

Ep #236: 5 Myths About Running While Fat (& Why Fat Isn't a Bad Word)



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Jill Angie

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Welcome to *The Not Your Average Runner Podcast*. If you're a woman who has never felt athletic but you still dream about becoming a runner, you are in the right place. I'm Jill Angie, a certified running and life coach, and I teach women how to start running, feel confident, and change their lives. And now I want to help you.

Hey Rebels, so I'm going to need you to buckle up this week, my friends. I have got some things on my mind that I'm going to share. We are going to talk about the word fat today. And then I'm going to share five myths about fat runners that most people, even some fat runners themselves, believe.

And when you're fat, running can seem like a dumb idea, right? Because, A, running is hard no matter what you weigh. And, B, there's such a bias in our society about fat bodies that most of us would rather just hide than allow people to see us doing something fitness related, right?

Fat people don't run, fat people sit on the couch eating and watching TV. Fat people are lazy, undisciplined, and definitely not athletic. Such bullshit. Now, if you have been listening to my show for any length of time, you know that already. I am preaching to the choir here. But if you're new, you picked the perfect first episode to listen to.

Now I know lots of super athletic fat people, and I know just as many out of shape thin people. Body size, body weight does not tell you anything about a person's fitness. We are conditioned to believe that fat equals unhealthy and unfit, and it is absolutely not true.

And in this episode I'm going to use the word fat a lot. I'm going to use it to talk about runners who could be described as overweight, or plus size, or obese, or heavy, or whatever word you choose. And I know that the word fat makes a lot of you cringe, and I'm hoping to destigmatize it a bit today.

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So I hope that you'll stick with me, we're going to dive in. The first thing I want to do is talk about the words overweight, obese, and plus size.

Now, overweight is simply a clinical term that is used when your BMI is between 25 and 29.9. Now if your BMI is 30 or above, the clinical term used is obese. And there are actually three categories of obesity, you can look all of that up on your own, it's not relevant to our discussion here.

BMI stands for body mass index, and it is calculated by dividing your weight with the square of your height, and then multiplying that number by 703. It's a very simple calculation. And it was invented like around 200 years ago, has a pretty racist history. It was never intended to be used as a health indicator. I'm not going to go into the details of why BMI is such a flawed assessment of health, but I have linked to an interesting article in the show notes for this episode if you want to learn more.

But the bottom line here is when your doctor says you're overweight, what they are really saying is that your height in relation to your weight is higher than what insurance companies would consider a low health risk. That's all they're saying. And you might feel offended thinking, "Oh, they're judging me, they called me overweight." And who knows, they might be judging you, right? Other people's opinions, again, not our business.

But the words overweight and the word obese are simply clinical terms describing a range of numbers that are representing a flawed measurement system. You are over the weight deemed to be a low health risk by insurance companies for your height. That's what overweight actually means.

And somehow it's become a catch all term for anyone that thinks their body is too big or for describing somebody else's body that you think is too big.

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And overweight also tends to be the more politically correct word to use when you're describing somebody like that because I guess somehow it sounds gentler than fat.

Maybe because nobody ever made up a playground rhyme using overweight because fat is way easier to spell and say. I don't know. But the word overweight is commonly used as a more neutral word choice for folks who aren't comfortable with the words maybe fat or obese.

And sometimes people use the word heavy, and that cracks me up a little bit because think of all the heavily muscled bodybuilders who actually have really low body fat. But they're also heavy, right? We don't use the word heavy to describe them because they're a more socially acceptable body type, despite being at the same weight as someone else.

I mean, really, think of two people who weigh 180 pounds, one of them could be 10% body fat and pretty compact. And the other could be 40% body fat, same weight on the scale, but their body looks larger, they have more body volume. They're both the same weight, so shouldn't we call them both heavy? What is the weight that we consider to be heavy versus light? It's so irrelevant, it's so steeped in fat phobia. So I'm not a fan of the word heavy to describe somebody whose body is bigger than the "norm."

Plus size is an equally fraught term as obese or overweight in my opinion because its association with the very exclusionary nature of the fashion industry is similar to the BMI scale, which was never really intended to be a measure of health and has a very racist history. So plus size is basically a way of pointing out that you fall outside of the accepted boundaries of body size as determined by the folks who decide what is fashionable, right?

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And therefore you're labeled as such, you're labeled as plus size because you're bigger than what fashion industry says is an acceptable size. As if it wasn't bad enough to go shopping when you're fat and nothing fits, now you have to go to your own fucking special department, right? It's infuriating. It's the reason I do 99% of my shopping online.

But anyway, all of this is to say that I really prefer to use the term fat, because even though it's used as an insult by many folks, and it is, right? We're not going to pretend people like don't use the word fat as a way to try to make you feel bad. In my mind, fat is simply a neutral descriptor. It's also a lot easier to say and it's obvious, right?

It's like when I describe myself as fat, I'm basically telling somebody like, listen, I know what my body looks like. We don't need to pussyfoot around it. We don't need to say like, oh, but you're beautiful. Yes, I know. I'm beautiful and I'm fat. Those two are not mutually exclusive. Or they are mutually— I think I said that wrong but you know what I mean.

The word fat is still flawed and I'm going to talk about why in a moment. But to me, it really is the most neutral, objective way— I say objective, maybe it is subjective. It's definitely subjective. But to me it's the most neutral way to describe someone's body because it can't really be tied to any actual standards of measurement, all right?

And I want to share a little interesting story with you. So last week, I posed a question in the Not Your Average Runner Facebook group. And the text of the question was, "Fat runners, what surprised and delighted you about running when you first started?" And there was one person who replied, and she thought that using the word fat was very rude. And her words, she called it rude. And she said, "You should consider using the term out of shape instead of fat."

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And I'm like, well, I'm not going to say hey, out of shape runners, blah, blah, blah. Because damn, the fat runners in that group are in great shape. And I was writing the post to ask the fat runners in the group a question. I wasn't saying, "Hey, I think everyone in this group is fat." Because there are women of all sizes in that group, fat, thin, everything in between, okay?

But I realize that for some folks, fat is still a big trigger word. So in today's podcast we're going to break it down in hopes that some of you might be able to release the stigma that you hold when that word comes up. Why I think it's important to do the work because I really, really think it is. I think doing the work around the word fat will release you from a lot of your own internal bias against yourself for being fat.

Okay, so first of all, fat is just a word, just three letters. It's just like the word fuck, it's just letters that we've given meaning to. Some folks are offended by that word, some people love that word, some people could care less. Right? The word itself holds no power until you give it meaning, holds no power over you until you personally give it meaning, right?

The word fat holds no power over me because I don't give it a meaning. Other people give fat lots of meanings but I'm like all right, right? And meaning is subjective, it's up to the individual. So, I mean, the meaning that I give the word fat is just that it's a neutral word that describes the shape of my body, and that's why it holds no power over me.

You might cringe when you hear the word fat because you give it the meaning of that person is insulting me, right? Or that person is disrespecting me, or that person is rude. That's the meaning you give it, that's why fat is powerful for you, all right?

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That's number one, number two. Now, fat is a substance that all of us have on our bodies. I was a chemist in my prior life, I am very familiar with molecules and all the things. Fat is a molecule, that's all it is, right? There is no such thing as a living human who has 0% body fat, we call that a dead human. Fat is simply a collection of molecules that are made up of carbon, hydrogen, and oxygen in various arrangements.

Some of us have more fat on our bodies than other people, but every single human has fat inside their body. So calling someone fat is an inaccurate use of the word because we all have fat in different amounts. We also all have muscle, and bone, and water, and hair, and skin, and tons of other chemicals and molecules and bacteria and viruses inside us.

And yes, your body is full of microorganisms that help you digest food and a host of other important functions. Humans are walking bacteria farms, without them, we would die, but I digress. But calling someone fat is about as accurate as calling them muscle or eyelashes, right? You're very eyelashes, my friend. It doesn't make any sense.

When you think about how the English language is structured, fat is a substance. Fat is a thing that we have on our body, so calling someone fat, yeah, we're all fat because we've all got fat on our bodies. We're also all muscle, we're all bone, we're all eyelashes, right? It doesn't make sense.

And what I would call fat might be thin by someone else's standards, right? It's like when I say I'm a slow runner, there's no definition of what a slow running pace is. It's all in the eye of the beholder. So using the word fat to describe a body really gives us no information other than in the eye of that beholder, the person they're describing has a body size that is larger than what that person thinks it should be, right? It's so hard to describe.

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I mean, at least with the terms overweight, and obese, and plus size, you can point to a chart and say this is what it means. But with fat, no, you literally can't. There's no chart that says this is what fat is. So when I think about it this way, the word fat loses all its power over me. But what we've done as a society is we've appropriated the word fat to describe someone who has more body fat than what we consider to be the typical body.

We've turned it from a noun, into an adjective. And then we have stigmatized it by believing that having more fat than the typical body, whatever that even is, is a bad thing. It's like a moral failing. We live in a society that is rampant with fat phobia.

And even the most woke of us still have internalized fat phobia, right? Because how can you not? It is passed down from generation to generation. And even if you think, "Oh, I've got no fat phobia I've done the work." I want you to notice, next time you see yourself in the mirror, right, say you're like in the bathroom, you're in your undies, you catch sight of your butt and you think just like a briefest flash of like, "I wish I could get rid of that cellulite," right?

Or when you see somebody on the street and she's wearing an outfit that clearly shows her belly roll. Do you think ever, for even a tiny second, like, oh, honey, that's not a good look for you? Even if it's there for a microsecond and then you're like, "Nope, that's not how I want to be thinking," you still have internalized fat phobia.

And I'm not saying there's something wrong with you for having it. You were raised in a society that is fat phobic, so of course you absorbed a lot of that. And I think doing the work to sort of dismantle it is super important. And then, of course, being compassionate with yourself when you see it

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come back up, you're like, "Oh, of course I thought that, I was raised in a fat phobic society. But here's how I want to think differently."

But do not for one second think that you have somehow erased all of it from your mind because it's not possible. All right? Now, I can't change society overnight. I can't make fat phobia just disappear. But I can help you let go of your beliefs about being "fat" is a bad thing, all right?

I want to allow you to start using terminology to describe yourself that you don't cringe when you're using it. And if you cringe when you use the word fat or when you hear the word fat, it's not because the word itself is insulting, or rude, or unkind. It is because of the meaning that you have given it. Okay?

So when you can remove your own internal stigma about the word fat, or the word obese, or the word overweight, whatever word makes you cringe, if you can remove your own internal stigma around that, it's freedom, okay? Because the words themselves are not insulting, rude, unkind. The meaning that you give to them is what makes you feel that way. Okay?

So I urge you to give some thought to everything I just shared, decide if maybe you're willing to let the word fat have a little less power over you. I promise, I'll be doing more podcasts on this topic in the future but I'm planting the seed today.

Anyway, all that to say, feel free to use whatever fucking word you want to describe your body. I just wanted to give you some food for thought today. And to let you know that if other people call themselves fat or other people call you fat, it's not actually a problem for you. Because remember, the number one rule of this fucking podcast is other people's opinions are none

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of your business. Damn, I think I need a drink of water, that was quite a rant.

All right, let's jump into those myths. If you're still with me, let's dive in. So the number one myth, and, y'all, I know you all feel me on this. But there's this belief out there that fat runners are either out of shape or that they must be a beginner, right? And this is a perfect segue from the person in my group who thought it was rude to call somebody fat and that I should call them out of shape instead. I was like what? Fat does not equal out of shape, they're completely unrelated, right?

And also, I fucking hate the term out of shape. Again, it's like the word slow, it's all of it. Fitness is a spectrum and what feels like in shape to one person is totally out of shape to another. It's like saying you're a slow runner. There is no standard for this. Show me the book that defines what is in shape and out of shape. That's right, you can't because it doesn't exist.

When you see a fat runner, assuming that they are out of shape, you can't. You cannot assume anything about somebody else's body based on what it looks like. You have no idea what that person's fitness level is, how long they've been a runner. I mean, I've been a runner for 25 years and I've been fat the whole damn time.

And I know some fat runners that are in exceptional shape. Mirna Valerio, Martinus Evans, Latoya Snell, Louise Green. Look them up, they've all been on this podcast to talk about running while fat. They're amazing, they're in great shape, they're fat. And they've been doing it forever. Okay, so making assumptions about someone's fitness or experience level based on their appearance of their body, it's just dumb, right? Please don't do it. Just don't.

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Okay, myth number two, running while fat will ruin your knees. Oh my God, here's what's going to ruin your knees, running while weak. Now yes, if you're fat there's more pressure on your joints with each step than somebody who weighs less. But that is true of someone who weighs the same as you and has more muscle and less fat.

As far as the knees are concerned, a 200 pound person exerts the same amount of force whether they're 20% body fat, 10% body fat, or 40% body fat. The difference is the person with more muscle has a lot more support for their joints, they have a lot more power, the impact is felt so much differently. And if you don't believe me, check out Usain Bolt. He is one of the fastest humans on the planet. He weighs 200 pounds and I'm pretty sure his knees are okay. All right?

So weight is not what ruins your knees, running while weak is what can lead to knee pain and knee injury, all right? I know plenty of people who have had knee replacements and guess what? Not one of them was a runner.

Because running is actually awesome for your joints. It stimulates bone growth, it makes your bones denser and stronger. And by the way, when you're fat and you got more weight hitting those bones, you get denser bones. So there's a little bonus for you, if you're fat, denser bones, congratulations.

So make sure you do your strength training and get strong, you're going to be a runner for life. And that goes whether you are a teeny tiny little person, or whether you're like oh yeah, I'm a big fat fatty, right? Everybody do the strength training. Running while weak is what destroys your knees, it is not running while fat.

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Okay, number three, this one probably makes me the maddest of all. And I've been pretty ranty today, so you got to imagine that this one really pisses me off. And that is the belief that every fat runner is running so they can lose weight. Stop it. Just stop.

First of all, running is a terrible weight loss strategy for most people, especially women. Just ask any woman who's ever trained for a half marathon and be like, "So how much weight did you lose?" And she'll just roll her eyes and walk away, okay?

Fat runners, we run for the joy of running. The joy, right? Because it feels great to move our bodies, to push our limits, to see what we can accomplish. We run for the community or for the alone time. We run for the endorphins. We run so we can see dogs in our neighborhood. Right? We run because it feels good. Not because we're like, okay, I just ran two miles, I burned 200 calories, right? No, stop.

Here's a question to never ask a fat runner, if you run so much why aren't you skinny? Right? Because most of society is fat phobic and lots of people think that everyone must be trying to be smaller, especially the fat people. But that's not true, plenty of fat people are just fine with the body that they're in. Happiness and self-worth don't magically arrive when you are in a smaller body. That is a lie, okay?

And I swear, I'm going to make a button that says, "I'm not running to lose weight." I'm going to start selling them. Because it is one of the most toxic lies about running and I really just want everybody to know that just because you're fat and running does not mean you're like, I'm trying to lose weight, okay?

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All right, number four is much more uplifting and fun. And this is that most fat runners think that they're going to be shamed or rejected if they do a race like a 5K or half a marathon or whatever. But that's the farthest thing from the truth.

So the number four myth is that running is a very exclusive, unwelcoming society and that races are unwelcoming. But the opposite is true, runners are a super welcoming community. No matter what size you are, runners are generally happy people because they're consistently bathing themselves in endorphins, right?

They love talking about running, they love cheering on other runners, they love getting new people to start running. If you are fat, if you are thin and you're out there running, other runners are cheering you on, I promise you, all the time. Okay? So if you're a fat runner, make sure you sign up for a race. Go sign up for that 5K, you will be surprised at how friendly everyone is and how many people you see there that actually look like you.

And finally, the number five myth is that nobody's actually looking at you. Nobody cares if your ass jiggles in your tights. Nobody cares if you're running in a sports bra and your arms and belly are showing. Seriously stop, nobody cares. And you know, actually, even if they do care, guess what? You are the boss of you.

I used to spend so much time trying to cover myself up when I was exercising because I would think to myself, nobody needs to see that. I didn't want to subject all these other people to the horror of my fat body, okay? So instead I would be uncomfortable, and hot, and I wouldn't get as much out of my workout because I was all stressed out about what other people were thinking. I was trying to make sure that I was sucking in my stomach and, you know, ridiculous, right?

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But it doesn't matter what anybody else thinks. They don't live your life, they don't live in your body, you do. So put yourself in charge. Please don't live your life so that other people won't be offended by your presence. Fuck that, take up space, be yourself, run the way you want to run. It's so freeing and nobody else cares. Just do you.

Okay, my friends. I would love it if you'd share this episode with somebody who has a problem with fat runners, or the word fat, or just generally thinks that being fat is the worst thing ever. Please spread the word, especially on Instagram.

And real quick, I want you to know that my 5K training program opens for registration on February 20th. This is going to be a six week online class. It's going to be designed for beginners. If you can currently walk three miles comfortably you can do this class.

Now, if you're not a beginner, you can still totally join the class because, again, I'm going to be teaching you the basics of running, but also how to keep yourself on track with a training plan, how to navigate a race environment, how to pick a good race. How to kind of like get yourself in the mindset to run your best race, and tons of more stuff, right? It's going to be packed with great information.

So if you want to learn more about that, just head over to notyouraveragerunner.com/5kclass. Again, that's notyouraveragerunner.com/5kclass. Class opens on February 20th, we start on February 28th and we finish on April 10th. So I hope that I see you there.

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Rebels, I hope this has been a helpful episode for you. And if you liked it, please share it on Instagram, let people know. I love you. Stay safe, get your ass out there and run.

Oh, and one last thing, if you enjoyed listening to this episode you have to check out the Rebel Runner Roadmap. It's a 30 day online program that will teach you exactly how to start running, stick with it, and become the runner you've always wanted to be. Head on over to rebelrunnerroadmap.com to join. I'd love to be a part of your journey.