

Call to Action

Health as a Value versus Size as a Goal

The Need to Re-frame “Obesity Prevention” for Effective Prevention of Poor Eating and Fitness Habits

By Kathy Kater, LICSW

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Worry about weight affects nearly everyone today, and at ever younger ages. If only it helped, it might be worth sacrificing a few to eating disorders to keep most people healthier. But instead of improving choices, new evidence documents that body dissatisfaction leads to poorer or disordered eating and fitness habits, diminished overall health, and *weight gain*. So it is that in the fifty years since weight was first framed as a “problem” with “weight control” cast as the solution, not only have eating disorders emerged to threaten those who are vulnerable, but rates of obesity and associated health risks have risen exponentially. While other environmental changes have certainly played a part, we cannot discount that the thinner we have tried to be, the fatter we have become. Clearly *worry about weight* is not only ineffective, it is counterproductive.

Einstein noted, “You cannot solve problems with the same thinking that created them.” For those who view weight as a simple formula of calories eaten versus calories burned and believe that fatness inevitably causes diminished health, “obesity prevention” seems only logical. But framing the goal as “eliminating fatness” is not only biologically naïve and incredibly prejudicial (given those whose lifestyles are optimal while their bodies remain fat)—it fuels *worry about weight*, and it is therefore iatrogenic.

Reframing how people think about and respond to weight is critical to preventing and treating both eating disorders and excess weight due to poor health habits. When all of the evidence is considered, it is clear that interventions should support a new paradigm that promotes *health as a value* versus *size as a goal*. This shift calls for a major change in campaigns and policies aimed at “obesity prevention” to promotion of wholesome eating and fitness for *everyone*, with acceptance of the diverse sizes and shapes that result.

Kathy Kater may be contacted at 651-770-2693 or by email at kathykater@isd.net.

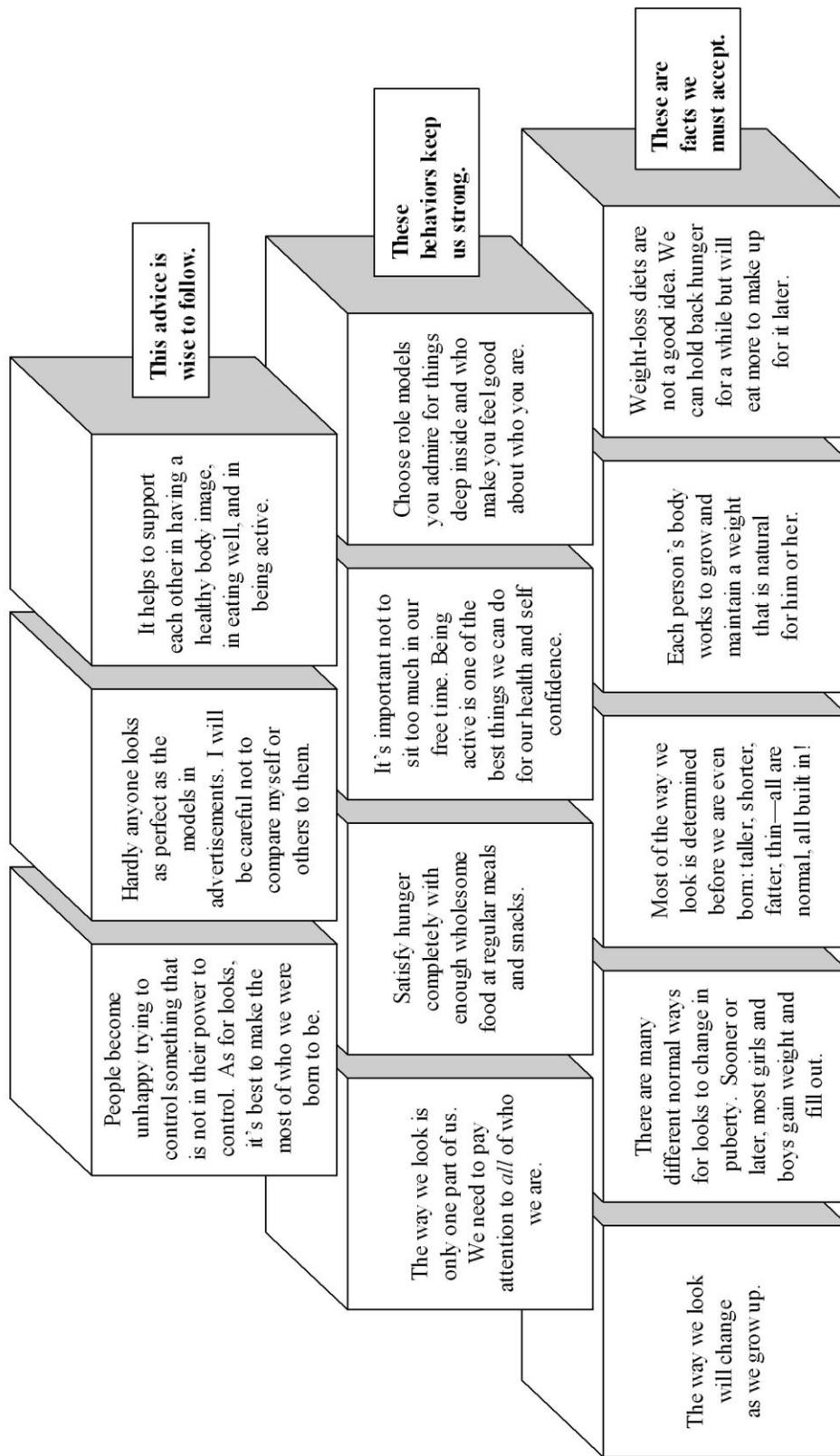
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Health as a Value vs. Size as a Goal

The *New Model for Healthy Body Image, Eating, Fitness and Weight* is an example of an approach that promotes health as a value versus size as a goal. This model provides the basis for the *Healthy Body Image: Teaching Kids to Eat and Love Their Bodies Too!* curriculum (NEDA, 2005). In implementing the model, all of the conceptual building blocks should be addressed to avoid a skewed outcome.

THE NEW MODEL FOR HEALTHY BODY IMAGE, EATING, FITNESS AND WEIGHT			
Conceptual Building Blocks	Foundation	Desired Outcome	Goal
<p>Developmental change is inevitable. Normal changes may include weight gain and temporary out-of-proportion growth. Fat does not, by itself, define "overweight."</p> <p>Genetics and other internal weight regulators strictly limit the degree to which shape, weight & Body Mass Index can be manipulated through healthy means.</p> <p>Restricted or restrained hunger (dieting) results in predictable consequences that are <i>counterproductive</i> to sustained weight loss and interfere with normal hunger regulation.</p>	<p>Recognize and respect basic biology/physiology; understand what <i>cannot</i> be controlled about size, shape and hunger through healthy means.</p>	<p>Accept the limits to external control of body size and shape: "This is the body I was born to have."</p>	Healthy Body Image
<p>Balance attention to many aspects of identity. Looks are only one part.</p> <p>Satisfy hunger completely with enough varied, wholesome food in a stable, predictable manner on a regular basis.</p> <p>Limit sedentary choices to promote a physically active lifestyle through all stages of life.</p> <p>Choose role models that reflect a realistic standard and enhance self esteem.</p>	<p>Emphasize the real choices available to positively influence health.</p>	<p>Enjoy eating well for balance, energy, enjoyment, and hunger satisfaction.</p> <p>Create a physically active lifestyle for fitness, endurance, fun, relaxation and stress relief.</p>	Healthy Eating and Physical Fitness Well Fed, Fit People With Healthy Diverse Weights
<p>Promote historical perspective on today's cultural attitudes related to body image, eating, fitness, and health.</p> <p>Develop media literacy. Learn to think critically about messages that negatively influence body image and encourage weight bias.</p> <p>Support others in resisting unhealthy norms about body image, weight, dieting, low nutrient food choices, excessive eating for entertainment, and sedentary entertainment.</p>	<p>Develop social and cultural resiliency.</p>	<p>Develop autonomy, self esteem, confidence, and the ability for critical thinking.</p>	
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The Body Image Building Blocks



Ten Essential Lessons to Build Body Esteem ©

To begin, accept what *is not* in your power to control:

- 1) Accept your body's genetic predisposition. All bodies are wired to be fatter, thinner, or in between. This includes fatter in some places and thinner in others. Regardless of efforts to change it, over time your body will fight to maintain or resume the shape it was born to be. You may force your body into sizes and shapes that you prefer, but you can't beat Mother Nature without a tremendous cost.
- 2) Understand that all bodies change developmentally in ways that are simply not in your control through healthy means. You may positively influence changes of puberty, pregnancy and lactation, menopause, and aging by making healthy lifestyle choices, but you will not "control" these changes, no matter how much you try.
- 3) Never "diet." Hunger is an internally regulated drive and demands to be satisfied. If you limit the food needed to satiate hunger, it will backfire, triggering preoccupation with food and ultimately an overeating or compulsive eating response. You may lose weight in the short run, but over 85% of weight that is lost through dieting is regained, often with added pounds. Dieters who go off their diets only to binge are not "weak willed." They are mammals whose built-in starvation response has kicked in—both physically and psychologically—going after what has been restricted. Scientific evidence documented this in 1950, but most people are not aware of the biologically predictable, counterproductive results of "dieting."

Then focus your attention and energy on what *is* in your power to control:

- 4) Satisfy hunger completely with a balance of wholesome, nutrient rich foods on a regular basis - *eat well!* In today's world, surrounded by flavor enhanced, cheap, cleverly advertised, readily available, low-nutrient entertainment foods, learning to *feed* your body versus merely "eat" is an essential difference. Enjoy entertainment food *after* nutritional needs are met.
- 5) Limit sedentary entertainment. Move (aerobically if possible) on a regular basis. Everyone who is not medically inhibited, regardless of size, can and should develop a reasonable level of fitness and maintain it throughout the life cycle. Enjoy sedentary entertainment *after* fitness needs are met.
- 6) Understand that if you eat well and maintain an active lifestyle, your healthy weight will be revealed over time. Value health versus size, and support this value with a health enhancing lifestyle. Don't be swayed by whether or not this makes you thin. Healthy, well fed, active bodies are diverse in size and shape, from fat to thin and everything in between. Don't let anyone tell you otherwise, not even your doctor, who may be caught in unhealthy cultural myths about weight.
- 7) Choose role models that reflect a realistic standard against which you can feel good about yourself. If the "Ugly Duckling" had continued to compare herself to the ducks she'd *still* be miserable, no matter how beautifully she developed.
- 8) Maintain your integrity as a human being. In spite of advertisements seducing you to believe that "image is everything," *Never* forget that how you look is only one part of who you are. Develop a sense of identity based on all the many things you can do, the values you believe in, and the person that you are deep inside.
- 9) Become media savvy. Educate yourself about the hidden power of advertisements. Advertisers spend tons of money on strategies to make you feel there is something wrong with you. Why? If their standard of beauty leaves you feeling deficient by comparison, their product's promise to improve your condition is an easy sale. Don't be "sold" this bill of goods.
- 10) Encourage your friends, family and co-workers to join you in developing a healthy, realistic body image. Use the collective energy your group would have spent on hating your bodies to make the world a better place. Help the next generation to develop healthy body image attitudes and learn positive lifestyle habits too.