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In the Fatosphere, Big Is in, or at Least Accepted



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By RONI CARYN RABIN Published: January 22, 2008

For years, health experts have been warning that Americans are too fat, that we exercise too little and eat too much, that our health is in jeopardy.

Some fat people beg to differ.

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Blogs written by fat people — and it's fine to use the word, they say — have multiplied in recent months, filling a virtual soapbox known as the fatosphere, where bloggers calling for fat acceptance challenge just about everything

conventional medical wisdom has to say about obesity.

Smart, sassy and irreverent, bloggers with names like Big Fat Deal, FatChicksRule and Fatgrrl ("Now with 50 percent more fat!") buck anti-obesity sentiment. They celebrate their full figures and call on readers to accept their bodies, quit dieting and get on with life.

The message from the fatosphere is not just that big is beautiful. Many of the bloggers dismiss the "obesity epidemic" as hysteria. They argue that Americans are not that much larger than they used to be and that being fat in and of itself is not necessarily bad for you.

And they reject a core belief that many Americans, including overweight ones, hold dear: that all a fat person needs to do to be thin is exercise more and eat less.

"One of the first obstacles to fat acceptance is breaking down the question of whether being fat is a choice," Kate Harding, founder of the blog Shapely Prose, said in an interview. "No fat acceptance advocate is saying you should sit around and wildly overeat. What we're saying is that exercise and a balanced diet do not make everyone thin."

Ms. Harding, a 33-year-old yoga enthusiast from Chicago, promotes the idea of health at any size (she is a 16). She started Shapely Prose (kateharding.net) last April, after noticing that posts about fat in her personal blog hit a nerve. Since then, it has quickly become one of the most popular fat acceptance blogs, with an average of 3,710 page views per day, according to Sitemeter, a Web statistics program.

People come in different shapes and sizes, bloggers like Ms. Harding say, and for those who come extra-large, dieting is futile. Many of the bloggers label their sites "no-diet zones." (Don't even mention weight-loss

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“You relapse, and then you go on a diet again, and this time you’re going to do it, it’s really going to be it this time,” Marianne Kirby, a 30-year-old blogger from Orlando, Fla., who writes *The Rotund* (therotund.com), said in an interview. “And it still doesn’t work, not long-term — you end up heavier than before. And you say to yourself: Why did I fall for this again?”

The blogs have drawn their share of negative, even vicious comments. But for overweight readers, the messages are empowering — and liberating.

“Girlfriend, let me tell you, I am finally coming to grips with myself,” one fan commented on Ms. Harding’s site. “I will always be fat. I accept that now.”

Harriet Brown, a 49-year-old blogger in Wisconsin and an occasional contributor to *The New York Times*, encourages readers to take her “I Love My Body Pledge” (at harrietbrown.com), in which they promise not to talk “trash” about “how fat my thighs or stomach” are, and not “call myself a fat pig.”

Fat Fu’s anonymous blog (fatfu.wordpress.com) has a ruthless deconstruction of recent research like the “fat friends” study, as well as one of the most comprehensive lists of links to the fatosphere, including online communities, fashions and health sites for fat people. The Big Fat Deal blog (bfdblog.com) suggests 10 ways to be a “body positivity activist,” including “Be yourself,” “Understand that a lot of people are hateful morons” and “Don’t be afraid to order the cheesecake.”

Many of the bloggers are women whose writing has a distinctly feminist flavor, but there are male fat-acceptance bloggers like Red No. 3 (red3.blogspot.com), who says: “See, I don’t have a problem with fat. My body is simply adorned, and I’ll take that.”

But some experts say this sort of message is dangerous and undermines public health efforts to rein in obesity. “We do have to be careful not to put all the blame on the individual,” said Dr. Walter C. Willett, professor of nutrition and epidemiology at the Harvard School of Public Health. But he added, “The large majority of people who are overweight are overweight because of lifestyle.”

The bloggers argue that changes in definitions over time, along with flaws in the body mass index formula, have pushed more Americans into the “fat” and “obese” categories, and they point to provocative studies suggesting that there may be benefits to being overweight, including a large study that found that underweight Americans are more likely to die than those who are moderately overweight.

Several other recent studies on heart patients and [dialysis](#) patients have also reported higher survival rates among heavier patients, suggesting that the link between body size and health may be more complex than generally acknowledged. Another study of people over 60 found that being fit has more bearing on longevity than simply being thin.

The bloggers’ main contention is that being fat is not a result of moral failure or a character flaw, or of gluttony, sloth or a lack of willpower. Diets often boomerang, they say; indeed, numerous long-term studies have found that even though dieters are often able to lose weight in the short term, they almost always regain the lost pounds over the next few years.

Ultimately, these bloggers argue, being skinny may have far more to do with the luck of the genetic draw than with lifestyle choices.

“We accept that some people are tall and some people are short,” said Rachel Richardson, 28, of Cincinnati, who writes a blog called *The F-Word* (the-f-word.org). “Yet we seem to think all people should be thin — it just doesn’t make sense.”

Fat acceptance bloggers contend that the war on obesity has given people an excuse to wage war on fat people and that health concerns — coupled with the belief that fat people have only themselves to blame for being fat — are being used to justify discrimination that would not be tolerated toward just about any other group of people.

“I’m not surprised there are so many of these blogs now,” Ms. Richardson said. “Anti-obesity hysteria has reached a boiling point. Blogging is a way for people to fight back.”

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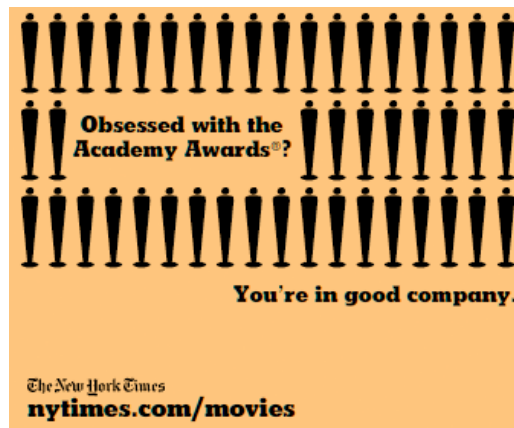
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