

Ep #294: Glorifying Obesity



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With Your Host

Jill Angie

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Welcome to *The Not Your Average Runner Podcast*. If you've never felt athletic but you still dream about becoming a runner, you are in the right place. I'm Jill Angie, your fat running coach. I help fat women over 40 to start running, feel confident, and change their lives. I have worked with thousands of women to help them achieve their running goals and now I want to help you.

Hey, hey, runners. So I have had this episode stewing inside me for months now. Last summer I had an Instagram reel go viral, it had like 7 million views, it was fucking crazy. And it showed me running in different locations and talked about how I don't need to lose weight to be a runner.

And there was tons of supportive commenting and people going, "Oh my gosh, this is amazing." But there were plenty of people commenting about how I'm ruining my knees and how I should lose weight and blah, blah, blah. And, honestly, none of that was surprising. But then there were another set of commenters that kind of blew my mind. And these are the folks who said that I am glorifying obesity. Now, I'm just going to let that land for a moment. Glorifying obesity.

In other words, praising myself and others for being fat and trying to bring other people into the cult of fatness. As if being fat has made my life so much better that I want everyone to be fat, that I want to make sure the whole world knows that being fat is the best possible thing you can be. That I want to help everyone be fat. It's fucking ridiculous.

I'm like, okay, I'm just over here trying to help fat women start running so they can build confidence and feel stronger in their body, and you're telling me that somehow that's glorifying obesity? Bitch, please. I don't care if you're fat or thin or anything in between. One body is not better than another.

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All bodies are good bodies. And telling anyone that their body is wrong because it's fat, or because it's too thin, or disabled or is dark skinned, or because the person inside the body is a different gender than the outside of the body. Telling anyone that their body is wrong for any reason in its current state is not okay.

Me showing up in my fat body saying, "Hey, other fat women, you can do this too," is not promoting or glorifying obesity in any way. Glorifying obesity looks like this, hey, fat people are better than everyone else. Fat bodies are sexier than all other bodies. Everyone should be trying to be fat. Fat is the best. And if your body can't gain weight, well, you're just not trying hard enough. Drink more milkshakes and eat less kale. Hire a nutrition coach to help you gain weight.

Stop exercising so much, aim for less than 2,000 steps per day. Spend as much time as possible on the couch. And for fuck's sake, start wearing clothes that make you look fatter. Buy things that are too tight so it looks like you're busting out of your clothes to give the illusion of fatness because everyone should be trying to be fat. Being fat is morally superior to being thin in every way.

That is what glorifying and promoting obesity looks like. But having so many of these ridiculous comments on my Instagram does give me an opening to discuss what obesity actually is and why labeling someone as obese is not helpful. And I'm going to do that right now.

So I looked up the word obese in a few different dictionaries and they all defined it as some version of very fat. Okay, that was my understanding of the word as well. The word obese itself dates back to the 17th century-ish, and it comes from the Latin word *obesus*. And I never took Latin, I'm probably mispronouncing that. But *obesus* means having eaten until fat. Okay, makes sense. This all tracks.

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For much of history having excess body fat, though, was a symbol of wealth and prosperity. When plagues and famine were everywhere, fat bodies were viewed as successful and healthy. It was a desirable look. Think about those renaissance paintings with voluptuous women just lying around looking sexy, right? That body type was desirable.

But in the 19th century food supplies became more plentiful, modern medicine began to develop, living standards started to rise. And then by the 1940s thin bodies were actually becoming the new standard of health and beauty. And that's when beliefs that fat people were lazy and unattractive began to take hold.

And in 1954 Life Magazine published an article stating that obesity is caused by gluttony, which pretty much sums up the whole prevailing opinion that obesity is a sin, right? That is just so fucked up to me. Being fat is a sin. Now, I can think of lots of ways that humans can be pretty terrible, being fat does not make that list.

So within the last century we've gone from the word obese meaning very fat to the medical industry giving a clinical definition to the word obese. And that is having a body mass index or BMI, you've heard this term before, of over 30. So if you have a BMI over 30 you are clinically classified as obese.

Now, the BMI is a simple calculation, it is a person's weight in pounds or kilograms divided by the square of their height in feet or meters. And a BMI of 18.5 to 25 is considered healthy. Over 25 is labeled overweight, over 30 is labeled obese. There are additional classifications after that, such as morbidly obese and super morbidly obese.

Now, if you are a woman of average height, say you're five foot five inches tall, and the BMI says that your healthy weight range is 114 to 144 pounds. So if you're 5'5 and you weigh 150, you are clinically considered overweight. I am not even joking, okay?

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At 180 pounds you are considered medically obese. And if you march into the doctor's office at that weight you're going to be told that you need to lose weight immediately or it's going to impact your health. You'll get the whole song and dance, dog and pony show like, oh my God, you're going to die. I'm being a little over dramatic. But you will get, most likely, some commentary from your doctor about your BMI being in the obese range at 180 pounds and five foot five inches tall.

Also, the BMI does not consider body fat, muscle mass, bone density, fitness level. Case in point, think of Jason Momoa, if you're a Game of Thrones fan imagine Jason Momoa, or if you're an Aquaman fan. Do you look at this guy and you say, oh, he is very overweight. He might even be obese. He is definitely unhealthy.

No, we look at him and we say, okay, he's clearly healthy, right? He has visible abs, he's visibly muscular, he has that sort of desirable body type, desirable by current society standards. But if you look it up on Google, which I did, his BMI is 28.5. Not only is he overweight, he is borderline obese. His body fat is 18%, but there he is glorifying obesity, prancing around with his borderline obese body. It's fucking ridiculous.

So the body mass index, just to give you a little bit of history that you may or may not know, was created in the 1840s-ish by a Belgian man named Lambert Adolphe Jacques Quetelet. And I'm probably mispronouncing all of that, and I apologize. But I think it's Lambert Adolphe Jacques Quetelet, something like that.

Anyway, he was not a doctor, he was a mathematician. He was a very learned man, not a doctor, had no medical training. What he did have was a particular interest in identifying the characteristics of what he called the average man. And back in the day, the word average wasn't kind of a low key insult. Average sort of meant ideal, right? It was the ideal man.

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And he actually believed, this is kind of weird, he believed that every one of us is a flawed copy of a cosmic template for human beings. And he was like, if I could just take the average of a bunch of people, that would tell me what we are all supposed to be. He was like, I'm going to get all this data from all these flawed copies, all these humans, and I'm going to take the mathematical mean, and that is going to be the ideal human.

So he took all of these body measurements, right? Like height and weight, yes. But also chest measurements, and limb length and head circumference all the measurements so he could figure out exactly what the ideal human would be. I can't even, right? Don't even get me started.

The thought process that leads one to believe that there is such a thing as an ideal human, when the complexity of evolution, the complexity of our DNA, of our genetics, there's no possible way there could be one ideal or any ideal. It's just not possible. But the thought process that leads you to believe this is like the opposite of celebrating diversity.

It's basically saying there is a perfect way to be. There is one perfect way to be, and we should all be striving towards that so we can be exactly the same and that any deviation from the norm should be discouraged. This is just gross. I just fucking hate this idea. Although I recognize that, for sure, our society is still kind of like circling around that idea that we should all be thin, white, blond, with these perfect proportions.

Anyway, I'm digressing. So Quetelet took the physical measurements of a bunch of French and Scottish men in 1840-ish. And from their measurements came the BMI, okay? So, I'm not a French man. I don't know, maybe I know a couple French men, but most of the people I know do not fall under the description of French or Scottish men.

So basically, the criteria that we are currently using to evaluate someone's health is independent of age, gender, ethnic origins, right? We're applying a

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data set from white, western European men from almost 200 years ago, by the way. A time when the average white western European male was five foot seven and weighed 150 pounds.

In 2020, the average male height was literally two inches taller than that. So even if somehow the BMI system of evaluating somebody's health was actually valid, the system that we currently have was derived from a population of humans that's not even in existence today. Even if you are a white Western European male, the BMI isn't relevant to you. If you're a person of color or you're female, it is even less so.

Now, to be clear, Quetelet –I feel like there are French and Belgian people listening right now that are just cringing at my poor pronunciation, and I apologize to you. But anyway, he didn't intend for his dataset to be used as an indicator of health. He did intend it for other things, I'm not even going to go into that in this podcast.

But here we are with this bogus classification system that is now being used by most medical professionals with no consideration for individual health indicators, or whether it even applies to the person you're working with.

So I have mentioned before on this show that I don't ever use the words overweight or obese to describe myself. And this is exactly why. Because obese either means very fat, in which case, I'll just call myself fat, thank you very much. Or it means I have been classified as obese by a system that was never intended to measure health, and is at its very best completely inadequate to do so. And at its worst, it is harmful.

Back to the original discussion. The belief that it is glorifying obesity when someone in a fat body is active and says, hey, you can do active things too. It's fucking ridiculous. It speaks directly to the anti-fat bias that has become the norm in the past century.

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There is no such thing as a perfect body. If the ideal human form existed, everyone would be in agreement and public opinion would not change over time. I mean, even in this day and age there are parts of the world that value fat bodies. I'm very tempted to move to those places. If it is true that being fat is categorically unattractive, and unworthy, and a sin according to Life magazine, how is it possible that entire cultures prefer fatness to thinness and actually seek it out?

So the concept of glorification of obesity is ludicrous. I live in a fat phobic world, one that is not made to accommodate my body. It is often very inconvenient being fat. I shop primarily online because most stores don't carry extended sizes. Airplane seats are so uncomfortable, they're uncomfortable for thin people, but they are very uncomfortable for me. And don't even get me started on race shirts, okay?

It is very inconvenient and sometimes uncomfortable to be fat in this world. Now, I love my body and I think I am worthy, regardless of my size. But am I inviting everyone to be fat? Not a fucking chance. If you're naturally thin, I am not calling you over to the fat side. I am not trying to influence everyone to be fat. I just want you to feel worthy in the body you are in right now and to recognize that your weight doesn't ever have to hold you back from doing what you want to do.

I am glorifying body acceptance. I am glorifying doing the thing fat instead of waiting for some imaginary future time when everything is perfect. And I am glorifying feeling confident in who you are without needing to meet some ridiculous, bullshit societal standard. That is what I am glorifying.

Now, I know there might be some of you listening thinking, well, this could all be solved if you would just lose weight instead of getting all worked up over people who think you're glorifying obesity. Why don't you just do the work to become smaller? And this is where I roll my eyes and say you're missing the point.

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Now, I won't get into the success rate statistics of intentional weight loss, but they're pretty grim. Yes, some folks have successfully dropped pounds and kept them off. Most don't and it becomes a roller coaster of lose weight, feel amazing, gain some back, panic, double down on your diet, lose weight, feel amazing, gain some back.

And then your life becomes this roller coaster of highs and lows and thinking about when you used to be at your goal weight. And how are you going to get back to your goal weight? And how are you going to stay at your goal weight? And then you're missing out on your actual life because you're so focused on making your body look a certain way that you can't even enjoy the body that you're in right now.

And again, not everyone has this experience of weight loss. Some people are successful and maintain their weight. And that's awesome. But a lot, a fuck ton lot of people do end up on this roller coaster thanks to how the diet and fitness industry teaches you that your body size is the most important thing about you. And that is the whole problem with being told to just do the work to lose the weight. Because it implies that your body size is a result of laziness, of lack of discipline, and is a moral failing.

And if you're fat and you think it's because you're lazy and worthless, first of all, it's not your fault that you think that. But also, it's not the truth. Morality is a made up thing. It is not like gravity. It is not science. It is a bunch of thoughts that people think. It is a manual that we have for how the world should operate. Different people, different cultures have different versions of it, but it is all made up.

Now, if you were raised in the US I'd bet all my money that you were raised to think that fat is bad and thin is good. And that one of the worst things you can be is fat. And even if you didn't get that messaging directly from your parents, you got it at school, you got it watching TV, you got it on social media, you are still getting it. It is everywhere.

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And so what happens is we internalize this anti-fat belief system and we use it against ourselves. So it's not just other people saying this stuff. We're saying it to ourselves. And one of the reasons that I don't allow before and after pictures or diet discussions in my Facebook group, is that I want to create a place where women can get a break from the barrage of low key body shaming that we are exposed to everywhere else.

Because even if you are not shaming yourself, even if somebody else is not shaming you, seeing someone else shame themselves, complaining about their own body can trigger all kinds of thoughts in your own mind about your body. And when you're trying to heal from a lifetime of fat phobia, you need a space where it is okay to just be fat, just celebrate your fat body without someone else saying, oh, but you'd be so much healthier if you lost weight. Can we please just get a fucking break from all of that?

And it's not like we're sitting around in that group all day long going, oh my God, I'm so happy I'm fat. I wish everyone was fat. Look how fat I am. No, we're just going about our business, being awesome runners in a safe place where nobody is going to harass us and shame us.

And what happens when you're in a place like that, is you stop focusing so much on your body size and you start thinking about how powerful you are. How strong you are becoming. How confident you feel. It is absolutely amazing what you can do when your brain gets a break from anti-fat influence, even for a little while. Because you start to think different thoughts about yourself. Your brain starts to clear up a little bit. You start taking different actions and you see results.

In my Run Your Best Life coaching program we do so much of this work. And the women in that program are just doing it fat, right? Many of them are running marathons. It is amazing. And it is all because they've stopped believing all the bullshit stories they've been told about fat bodies. They are retelling the story in a way that works for them.

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And I don't care if you've been bullied your whole life for being fat. If you've internalized that fat phobia so much that you can't imagine not hating on your body 24/7, if that's your reality, I still know that spending time in a safe space where no one is going to tell you that all your problems are due to your body size, that you're lazy, and that you have no discipline, right?

Spending time in a safe space where none of that is happening, and when you're actually hearing that you can do amazing things in a fat body, not only have we taken away the negative messaging, but we're actively putting the positive messaging into your thoughts. Being around that kind of influence will change your life.

And that's what we do in Run Your Best Life. If you're not in that group, please, I urge you to check it out today. Just go to runyourbestlife.com for all of the details because that is a group where we don't talk about weight loss, we don't talk about any of that. We're like these are the bodies we have, let's fucking go. Let's just go. All right? So check out runyourbestlife.com for all the details on that.

Okay, my friend, that is it for this episode. I hope you enjoyed it. I hope you learned something. Please share it on Instagram, share it with somebody that you know needs to hear it because this is an important message to get out there. Meanwhile, stay safe, get your ass out there and run and I will talk to you next week.

Real quick, before you go, if you enjoyed this episode, you have to check out Run Your Best Life. It's my monthly coaching program where you will learn exactly how to start running, stick with it, and become the runner you have always wanted to be. Head on over to runyourbestlife.com to join. I would love to be a part of your journey.