

Unburdened Eating Article

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If you're like many people, you start the new year focused on one body project or another. Whether it's weight loss, fitness, clean eating, or sobriety, you feel some pressure to make up for the excess of the past weeks or renew your attempts to live more like parts of you believe you should.

This annual commitment to self-improvement is likely an uptick in the dissatisfaction you generally feel about your body. You're so used to it that you probably don't question the decision to "do something about it". After all, shouldn't you be trying to feel and look better? How many people do you know who aren't trying to change their bodies?

As you embark on your new diet or wellness program, you may notice feeling hopeful or at least a little less self-critical. Having some structure and goals you can work towards can relieve or distract from the anxiety or shame parts of you feel about food and your body.

Over time, however, you're likely to find it more difficult to stick with the program. And while this makes sense - the longer you override your needs, the more insistent they become - you'll probably blame yourself for not having enough self-control. The austerity of the diet, cleanse, or wellness plan works alongside underlying critical beliefs that contribute to a predictable falling off the wagon.

While parts of you will perceive this as a loss of control, the IFS model understands this as predictable - when some parts in a system push for restriction, other parts will naturally act to restore balance by countering the restriction. That's because it's the nature of systems to find

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homeostasis and also because the parts of you who hate being pushed around or shamed by managers or made to go hungry will push back.

Even when parts of you recognize that your inability to sustain your weight loss or fitness program is a natural reaction to deprivation, other parts of you will typically persist in believing that with enough determination and the right program you would succeed. That's because parts of you learned early, and keep getting the message, that certain bodies are worthy of praise and protection while others deserve judgement or harm. Parts of you keep working to change your body so you fit in better or at least look like you're trying to fit in. Other parts dissociate from your body and its needs and feelings to avoid your exiles' shame and fear.

People occasionally ask if the IFS Institute endorses food and weight management programs. They argue that the structure of these programs, which typically require the elimination or reduction of certain triggering foods, may facilitate the healing of deeper wounds that drive emotional eating, especially when used in conjunction with IFS.

IFS I recognizes that it is possible to get to know and heal parts who carry burdens in the context of managerial weight loss programs. When you're less dominated by, or blended with, critical managers because they are reassured by the structure of the diet and the constraints it places on the firefighters they polarize with, you may be able to connect with and unburden exiles because they become more forthcoming when the managers aren't as shaming. If you have firefighters who often use food

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to avoid or numb exiles' feelings, dieting may help you become aware of and heal exiles whose feelings surface when they don't do that. The firefighters may be surprised to discover that you can handle the exiles' feelings without their help after all.

However, even when these moments of healing occur, they come at a significant cost to other parts of the system. Since overriding your body's needs and what parts who don't want to diet want typically backfires at some point, intentional weight loss programs run the considerable risk of exacerbating the shame and hopelessness parts of you already hold about food and the body. More important, body improvement projects also participate in cultural stories that are pernicious and, for some people, dangerous. Even aspirational body projects (i.e., thinking about how you should be dieting or improving your body) perpetuate harmful cultural beliefs about which bodies are most valuable.

As Sabrina Strings explains in *Fearing the Black Body*, anti-fat attitudes emerged during the slave trade, when race scientists deemed fatness as a key indicator of the inferiority Black people, whom they judged as less rational and in control of their appetites. Strings describes how the distinction promoted by race scientists coincided with religious currents that emphasized self-control and contributed to our culture's moralization of so much that relates to the body (e.g., weight, health, and sexuality). (Strings, 2020).

That anti-fat attitudes are rooted in racism may be new information to you, especially if you've benefitted from privilege. As you consider this information, you may still have parts who don't understand how it relates

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to your perceived need to lose weight, get fit, or enhance your appearance. How can doing something to take care of yourself, to feel and be well, be a cultural legacy burden? Isn't it natural to want to look feel and look good?

Consider some of the messages you've gotten from family, friends, doctors, and the larger culture about what is normal, attractive, and healthy. Years of lived experience have shaped the lenses through which you relate to your body such that parts of you likely believe it would be irresponsible or dangerous to believe that your body could be okay the way it is. These parts may minimize or disconnect you from being aware of the emotional and physical harm that comes from constantly treating your body as the enemy or, at the very least, a fixer upper. They may also prevent you from registering how other people in marginalized groups experience greater harm from our culture's biases regarding so many aspects of the body, including weight, skin color, health, age, ability, sexuality, and gender.

To the extent that intentional weight loss elevates certain parts/bodies and shames, blames, and exiles others, it cannot be seen as benign or in alignment with the IFS Institute's commitment to healing the legacy burdens that "work to maintain power structures within ourselves, our community, and the world". As Da'Shaun Harrison articulates in *The Belly of the Beast* (2021), "...the celebration of "lost" weight is much more of a celebration of thievery. It is the theft of a fat person's ability to see themselves as someone who matters, theft of a person's right to see their body as neutral rather than inherently bad."

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Intentional weight loss programs are not the same as Self-Led eating, which involves tuning into and respecting and, if necessary, unburdening, all the parts who have needs and agendas related to food and the body. These include parts who yearn for weight loss as well as parts who want to experience pleasure, connection, or keep exiles exiled. Self-Led eating involves healing the parts who carry extreme beliefs so your core wisdom is available to facilitate inner collaboration between and among the different parts who focus on food and the body. Only then can we hope to abolish the hierarchy of which bodies are valued and supported.

Again, while it is possible to find and unburden some parts in the context of austere diet and wellness programs, this requires managers to dominate. The toxic belief system about bodies that the diet perpetuates will be reinforced, contributing to the suffering of both the individual and the culture.