

# THE THIN-IS-HAPPY MYTH

Is it keeping you from losing weight?

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One of the most pervasive myths in America, in Female America anyway, goes something like this: "If only I were thin, life would be wonderful. I would be loved by the man I want. I could get the job I want. And I could finally do everything I've dreamed of—ski, swim in a bikini, wear beautiful clothes, etc."

Our society supports this Thin-Equals-Happy Myth with a vengeance. We not only reward thin, we penalize fat. Obesity is often viewed—by doctors, employers, friends, acquaintances, passers-by—not merely as evidence that the overweight person has an eating problem, but that she is out of control in every area of life. This, in many cases, is nonsense, but it is nonsense that, unfortunately, a lot of overweight people buy, and even incorporate into their own self-image. They end up feeling hopeless and contemptible.

And this is when they start buying the myth. According to the experts I spoke with, this kind of thinking can actually inhibit weight loss for many people. When you pin all your hopes for happiness on one achievement—in this case, weight reduction—you put yourself under tremendous stress. Lee Crespi and Laura Kogel, two psychotherapists who work with women who have compulsive eating problems, point out that if you believe that once you lose weight you'll get everything you've always wanted, you start worrying that you won't be able to live up to it all. And this produces a kind of diet-defeating fear.

This kind of anxiety has something to do as well with the Yo-Yo syndrome, that seesaw of weight loss and weight gain that many dieters experience. Dr. Alan J. Barnes, on the faculty of the University of Massachusetts Medical School and psychiatric consultant for a nutritional clinic, points out that anxiety—or more specifically, *warding off* anxiety—is one of the chief reasons people overeat. A dieter may start worrying about living up to expectations after weight loss, and end up bingeing to relieve anxiety.

And yet, many women do take off weight and *keep* it off. Why do they succeed where others fail? I talked to a number of women who'd lost a significant amount of weight and managed to stay thin. It became increasingly clear that these women had succeeded because they'd finally rejected the theory that happiness would come to them only after they were thin. Instead, they saw that they had to take control of their own lives no matter what their weight and make themselves happy.

A perfect example is Estelle, an attractive interior designer who's delighted with her tall, slim body. When she was twelve, Estelle was 5'5" tall and weighed 175 pounds. Her mother dragged her from doctor to doctor in an effort to get her to lose weight. "Through all of that I learned one important thing," Estelle said. "Nobody can put you on a diet but yourself." Since that early age, she's tried "every diet known to man," but she could never keep the weight off. The turning point came when Estelle realized that being overweight might be getting in the way of career advancement. She was working for an interior design firm (which she'd always wanted to do), but was shut away in a back room, far from the clients and the action. "Finally I realized I had to take responsibility for getting myself out of that room," she said.

This time Estelle, with the help of Weight Watchers, took the weight off and kept it off. Coincidentally with losing weight, she changed jobs, and today she works for another designer, right out in the front office, dealing directly with clients. "I lost weight," she says, "when I stopped thinking I owed it to other people—to my husband, my boss, whomever—and decided I owed it to myself."

For Holly, too, weight loss and a job change coincided. About two years and forty pounds ago, Holly became the assistant to the public affairs director for a large company. "As soon as I took the job I felt a great responsibility to it. It enabled me to do many things—such as travel—that I wanted (Continued)  
by Bette-Jane Raphael

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#### THIN-IS-HAPPY MYTH

*Continued*

to do. And part of my responsibility to the job is taking care of my appearance. I've got to look good for it. So I made a commitment to lose weight. I know I'd be selling myself out if I gained it back."

In the case of Aline, a high school teacher, the decision to lose weight was not connected to a career change, but to having a baby. "Having a child meant, for the first time, that I was responsible for someone else," says Aline. "My whole lifestyle was changed, my freedom curtailed. I felt confused about who I was, and out of control of my life. My dieting was an attempt to take control again, to do something to help me define myself. And it worked. Now I feel my slim figure reflects the person I am."

Sally, a school administrator in a county where she was one of only two women administrators, had to face a great deal of hostility from the male school board members. They opposed some of her programs and her attempts to secure funds for minority children. Her consequent unhappiness led her to put on forty pounds in her first year on the job. Then, in only a few months, she took off every one of those forty pounds, and she's never gained them back. Talking about that year, Sally recalled the cycle of self-hatred and depression: "I saw their rejection of my programs as a rejection of me, and I felt terrible about myself. I stayed home and felt sorry for myself, and that in turn led me to overeat. The depression went away only when I started to lose weight, because then I was taking care of myself and accomplishing something. I was creating my own self-image."

As you listen to the stories of women like Estelle and Holly and Aline and Sally, a pattern emerges, not so much in their difficulties with weight, but in their feelings about themselves at the time they decided once and for all to shed that weight. They seemed to have a sense of their own strength, a sense that gave each the ability to tackle the problem. Though in the past they had wanted to lose weight to show others—husband or friends—the turning point came when they decided to do it for themselves. Being thin alone wasn't going to make them happy; it was one of several steps for taking control of their lives.

Another important point to notice about these women is the way they learned to deal with stress. When they saw that stress didn't have to mean loss of control, that it could be a motivating factor as well, they were able to lose weight and keep it off.

For these women, conquering the problem of overweight was part of a larger process. It is not surprising then that their lives changed in other ways. Most talked about doing more now than they used to do, and doing things they never did before—activities like running and playing squash and swimming and walking the distances they used to ride.

For Holly there was also new happiness in relationships after weight loss. "When I was heavier," she told me, "I didn't want to be grown-up and independent. I wanted somebody to lean on. Now I like being independent, and my current relationship reflects that."

And while this sense of confidence and self-liking is far more than skin deep, it is, nevertheless, based on a deep satisfaction with what they see in the mirror. Judy, who took off twenty-five pounds, stood up and raised her sweater with one hand, patting her flat midriff with the other. "No spare tire there," she said, with a smile. In different ways, all the women I spoke with expressed a justifiable delight in their body.

They've also discovered that their own confidence and self-respect is reflected by the people around them. "My husband always loved me," said Aline, "but he has more respect for me now. He'd never seen me set my mind on something so thoroughly before. He watched me sweat it out until I did it."

What it adds up to is that these women *are* happier now than when they were heavy. Does this mean the myth really is true? No. Life didn't dump good things in their lap simply because they got thin. Each woman pursued *all* of those good things—the job, the relationships, the activities—just as she had pursued a thinner body and success built on success. As one woman says, "It becomes clearer and clearer to me as I get older that nobody but me can give me the life I want for myself. I've decided I like the life I live as a thin person. And because it's the kind of life I want, it's up to me to keep the weight off."

*Editor's note:* Bette-Jane Raphael is a free-lance writer based in New York City.

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