



Taking OUR BODIES *back*

HAVING A HEALTHY VIEW OF ONE'S OWN BODY HAS NEVER BEEN MORE IMPORTANT, WHAT WITH SOCIETY'S UNATTAINABLE BEAUTY STANDARDS BRINGING IN A VERY TOXIC DIET CULTURE, UNHEALTHY FOOD HABITS AND A CONSTANT RACE TO LOSE WEIGHT. HERE, WE SPEAK TO THREE WOMEN ABOUT WHAT IT MEANS TO EMBRACE AND LOVE OURSELVES, NO MATTER WHAT SIZE WE ARE

By JAMIE LEE

The other day, I tried putting on a pair of jeans that I hadn't worn in two years and they wouldn't go past my hips. I took a deep breath and sucked in my stomach but they just wouldn't budge. It was clear: I had gained weight. At first, I felt upset. Had I been eating too much or exercising too little? Thoughts like that kept going through my head.

Until I remembered reading something online about how our clothes should fit us, instead of the other way around. So instead of focusing on the fact that I had gained weight, I should dwell on the joyous fact that I now had a chance to go shopping for a new pair of jeans. Or think about the truth that I actually look healthier and feel happier now as compared to before (backstory: when I had been skinnier, that had been because of a lack of appetite due to stress).

It isn't easy to retrain your brain to think like that, especially when the word "fat" has so many negative connotations – especially for women. Kate Moss was praised for being so skinny that the term "heroin chic" had been coined for her. When Monica, in the TV show *Friends*, lost weight and became skinny, she immediately caught the eye of Chandler who had earlier made fun of her for being fat. A few years ago, IU's extreme diet of vitamin pills, fruits, water and exercise went viral with YouTubers like S W and Yoor Jung gaining millions of views after trying it out. Unfortunately, the power of a weight loss transformation often means that you become "prettier" in the eyes of the world, and others automatically view you more positively.

A rampant diet culture has ruled over society in the past few decades – think brutal calorie counts, detox pills, slimming centres, crash diets, keto meals and intermittent fasting – the list is endless. Virginia Sole-Smith, the person behind the anti-fat-bias podcast and newsletter *Burnt Toast*, believes that promoting diets to achieve certain body types is toxic and unhealthy. Rather than focusing on being healthy and fit, people are especially fixated on losing weight, thinking that it will make them feel and look better – but that is not often the case.

By creating a healthy mindset towards our body and cultivating a good relationship with food, not only can we regain our body autonomy but also take the negative power out of the word "fat". Here, we speak to three women, Anna Milani, founder of SPARKD: Catherine Halim, an advocate for body positivity and home chef Grace Kee, on taking our bodies back.

CREATING A HOLISTIC,
ACCESSIBLE APPROACH TO
FITNESS AND HEALTH

ANNA MILANI
Founder and CEO of SPARKD

"As someone who has been in the health and wellness industry for over 20 years, I became fascinated by the impact exercise has on our brains, most especially after losing my grandfather to Alzheimer's. SPARKD was born out of the desire to create awareness about cognitive and physical performance. Our mission is to help others improve their brain-body performance so that they can perform at their best every day. as well as change the way people perceive health and fitness, especially when related to cognitive functions.

The brain controls cognitive function, conscious movement, all our thoughts and everyday actions. This includes aspects like information processing, attention span, thought organisation, decision-making, inhibition, impulse control, habits, complex organisation and of course, memory. Every time we carry out an action, we use a combination of these elements, which ultimately directs the way we function in our everyday lives. Being able to change the way we view health through what we do at SPARKD is really empowering for me. I believe that the more responsibility we take on to better ourselves, the more we can feel in control of our lives and fulfilled.

I started SPARKD in 2021 but prior to that, I spent a year researching the market on cognitive motor training globally and selected the technologies that are more suitable for our target market. Today, SPARKD offers personal training, group classes and team building events that focus on the four primary cognitive domains of brain-body training, namely visual-spatial, memory, processing and executive functioning that is connected to emotional intelligence, social intelligence and self-awareness. The training is a combination of physical and cognitive tasks. For example, clients could be doing squats, lunges, press-ups or biking while solving math equations, or playing memory, visual and reaction games.

The training sessions and classes conducted at SPARKD are facilitated using technology that is frequently used for sports performance on top athletes or in rehabilitation facilities to aid neurological conditions. Technology like the action lights and the smartfit boards help us to create training programmes and protocols that revolve around the principle of dual tasking or cognitive motor training, which has been shown to enhance neuroplasticity. It also serves as a great way to objectively track baseline and performance.

Focusing on brain-body fitness and good health can help us enhance our physical, cognitive, and therefore mental wellbeing. The more we exercise, the more we create a habit, and with that we start reaping the benefits of exercise – such as looking and feeling better about ourselves. The better brain health and cognition we have, the better our executive function and our decision-making ability will be – ultimately allowing us to make more conscious choices when it comes to food and exercise.

Weight loss can be a bit of a controversial topic, especially these days. But rather than saying

it's definitely 'good' or 'bad', I want to instead ask: What is your approach to losing weight? If you carry extra body fat that might cause harm to your health, then from a health perspective you would be encouraged to get healthier by moving more and maybe eating healthier foods to lower inflammatory markers and ensure optimal health. If you want healthy body fat parameters, achieved through a balanced lifestyle of fitness and nutritional foods, that would certainly be encouraged.

With that being said, I think striving to eat a healthy balanced diet is great, but not to the extent of over obsessing. Be mindful of your food choices as much as possible, while listening to your body and mind and how it responds to your food. When you eat something, pay attention to how you feel afterwards, both from a physical but also a mood perspective. But most importantly, enjoy your food and take time to savour it!

One thing I would love to share is that it's ok to have [physical] role models and it's ok to aspire to be like them but do not compare yourself to others. We are all different and unique in our own ways and should be proud of that. Instead of that, look at what they are doing, their behaviours, their habits and ask yourself how those realistically fit into your own lifestyle."

LEARNING TO DEFINE
YOUR OWN EXPECTATIONS
AND BOUNDARIES
WITHOUT LEANING INTO
SOCIETAL PRESSURE

CATHERINE HALIM

*Co-founder of Blunies and Cafe Kisaku
and a body positivity advocate*

"Growing up, I had a really bad relationship with food. I hated exercising because I was always forced to work out to lose weight. I couldn't fully enjoy food as [I felt] it made me fat. Food and exercise was always associated closely with weight loss. I grew up watching a lot of Asian dramas, [which featured] women who were beautiful and petite. I think that really made me question whether I could be accepted because I had always been big. It

was sad to say that growing up, there was only one standard of beauty – big eyes, double eyelids, small and fragile bodies. It was quite tiring because I felt the need to fit into this narrative of beauty. Because of that, I developed full-blown eating disorders when I was 26 years old that included binge eating, orthorexia and bulimia. I'd go on a binge, vomit out

my food, and then spend the next day working out so I could burn my calories. It was tough because I eventually developed a lot of health issues.

To be really honest, I was quite lucky that I met a health coach who previously had eating disorders himself. That was when I realised how unhealthy it was to have these expectations of myself. I went to him as it was my last attempt to lose weight, not to cure my eating disorders. At that time, I was not convinced that I was skinny enough to have eating disorders. My health coach provided me with additional help to first work on my relationship with food, body image and exercise. If it wasn't for him, I think I would have never admitted that I had eating disorders.

After this breakthrough, I had to develop a new relationship with food, my body and exercise. It consisted of doing a lot of 'rewiring' of my relationship with exercise and food. This journey took time. I remembered absolutely hating my body for putting on weight during this recovery period. When you put on 30kg to become healthier, it really challenges you.

But during this time, I learnt how to process a lot of my emotions, through meditation and journaling. I was afraid of social interactions during the time of recovery so I mostly spent time with people who I was close to. I learnt to eat during the recovery process and experienced being full. In recovery, what really helped was to equip myself with nutrition knowledge. With that, I learned to see food as fuel, and that there is no 'good' or 'bad' food. I experimented with cooking at home a lot (it was also during the pandemic), using ingredients that I would never have thought of 'good'. Overall, the recovery process involved a 30kg weight gain, a lot of bloating, swelling around my legs and stomach, as well as acne breakouts.

Health isn't just about weight loss. Weight loss doesn't also mean health. What we have learnt about health 20 years ago has been updated with new research and knowledge. It's great that we are more open to different standards of beauty. When I was growing up, I'd never see someone who isn't petite or small in magazines. Beauty is so different now and that's amazing. I'd urge each of us to really look within to think about how we define 'ugliness' and think about how we formed that standard. Most often, we are biased due to the environment we grew up in. Learn how to appreciate different types of beauty, even if it is extremely challenging.

Apart from self-love, body acceptance or having a healthy relationship with food – I believe knowledge about nutrition, or about moving your body (exercise) should be taught from young. I believe we don't have to always associate

weight loss with food or exercise. Self love is being able to show up for yourself, even when we have flaws. Beauty in imperfection is, in my opinion, extremely beautiful."

ALL GOOD RELATIONSHIPS
WITH FOOD ARE
NURTURED FROM YOUNG
GRACE KEE
*Owner of Good Graces, home chef
and mother*

"In my family, food is about love. Family gatherings, Christmas, Chinese New Year and other occasions are all centred around food-laden tables and looking forward to home-cooked goodness, with family members preparing their signature dishes.

Even up to now, certain dishes trigger happy memories: ice cream cake and French fries at Swensen's after piano class, durian parties during durian season, my grandma's very delicious dry mee siam. There was a short period in my teenage years that I thought I could be thinner and was measuring every bit of food I ate and trying to dab off oil but I eventually got bored of this and moved out of this phase.

When I was a kid, food health & wellness was not really a big thing. I ate what I was given and had lots of snacks in between. Nowadays, we are more conscious about what we put in our mouths. Is it sustainable, is it organic, does it promote gut health, is it a superfood – things like that. Although I don't go to the extreme, I am definitely more aware of what I buy and one of my preferences is for locally-farmed produce, which I do go out of my way to find. Aside from that, I eat everything but in moderation and would rather go for quality than quantity.

My daughter has been helping me in the kitchen since she was three and the first dish that she cooked by herself was fried rice. I believe it is important to teach kids about simple healthy dishes from young as it helps the child understand the whole process of where their meal comes from, and what ingredients go into their food. Kids are more likely to eat what they cook for themselves because it gives them a sense of achievement, and in turn, it builds a positive mindset about food. My daughter has since learned how to make her own vegetable soups, fried beehoon, pastas and pizzas, all from scratch. We also grow our own vegetables and herbs at home and she has her own little pots of herbs that she grows herself.

The proper three meals a day – breakfast,

lunch and dinner – at fixed timings is a must. We try not to snack an hour before meal times so that it doesn't spoil the meal and we also rarely drink sodas, but of course there are exceptions to this, like when we are on holiday. On special occasions, we have Peranakan feasts, like my *nasi lemak* buffets and DIY *popiah* parties. We also love thematic nights, like Mexican Tortillas, New Orleans Seafood Boil, Southern Fried Chicken and Spanish Paella and Meatballs.

But I believe that using food as a reward or punishment will undermine good eating habits. It will lead to the child associating certain foods with being good or bad, and that could result in the child feeling guilty for eating things they like. Making something like sweets a reward also creates a craving, which could result in over-indulgence. Rather, I believe that everything consumed should be in moderation.

The word 'fat' as a neutral descriptive word has been turned into a 'bad' word because bigger body sizes are viewed negatively. Fat people are automatically viewed as unhealthy, slower, lazy and undisciplined. This is of course extremely harmful, especially when it comes to youths who have not developed self-confidence, and it can lead to health issues like eating disorders.

I think, whether you're a parent or not, we all need to be aware of how we use the word 'fat'. We are all guilty of using it negatively, especially in conversations like: 'I ate so much, I'm so fat!' or when someone says they're fat, our knee-jerk reaction is to reassure and comfort them. Already,

we are driving a negative perception that the child will pick up on. To counter that, I try to keep words that describe physical appearance to a minimum and instead focus more on positive behavioural words and actions. For example, rather than saying, 'You look so pretty in that dress', you could instead say, 'I like the creative way you put that outfit together'. If my child talks about a friend or classmate that is fat in a derogatory way rather than as a descriptive term, I'll teach her that it is normal that people come in all shapes, sizes and weights.

It's really hard these days with the media of all forms bombarding us with unrealistic beauty standards. From social media platforms like Instagram to TikTok, there's content promoting diet pills, dances to sculpt your body in a certain way, fat-freezing procedures and more. Even as an adult, it is tough not to be swayed into wanting to look a certain way. But ultimately, body acceptance starts from the upbringing and the role models you grow up with. If you are happy and comfortable with your own body, your child will follow suit. 🌟



Anna Milani



Catherine Halim



Grace Kee

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