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WHY OBSESSING OVER A 'HEALTHY' WEIGHT IS WRONG

The constant focus on body mass index – driven by diet culture, body shaming and New Year's resolutions – is misplaced and can be damaging

South China Morning Post · 6 Jan 2022 · B11 · Tribune News Service

In most cultures it's bad to be fat. Rarely is this more apparent than at the start of the new year, when diet culture, fatphobia and capitalism converge. Exploiting body shame and people's desire for renewal, weight-loss companies ramp up ads, gyms reduce rates and diet companies promise to help people realise the elusive goal of lasting weight loss.

Sociologists and medical professionals say this yearly cycle underscores society's obsession with thinness and fuels dangerous misperceptions about the relationship between weight and health.

January's anti-fatness may be cloaked in wellness and body positivity, but its core message to potential customers is always the same: their body is not good enough and they have not been disciplined enough to lose weight.

"People are doing this to avoid the social stigma, the economic stigma, the moral stigma of being fat or just not being as thin as they could be," says Natalie Boero, a sociology professor at San Jose State University in California and author of

Killer Fat: Media, Medicine and Morals in the Epidemic. American Obesity

"If it were about health, we would be talking about access to health care. We would be talking about the toll of discrimination against fat people in medical settings, as well as in social settings ... We certainly wouldn't just be talking about people above or approaching a certain weight."

Implicit in the barrage of weight-loss ads is the belief that thinner is healthier. The relationship between weight and health is complex, though.

Dr Gregory Dodell of Central Park Endocrinology in New York said some medical professionals are questioning body mass index (BMI) as a marker of health. Rather than focusing on the scale, Dodell takes a holistic approach by assessing his patients' overall health and related behaviours, including exercise and nutrition.

"People can be healthy across the size spectrum," he said. "I have patients that are 'normal BMI' that have type two diabetes. And I have patients that are well above 'normal BMI' that don't have any health problems ... If you just compared their labs (test results) to each other, you'd think the person with the poorer labs was the heavier person. It's not always true."

Dodell is part of a growing community of medical professionals who say the risk of obesity, typically defined by BMI, has been overstated.

"We don't expect you to be healthy because you weigh 300 pounds (136kg), and it seems that you're fighting a battle that you were never meant to be healthy, which is just not true," he said. "I have patients who come in and say they avoid doctors because every time they go – for a sore throat, for irregular periods, diabetes – all they say is, 'well, you really should lose some weight.'"

“And they’ve made the assumption that that person is not exercising or not eating healthy when they’re actually doing yoga four times a week, meditating and eating plenty of fruit and vegetables. There’s so much stigma around weight in our culture.”

Goal-setting around health in the new year isn’t inherently problematic, says Natalie Ingraham, a sociology professor at California State University. But goal setting towards weight loss, in particular, is setting people up for failure. Ingraham said research shows 95 per cent of people who diet gain back their weight.

“It’s not that people should never watch what they’re eating or never have to change what they’re eating. But I think the change towards eating particularly focused on weight loss as the main outcome is just a boulder up the hill and your body’s going to fight back. It wants to be at a certain weight, a certain size and it’s going to do what it can to stay there,” she said.

Dodell said people in larger bodies are the ones most likely to have dieted. “The most likely outcome of dieting is weight regain, which metabolically is shown to be worse for people because you go into this restrictive state, which gets you into this January – lose 30 pounds in 30 days. What happens in February?” he said.

“This weight cycling increases inflammatory markers, it increases stress response. It actually may even reset our set point so people not only gain the weight back that they lost, but more. And what does that do to your body? Your body just throws up its hand and is like, ‘what am I supposed to do now?’”

Ingraham said not everybody can or should be thin, and people have less control over their weight than diet culture would have them believe.

Boero said the weight loss industry needs people to believe in the myth of self-discipline. “During this pandemic, many of us have felt so out of control, and I think there’s a way in which diet companies or various ‘wellness companies’ ... will continue to capitalise on this idea that this is under our control.”

The irony, Boero said, is that in the middle of this ongoing pandemic, “we still haven’t grasped that our health is about more than our individual behaviour”.

At the start of the year, experts say people who want to renew their focus on health should take time to examine what health means to them.

“There’s going to be this onslaught of messages in January that you need to reinvent yourself, that there is something wrong with you that needs fixing,” Ingraham said.

“You can push back on that mentality to say, ‘I’m doing OK actually.’ Or maybe there is something you’re wanting to change about your lifestyle that is in your control, and I think it’s OK to set that goal.”

You may not be able to control your weight, and some experts would argue you may not need to, but you can control eating more vegetables, drinking more water, finding moments to breathe, and exercising in ways that don’t feel punishing.

“If we cared about fat people’s health as a society, there are a million things that we would do before we shamed people, before we prescribed people diet after diet that frankly ends up draining their systems, likely making people weigh more over time,” Boero said.

“It’s worth asking, ‘who benefits from us feeling terrible about ourselves?’”

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