

INTRODUCTION

You want to lose weight. You look in the mirror and you see “fat and ugly.” You’ve heard the obesity fears trumpeted repeatedly in newspapers, magazines, and on the television news: 65 percent of Americans are overweight or obese . . . growing numbers of overweight kids . . . we don’t know how to eat . . . we’re not exercising enough . . . we’re the first generation that’s going to die younger than our parents . . . blah, blah, blah. So you buy one diet book after another, desperate for the one that will finally save you. But they never do, at least not in any lasting way.

Face it, the “D” word is dead. A new diet isn’t going to get you what you want. You’ve been there, done that, and there’s no point in trying again. Even exercise programs don’t deliver.

So you picked up this book, *Health at Every Size: The Surprising Truth About Your Weight*, hoping it will finally provide the cure. This book can cure your weight woes, but the answer may be different from what you’ve imagined.

Health at Every Size is not a weight-loss book. It’s not a diet book. It’s not an exercise program. *Health at Every Size* is a book about healthy living, one designed to support you as you shift your focus from hating yourself and fighting your body to learning to appreciate yourself, your body, and your life. It’s a book designed to help you break free of the weight-loss mentality and embrace the health-and-happiness mentality. Because really, what’s beneath your weight-loss quest? Isn’t your ultimate goal to feel better about yourself, to feel love, acceptance, vitality, or good health?

That's the Health at Every Size promise. You *can* feel better about yourself. You *can* feel loved, accepted, and vital—and you can improve your health—*regardless* of whether you lose weight.

Health at Every Size is not speculation or unproven theory. It's based on a scientifically tested program. The program was evaluated through a government-funded academic study, its data published in well-respected scientific journals.^{1, 2, 3} It showed that the program *can* give you what you want. Even the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) touts the Health at Every Size program as the “new hope” for people struggling with their weight.⁴

“Oh, no, no, no,” you may be thinking. “To feel better about myself, I've got to lose weight!” That's what the women in our research study initially thought. When my colleagues and I recruited participants for the study, we ran open-ended ads for large women who were struggling with their weight and interested in feeling better about themselves and improving their health. Every respondent assumed they were applying to participate in a weight-loss program. After all, they figured, how can large women feel better about themselves and improve their health without losing weight?

The disappointment was palpable during the orientation session when the women randomly assigned to the Health at Every Size program learned they would not be part of the weight-loss group (the control group). If they could have walked out then, I think they would have. Fortunately, they all decided to stay through the initial meeting.

During that meeting, I asked the women to reflect on their history of trying to lose weight. We shared stories of diet and exercise routines; stress management techniques; years spent working with nutritionists, physicians, psychotherapists, hypnotherapists, personal trainers, clergy, and psychic healers. We laughed and cried as we remembered the money and energy we wasted on fat magnets, slimming slippers, thigh creams, ear staples, and even headbands purported to help dream the fat away.

We bonded over the underlying pain and desperation that led us to try everything and anything, from the mundane to the outrageous, and repeatedly go back for more. It became clear that, in contrast to the negative stereotype of the lazy and undisciplined fat

person, everyone in this group had exhibited tremendous determination, strength of character, and willpower in their persistent attempts to lose weight.

You'll read more about the study later in the book, but let me share with you one story that will show you how life-changing this book and its program can be.

Kelly was one of the quieter participants that first night. Although highly motivated to make changes in her life, she was also dubious about our approach. Like the other women, she very much wanted to lose weight and had a long and painful history of fruitless attempts. She'd often felt that initial hope and enthusiasm at trying something new, only to be disappointed in the end. She was pessimistic that we could provide anything significantly different than what she'd already tried (and failed at) countless times before.

It wasn't until the end of the session that Kelly finally spoke. Slowly at first, then with increasing intensity and emotion, she described the ways in which her inability to lose weight and the subsequent self-hatred controlled much of her life. Other group members nodded in recognition as Kelly admitted that she rarely ate at restaurants because she dreaded the looks of other diners as she ate, feeling their judgment and disapproving looks at her body and the food she chose.

She described how her self-hatred led to isolation, how she'd sometimes cancel plans with friends because she couldn't bear to be out in the world in such a fat body. She kept returning to the refrain that she had tried to lose weight, she had *really* tried, but she was just too weak to keep up the regimen of dieting or exercise.

I suggested to Kelly—to all of us—that perhaps we hadn't failed. Maybe, I said, we had successfully tested many weight-loss regimens and *they* had failed *us*. Had it ever occurred to them that maybe we did everything right, but the techniques we tried just weren't capable of delivering on their promise?

They all looked at me blankly. This possibility was clearly something they hadn't considered. They had spent years viewing their weight as evidence of their own personal failing.

The women were provided with a rough draft of this book and met weekly to discuss the personal meaning of its contents. As they

learned more about the science behind weight loss, why some bodies naturally weigh more than others, why conventional recommendations to diet or exercise may not have much impact on weight in the long run, and that weight is not such an important factor in measuring one's health or worthiness anyway, an incredible transformation occurred.

In the end, the women participating in the Health at Every Size program emerged with better physical health, higher self-esteem, and a relationship with food that's as healthy as their cholesterol and blood pressure levels. The women participating in the diet program experienced none of these benefits and regained the weight they initially lost.

You'll read more about the Health at Every Size study later in the book. I bring it up now because I want you to know that even if you picked up this book looking for a weight-loss solution, you may want to stick with it, even though you know up front that you won't be getting the prescription you seek.

I want you to read what Kelly wrote in her journal shortly after that first meeting:

It was powerful to realize how hard we had all tried to lose weight, how humiliating some of those attempts were, to feel one another's desperation. I so empathized with the other group members as we shared stories of our hopes getting dashed again and again.

What motivates us to keep trying? I'm short and I don't like that, but I don't read growth books, attend heightening groups, or consider going to a salon to get stretched. That's because I just don't see my height as changeable. But weight is different: It seems like I *should* be able to change it.

When I start a diet, I have a feeling of hope. I was on a real high on my way to that first meeting, I let the fantasies run wild. This is an actual government-sponsored university study, state-of-the-art. I'll finally lose weight: Guys will notice me as I walk

down the street, my mom will tell me how proud she is, I can have confidence when I apply for a job.

And then I heard Dr. Bacon say that weight loss may not be possible and would not be a goal. I felt like I had just been popped, like she inserted a needle into my big balloon, and my insides were leaking out. Life didn't seem worth living without the hope that I could be thin.

But as this thought crossed my mind, it helped me to see the extent of my magical thinking, how much I have riding on the fantasy, why I keep trying so desperately to lose weight. Inside, I believe that weight loss is the only thing standing between me and happiness. *So if I never get thin, I can never be happy*, I can never become the person I want to be.

In that moment, I understood: It was the dream of weight loss that clouded my ability to be happy with myself—not the weight itself. Perhaps Health at Every Size can finally help me feel better about my life and myself?

The Health at Every Size program won't ask you to give up on your dreams; it will help you to actually live them. It will give you the tools to realize those dreams, to live in a body you love, and to focus on things like feeling good and enjoying life—no matter what your weight.

Decades of research—and probably your own personal experience—show that the pursuit of weight loss rarely produces the thin, happy life you dream of. Dropping the pursuit of weight loss isn't about giving up, it's about moving on. When you make choices because they help you feel better, not because of their presumed effect on your weight, you maintain them over the long run. You do it because you *want* to, not because you believe you *should*.

When you stop trying to control your weight through willpower, your body starts doing the job for you—naturally, and much more effectively. If you stop fighting yourself, achieving and maintaining a healthy weight is effortless. Consider Kelly's experience:

Before participating in the Health at Every Size program, I never truly enjoyed food. Either I felt compelled to steer clear of my favorite foods, like potato chips and ice cream, or I ate them and felt guilty. And I felt like I could never get enough. But it's different for me now. As much as I love pizza, when my body's had enough I just lose interest. I don't have to fight my desire to eat because I just don't want to eat any more.

Before, I didn't know that I could trust myself. My fear was that if I let down my guard, I would eat out of control and just keep gaining weight. But that never happened. I don't count my calories or limit fat, I don't feel guilty when I eat—and everything is okay. I'm not scared of food anymore. My weight has stabilized and it seems like my body is doing a pretty good job of taking care of me! More importantly, I can now say that I absolutely love food. I never knew chocolate was so amazing!

The Health at Every Size program was truly transformative for Kelly and the rest of the women in our study, and it is my hope that this book will also be transformative for you.

The research participants had the advantage of coming together as a group and supporting one another in engaging with the ideas presented in this book—an advantage that you, as a reader, may not have. I am not confident that this book—or any book about weight for that matter—can stand alone. Cultural attitudes about weight are so strongly embedded in you that you are unlikely to be changed by mere exposure to ideas: It will take active personal engagement for these words to take root.

With that in mind, I encourage you to pay careful attention to the emotional and personal significance of the ideas presented here, to try to make sense of the ideas by relating them to your own life experiences.

You may feel resistance as you read. When this feeling occurs, consider what it may threaten in you before dismissing the idea. If you examine your fears, they hold less power in limiting you.

My hope is that this book can offer you a fresh, transformative view of yourself, your body, and your value as a unique individual. This was certainly true for Kelly and the other participants of the Health at Every Size research study:

I came to the program looking to make less of myself (lose weight); I left proudly taking up *more* space, feeling lighter and less restricted in my body. I came to the program looking for rules about what to eat or avoid and how to control my urges; I left trusting myself, confident that I am more competent than any outside expert in knowing how best to feed myself. Food, previously a trigger for shame, guilt, and fear, is now a source of great pleasure. Most importantly, I know that everything I want in life is available to me now, not twenty pounds from now, which has given me a tremendous sense of freedom to explore what's really important to me.

Kelly learned a whole new way of understanding herself and her relationship with food. And so can you.

The first half of the book sets up the theory, explaining the biological and cultural underpinnings of weight and giving you self-assessment tools to identify the stumbling blocks to achieving the weight that is right for you and appreciating wherever that may be. Armed with the science and knowing where you currently are, you are ready for part two, which supports you in adopting Health at Every Size.