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# Fat Shame: A Conversation with Author Amy Farrell

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# Find a Therapist



**Alexis Conason Psy.D.**  
Eating Mindfully

## Fat Shame

A conversation with author Amy Farrell

Posted Sep 17, 2014



Lose 1-2 pounds per day! Burn fat fast! Unwanted love handles? Cleanse them away! We are constantly bombarded with media telling us that we must rid ourselves of fat. We can burn it off, shake it off, starve it off—if only we have the proper willpower and motivation. In our culture, fat has become synonymous with lazy, unmotivated, and stupid. Fat has become something to be ashamed of.

But when did this start? Why do we associate fatness with slothfulness, gluttony, and apathy? How did we, as a society, decide that fat is bad?

In her book *Fat Shame*, Amy Erdman Farrell, a professor of American Studies and Women’s and Gender Studies at Dickinson College in Pennsylvania, demystifies fat stigma in America by following its history across the globe. “Fat is not a four letter word,” writes Farrell, acknowledging the cultural stigmatization of the adjective fat. We have effectively turned the adjective fat into a derogatory insult. Farrell believes that if we can accept the word “fat” into our vocabulary, just as we use the words tall, short, green, or blue, we can create an environment where the term “fat” holds no negative moral value.

We see it as our expressed right to rid fat people of their fatness; to “cleanse” them so they can participate in society. Farrell describes this phenomena writing, “Just as it would be insufficient and offensive to fight racism by encouraging black people to bleach their skin, or to challenge anti-Semitism by converting Jews to Christianity, fat activists argue that fat people should not be forced to become thin in order to expect fair and decent treatment within society (2011, p. 169).”

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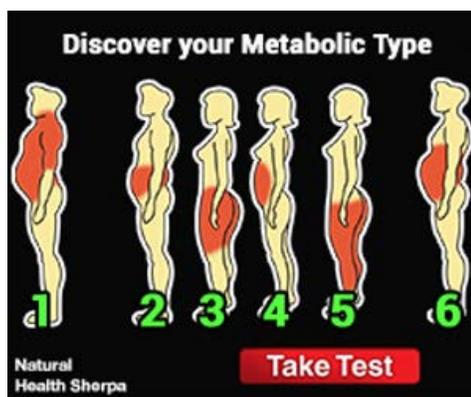
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Farrell notes that the US has made progress regarding the oppression of racial and religious minorities, yet when body size is the defining factor of the minority, it becomes acceptable to place shame and stigma upon the group. Popular television shows, such as *The Biggest Loser*, debase fat people. Physicians and other medical practitioners provide inferior care to fat individuals by failing to correctly diagnose fat patients. Whether they are seeking treatment for the flu, a bunion, or hypertension, fat patients are universally diagnosed as “FAT” and blamed for their health problems.

In an interview with Professor Farrell on June 17<sup>th</sup>, 2014 ([read the full interview here](#)) Farrell stated, “Our bodies are not objects to be endlessly remade and remolded. If we do believe we can remake and remodel ourselves, we will be led down a path of tremendous ill health, and we will create situations where discrimination can flourish, and where other problems our culture is facing get ignored.” In her book, Farrell argues that the weight loss industry is “‘treating’ people for the horror of a stigmatized identity, one that has little to do with real, physical health risks (2011, p. 176).”

Yet how can we fight the over 60 billion dollar diet, pharmaceutical, and medical industries pushing the “fat is bad” message? The National Association to Advance Fat Acceptance, a non-profit started in 1969, is fighting to end the fat stigma and discrimination prevalent in society today. Marilyn Wann, author of *FAT!SO? Because You Don't Have to Apologize for Your Size!*, promotes fat activism through her writing. Wann encourages readers to feel “fabulous” and “Don't worry if you wiggle.” In her book, Wann includes pictures of fat butts, upper arms, and stomachs as “visual propaganda,” fighting the ultra-thin ideal we are accustomed to in the media today. Through challenging the current media thin ideal, Wann and other fat activists hope to redefine beauty and health.

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Farrell describes how we often confuse fitness with “not fat.” We believe that fitness is something to be *seen*--evidenced only by six pack abs and thigh gaps--rather than understood through less visibly obvious markers that would require blood tests or EKGs. We have become a people more interested in looking fit than being fit.

Studies, such as the one conducted by Katherine M Flegal PhD and Kamyar Kalantar-Zadeh MD, MPH, PhD on *Overweight, Mortality and Survival* that was funded by the National Institute of Health suggest that being overweight can be beneficial in survival rates for certain diseases (for more information on this study, read my post [Happy and Healthy](#)). Yet, these studies are overwhelmed by the culturally accepted bias that fat equals poor health. In our interview, Professor Farrell argues that our culture’s unquestioning acceptance that fat equals poor health can be detrimental. She states: “sometimes when we already know things so clearly, the evidence will come to support those conclusions regardless. In the same way that when we as a culture *knew* that women were inferior to men, all sorts of science came to support that theory. Science, history, theology, everything came to support that, when we *knew* that people of African origin and Native Americans were inferior to Europeans all sorts of evidence came to support that theory. We are looking at a similar sort of situation here.”

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To read our full interview with Dr. Farrell, please click [here](#).

*This blog post is guest written by Kimberly Buesser, a nutrition student at New York University, and edited by Dr. Alexis Conason. It is part of a series of stories and interviews with experts on the topic of Fat Shame that will appear in this blog over the next several months.*

To learn more about Dr. Conason and *Mindful Eating*, please visit [www.drconason.com](http://www.drconason.com)

Reference: Farrell, Amy Erdman. *Fat Shame: Stigma and the Fat Body in American Culture*. New York, NY: New York UP, 2011. Print.

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