

FAT-SHAMING

IS a Thing

...And It's **Foolish**



By: Zach Good
September 2015

My name is Zach and I'm a 29 year-old male. I am 6'1" tall, weigh 175 lbs., can run a 6-minute mile, work out religiously three times per week, and follow a strict gluten-free, vegan diet.

And I'm here to tell you that fat-shaming is shortsighted, mean-spirited, and irrational.

It seems every few weeks a new viral photo or video about fat-shaming evokes such a passionate response online that the buzz spills over into the headlines of mainstream national news outfits. A couple months ago it was the Old Navy changing-room selfie. This month it is comedienne Nicole Arbour's 6-minute YouTube video outburst against overweight people, during which she claims things like "fat shaming is not a thing" and "big-boned isn't a thing" while making various derogatory 'jokes' about obese individuals.

As in previous cases of fat-shaming, two camps have taken root online in the video's wake: one that believes being overweight is a choice—and thus, that overweight people are inherently flawed and should be ashamed of themselves and their appearance—and one that believes that we should all be content with who we are and what our bodies look like, whatever they might look like. The former group claims the latter is overly-sensitive, and the latter group claims the former is overly-harsh.

In the past I've sat back and watched this process unfold as a neutral observer, but this time I'm taking a stand. As a self-confessed workout addict who follows a militant diet, I'm lifting up my voice to say that fat-shaming is not only morally wrong, but it is also narrow-minded and cruel.

Fat-shaming is logically invalid and rude. A 2014 study by the London-based Health Behaviour Research Centre found that not only does fat-shaming *not* motivate weight loss, but it can also do more harm than good. The reason is because humans are wired to respond constructively to positive affirmation and destructively to negative affirmation. “Othering” particular groups frequently spurs its members to pull farther away from the mainstream rather than merge with it. Fat-shaming, therefore, is purely a mean-spirited action.

The fat-shaming crowd often underwrites its criticisms with an air of supremacy, as if they are inherently more righteous than the obese. It should follow, then, that fat-shamers should know to judge other human beings from an enlightened viewpoint—one that focuses on enduring qualities such as character, intelligence, and integrity, and not fleeting and shallow attributes like outer appearance. The body is impermanent. At any moment it can change shape, develop an illness, or become impaired. The mind and soul, on the other hand, are timeless. Making a permanent judgement of another based on transitory features is irrational and logically invalid.

Despite what fat-shamers claim, being overweight is not always the result of laziness or apathy. Individuals can become obese due to physical health issues that have little or nothing to do with diet and exercise. Thyroid imbalances and digestive disorders are but two of many, many conditions that can lead an individual to obesity even when a sound diet and exercise routine are followed. My father experienced such a condition. An athlete, he played football through college and continued to work out and eat well long after he graduated and got married. When he was diagnosed with cancer in his late-twenties, however, some of the medications he needed to take caused him to gain weight very rapidly, pushing him from a normal weight to one doctors would consider ‘obese’ by today’s standards. The thought that a stranger may have seen my father in public during those days and looked down on him for his weight brings a tear to my eye.

In a similar manner, obesity can be the result of mental health issues. For many, food is a vehicle for dealing with emotional trauma, and an intriguing concept is that emotional trauma can trigger both overeating and undereating. For example, two girls can suffer equally-horrifying instances of abuse during their teenage years but while those events might fuel anorexia in one, they may stimulate overeating in the other. Since our society views being skinny as a more beautiful quality than being heavy, there is a greater chance the anorexic girl will be seen in a favorable light than the overweight girl, despite the fact that both eating habits are equally dangerous for human health and are an expression of the same afflicted mental state.

Obesity may be the result of social norms and miseducation. Looking back on my experience in the public education system, I can say with certainty that America’s schools offer suspect health education, particularly as it pertains to nutrition. Nearly all of my nutritional knowledge came not from school, but from independent study after I graduated college. It’s no wonder, then, that upon hearing I follow a vegan diet, so many people ask me how I get my recommended daily amount of protein and whether I’m worried about becoming malnourished and sickly. It’s also no wonder that, when I tell them I eat more than 150 grams of protein and 2,800 calories per day—without the aid of any supplements whatsoever—I’m given a surprised look.

Our society glorifies junk food. Next time you drive down the highway, look at the billboards you pass. Do you see advertisements for spinach, pears, and beans? No; you see advertisements for hamburgers, french fries, and pizza—comfort and convenience foods that contribute to obesity, cardiovascular disease, and diabetes. These are unfortunately the same foods slopped onto the plates of students in public school cafeterias across the country every day, reinforcing our collective erroneous belief that these foods are to be consumed regularly. America is in dire need of a nutritional paradigm shift. Instead of spending time berating someone's physical appearance, fat-shamers should be trying to reform our incompetent social and public institutions.

Without a doubt there is an obesity epidemic in this nation and it must be addressed.

According to the National Institute of Health, more than one-third of Americans are obese. From a healthcare standpoint, that is way too high.

But there is hope.

If you belong to that cross-section of America and have yet to take action, it is with a great sense of compassion for your wellbeing that I appeal to you to use every available resource to improve your health. Becoming physically fit might seem like one colossal leap but just as an oak tree starts as an acorn, wellness begins with a single step. All you have to do is commit to that first step. Start by blocking off some amount of time in your schedule each day—even 10 or 20 minutes—to devote to your health. Use that time to do something simple like review a food label guide online or try an instructional workout video on YouTube. Replace one unhealthy serving of food with a healthy one. Instead of taking the elevator, take the stairs. Buy a pedometer and challenge yourself every day to take one more step than you did the day before. Once you start seeing improvements in your health, I promise you will be encouraged and gladly increase your efforts.

You *can* do it.

But no matter where you are on the journey to wellness—even if you have yet to take that first step—love your body and yourself. You are given one cosmic eye blink on Earth to shine your light. Spending any portion of that time entertaining disparaging, self-defeating words that originate from either your mind or the mouth of a stranger will only fill that valuable time with unhappiness and regret.

In the end, body type says nothing about the value of a human being.

But speaking carelessly does.