

A FAT WOMEN'S S PROBLEM-SOLVING GROUP:
RADICAL CHANGE

--by members of the Fat Women's Problem-Solving Group, 1973-74,
of the Los Angeles Radical Feminist Therapy Collective

Written by Aldebaran, Gudrun Fonfa and Reanne

With: Simone Wallace, Merry Demarest and Syd Jasso

The ultimate failure rate for all reducing diets is greater than 99% (1). Therefore it is pointless for therapists to counsel fat people to lose weight as a solution to the problems they face for being fat.

* * *

Fat people who binge on food have been told to "eat less," "call for help to stop bingeing," etc., etc., time after time, week after week, year after year, and the bingeing continues. Therefore it is senseless for therapists to counsel fat people to "eat less," "call for help to stop bingeing," etc., etc.

* * *

Therapists have to stop persecuting fat people with the blame for treatments that don't work. Therapy is oppressive when it piles the failure and blame onto its victims, and consumes our energy and self-respect in the process.

We are a group of fat women who met in a weekly problem-solving group for one year. The group's facilitators were two fat members of the Los Angeles Radical Feminist Therapy Collective. The group was a fat liberation ion group. We wanted to develop self-respect as fat women; to take back our power over food and our right to enjoy eating; to support one another to reject society's condemnation of us; and to act against our oppression as fat women. This paper was written by members and facilitators of the group. We want to share what we did and what we learned with others, so that fat people can start to demand non-oppressive therapy and get it.

From the beginning, the group took the position set forth in the "Fat Liberation Manifesto" (Fat Underground, 1973). Basically this position is that fat people are an oppressed minority, exploited and persecuted by the very nature of the capitalist, racist, sexist, elitist society in which we live. The medical reasons usually given to justify our oppression are lies and misinterpretations of fact.

We took very seriously the nutritional research that finds that most fat people eat the same, or less, than most thin people (2, 3, 4). This research is widely published and well-established. It has been ignored by psychologists, who continue to treat fat people on the basis that we're fat because we supposedly eat more than "normal" (i.e. slim) people.

Our guiding principle was that fat people deserve to enjoy food just as much as slim people do. Fat people know what food we want; often we just don't believe we really want it because we've been punished so much for wanting to enjoy food. We saw so-called "compulsive eating" as the positive rebellion against food

repression. Instead of trying to distract ourselves from hunger through hobbies, athletics, sex, etc., as often prescribed by weight loss programs, we sought to indulge our hunger. Anything you eat is okay. Even if some fat people actually do eat more than some thin people, the degree of ridicule, contempt and oppression dealt out by a multi-billion dollar diet industry toward fat people is not consistent with the degree of ridicule, contempt and oppression imposed other "excesses" such as sex, television, sports fanaticism, smoking, etc.

Since many people who are liberal would go along with "liberated eating", but are concerned that fat is unhealthy, we want to state our position on health. It should be obvious that fat people who live starved and persecuted aren't going to be healthy. All medical research finding fat to be unhealthy used as subjects fat people who hated themselves and who kept trying to starve themselves into acceptability (through "voluntary" reducing diets). In fact, the diseases usually associated with obesity can be related directly to stress and starvation: hypertension, atherosclerosis, kidney problems, diabetes, heart disease, and so on (5, 6). Also, when doctors refuse to treat fat people, or shame us so badly that we avoid future contact with them, they make us sick. Adding further support to this position is the evidence that fat people living in cultures that approve of fat are as healthy as slim people of the same cultures (7). As the Fat Underground says, "Fat people die from the social disease called oppression, and not the medical 'disease' called obesity."

One of the group's facilitators made this impassioned statement: "It enrages me that people dare to challenge fat people's fat on the basis of its being 'unhealthy.' No one has the right to oppress anyone because they are perceived as unhealthy. People who smoke two packs a day, or choose to engage in some other 'non-healthy activity' still get to have the jobs, lovers and general societal acceptance that healthy fat people are denied. Thin people have health problems; there is no disease unique to fat people."

Finally, we assumed that fat people are biologically distinct. That is, most people eat as much as we do, and aren't fat. We do not choose to be fat. We don't have to want to be fat in order to justify being fat. This point became extremely important as the group evolved.

GROUP PROCESS AND FEEDBACK

This section describes the group's process in working with problems related to fat oppression, and the feedback that went along with the process.

1. Formation

The radical fat liberation movement became public in Los Angeles with the writing of the Fat Liberation Manifesto, by Judy Freespirit and Aldebaran (Vivian Mayer) in November of 1973. Both women are radical feminists and were working in the Los Angeles Radical Feminist Therapy Collective. They were joined by other fat women (and one fat man, who later left) to form the Fat Underground, a group whose purpose at that time was consciousness-raising and developing a political analysis of fat liberation.

At the same time, Aldebaran and Simone Wallace, another fat woman in the L.A.R.F.T.C., announced that they would facilitate a problem-solving group for fat women. The group was presented to the feminist community as a "fat liberation group", to provide a safe place for fat women to work on problems and to learn to feel good about themselves. The political analysis of fat liberation would be applied to personal problems. Development of this analysis had barely begun at that time. Feedback in the group was limited by how well we understood fat politics. Struggling with problems in the group added a lot to our understanding, and complemented the analysis being developed by the Fat Underground.

Women who wanted to join the group were asked to read the article "Fat Liberation" (8) by Aldebaran first, and to join only if they agreed with its point of view. Nevertheless, at the first meeting, one woman was

openly skeptical of fat liberation, and others were secretly skeptical. A typical assumption by members was that, once they learned to like themselves through fat liberation, the pounds would "melt away" and they'd no longer be fat!

Group members were asked not to diet while in the group. The reasons for this were: Weight loss, as long as it is sustained, masks some problems of self-esteem, etc.; Dieting creates other problems, particularly eating problems; Fat women could not possibly feel really good in an atmosphere that condoned open rejection of fatness (i.e. "It may be ok for you, but it's not ok for me"). Also, group members who were not losing weight, whether by choice or because their diets weren't "working" would inevitably feel bad listening to reports of the "success" (however temporary) of the dieters. However, the facilitators were afraid that if dieting were forbidden outright, the whole group would walk out. As a result, group policy retreated into ambiguity: "You shouldn't diet, but if you have to, don't talk about it in group" (!!)

This lasted for only a few weeks before everyone became entirely confused and paranoid about each other's intentions. The rule was made: No dieting. Giving up the hope of a future thin self via a personal dieting solution meant facing a lifetime of fat oppression, and most members were uncomfortable with the rule. We attempted to look at this as choosing where and how to struggle: against your body, or against your oppressor, who hates your body, the way you look, hence you.

2. The First Few Months

In the first month, typical fat problem-solving looked like this: A group member starts to talk about how awful she feels being fat. Gloom descends on the group.

Facilitator: "What do you want from the group?"

Member: "Permission to go on a diet."

Then, while the group listens, torn by mixed feelings, the facilitators repeat all the reason for not dieting, and for putting energy into the struggle against fat oppression instead. Soon the group members and facilitators were secretly furious at each other.

To get out of this situation, the facilitators strove to place responsibility for not dieting onto the members:

Member: "I hate being fat."

Facilitator: "What do you want from the group?"

Member: "Permission to go on a diet."

Facilitator: "Tell what you know about dieting."

Soon no one talked about wanting to lose weight. This part of the process went "underground."

A new variation on wanting to lose weight that now appeared was, "Don't get me wrong now, I don't want to be really thin, I just don't want to be as fat as I'm going to be if I keep on eating like this."

"This" varied from eating pretty much what the average non-fat adult eats (which seems excessive to fat people because we're accustomed to dieting), to bingeing. Group members were on the defensive, and were

really scared about getting fatter, yet valued the emotional support of other fat women, and wanted to stay in the group. The facilitators, being scared also, were afraid that if they admitted their own fears the group would fall apart. The facilitators knew that it is as futile trying to keep off twenty-five pounds as trying to keep off two hundred, but the insight that a person's weight is rarely the result of their "choice" had not yet been articulated.

One point the facilitators stood by was that any kind of eating restrictions were likely to lead to worse problems than they were intended to solve. When a woman would ask the group to help her stop "eating so much," or help her stop bingeing, the first feedback would be that all fat people get that sort of "help" over and over again, and it doesn't help. There are no magic words we can say that haven't already been said.

We feel strongly that people know in themselves when to eat and when to stop. The following feedback was given to women who were bingeing and terrified by it:

1) Relax. It's okay to binge. You've been repressed about food a lot, and you deserve as much as you want. There's nothing to be ashamed of; eating isn't a crime and doesn't have to be "rational."

2) Food is a natural tranquilizer. Society approves of valium, milltown, etc., but frowns upon food intake as a "neurotic" solution.

3) Make sure you have a safe place to eat, where there's no one to judge you or to make you paranoid. Alone might be best, or with someone from the group who'll eat with you and who supports you to eat freely.

4) Keep plenty of "binge" foods around the house.

5) Take your time. If you feel panic, take some deep breaths and then eat more if you want to.

6) It's okay to make mistakes and eat more (or less) than you want.

7) You deserve to enjoy food.

It's important not to attach any anticipated changes in eating behavior onto this feedback. Early in the group some members expected that once they really had permission to eat, they would eat less. This in fact did not happen, since most members were not eating as much as they wanted in the first place. But with such expectations these women continued to be uptight about eating.

A fat diabetic woman joined the group, and her problem with bingeing illustrates the difficulties of working with this sort of situation. She had been bullied, scared and patronized by doctors plenty in the past, and her bingeing on sugar continued. We worked with her the same as with non-diabetic bingers. However, the pressure of the extra eating injunctions on her was very painful. She always seemed to have an agenda to stop the eating that she was ostensibly giving herself permission to do. So, while other group members gradually relaxed around food and stopped feeling the urge to binge, this woman continued to have severe sugar binges.

The group's refusal to support dieting and other food restrictions was very frustrating to some members, so they left. New women joined, but except for the first month there were always vacancies in the group.

Meanwhile we did a lot of "touchy-feely" exercises to help us learn to accept and like our bodies. After group, members went out together to eat. We supported one another to enjoy the "fattening" foods that we had never before felt permission to eat in public.

When the group was about four months old, we had an all-day Permission Marathon. The high points were a (planned) eating orgy in the afternoon, and an (unplanned) sex orgy in the evening, after the marathon was over and the facilitators had gone home.

3. Turning Point(s)

About six months after the group started, we were joined by a woman who was in a crisis of pain over being fat. In the way the group responded to her, we discovered how supportive and strong we had grown.

New member: "I'm so ashamed. I can't bring myself to do anything. I know I should go to school and make something of myself, but I'm too scared walking into a classroom, with all those people seeing me. What's wrong with me?"

Old member: "Nothing's wrong with you. You know those thin people are all judging you and wishing you'd get the hell out of their sight. It makes a lot of sense to be scared. We all are. You know it's not safe."

The new member responded to this feedback by crying with relief: nothing was wrong with her. Fat people are often wrongly accused of using our fatness as an "excuse" for not succeeding at things. We need validation of our experience of oppression, or we end up feeling crazier and hating ourselves even more.

New member: "Why do I feel this crazy panic to do everything perfectly?"

Old member: "Because you know you have to work ten times harder than a slim person to get anything."

The night that these issues came up, the discussion drifted into consciousness-raising. We all talked about feeling ashamed and persecuted for our size. One facilitator said that, given a choice, she'd much rather be slim. The whole group sighed with relief. At once, the awful "underground" secret came out into the open and was made acceptable: it's okay to wish you were slim. It's a futile wish, but a valid one.

This kind of validation is what was missing from the work that went on early in the group about wanting permission to lose weight. We're not sure that the group in those days would have heard such validation without assuming that it meant, "Okay, go on a diet." However, our experience suggests that it might have been good to have had a consciousness-raising group along with the problem-solving group. In a consciousness-raising group an awareness/analysis of fat politics might have developed faster.

4. The Group Gets Political

Gradually several factors "clicked" together and the group began to take a conscious and active public stand on fat. First there was the emotional environment that about eight months of working together had built: caring about one another; anger whenever a member talked about how she'd been hurt by some anti-fat bigot and pride whenever a member talked about fighting back. "Incurable" compulsive eaters had achieved stable appetites and were comfortable with and in control of food. We had all gained weight, most of us had stabilized our weight, and our lives were feeling better in many important ways. All the women who had big doubts about fat liberation had dropped out of the group. We felt a strong sense of "us."

The facilitators began to emphasize political action as a necessary part of radical therapy. Members of the group were urged to become involved in some fat liberation or women's liberation project. This urging was met with mixed resistance and agreement.

Shortly before August 27, 1974, Women's Equality Day, the singer Cass Elliot died. The group joined with the Fat Underground in a funeral procession and angry speech at the Los Angeles Women's Equality Day celebration, accusing the medical profession of having dieted Cass Elliot to death.

From that point on, every woman in the group considered herself an activist in fat liberation. Most members joined the Fat Underground when it opened up to new members soon afterwards. Individually and together, fat women from the problem-solving group, the Fat Underground, and the Radical Feminist Therapy Collective started confronting the world and the feminist community for having anti-fat attitudes and discriminatory practices.

Group work on fat problems now frequently involved role-playing of confrontations. For example:

Member #1 (playing bigot): "You really ought to learn to control yourself, you disgusting slob."

Member #2 (as herself): "go away, I hate you!"

Member #1: "It's for your own good that I'm telling you this."

Member #2: "I don't have to listen to you!"

Member #1: "You're just trying to escape. This 'Fat Lib' stuff is just escapism."

At this point Member #2 was stumped and could think of no reply. The group offered these replies: "You deserve to escape." "Escape was considered wonderful when it was Jews escaping from pogroms or slaves escaping from the South." "You're choosing your struggle."

By this time, conflicts within the feminist community were reflected within the group: conflicts between the Lesbians and the non-Lesbians; conflicts between the anti-professional radicals and the psychology graduate students; conflicts between some individuals and the structure and ideology of the facilitators and their collective. Hoping that we could all work together on fat problems in the Fat Underground, the group decided to end.

A SUMMARY OF REACTIONS BY A GROUP MEMBER

The fat group provided the expected safety, but more than that encouraged pride through identification. These new feelings of self-worth became a source of power. When the political insights connecting looksism and fat oppression were used as confrontation tools, a reversal of societal standards occurred to some extent. There existed a certain prestige to being an articulate fat woman.

Outstanding Feedback used in the Fat Liberation Problem-Solving Group:

1) Oppression can be overt or mystified. People (friends, relatives, doctors, business associates, strangers in the street) are vessels carrying society's cruel messages. They have aesthetics that are programmed, and false information about our health. The stress and tension of our oppression causes the illnesses that are attributed erroneously to our fat. When anyone gives advice on dieting out of a supposed concern, they are acting on behalf of our enemies, and in that sense they are our enemy. They are saying in effect that we are not acceptable as we are: we should inflict pain upon ourselves in order to change to suit an arbitrary standard that they have been coerced into adopting.

2) All dieting is an attempt at a personal solution, when the problem is political. Dieting/starvation weakens a person physically and mentally and incapacitates her as a revolutionary.

3) One fat person "succeeding" in the world (such as Cass Elliot or Winston Churchill) will no more end the persecution of fat people than one black, or one woman, succeeding in the white (thin) male, heterosexual, Christian, capitalist society frees all blacks or all women.

4) Fat women burden themselves, by dieting, to make life easier for people close to them: parents, mates, children, friends who are stigmatized by the social unacceptability of the fat person. The public stance maintains that there is something wrong with people who choose to associate with fat women. Our response is that the fat person is not responsible for other people's embarrassment. Our friends and relatives need to struggle with their embarrassment and not burden the fat person with it.

5) There is also a taboo against fat people associating with other fat people. The stares and comments in public are increased. We are abused for being an unusual sight. We need to remember our human rights, and that we can choose to fight or ignore outside judgements. We also should be aware that one oppressed individual, isolated, is a potential suicide, while a group of oppressed people, able to share their insights and care about each other, is a potential revolution.

6) Anger is a first step toward liberation. We learned to turn our depression into the anger buried within us. At first it was easier to experience anger for each other than for ourselves. Consciousness-raising hardship stories put us in touch with painful injustices. Feedback is to remember who your enemies are; who benefits from our oppression; to be aware that all thin people have privileges by virtue of their status in society. To confront people for abusing us is to take the offensive.

7) In order to end the "doormat syndrome," one must learn to feel deserving, not to trust authority, and not to accept bad treatment and neglect. We kept in mind a basic nutritional fact that has been suppressed: the average fat person eats no more calories than the average slim person. We had not done something wrong to deserve mistreatment.

8) We relaxed together outside of group, saw each other naked, and found that we looked beautiful to one another. The process outside the structure of the group is as important as what happens within the group.

9) We became aware of a lack of role models and heroines. Society would lead us to believe that every great woman was a thin woman, even to the extent of theatrical presentations in which fat women from history have been portrayed by thin actresses. Through research we found fat women who had made historical contributions, a number of them in the suffrage movement. We also became our own role models, by recognizing our own and each other's strengths. We are aware of the similarities with other oppressed minorities.

10) Peculiar to fat women is a mind/body split from being taught that to love ourselves we must hate and starve our bodies. We see this as demoralizing, and therapies that encourage this thinking are propagating society's worst messages about flesh. The panic we felt at the thought of getting fatter was mitigated through emotional support by group members and by accurate medical and nutritional information. Dieting has ruined our bodies; we may not ever settle at one steady weight. It is true that for every twenty pounds, oppression is increased, clothing is harder to buy, furniture to sit on, etc. These are society's punishments for our weight. Society is wrong: we can still see ourselves as viable human beings.

Footnotes

- (1)Alvan R. Feinstein, "How do we measure accomplishments in weight reduction?" Obesity: Causes, Consequences and Treatment, ed. Louis Lasagna (New York, 1974), pp. 81-87.
- (2)U.S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare, Obesity and Health, (1966), pp. 34-35.
- (3)A.M. Bryans, Childhood Obesity--Prelude to Adult Obesity," Canadian Journal of Public Health (November, 196?), p. 487.
- (4)Jean Mayer, Overweight: Causes, Cost and Control (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, 1966), p. 76.
- (5)Obesity and Health, p. 40.
- (6)Aldebaran, "Fat Liberation--A Luxury?" State and Mind, (June-July, 1977), pp. 34-38.
- (7)C. Stout, et. al., "Unusually low incidence of death from myocardial infarction..." Journal of the American Medical Association, 188 (June 8, 1964), pp. 845-849.
- (8)Aldebaran, "Fat Liberation," Issues in Radical Therapy #3 (Summer, 1973).