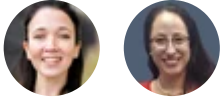


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Fat Shaming and Body Shaming Can Harm Your Mental Health — Here's How to Cope



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Key takeaways:

- Body shaming is any act that criticizes a person's body shape, size, weight, or other physical characteristic.
- Body shaming stems from a long history that separates people by class, race, ability, and socio-economic status.
- Body shaming can have detrimental effects on body image and mental health. But with intention and effort, we can move toward greater body inclusivity.



Human bodies come in all shapes and sizes. And they do amazing things for us, like thinking, moving, and communicating.

There is no “ideal” human body. Yet many aspects of American society try to convince us that a perfect body exists. Body shaming ads and health campaigns encourage us to want it. And we may shame ourselves and others if we fall short of meeting this unrealistic ideal.

This can harm our mental health and make it harder for us to move through the world with confidence. Body shaming is not OK. So what is body shaming, and how can we stop it?

What is body shaming?

[Body shaming](#) is any act that criticizes a person for assumed physical imperfections. It most often targets body size, shape, or weight. But it can also focus on physical attributes relating to skin, hair, age, or disability.

Direct body shaming happens when one person comments about or mocks another person. We can also indirectly body shame by gossiping about a person without their knowing. And we body shame ourselves when we criticize our looks or believe we'd feel better about ourselves if we looked different.

Examples of body shaming include:

- Gossiping that someone is too old for the outfit they're wearing
- Dehumanizing someone by joking that their hair makes them look like an animal or inanimate object
- Telling someone struggling with their body image, “At least you have your health”
- Implying that someone needs a makeover and offering to give them one
- Telling yourself you don't have the “right” body to wear a certain outfit

What's the difference between fat shaming and body shaming?

Body shaming can target any physical attribute. Fat shaming criticizes weight, shape, size, or eating habits. It stems from [weight stigma](#), which falsely assumes that people with larger bodies lack self-discipline or impulse control. Many times, it also assumes that people with



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Examples of fat shaming include:

- Advertisements showing thin people as examples of the “perfect body”
- Grabbing a friend’s waist and joking about their “love handles”
- Believing you’d be more attractive if you lost a little weight
- Commenting that someone has “gained weight in all the right places”
- Implying that someone shouldn’t eat what they’re eating to manage their weight

Why do we body shame?

This history of body shaming in Western society (including the United States) is long and layered.

For [much of human history](#), a rounded body signified health. If you had enough money, you could afford good food and leisure. By contrast, thinness was a mark of weakness, illness, or poverty.

This ideal [morphed with the enslavement](#) of African and indigenous people. To justify slavery, European anthropologists recorded Africans as dark skinned, fat, promiscuous, and undisciplined. They were, therefore, “inferior.” To contrast this, Europeans progressively prized thinness, fair skin, and self-restraint as marks of intelligence and “superiority.”

Under the guise of “health” advice, the [first diet books](#) of the 19th century cemented this weight bias: Fat people are undisciplined and unhealthy, it said, and therefore inferior. Thin people, on the other hand, are self-disciplined and healthy and therefore superior.

Today, we understand that [body size and health](#) do not intertwine so simply. And a person’s

worth has nothing to do with their weight. But because body shaming is so deeply rooted in

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often the highly posed and edited photos that hit the top of our feed.

This is because body shaming is all over social media, whether you realize it or not. For example:

- [Some studies show](#) that Instagram's algorithm disproportionately removes or filters posts by large-bodied influencers. This reinforces stereotypes that limit the visibility of people with larger bodies.
- Across social media sites, around [90% of posts](#) about obesity include the word "fat" with derogatory implications or that show prejudice against women in particular.
- On YouTube, user-generated videos [that fat shame receive](#) more views, ratings, and comments than those that don't. Any interaction on these videos moves posts higher in feeds. So content creators may encourage such body shaming discussions to get more interaction.
- [For young girls](#), posting the "wrong" photo or comment about their bodies can lead to fat or skinny shaming. As a result, young girls often discuss their bodies as "unfinished." They look to exercise and diet as "healthy" means of shaping their bodies to be "better."
- Body dissatisfaction [encourages impulse buying](#). If you see a post and feel bad about yourself, you're more likely to buy the "quick fix" offered. So brands encourage this as a marketing tactic.

It's important to note that social media can help with body shaming too:

- Routinely viewing body-positive content [can reduce](#) the negative effects of body shaming.
- Even brief exposure to body-positive posts has been shown to [improve women's moods and body appreciation](#).
- The more make-up free, filterless selfies we see, the better we can identify posts with body-shaming implications.

How body shaming affects mental health

Weight bias assumes that shame encourages people to take better care of their health. But the opposite is true. Fat shaming can [encourage weight gain and increase the risk](#) of some diseases.

Regular exposure to body shaming can have detrimental effects on mental health too. For example:

- Adolescents teased about their appearance by their parents [are at increased risk](#) for disordered eating, negative self-evaluation, and appearance-related anxiety. And when parents body shame a child, their siblings are more likely to tease them too.
- First-year college students who are body shamed [are less likely](#) to establish or maintain strong friendships. This puts them at greater risk of [depressive symptoms](#).
- Body shaming [can release cortisol](#), a stress hormone. When cortisol [climbs and remains high](#) due to chronic stress, it can [negatively impact your health](#). It may lead to poor sleep, increased substance use, or [binge-eating behaviors](#).

Fat shaming is [also generally linked](#) to a greater chance of developing:

- Major depression
- Anxiety symptoms
- Low self-esteem
- Eating disorders
- Exercise avoidance

How to stop body shaming

It can be difficult to know what to do when derogatory conversations happen unexpectedly around you. But with a little time and intention, you can help curb hurtful habits. Here are a few ways to get started:

1. **Speak up.** When friends, colleagues, or loved ones body shame another person, don't

join in. Shift the conversation. If you feel safe, point out that body shaming is neither kind nor acceptable behavior.

2. **Reconsider your instinct.** Many of us comment on someone's appearance as we say hello. Consider potential body shaming undertones in how you usually do this. Should you shift your language or simply express how pleased you are to see someone instead?
3. **Learn more.** Explore [body neutrality](#), body positivity, [health at every size](#), and [anti-fat bias](#). These can help you better understand [weight stigma](#) and body shaming. They can also help you be a more generally inclusive person too.

Ways to cope with body (fat) shaming

No one should feel ashamed about how they look. But if you've been fat or body shamed, you are not alone. And you deserve to feel good about yourself. There are things you can do to take care of yourself if you experience body shaming.

These steps can help you get started:

1. **Stay vigilant.** Marketing companies invest a lot of money in campaigns to promote the "perfect body." Notice body shaming in these ads and in the conversations of those around you. This can help you identify and stop any body shaming you've internalized and may be repeating to yourself.
2. **Shift the self-talk.** Notice how you criticize your body. Then, reframe that conversation. Consider something you love about your body, and praise it. Focus on how your body feels. Thank your body for all it does for you.
3. **Do things you love.** Celebrate your body by doing what you love with it. A little active self-care can go a long way in helping you appreciate the body you live in.
4. **Find community.** Clean your social media feeds of body shamers. Then, fill them with body-neutral and larger-body-size influencers. Read books and watch movies that celebrate inclusivity. And discuss body neutrality and body image issues with trusted loved ones. Chances are, they've been on the receiving end of body shaming too.
5. **Talk to a professional.** Reframing your relationship with your body is a lot of work. You don't have to do it alone. Talking to a licensed therapist or healthcare provider who specializes in body inclusivity can help.

The bottom line

Body shaming roots deep into American history and society. It can harm physical, mental, and emotional health. And no one should have to accept body shaming practices as the norm. If you experience body shaming or fat shaming, you're not alone. There are many resources to help you reframe your relationship with your body. And there are ways that you can help encourage body positivity in others. No quick fix will uproot these practices. But greater body inclusivity is attainable.

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