



## Obese people face cruel insults, but also live in a 'world of invisibility': Fighting Fat

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### **In their own voices**

"What I would like the rest of the world to know is that if you're not careful in life -- and this just isn't with eating, it's anything -- you can very quickly, before you know it, become a prisoner in your own body. And, at times, it can be so overwhelming, it feels like there is no escape."

-- *Mark Mazzocco, 37, Parma, who works in comedy-club promotions and does stand-up comedy on the side*

**Watch Mazzocco's video**

"It's a waste of a life to be obese. I don't care if you think you have a vibrant career, if you're doing this, if you're going there. It's a waste of human life because you're not fully accepted. Your dating life is very limited. People are just not attracted to obesity. I tend to stay by myself. I don't go out. I don't do this, I don't go there, I just stay home and keep quiet. It's a waste of life, of precious life."

-- *Joseph Silvestro, 40, Parma Heights, customer-service representative*

**Watch Silvestro's video**

"If I could sum it up in one sentence: There's more to me than meets the eye. And I think that goes for pretty much everyone, including every person who's overweight. It's not this whole thing where you just eat too much and you have no self-control and you don't exercise. I do exercise. I do try to control my portions. We're not like Homer Simpson, just eating a thousand hamburgers. It's not like that. We're really great people to be friends with and go out with and have relationships with, so don't just count us out because we're fat."

-- *Jonetta Reed, 27, East Cleveland, graduate student at Cleveland State University*

**Watch Reed's video**

"For people that are out there who are obese, there is hope. That you inside, the way you feel, the one that dances, that smiles and talks and skis and cooks, that really is the real you. That's the first part of the message. And the second part of the message is that today is the day you have to be that person. One of the things that happens with being obese is a kind of delayed gratification. 'I'll go there when I'm thin.' 'I'll do that when I'm thin.' 'I'll buy this when I'm thin.' But you may not be thin tomorrow. So if there's something you love or someone you want to be with, today is the day."

-- *Sara Stein, 55, a psychiatrist who works for Kaiser Permanente and Neighborhood Family Practice*

**Watch Stein's video**

"Truthfully, before -- when I was fat -- I had friends because I was a loving, fun person to hang out with. But now I feel like when we go to the mall, I can be in the group. Before I would go to the mall and it would be like, 'Oh, there's her three friends and the one fat kid.' Now it's like 'There's the four kids together' and we can all go to the same store and shop because we all wear the same size."

-- *Salena Williams, 15, Euclid, ninth-grader at Euclid High School*

**Watch Salena's video**

They worry.

They worry about how they look, that people will make fun of them, that they'll break the next chair they sit in.

They hurt.

Their knees throb. Their ankles ache. Their hearts have been broken so many times, it's a wonder they continue to pump.

They are lazy or funny or a joke. That's what the world tells them, but only when it happens to notice that they exist at all.

They're America's obese, a category more and more of us move into every year, a group growing so fast the majority of U.S. residents will belong to it by 2030 if we keep eating the way we do.

That's what researchers say.

New data on obesity appear almost every day, telling us we're getting fatter faster than ever before. Missing from most of those reports are the voices of the obese -- real people who weigh 50 or 60 or 200 pounds more than they should.

That doesn't surprise them.

"When you enter the world of obesity," says Joseph Silvestro, a 325-pound man from Parma Heights, "you enter into a world of invisibility. You are dismissed. You are rejected. You are definitely not included."

"It's fascinating," Cleveland-area psychiatrist Sara Stein says, "to be taking up so much space in a room and have people act as if you don't exist."

She and others who struggle with weight want the rest of us to know what the battle is like, what they go through every day, what it's like to be them.

Stein walks in both worlds.

She specializes in treating those who are obese, has lost 90 pounds over the past few years and has 70 more to go, she says.

When you're heavy, Stein says, you never know when the next insult's coming -- or who's going to hurl it.

"I'll tell you a story that came up when I was a teenager," she says, "A very nice, very popular guy in my class came up to me. He put his arm around me and he said, 'You know, you're the only girl I could spend the whole night with naked and not have sex with.'"

"Gee, thanks," she says. "I'm not a sexual person because I'm fat? What am I? I'm a thing?"

"And that was from somebody who wasn't trying to hurt me, he actually thought he was giving me a compliment."

She laughs at the story now. But the pain buried in it is bigger than she ever was.

It's a hurt other seriously overweight people know well.

Before 15-year-old Salena Williams lost 50 pounds -- enough of a drop to no longer be considered obese -- kids at her school called her "Salami."

"It was a little joke," says Salena, a ninth-grader at Euclid High School.

"It was funny, but it was still kind of mean. You know kids are mean."

So are adults, even smart ones who ought to know better.

Stein remembers a day in her medical residency, back before she lost so much weight, when a professor began to humiliate her about her size in front of her fellow residents.

"He just went on and on until one of my friends in residency said, 'I feel like she's getting raped.'

"And that's what it felt like. It was like somebody just ripping your guts open and saying, 'You are a worthless piece of whatever,' because of the way you look.

"I want to tell people, 'I don't look the way I look because I want to look this way. I'm sorry if I'm offending your eyes.'

"I live with this. It hurts. It hurts emotionally, it hurts physically, it's painful, and I try to do what all of you out there tell me I ought to be doing, and it's not working. It's not working for me, and it's not working for any of the other millions of obese people in society."

### **Coping with meanness, pressure from family**

It's not just friends and colleagues. Other people are mean, too.



**View full size** Lisa DeJong, The PD "If I could sum it up in one sentence:

There's more to me than meets the eye," says Jonetta Reed, 27. "The worst I've gotten has been from my family," says Jonetta Reed, a graduate student at Cleveland State University who's trying, again, to lose 50 pounds.

When she was growing up, one close relative in particular -- an adult -- would yell at her about her size.

"I can remember so many Christmases my dad holding me because she talked about me and how fat I was to the point that I cried.

"And when you're fat, at least in my family, you're not cute or you're not beautiful. So for the longest time, I equated being beautiful with being thin. And because I wasn't thin, I wasn't beautiful. It took a long time for me to disconnect the two. That you can be beautiful and glamorous and -- oh, yes, God, even sexy -- without being small."

Those experiences are soul-stealing, Silvestro says. They eat away at you, and one day you wake up and find somebody else living in your overstretched skin.

"I was a very vibrant, flirtatious kind of person," says Silvestro, who takes customer-service calls for a living. "I loved life. I liked to dance. I was very athletic. I just liked dressing very well. I looked great. I had fun.

"And now it's like I'm very quiet. I've become withdrawn. Being ignored and being dismissed has really hurt my feelings -- a lot. It's stolen my personality away."

#### **Video: Comedian Mark Mazzocco talks seriously about obesity and his health.**

Family and friends put other kinds of pressure on those who are overweight.

"Many times people will pull me aside and say 'Hey, Mark, you know what? We want you to be around,' " says Mark Mazzocco, who weighs about 400 pounds, works in comedy-club promotions and does stand-up comedy in his spare

time.

"That really tugs at your heartstrings because there's enough stress in the world today with the economy and everything that's going on. I don't want to put any more stress on my friends and family. That's really one thing that upsets me greatly."

When he hears concern from those around him, Mazzocco says, he lays off the chicken wings and Cokes, at least for a while.

"Do it for them," he tells himself. "If you're not going to do it for you, maybe the motivation will be to do it for them."

He tries to lose weight and has done it in the past, as so many others have.

Salena lost her 50 pounds after she was diagnosed with diabetes. She did it by eating more fruits and vegetables, helping herself to smaller portions, going outside to play more often and making the freshman basketball team at her school.

Stein dropped from her peak of 270 pounds by replacing lattes with coffee, walking her dogs, taking yoga and making a series of many small changes.

But so many other people don't succeed.

"I tried," says Reed, who weighs 240 pounds now. "I bought a treadmill. I actually have an elliptical in my bedroom right now. I had a Bowflex machine. I spent so much money, like at least \$5,000 on crap that I bought off TV that was supposed to make me happier or make me smaller.

"I did [the] Atkins [diet] and then I lost 60 and gained back 80, and that was so heartbreaking.

"It's like you go through this cycle of hope and then a little bit of results and then this brief period where you're enjoying it, and then it comes back and there's failure and depression. It's a cycle."

### **What they want you to know**

There are a few other things those who are -- or have been -- obese want you to know. For one, they take responsibility for their weight.

"I am to blame for this," Mazzocco says. "No one forced me to eat all these bad meals. I really need to say 'OK, enough is enough.' I need to lose this weight so I can fit comfortably into places and I don't need two airplane tickets and everything. I have to discipline myself and change it. We all control our own destinies."

The other thing they want you to know is that they aren't as different from the rest of us as you might think.

"We're not aliens," Silvestro says. "We're just people. Don't stereotype us. Look within yourself and ask yourself why do you dislike us so much based on our appearance."

So often that dislike turns to verbal abuse and bias, which seem to be condoned by many Americans.

"We're kind of the last bastion of discrimination and nobody's saying, 'Hey, wait a minute, it's wrong,' " says Stein.

"If you switched the word fat to black or Jewish or gay or female or any of a dozen different ways of being, it would be illegal, the stuff they're saying.

"You may think that a fat person is different because they let themselves get like that and so I say to you, 'Is that somehow different than your alcohol, your tobacco, your gambling, your shopping, your overwork, your raging, your conscious depression, your repetitive anxiety?'

"You know, we're all the same."

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