

Can Body Shaming Be Outlawed?

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In 1961 at the age of 37, [Jean Nidetch](#), who struggled with her weight for most of her life, signed up for a 10-week program offered by the New York City Board of Health called the “Prudent Diet.” Ms. Nidetch lost 20 pounds, but she grew disillusioned — to keep going, she would need the kind of motivation that she believed could only come from community. Borrowing the central tenets of Alcoholics Anonymous, she began inviting friends in a similar predicament to weekly meetings at her Queens apartment, where they would talk about the emotional roots of overeating and generally buttress one another in a shared commitment toward what was then so often pitifully called “reducing.”

The group grew and grew; the result was Weight Watchers, which, by 1968, could count five million members worldwide.

A half-century later, the notion of *watching your weight*, of subjecting your body to a daily metric surveillance for the sole purpose of becoming thin, had come to seem retrograde — a capitulation to the debased mandates of the patriarchy, another useless foray into self-reproof. In 2018, in an effort to meet the moment, Weight Watchers rebranded as WW, with the tagline “Wellness that works.”

Even if the move fooled no one, it affirmed that norms and ideals had shifted. In 2004, Dove broke out its Real Beauty campaign, featuring women in a wide range of shapes and sizes in its advertising. Three years ago Lizzo appeared on the cover of *Vogue*. It is now inconceivable that any fashion magazine editor would be caught talking about her own eating habits the way that Helen Gurley Brown did decades ago when she said that dinner when she was *not* dieting typically consisted of “muesli with chopped prunes, dried apricot, six unsalted almonds, a dusting of Equal and a cup of whole milk.”

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