

Introduction

I can't begin to tell you how many times I've been walking down the street, minding my own business, pottering along on my bike or simply sitting in a queue of traffic at the wheel of my Mini when, apropos of absolutely nothing, I've heard 'fat cow', 'fat bitch', sometimes 'fat c***' (sorry, can't bring myself to actually write that one) or, 'Eh, love, who ate all the pies?'

Every time it happened I would try to convince myself I didn't care.

Yes, for much of my adult life I was substantially overweight, obese even, and had done every diet known to man or woman with no lasting success. I'd done my very best to persuade myself that it was possible to be fat and happy, and that the people who loved me wouldn't cease to care just because the middle-age spread had got somewhat out of control.

By the time I was sixty-four years old my weight had become quite crippling. I told myself my obesity had played no role in the breast cancer I'd been diagnosed with in 2006 (almost certainly wrong) and that my need for a bilateral hip replacement had nothing to do with the strain I'd been putting on my joints. I put all the blame for the damage done to my bones on the chemotherapy I had after the cancer surgery.

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For so long I had wanted to join the ever-increasing groups of women – Dawn French, Jo Brand, Beth Ditto, Rebel Wilson and, most recently, Sofie Hagen, the author of *Happy Fat* – who argued it was possible to be fat and fit, and were furious at the fat shaming that is so widespread. Hagen claims to have become completely at ease with ‘taking up space in a world that wants to shrink you.’

The excuses I made to myself were legion. I was, I kept on telling myself, fat and happy and I didn’t care about the insults. The fat part was blatantly obvious. The happy was an Oscar-winning performance put on in public, but in private I lived with a growing sense of fear and misery that this incredible hulk was my lot for evermore and would probably kill me long before I reached my three score years and ten. I did care, but for so long I tried to put all the worries to the back of my mind.

I tended to avoid the scales and merrily ordered clothes online from the Sixteen47 website owned by Dawn French and Helen Teague, which boasts ‘the biggest range of plus sizes in the UK’. I wore only their baggiest tops in the most voluminous size along with a pair of stretchy leggings – always a ‘slimming’ black in colour. I joked I’d managed to create a uniform for myself that made life so much easier in the morning.

It was just like school days, I told myself. I didn’t have to think about what I was going to wear. My mind could be occupied with more important thoughts than the frivolity of fashion. I simply needed to make sure there were plenty of the same type of items in the wardrobe so all I had to do was pick out a clean outfit. Ordering online meant never having to go into a shop and face the disapproving glances of a sales

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assistant who doubted she would have anything in my size, and never having to endure the humiliation of a communal changing room.

So, I simply used the uniform to hide away all the abundant flesh and, at the same time, tried hard to become immune to what I was feeling about the constant insults. Some days I would let the anger bubble to the surface and shout back some foul obscenity. Witty remarks never seemed to come to me at those horrible moments. Mostly, I wanted only to curl up and die. Go home and eat something comforting. And that, of course, was no solution to the problem.

Two things shocked me into taking myself in hand. My old GP, who was also significantly overweight, retired. I guess I'd always used her as an excuse. If my doctor was fat, what did I have to worry about? She never made me step on the scales and I don't recall her ever suggesting weight loss might be a good idea. I should, perhaps, point out that, like me, she also had breast cancer – in her case twice.

My new GP is a man. He's quite elderly and never pulls his punches. He suggested I step on the scales at our first appointment. The scales groaned and so did I when I saw the reason why. Twenty-four stone! How on earth had I allowed that to happen? My doctor's question was what did I propose to do about it?

The second shock came when my son Charlie accompanied me and my three little dogs on a walk in the local park. My walks tended to be slow, painful and rather lumbering, with frequent pauses at benches. We were having a 'little sit-down' when an enormous woman passed us, driving a mobility scooter. Her two dogs trotted along beside her, their leads attached to the handlebar. 'Blimey, Mum,' said Charlie, his

voice full of concern, ‘if you aren’t careful, that’ll be you before long.’

It was the prompt I needed to do something about it. This book tells the story of how I took that fat chance, lost 8 stone in less than a year and how my weight has now stabilized as I’ve developed a healthy relationship with food without losing the pleasure I take in eating it. It also asks why obesity is the health crisis it has become and explains how the food and diet industries have done us anything but good. I hope the second part of the book’s title indicates a new interpretation of the expression ‘fat chance’ – no longer a negative, but a positive opportunity to get well again at a healthy weight.

I’ve kept the ‘fat cow’ in the first part because the stigma directed at so many of us simply has to be tackled. It was not until I attended a symposium on obesity and stigma in 2017 that one of the speakers, Dr Stuart Flint, made a point that opened my eyes to what those of us who suffer from obesity have to endure. ‘Hate speech,’ he said, ‘is illegal and a number of conditions are covered by the law. Expressions of hatred towards someone on account of the person’s colour, race, disability, nationality, ethnic or national origin, religion, gender identity or sexual orientation are illegal. Any communication which is threatening or abusive and is intended to harass, alarm or distress someone is forbidden. The penalties for hate speech include fines, imprisonment or both. However,’ he paused, ‘you will note there is one common condition which frequently induces what I would describe as hate speech that is not included in the list. And that condition is obesity.’

It was a profound moment for me. A light bulb began to flash in my brain, prompting me to do something to spread the word that fat shaming is hate speech, even though it’s not

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included in the statutes. For the person who hears it, it is insulting and deeply distressing. People will often justify calling out to the ‘fat cow’, making the assumption that, whilst it’s impossible and undesirable to change your colour, race, disability or chosen gender identity, the fat person should want to change their physical form and, indeed, could change it if they weren’t so greedy and lazy.

You’ll often hear the mantra ‘take less energy in and put more energy out’. Most thin people who haven’t suffered the struggle with a body that refuses to conform to what’s thought to be the norm – slimness – assume you can successfully go on a regime of diet and exercise and no longer be an obese, sick drain on the NHS, suffering from type 2 diabetes, heart trouble and some cancers. It’s worth pointing out at this stage that even thin people have diabetes, cancer and cardiac arrests, but you wouldn’t think so from the daily diet of news stories describing an obesity epidemic.

Over the past year alone I have counted hundreds of headlines in various newspapers warning of the risks and general downside of becoming overweight: ‘Generation fat: 40 per cent of young are overweight’, ‘Children who are obese at eleven “being doomed to an early death”’, ‘Diabetes cases double in just twenty years’, ‘Britons eating 50 per cent more than they say’, ‘Children face obesity apocalypse’, ‘Bad lifestyles to blame for 2,500 cancer cases per week’, ‘Give patients crash diets on NHS says Oxford professor’, ‘Bobbie Williams no more! Slimline star is now a Weight Watchers ambassador’, ‘Why don’t chubby stars get any sex scenes?’, ‘Gorging into the grave’, ‘One new diabetes case every three minutes’, ‘Obesity is the new smoking’, ‘New war on junk food’, ‘Skipping breakfast is making children fat’, ‘Huge health risks of high BMI’, ‘Pill

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that expands in stomach doubles weight-loss chance' OK! Enough! You get the picture.

My intention in writing this book is to explain what it feels like to be fat and how incredibly difficult it is to lose the weight, no matter how hard you try. I shall also try to unpick the complex new scientific discoveries that explain why going on a diet is rarely the answer to the fat girl or boy's problems. In recent years, science has come on apace to increase understanding of the genetic, environmental, evolutionary and metabolic reasons why some of us can eat as many chips as we choose without putting on an ounce and some of us will balloon if we dare to walk past a chippy and merely sniff, without consuming so much as one fry.

I would like to think that people who read this book and discuss its contents will begin to understand why fat shaming is so hurtful, harmful and cruel. The stigma often makes fat people withdraw into themselves to the extent they are too afraid even to go to a doctor to discuss the problem and enquire what solutions there might be.

My aim is never, ever to hear any passing stranger call out 'fat cow' to anyone. Never again.