

Book review

Women Afraid to Eat – Breaking Free in Today's Weight-Obsessed World. Frances M. Berg. 2000. Hettinger, ND: Healthy Weight Network. \$20.95 (hardback), \$17.95 (paperback). ISBN 0 918532 62 0.

Women living in developed countries today are the population group most likely to restrict their food intake due to body image concerns. Recent studies have shown that even pre-pubertal schoolgirls are vulnerable to this universal pressure to be thin. Perhaps ironically, however, the sharp rises observed in obesity prevalence are most evident among women. This book examines the major public health challenge arising from this situation, i.e. how to effectively tackle the increasing trends in body fatness and obesity without exacerbating fear of fatness and its accompanying risks of dietary inadequacy and the development of eating disorders. Therefore, although this book is written for all women, it is particularly aimed at those who have a role in influencing national health policy on obesity, namely health professionals, educators and the media.

In the first part of the book the author, Frances Berg, explores the destructive effects that obesity phobia, fad-dieting and weight obsession have on women's physical and psychological health. She describes how such an obsession may stifle a woman's potential in all areas of her life. She blames current health policy on obesity for causing these problems initially. She maintains that the situation is then exacerbated to form 'today's crisis' by health strategies that continue to separately address the key issues involved. She argues that because these issues, dysfunctional eating, eating disorders, overweight and size prejudice, are intrinsically interrelated an integrated response offers the only possibility of success.

In the second part of her book she outlines strategies, which she describes will effectively help women to: 'break free in a weight obsessed world'. Basically her solution involves rejecting what she describes as the 'current control paradigm [which] says that all bodies should be at an 'ideal' weight and large people must lose weight to be healthy'. This, she maintains, must be replaced by the promotion of 'health at any size' using four basic guidelines that encourage people to 'eat well, live actively, and feel good about themselves and others'. However, this is presented as a solution to weight obsession and dietary restraint only: there are no claims that overweight and obesity will be solved. On the contrary Berg claims: 'Some people will lose weight when they make this shift. Others will stay the same weight, but will feel lighter once they shift the load of guilt and find self acceptance. Still others who have kept themselves at an unnaturally low weight may gain a few pounds'.

Frances Berg is a licensed nutritionist and the founder and editor of the *Healthy Weight Journal*. In the book she displays a deep understanding of women whose lives are indeed weighed down by obesity phobia. She provides vivid

descriptions of the miserable situations many obese women experience due to the stigma associated with female fatness. Thus she explains why so many women go to such extremes to lose weight, whether they need to or not. The vulnerability of women to fad diets and the dangers of overdosing on diet pills will be recognized by health professionals involved in treating obesity. There are many aspects of Berg's 'health at any size' solution that are commendable, particularly the soundness of integrating strategies to address weight obsession and rising obesity rates. However it is noticeable that although she demands a 5-year trial of new approaches to obesity treatment, she does not consider that the same level of testing should be applied to her own hypothesis.

There are, unfortunately, other aspects of this book that detract from its merits. The book is sensationalist in parts and tends to go beyond the scientific evidence. For example when listing the dangers of weight obsession and dietary restraint Berg states several times that this will lead to fragile bones and osteoporosis. She ignores the possibility that episodes of restraint may be compensated for by periods of disinhibition and bingeing. She exaggerates the prevalence and consequences of low Fe intakes by making no distinction between the profound effects of anaemia on physical and mental functionality compared with the much less devastating effects of the more prevalent condition of Fe deficiency (low Fe stores). She also places too heavy a reliance on dietary intake data. For example she does not mention that women who are weight conscious are the most likely group to underreport and that this probably accounts for a significant proportion of their low intakes of micro-nutrients. Although she provides large bibliography many of the references are difficult to follow-up mainly because the *Healthy Weight Journal* is not listed in Pub Med. Furthermore, to support the claim that as many as 10% of women are affected by eating disorders she gives the same weight to newspaper articles as to studies subjected to peer review in the literature. However, the most important reason for reservation about this book concerns the criticisms Berg has for public health advice on weight gain during pregnancy. She suggests that women are being urged to gain too much weight during pregnancy and considers it important for women to 'try not to gain too much weight' at this time in order to reduce their risk of obesity. She ignores the fact that these weight gain recommendations are based on sound research and aim to achieve the best outcome of pregnancy.

In this book the links that exist between science and industry were very heavily criticized and this criticism was extended to include leading medical journals. Everyone would agree that it is absolutely crucial to ensure that scientific opinion is not biased. A good way of determining this, suggested by Berg, is to demand that those serving on national advisory groups declare allegiances. There was much doubt placed on obesity experts in this book and

one wonders how well this actually serves women who are weight-obsessed. The sound scientific approach to a healthy weight range is already lost for those many women and girls who choose for themselves an 'ideal weight' that is well below the current recommended standards, and then choose for themselves the methods to achieve this target. It is not at all helpful to encourage such a vulnerable group to further

mistrust the evidence of rigorous research. In conclusion, therefore, while this book may be of interest to those with a good working knowledge of obesity and nutrition, for others there are too many aspects that are misleading.

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