

A man in a white long-sleeved shirt and dark trousers stands with his hands on his hips, looking towards a full-length mirror on the right. The mirror is on a black stand with wheels. The background is plain white.

DO I LOOK FAT IN THIS DIAGNOSIS?

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BY MICHAEL JOHN CARLEY

As a collective, it would seem that people with autism have higher prevalence rates for obesity and being overweight. Is that true?

Though it's currently early fall, the subject makes me think of many Januaries, when after an over-abundance of holiday food/under-abundance of exercise, we tend to see added skin in

the mirror, or feel relatively ill. For a few, the food hangover even feels like a spiritual hole; a void where our workout regimens or dietary discipline once lived.

I myself didn't exercise for two weeks one December, ate terribly, and as a result, felt awful after the winter break.



Over the past four years, Disability Scoop¹ has written about obesity's effect on spectrum children, as has Spectrum News² and WebMD.³ The journal *Pediatrics* covered the topic in a 2015 study⁴ (that found 33% of spectrum kids to be overweight, and 18% to be obese); and a year earlier, the National Institute of Health (NIH) had looked into multiple, international studies⁵ that found roughly the same findings as the *Pediatrics* study. Additionally, NIH cited that *all* children's obesity rates have tripled over the last 20 years.

Now, the absence of adults in these studies is somewhat infuriating. But the data wouldn't differ that much if they studied our grownups because the social origins of obesity are primarily the same: a bad diet, lack of exercise, side effects of medications, sensory issues with food texture (we tend to love soft, mushy, fast food, and we can be picky about the good stuff), sleep issues, and an all-around pragmatic questioning of, if not the depression-induced, "Why should I care how long I live when I don't like my life?" at least the culturally-induced, "Why should I care if I'm fat? Isn't it what's inside that counts?"

Well, yes and yes (it is what's inside that counts). Yes, in the literal sense because if you eat crap, and the crap goes inside you, then you will feel like crap.

But yes, also on a figurative level, because privileged societies are notoriously bigoted when it comes to body types. We still watch Bravo shows, and read fashion magazines that demonize the "unskinny." We are fooled into thinking that "plus-sized" (I hate that term) models are accepted in the fashion world when they are not – they are tolerated (I hate that word). My 28 years in New York, a very body-conscious town, certainly showed me how cruel folks can be to those whose forms deviate from whatever the "shape du jour" is for that afternoon. And yet oddly enough, in progressive NY, L.A.,... etc., and in *direct contrast* to other forms of bigotry, body-shaming is more prevalent in more educated and wealthier communities. Usually, these tribes are the incubators for social progress; but in this one issue of body pluralism, big cities are surprisingly backwards.

We still, as a culture, haven't separated "health" from appearance. Ok, the super models aren't as deathbed anorexic as they once were, but we are still idealizing an

image that is not usually healthy, and we are still labeling overweight (as opposed to obese) people unfairly as "unhealthy." Though no data exists, I would wager that the average "overweight" person has more energy, capacity for focus, and sex drive than the average skinny person – as many skinny folks are malnourished.

Even obese people (as defined by the CDC⁶) shouldn't be pigeon-holed, pitied, or judged into a negative light because they could be, yes, as lazy or suicidal as all get-out. But they could also be working their tails off to rectify things and adopt healthier habits. And we will not be able to decipher whether or not they are trying hard simply by their appearance.

Obesity will never be healthy. And the national epidemic that we now have – spectrum or not – is scary, and says nothing good about Americans as a people. But we too often assume character deficits are the cause of the obesity. Again, there could be medications that cause the problems, an inability to exercise caused by another disability or injury... etc.

Needless to say, there is also a major role here played by income. Lower-income folks do not have the money to afford the more-expensive, organic versions of their daily foods; nor do they have the money for gym memberships, or the wherewithal to not be so overwhelmed that they can't find room in their day to exercise. And as our (already out of control) income discrepancy is expected to keep widening... it's not getting better.

It starts early, with arguably more inflexibility coming from spectrum kids about what they are willing to eat.

The afore-mentioned sensory issues, in addition to taste, plays a huge role, as that a mushy food satisfies perhaps sensitive gums and teeth, as well as contains that pleasing taste; the broth of minimal nutrients mixed with teasing salts and sugars. And if there are other issues going on, then emotional dysregulation will intimidate parents from making the same necessary

corrections to their child's diet as the parents of neurotypical children face.

Furthermore ... it's no secret that I'm a big advocate for spectrum kids not being shut out of competitive sports.⁷ But in my school consulting I have spent years and years having the same conversation with parents of overweight kids:

"He can't play anything. Look at how obese he is!"

"The risks of concussions are more real than anyone tells you. But football is also the only arena where a body type like your son's will be heralded, and celebrated – Not demonized. Wouldn't it be nice for him to feel great about his body, just for once?" (and for God's sake, isn't that the only nice thing we can say about football these days?)

Readers of my column also know that too often, I find my hometown of Green Bay, Wisconsin to be a surprisingly backwards incubator for bigotry and corruption themselves. But go figger: Green Bay has actually created an atmosphere wherein the negative

stigma for larger body types... barely exists. Granted, they are proportionately "bigger" here in Wisconsin than in New York City, making for more of a majority viewpoint. And this phenomenon also doesn't negate the fact that the entire Midwest has a major health problem

with obesity (and depression, and economic ineptitude, and racism, and poor education, and homophobia...). But the culture here celebrates the extra pounds, "owns" them – few would dare to body shame someone in Green Bay, and it is a surprisingly cool element about this place. This aura of protection for those at risk of ridicule couldn't really be characterized as a "movement," given that it is so unconscious. But there's still tremendous civil rights value to unconscious movements.

Also, our cultural perceptions change. In the late 1980s and 1990s, when thin was in, fashion models with near-fatal eating disorders were the pinnacle of sexuality, whereas today, celebrities like Jennifer Lopez and Kim Kardashian have gone to surgical lengths to make their butts bigger.

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And what do we really know about food? In a span of 10 years, I've gone from drinking skim milk, to soy milk, to rice milk, to almond milk, and now coconut milk. We used to think pasta was the healthiest thing in the world, and that red meat was terrible.

We used to think sugar only affected our teeth, and yet books like, *The Case Against Sugar*⁸ now paint the dangers of this additive (and they make a convincing case) as equal to cigarette smoke. Reality TV shows about people losing tremendous amounts of weight? Sorry... the producers snuck them pills to cause drastic short-term weight-loss, and contestants immediately gained the weight back once the show was over.⁹ Oh, and guess what...

Calorie-counting? Turns out the whole calorie counting thing was a myth (weight loss is now all about processed food vs. real food).¹⁰

Due to our autism challenges, some of us are unaware of the stigma. We may not notice society's condemnation of our extra pounds in similar fashion to how we often avoid the nonsense of gender expectation. But even if nonverbal, we still need to be coerced into healthier habits, as our bodies develop the same as others, even if our minds don't. Unfortunately, parents often feel too overwhelmed to deal with the negative fallback ("meltdowns") of such a transition. But these parents need to understand that in addition to their children being in better moods because they feel better, that their efforts could result in restoring many extra years of their child's life. A failure to address this, dare I say it, in addition to being a sign that the parents need help, might also be a sign that they believe their child's life has less value than theirs.

And on the other end of the spectrum, those of us who have the cognitive or functional ability to decipher what others think of us... these spectrum brothers and sisters would do well to separate health, from body

appearance; *and* to separate cultural pressure (which changes day by day) versus true biology. By all means, provide constructive criticism to those who have no desire to exercise or eat well. Tell them to love their autism (and yes, their fat – for even the skinniest need it to survive). Yet also tell them to kick depression's butt.

But to judge supposedly obese or overweight people by what they look like – in addition to the potential bigotry – invalidates not only their true health, but also the fact that, again, they may be doing everything they can to get healthier. Furthermore, why would obese people continue to try and get healthy, if supposedly healthy people won't give them a chance? If that's how healthy people behave, then who wants to be like healthy people?

When does the conversation about what's "emotionally healthy" finally get a word in?

My penance for my bad habits over that holiday break was to do "the Insanity workout" for the third time. Not the smartest workout for someone my age, no, but I didn't do such a difficult regimen because there's a roll where two of my abs used to be. It's because I've been healthy enough to know what being healthy feels like. It greatly affects my capacity for confidence and self-esteem. When it's there, it's awesome. And I wanted that back at its fullest. Knowing what this emotional health feels like also makes it easier for me to obtain it again. For others, it's like trying to describe a color they've never seen. If they have never truly loved themselves, what frame of reference do we think they have... to understand what loving yourself even means?

You math brains out there that are bored by all this self-esteem stuff? Think of it this way: if I exercise 30 minutes a day, 6 days per week, in the hopes of living 10 years more than someone who doesn't exercise, then I will have exercised for 156 hours (or 6.5 days) per year. If I do that over the course of 30 years then I will have exercised

for 195 days, a little over half a year, to live those 10 extra years.

Many people who are categorized as overweight are emotionally healthy about their bodies. Many supermodels are not. And Father Time is going to get us all to a physically hideous place someday anyway. The acceptance of fat, and the loving of fat (since it is a part of our body)... that's a good start. After that can come the courage it takes to want to be happy.

And this is where those seemingly perfect folks at the gym are unfortunately right. We *do* have to strive to feel good. Because aside from consciously accepting a much shorter, or a sadder life on earth for ourselves? We really have no other option. •

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