


What we know about food, weight, dieting and health is clouded in an ideology which makes it hard to understand the truth clearly. Even so, there is an abundance of scientific literature about the failure of weight loss diets, about the damage even "sensible" weight loss diets do to the body, and about the never-proven "cause" between fatness and a myriad of diseases. Even "weight loss professionals" (dieticians, nutritionists, psychotherapists) have become concerned about the failure of weight loss diets.

So why are we still living under delusions about "fattening foods" and "sensible diets?" Where are the legions of women taking hold of the long suppressed information about how diets do not work 96-99% of the time, or the fact that fat people do not, as a group, eat any more than thin people? Where are the feminist health activists making public outcry about expensive, experimental weight loss surgeries, some of which have a mortality (death) rate of 10% on the operating table? Why are we still willing victims of an ideology which keeps us obsessed about what we eat and what we weigh?

The facts about food, weight, dieting and the health of women are quite simple, well documented, and quite simply, totally repressed by the medical establishment and the diet industry. This suppression of information occurs in support of an ideology which is at least as pervasive as sexism, and which also has women as its primary target. Fat oppression, the name of this ideology, is the systematic hatred, ridicule, and discrimination against fat people. It impacts fat women especially hard, and if combined with oppression based on age, race, class, ability/disability, can be part of an overwhelming load of oppression which makes daily survival close to impossible. Fat oppression is based on the simple belief that fat people are not as good as thin people. This belief creates experiences of fat oppression ranging from rude remarks and hostile glances from friends, family and strangers on the street, to job discrimination, to "cures" (diets and surgery) which makes us physically ill and/or kill us. The weight of fat oppression is no laughing matter.

Fat oppression, like any other system of political beliefs, is supported by myths about food, weight and dieting which are seen as absolute truths by the medical community and lay people alike. Despite mountains of personal testimony by fat women about our life experiences which contradict these "facts," and despite increasing evidence supporting Fat Liberation's arguments, the Women's Health movement has done almost nothing to expose the myths about fat and health. In every other aspect of the Women's Health Movement, this kind of testimony is sufficient at least to launch an investigation, but when fat women speak about our experiences around food, dieting, weight and the oppression we face because we are fat, we are mocked and ignored. Skepticism from our feminists "sisters" makes it even harder for fat women to continue to believe in ourselves. The lack of support from other women creates an isolation that is hard to live with.

Fat oppression keeps all of us preoccupied with what we put into our mouths and how we think it will affect our weight. It keeps women divided and competitive with each other. Fat oppression supports the oppression of women very nicely -- it is another way in which men tell women how it is we are supposed to look, and punish us for our failure to do so. Of course, women internalize this oppression too, and use it against ourselves and each other. Fat women are seen



as inappropriate, inhuman, less than "real" women somehow, and failures at fulfilling our role of sexual companion and graceful ornaments to men's lives. In the feminist or Lesbian communities, we are seen as failures to be strong healthy Amazons. Even so, the power and grace fat women often possess, because of our size, makes us quite threatening to men who want women kept small and weak.

Women are kept weak by the inevitable yoyo process of dieting, maybe losing a little weight, regaining that weight, and dieting again. It should be emphasized that this failure has nothing to do with the type of diet, or the willpower of the dieter -- weight loss diets simply do not work 96-99% of the time. Weight lost is inevitably regained because diets do not work. But this failure is blamed on the dieter, not the ineffective method. When weight loss diets fail, they can be varied by rounds of bingeing, vomiting, and other purges, like overuse of laxatives. Women are told that we are at fault when diets fail; we are told that we must be sneaking food or eating in our sleep, or lying about what we eat. The failure is always ours, contributing to a low self-esteem and lack of trust in ourselves. When food deprivation, public hostility to our eating, families pulling food off of our plates and similar behaviors produce compulsive or abusive eating patterns, these become further evidence of our lack of will-power and self-control, further proof of our craziness. Eating problems are never blamed on their real cause -- genuine hunger, response to food deprivation of various forms, and the pressure to diet in order to be a "good" person. Our failure in this crucial endeavor, visible by our continued fat bodies, makes us targets for scorn and hatred. This public scorn, from people who don't know us and people who love us and "are doing it for our own good," becomes further proof in the mounting evidence that we are miserable failures at being human beings. If we weren't such miserable human beings, we would be thin. It is seen as that simple.

Comparison and competition among women is encouraged by our socialization in this culture, and it is seen as especially appropriate around body size. This competition keeps us viewing other women as relatively more or less successful in the ultimate measure of beauty, intelligence and worth: the size of our bodies. Comparison and competition, based on the fear of getting fat or the fear of getting fatter, keeps women from looking at who it is that really has control; who it is that is dictating how we ought to look and how we ought to live. Comparison and competition based on weight keeps us pouring our money into a \$10 billion industry that keeps us debilitated and weak. Comparison and competition keeps us from really banding together and fighting our common oppressor(s).

All women are victimized by fat oppression: women who are thin (superior now, but terrified of losing that advantageous position): women who are chunky (desperately trying not to cross that line into being fat); and women who are already fat (bottom of the heap, struggling desperately for self-esteem and social supports, or in despair of every becoming a "good" [that is, thin] person.) While fat oppression impacts fat women the hardest, and hits very fat women harder than smaller fat women, it is a way of keeping all of us divided and weak.

Think for one minute about the \$10 billion spent, by women, on diet pills, books, foods, clinics, psychotherapists, etc. Think about that money going to promote the ERA, or defeat anti-abortion legislation, or build

a park or the project of your choice. Think about the hours spent shopping for, using, and obsessing about diet-related projects. Turn that money over to a community project, that energy over to a women's group -- the prospects are staggering! Imagine for a moment women gathered at lunchtime in the workplace, but instead of talking about dieting and being "too fat," they are organizing about street safety in their town, or unionizing their shop. The energy which could go towards political satisfaction, personal projects or community improvements is enormous. Keeping our weight and body size our primary obsession makes it harder for women to really challenge a sexist, racist, class oppressive social system. Apart from the profit motive (which is amply rewarded), it is little wonder that the powers that be want women preoccupied with food and weight, not jobs and justice.

The Fat Liberation Movement is a political movement, and as such differs fundamentally from all the "food issues," body image and compulsive overeaters groups. We see the solution to the misery of fat women's lives as political change, not individual adjustment. It is not sufficient for a fat woman to learn to love herself, and in the absence of political analysis and group support, genuine self-love is difficult. Fat Liberation is a movement based on the knowledge that fat people as a group are victims of systematic oppression, and that the way to end this oppression is to work together for radical social change. We see the oppression of fat people as part of the existing social order that oppresses people because of age, race, sex, sexual preference, class and physical condition. We know that until values in this culture are radically changed, fat women will suffer from fat oppression.

So what do we want? The Fat Liberation movement exposes the lies that are the basis of our oppression as fat women. We encourage fat women to trust their own experiences and their own bodies, and we demand that thin women listen to us, and take our issues seriously. We expose the lies put out by the medical profession, and we demand that feminist health activists join us in this fight. We are working to end the use of "cures" created by the same medical monster that brought us thalidomide and DES, and that promotes "cures" which weaken and maim us, for a condition which needs no cure.

We want feminists to educate themselves about fat, food, diets and health, and to adopt a Fat Liberation perspective. We demand that women stop supporting the diet industry in all its disguises (including the insidious diet sodas which replace the "evil" sugar-based soda) we demand that political education on issues of food, health, fat and fat oppression be included as in-service education at every feminist health center, and within every women's group. We need all women, not just fat women, to become sensitized to fat oppression -- in media images, jokes, clothing (including the availability of feminist t-shirts), and physical access (is this space and the seating comfortable for fat women?) -- and to work to end fat oppression in the same way we work to end sexual or race oppression.

Feminist image-makers: writers, artists, photographers, actors; all have a responsibility to contribute to a positive aesthetic image of fat women by portraying us as strong and beautiful members of the community of women. Feminist health centers, women's centers, counseling centers can purge themselves of fat oppressive ideology, and present a positive image of fatness in their education, outreach and media efforts. Waiting rooms can have Fat Liberation information available, medical practitioners can be retrained in this area as they have in others.

Fat women -- what you can do for yourselves is get informed, get support, and get angry! It is not only up to us to make these changes, but we must begin the process for ourselves. And fat women, remember, you have nothing to lose!

AFTERWORD

Certain facts are essential for understanding the Fat Liberation position. For further information, or a literature list, send a self-addressed stamped envelope to: Fat Liberator Publications, P.O. Box 5227, Coralville, Iowa 52241; or Boston Area Fat Liberation, c/o 137 Tremont St., Cambridge MA 02139.

1. Fat people are not fat because we eat too much, eat the wrong foods, or have metabolic problems.

Over 100 studies have attempted to prove that fat people eat more, or eat differently than thin people, and every one of them has failed. Fat people eat the same amounts, and the same types of food as thin people -- this includes a wide range of eating patterns.

The relationship between food intake and weight is murky, at best. Most people seem to have a range of normal body weights, and when repeated dieting doesn't interfere (e.g. when people lose weight, then gain it back, they often gain more than the original loss), body weight seems to vary with activity, the seasons or other factors. Women who have dieted over long periods of time may have a higher "normal" body weight, as a result of dieting, than they would have had they never dieted. Eating less, even over a long period of time, does not produce permanent weight loss, because the body adapts to the decreased calorie intake.

2. Fat people cannot change our "problem" of being fat by dieting -- even on medically supervised "sensible" diets.

Medical research has consistently shown that weight loss diets have a long-term (five year) failure rate of 96-99%. This confirms fat women's experiences of dieting rigorously, and regaining weight after the diet ends. This failure rate means that only 1-3 people out of 100 dieters who do lose weight will remain at that weight for more than five years. 90% of the people who regain lost weight will regain more than they lost due to increased metabolic efficiency.

3. Dieting is an unhealthy process, contributing to poor mental health and causing the high incidence of certain diseases among fat people.

Dieting has been shown to increase the risk of heart attacks and strokes, hardening of the arteries, diabetes, gallstone problems, kidney disease, and more. The idea that the body "burns off its fat" is a particularly harmful myth; in fact, during the first few weeks of any weight-loss diet, the body goes for easy-to-convert fuel sources to replace lost calories. These sources are muscle tissue, not fat, and this includes the long muscles, supportive muscles, and the heart itself. Given the hundreds of diets many women are on, this destructive process can be repeated many times.

4. Fat people are not less healthy than thin people, nor are we unhealthy because of being fat.

Fat people range in health from very healthy to very ill -- just like thin people. Any attempt to prove that being fat actually causes illness has failed. Not one study has successfully proven that being fat causes the diseases attributed to it. Interestingly, all the diseases attributed to fatness (high blood pressure, diabetes, heart attacks etc.) are stress-related diseases, and are most likely to be caused by the combination of repeated dieting and living in a fat hating culture.

5. Fat people do not all compulsively over-eat, or exhibit other problem eating behaviors. Furthermore, these problem behaviors are not CAUSED by being fat.

Recent years have seen an abundant interest in a host of eating "disorders" ranging from self-starvation (anorexia) to bingeing and vomiting (bulimia). A host of medical and therapeutic "cures" for these illnesses have been created, at no small profit to the diet-medical industry. Fat Liberation is convinced that the genuine eating problems many women have are caused by fat oppression, that is, the fear of getting fat or the fear of getting fatter. We have seen repeated instances where an end to abusive eating behaviors was brought about not by therapeutic cure, but by an increase in political awareness around fat oppression by the woman with the eating problem. The cure for bingeing behaviors is to stop dieting, in whatever disguise the diet may occur.

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