This might be more difficult for some folks than others because of culture, relationship, and all sorts of reasons. Diet culture is notorious for sneaking into our thoughts and conversations, so be kind to yourself and others.

breaking up is hard to do

Diet culture has been a part of our lives for as long as most of us can remember, so this break up won't be an easy one. Embracing a life for yourself that isn't dictated by diet culture is a radical declaration of self-love, and not everyone will understand it. And that's ok! Engage in self-care, take it one day at a time, and seek support from like-minded folks as often as possible. You got this.

Sources: NEDA, Self Magazine, Aubrey Gordon, Christine Byrne, ASDAH, Scott Griffiths