What I learned as an “Obesity Epidemic Entrepreneur”

By Nikita Rose

Content Warning: *this content includes personal experiences of weight loss and dieting. This reading may be potentially disturbing and triggering for those sensitive to the topic of weight, weight loss, dieting, fitness, diet culture.*

For almost a decade I have formed a close relationship with social media and its popular portrayal of the ‘ideal’ body. I believed body fat was heavily associated with health, inferring that in order to be successful, you must be healthy, thin, and fit. As a personal trainer for four years at Goodlife Fitness, I communicated the message to clients that fatness was a ‘correctable’ health problem and that if all people engaged in physical activity and consumed a well-balanced diet that we would all live in a healthier, happier society. However, the experiences that I faced during my time working at GoodLife sparked my curiosity, as I felt there was a disconnect between being healthy and being fit. Despite my doubts and questions, I pursued my career as “obesity epidemic entrepreneur” (O’Hara & Taylor, 2018, p. 2; Monaghan et al., 2010). Obesity-epidemic entrepreneurs are personal trainers, health enthusiasts, and 21-day Bootcamp programmers, who treat fatness as a problem or social issue by creating, amplifying and supporting weight loss as an achievable and personal goal (Monaghan et al., 2010). They are ‘entrepreneurs’ in a sense, because they go through the process of making ‘fatness’ into a correctable health problem that can be fixed through diet and exercise. Obesity-epidemic entrepreneurs claim in their argument that even a 5-10% weight loss will improve health for obese people (Aphramor, 2010).

Dream Body

As a fat kid, all of my time was devoted to becoming thin or *normal*. Once I had clinically met the criteria

that placed me at a *normal/healthy* weight, I felt as I was living proof that with really hard work, all people could achieve this, or a similar result—as most successful, diet-culture, healthism advocates do. However, upon counselling several women who were interested in personal training, I noticed a common trend—most of these women were coming to me for quick weight loss strategies to change their body shape and achieve a *dream body*. Social media often portrays the belief that the ‘ideal dream body’ can be achieved by just committing to a given meal plan and exercise regime. **Magazines, websites, and advertisements dismantle the old facts and replace them with ‘new’ evidence, using positivist epistemology and the scientific method to clarify the Harris Benedict Equation and Body Mass Index as a user-guide on the bottom, side margin of the magazine page.** I would listen to how disappointed my clients felt if they slipped up on their diet or meal plan. I would hear them talk out loud, over analyzing their patterns, actions, and behaviours, making themselves feel unworthy, while looking for a solution to hop back on the wagon so they could ‘feel good again’. I could relate with my clients, because I too felt these feelings while dieting. Often, I would analyze how many hours a day that I was working out, or questioning if I was eating the right things, or eating too much. Yet, my body did not look like the girls on fitness magazines.

I wondered why no one had ever told me that my body was genetically predisposed to a specific body type that the world would either perceive as “attractive

and able” or “big and useless.” As I transitioned from a personal trainer to a dietitian, I realized that I am not the only person who has tried restrictive methods to align my personal identity with my professional life. I later discovered that dietitians too, restrict to ‘look the part’ (Rochefort, Senchuk, Brady, Gingras, p. 151). However, throughout my dietetic education no one ever motioned the words ‘thin privilege’, which is what Harrison (2017) describes as “by virtue of some characteristic of your body—in this case, being below a certain size—you have greater access to resources and face less discrimination in society than people without that characteristic” (Para. 6). I only now realize that the reason I was scared about regaining body fat, for the most part, was because I was fearful that the privilege I had gained would be withdrawn.

Hegemonic Diet Plans

I began to notice how my clients and I would become further frustrated with ourselves because the promised meal-plan, or buddy-system did not yield the results we were sold.

Is it the multibillion-dollar diet industry that purposefully leads women to believe that if they embellish their feminine features and work hard to achieve a thin body that they would gain social acceptance? (Mahn & Lordly, 2015). How did women come to believe that youth and beauty is something that must be maintained as we age? The diet industry has set a cultural standard for the aesthetic, ideological, thin, delicate female body, thus allowing individuals to believe they must fit into this narrow range to be accepted by friends, family, coworkers, and colleagues. At the time, I didn’t understand health as a commodity (Mahn & Lordly, 2015). I wasn’t aware that the fitness, cosmetic, and fashion industry were billion-dollar industries that fed off of people’s insecurities. While working in the fitness industry, I would see fitness enthusiasts promote their belly-melting meal plans, and booty-shaping workouts but I would often wonder, are these programs sustainable? When is some other ‘easy to follow’ regime going to come along? Unfortunately, my thoughts did not inhibit my actions. When I realized that meal plans didn’t work, I would start eliminating food groups in order to achieve numerical results, while blaming the dairy and sugar industry for promoting such unhealthy foods. Previously, when I would follow a diet, I trusted that it would build habits that would prevent myself from gaining weight. These hegemonic actions

(the repetition of activity that one thinks is beneficial for their well-being but is actually harmful) sustains diet-culture, and has the ability to foster cyclic anxiety, letting us believe that we/I must be on a diet to feel our best.

The women visiting my office were constantly analyzing all their *faults* that obstructed them from measuring up to ‘health standards’. These amazing, strong women would often confide in me by saying;

- *My husband won't have sex with me until I lose weight.*
- *My mom wants me to be lose weight, because she thinks no one will marry a fat girl.*
- *I am still being called fat, even after losing X lbs.*

If I could go back and talk to these women, I would tell them so much. I would tell them that the science of nutrition and body weight is not fully understood. That the body is not a machine to be modified and adjusted as pleased. That life is so much more than spending our time correcting our bodies for other people’s approvals. The underlying truth and reality of these potentially harmful hegemonic diets is that people don’t always follow a diet plan to improve their health or wellness. Sometimes people utilize the harsh words they were told about their bodies to change, not for themselves, but for the satisfactory of other people. For example; I have always been told I have fat fingers. As a mantra I would say to myself “Someday, if you work hard enough, you will have thin fingers.” I thought I needed to be small, quiet, pretty, and aesthetically pleasing to males if I wanted to be accepted socially or someday married. I didn’t understand that gender descriptions were socially constructed. That I didn’t have to lower my voice, be pleasant and smile, nor did I really want to.

The Chameleon Effect

It seems as if ‘health’ or ‘being healthy’ has a *Chameleon effect*. Chameleons have the ability to change their colour to ‘blend in’ or ‘become’ a part of their environment as a defence mechanism (Jones, 2018). Like chameleons, we too want to blend into our environment. When we start a job, sign-up at a new gym, or enter a new situation, we look around, analyze and sometimes we begin to compare ourselves to the people within that setting. Often, we compare everything from our education, skills, motive, and even our body shape. If we do not fit the context of what is around us, we often feel the need to change or transform in some way or another to feel

included or to feel a sense of belonging. I feel as if the chameleon effect also comes into play when we start to compare ourselves to others and then try to change and modify our bodies to look more like the bodies we see around us or in the media. I think women do this both out of desire, and out of fear. I think we have a desire to improve or explore what our bodies are capable of through nutrition and fitness. Yet, I feel that we also use nutrition and exercise to alter our body shape because we have fear in thinking: if I don't fit in, then I might be excluded which is ultimately the fear of alienation and social exclusion (Brookfield, 2004).

The hidden benefit of the chameleon effect is that we encounter people of different sizes, shapes and colour who look different than ourselves and not only are we attracted to them but, we admire them. I think it's beautiful, that as humans we are not attracted to only one shape, one colour or one size, and that we have the ability to see beauty in various forms by appreciating the physical features of others. The cost is that we compare these differences to ourselves. Comparing ourselves to others when each individual is uniquely different from one another can be unfair and damaging to ourselves. I remember being in a bigger body and going to parties, seeing curvy girls bat their eyelashes at boys all night long. Every girl there had long straight hair, a cropped top on that revealed a touch of their tanned midriff, blue jeans so tight that they look like they had been painted on, and long fingernails that danced along the rim of their drinks. I immediately wanted all of those things. This could be my summer goal—to fit into a new crop top and tight pair of denim, skinny jeans. After committing to my workouts and diet for a full year, I had finally gained the confidence to sport my risky new outfit; I felt fantastic. A part of me felt as if the girls who were having fun at parties didn't have to worry about following a diet and working out every day to fit into their outfit, but for me, this was a big achievement. When I began reaching out to women who had abdominal muscles popping through their sweaty workout gear and asking them “what the secret?” The response caught me off guard “Oh, these abs? I've always had them. Genetics!” As my admiration for the commitment of muscular definition grew, I began to spot girls with toned stomachs, sculpted backs, and striates of muscle through their long arms waving them around. They were all jumping up and down, like springs, beaming with energy and full of life. Within two minutes I felt myself wanting to blend into this *newer, fitter* environment. I forgot about the tight jeans and

crop tops and walked to the nearest Lululemon looking to purchase a pair of long muscular arms. What I learned is that long muscular arms come at a price. As personal trainer I was surprised when I gained enough knowledge to understand that you don't really attain a toned, chiselled body through earning bigger muscles and lifting heavier weights. You eat less to lose more fat, and losing more fat reveals more muscle definition underneath. My idea of living strong, fit, and lean was ultimately an obsession, an eating disorder, and a never-ending job. This was the opposite of what I had imagined living a healthy life to be.

I thought that the fit girls bouncing around in the Lululemon pants and crop-tops were always happy. Always energized and most importantly—free. Maybe they were free, but I wasn't. I didn't feel free, I felt restricted, isolated, and bored. I thought that if I looked like that one type of person, who seemed like they had everything I desired, then I would be happy. I began to notice how this thought kept reoccurring in my head. I slowly began to realize that no matter what I looked like, it was likely that something else would come along to make me feel unsatisfied with what my body looks like. Within my time as a trainer, it slowly became evident that not only women portrayed this chameleon effect of health and fitness, but so did men. I often listened to clients say that they felt embarrassed to be working out in a gym because they believed that they did not blend in with the health club's promoted advertisements of muscular, toned, abled-bodied people. Overtime, I became more critical of my work environment, and it became obvious that the gym was a place that gained profit by promoting health as a personal responsibility and I was contributing as an obesity-entrepreneur.

Hi, I am a ‘Obesity Epidemic Entrepreneur’ (Monaghan et al., 2010)

I believe that I started my career as an obesity epidemic entrepreneur in 2010. When I moved away to study graphic design, rather than focus on seeing my weight get lower on the scale, I decided to focus on health. Simply put, my new approach was to make healthy choices, but not let the scale discourage me, so I decided that I would stop weighing myself completely. I have always enjoyed being physically active. Running was my stress release since the age of fourteen. Being active, sweating, and challenging my physical strength made ‘health’ seem more achievable. Eating low calorie foods and dieting didn't result in weight loss. At least

through physical exercise I could see measurable, objective improvements, such as being able to run a longer distance, or being able to lift heavier weights. My new approach towards weight loss was novel to me. I felt energized, stronger, and confident. Unfortunately, despite my newfound confidence my mind was still reinforcing the thought that if I wanted to become a successful, hip design artist, then I should be thin and dress creatively. I feel as if the idea that I needed to be a thin design artist emerged from the *starving artist theory*—a commonly held belief, where it is believed that artists are so immersed and passionate about their work that they devote their life entirely to art, compensating their food and shelter in order to *create*. (Lewis, 2017). I also believed that it was necessary to be a thin graphic artist in order to be taken seriously in my career. I was aware that culturally, it is known that people of a heavier weight are perceived to have less leadership potential and less likely to be successful than those of a 'normal' weight (Flint et al., 2016). However, no matter how much I obsessed over my work, and craved success, I could not focus on creating without fulfilling my appetite. I loved food.

I dressed creatively by selecting clothes that fit my idea of trendy and fun, but I didn't wear controversial t-shirts and handmade skirts like my design colleagues. What I initially perceived about the art community, is that this is where weirdness and creativity could be accepted, right? But like dietetics, the creative world can be cold and competitive (Brady et al., 2012). Logos competitions, web-banner contest, photography awards, illustration work were all fought for by design students. I initially leaned towards graphic design because I desired a career that I was passionate about that also encouraged individual diversity. I thought that expressing myself through art would help me accept myself for who I am however, being vulnerable in the art community was also a risk. Design colleagues were competing for recognition, just as nutrition students do (Gingras, 2009). And everyone was really good. As much as I was interested in design, I was also intrigued by my weight-loss experience. I was surprised and empowered that despite not paying any attention to the scale or calories, I had lost a healthy amount of weight. I felt the need to help others who were also trying to lose weight. It took me by surprise when an employee at GoodLife Fitness approached me and offered a job. She scheduled an interview and I thought, 'why not at least go to the interview?' I remember being completely off guard when

they told me during the interview that the position was for a personal trainer. I thought "what?! There was no way an obese person could be a personal trainer". But then I remembered no one in Toronto knew about my past.

Personal Training

I accepted the job as a personal trainer. Other employees at the gym commented on how they saw my commitment every day. How I wrote down my workouts. Focused on strength training—something not many women did in 2011. GoodLife Fitness gyms for women were mainly filled with treadmills with a few free weights in the back. Co-ed gyms were topped with heavy weight resistant machinery and a few treadmills on the side. As I began to explore the dichotomies between different gyms I wondered if I could reveal the secret of my heavy past. At the same time, I was working even harder because I felt like I needed to belong to a fit, elite group of individuals. I was conflicted with the thought of whether I should tell my clients and coworkers my personal story. The personal story of growing up in a bigger body. I was ashamed of my previous fat body, and I wasn't the only one. Boyfriends and girlfriends would often tell me to erase the experience of the past and pretend that I have always lived and existed in a thinner body during social and work events. I knew erasing past experiences wasn't an uncommon thing. My biological father was so humiliated of his fat body that he cut every photo that existed of him as a teenager to ensure that past would never resurface. However, I decided I would take a different route, and reveal my challenges I had with my body weight to my clients and to those who inquired of my personal story.

Truth or Dare?

I could not erase, nor forget. As a personal trainer, with clients coming to me for weight loss I realized my personal history had more value than being dishonest to them. If I was going to help anyone in their body, then it wasn't going to be coming from the thin person who had only existed for two years so far. I decided to tell my co-workers and clients about my weight loss. I became vulnerable. I told them that it took many efforts; that I couldn't eat the way most people did; I tried many different things and that it took me about five years. That's when you saw the disappointment on people's faces. Five years? That's a long time. I agreed. Five years is a long time. But I promised that it would be worth it.

I promised they would feel better. I said that giving up some of their favorite foods to see results would be like pulling teeth but that *it is what it is*. In this way—I was an obesity epidemic entrepreneur.

Today, I feel as if it would be wrong for me to say that losing weight would be worth it, because sometimes it's not. Weight loss is not always worth the prescribed set of rules given to achieve the desired results. Unfortunately, what I wasn't aware of, was that the worth and priority that I placed on weight loss is very different from everyone else's. I enforced my narrow perspective on my clients, shaming them for not placing weight loss as their target goal, which to me, is wrong and inconsiderate. During the moments where I reinforced hegemonic behaviours there was a part of me that knew that from my own experience that sometimes weight loss just doesn't work. I thought I knew it all when I was a personal trainer but, at the same time, I knew that there was no way possible that I could know it all—I was 24 years old. I felt as if I needed a broader knowledge base in understanding of bodies, fat, food, and science. I then enrolled into the dietetic program at Mount Saint Vincent University, and while food was explored through various contexts, I still felt unfilled. It seemed as if only a few courses of my dietetics undergraduate degree discussed how food and nutrition intersect with class, culture, and social ideology. To me, these topics served as an appetizer, and I was curious of the main course. Strangely—now that I've completed my masters, I feel like the more I learn the less I know. I don't exactly feel as if I know nothing, but I know with the more knowledge I attain, the more questions and thoughts I have surrounding culture, socialization, ideology, and people.

Final Words

With my understanding of women and bodies now, I feel it is important to be selective and gentle with the words that we repeat in our head. Forcing your body to comply with societies standards of what a female body should look like is not their job, nor mine. I would rather empower women as they are, helping them to reveal their strengths and powers in the body that they stand in today and afterward, rather than perceiving discipline as strength. Did I think changing the shape of my body would transform who I was, my behaviours, and the people I liked? I remember looking at myself in the mirror at the gym and squinting my eyes as I look for other areas on my body that could use improvement. I began

to wonder when did my goal to become healthy evolved into an obsession to try and look perfect? Who was I trying to be? What was interesting about the experience of transforming my body was that regardless of my shape, size, profession, location, I essentially remained the same. I was still weird. I still loved to colour. I was funny, social and liked to laugh. I do believe there are also useful and constructive benefits of going to the gym and working out. I find it unbelievably disheartening and futile that we can so heavily critique our bodies during exercise, rather than appreciating exercise as joyful movement to release those endorphins, connect with others, or to spend time with oneself. Unfortunately, it would be an oversimplification to say that we must all think more positively about ourselves in the pursuit of finding our own personal fitness. However, as I move through the readings of O'Hara & Taylor (2018), Guthman (2013) and Campos et al. (2006) I identify that we, in fact, are not the ones to blame. It is capitalism that not only collects our money for a sense of belonging, but it also steals our identity and humanity for free.

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Author Biography

I am a Master of Science of Applied Human Nutrition student and dietetic intern at Mount Saint Vincent University, where I have also obtained an undergraduate degree in Dietetics. My experiences with diet culture growing up, as well as my time as a personal trainer have led to a passion for empowering women and studying weight science and stigma. Throughout my studies with Dr. Jennifer Brady, I have gained a stronger understanding of bodies and culture, transdisciplinary knowledge, and health equality. I am also a proud Critical Dietetics member and Health at Every Size advocate.

After completion of my masters, I hope to further research body weight stigma and human memory, and ideology along with other ways of knowing/learning outside of academia. I also intended to start a business to help people in need of cooking skills, food knowledge, or those facing challenges with disconnected eating.