

Healthy Living

at Any Size

by Francie M. Berg



It's time to take a new approach to wellness and wholeness. Time to focus on promoting healthy, happy lifestyles for both children and adults. This is an urgent challenge for countries around the world. The cult of thinness that permeates our lives has taken its toll. Viewing health through a weight-centered perspective has not helped families become healthier. Instead, research shows it has caused harm.

The new *healthy living* approach that embraces self-acceptance, respect and diet-free eating comes as a refreshing change. With roots in Health Canada's *Vitality* program of the early 1990s, this approach offers the simplicity of stress-free living: "Live actively, eat well and feel good about yourself and others."

Preventive of weight and eating problems, it's a health-centered, compassionate approach that leaves restrictive thinking behind and promotes health in body, mind and spirit for people of every size. Everyone qualifies. Right now, just as we are.

A paradigm shift

This paradigm shift is being called *health at any size*, or *health at every size*, or simply *healthy living*.

With this new healthy living approach the caregiver asks: How can I help this individual be healthier at the size she is now? How can we promote health without fostering new problems related to disordered eating or weight loss attempts? How can we reduce stress and help him enjoy a normal lifestyle that embraces living actively and eating well?

The new approach honors diversity as a positive characteristic of the human race, and reassures parents that, of course, children can be healthy at their natural sizes. The notion that thin people are healthy and large people unhealthy is false.

The response is everywhere positive to this approach. People recognize that the body cannot be shaped at will. They are weary of our long history of diets that don't work and sometimes kill, the widespread nutrition deficiencies and arrested development of teen girls, the deadly increase in eating disorders, and the unconscionable harassment of large children and adults.

The new healthy living approach recognizes that problems of overweight, eating disorders, malnutrition, size bullying and dangerous weight loss attempts are not separate issues. All are interrelated. All are intensified by the diet industry's current "war on obesity" being fought on newspaper front pages and in medical clinics. They need to be addressed together in a comprehensive way to avoid doing harm. The war can end peaceably.

This new approach is the way to prevent problems and heal the damage done. It embraces these concepts:

- Accept and respect your own and others' unique traits and talents; celebrate diversity.
- A healthy lifestyle is achievable by everyone, unlike so-called "ideal weight."
- Enjoy physical activity every day, your own way, as natural and beneficial.
- Enjoy eating well without dieting; rediscover normal eating — tune in to hunger and fullness.

Tenets of Health at Every Size

- **Size and self-acceptance** — respect and appreciation for the wonderful diversity of body shapes and sizes (including one's own!), rather than the pursuit of an idealized weight or shape.
- **Health Enhancement** — attention to emotional, physical, and spiritual well being, without focus on weight loss or achieving a specific "ideal weight."
- **The pleasure of eating well** — eating based on internal cues of hunger, satiety and appetite, and individual nutritional needs, rather than external food plans or diets.
- **The joy of movement** — encouraging all physical activities for the associated pleasure and health benefits, rather than following a specific routine of regimented exercise for the primary purpose of weight loss.
- **An end to weight bias** — recognition that body shape, size and/or weight are not evidence of any particular way of eating, level of physical activity, personality, psychological issue, or moral character; confirmation that there is beauty and worth in EVERY body.

by Karin Kratina, PhD, RD and Ellen Shuman. Adapted from *Moving Away From Diets* (2003), with input from the think tank *Show Me The Data*

Beauty, health and strength come in all sizes. This truth is affirmed by health at any size, a health-centered approach that focuses on health and well being, not weight.

It's about wellness and wholeness, eating in normal, healthy ways and living actively. It's about acceptance, self-respect and appreciation of diversity. It's health at any size. Everyone qualifies!

—Berg F., *Children and Teens Afraid to Eat*

- Enjoy full nutrition, balance and variety; all foods can fit.
- Focus on wellness in body, mind and spirit; focus on overall health and well-being.
- Enhance supportive relationships and good communication with family, friends and within communities.

Positive programs

Research confirms the wisdom of this new healthy living approach. A recent two-year study at the University of California tested 78 obese women, defined as chronic dieters. Half comprised the health at every size group; the other half began a well-respected behavioral dieting program (*JAmDietAssoc. 2005;105:929-936*).

Women in the first group learned to recognize and follow internal hunger cues, and feel positive about their size and shape. Over the two years they improved in metabolic fitness measures (blood pressure, blood lipids), in energy expenditure (more active), eating behavior (less restraint, eating disorder pathology), and psychology (self-esteem, depression, body image), and maintained a stable weight. They sustained all benefits for two years, and 92 percent stayed in the program until the end.

As we might expect, women in the dieting group lost weight the first year and temporarily improved in many health measures. But in typical yo-yo fashion, they regained the lost weight the second year, lost all their hard-won health benefits, and nearly half dropped out. Old diet, old story.

Combating misinformation

The *healthy living* or *health at any size* movement also takes on the misinformation being spread by the diet industry in their “war on obesity,” such as the exaggeration of health risks.

Katherine M. Flegal, PhD, Senior Research Scientist at the National Center for Health Statistics, CDC, explains, “Although people think there’s all this evidence out there showing a high mortality risk associated with overweight, in fact the literature doesn’t show it.” Far from it. Flegal’s research, analyzing 30 years of actual deaths in the US, corrected an earlier CDC re-

port that indicated severe risks related to overweight. She showed instead that being clinically ‘overweight’ is associated with a *lower death rate* than so-called ‘normal’ or ‘healthy’ weight (*JAMA 2005;293:1861-1867*). It confirmed much earlier research that had been studiously ignored.

Further, despite nearly three decades of intense research, obesity specialists fail to show success for any of the current weight loss methods, whether diet, drugs or surgery. All are considered experimental. None are proven safe and effective.

Dieting causes short-term weight loss lasting no longer than six months followed by regain, known as weight cycling, which carries its own risks, and can lead to food preoccupation, bingeing, dysfunctional eating and sometimes eating disorders. *Drugs* offer only minimal weight loss of about 5-11 pounds, regained when the drug is stopped, so must be taken long term with increased risk; of 6 million U.S. adults treated with fenphen/Redux, the FDA reports that one-third developed leaky heart valves, fatal to some, and others died of primary pulmonary disease. *Gastric surgery* for weight loss carries risk of nearly 5 percent death rate (nearly 50 percent for patients age 75 and over) according to Medicare studies (*JAMA 2005;294:1903-1908*), and more than 60 complications.

The 1990 Congressional hearings exposed much deception and fraud in the weight loss industry. In 1992 the National Institutes of Health reported not one diet company could produce research showing safety and success for any program.

In their 1998 New Year’s Day editorial, Marcia Angell, MD, and Jerome P. Kassirer, MD, editors of the *New England Journal of Medicine*, warned, “Until we have better data about the risks of being overweight and the benefits and risks of trying to lose weight, we should remember that the cure for obesity may be worse than the condition.”

Freedom to get on with life

Today there is overwhelming agreement among health professionals and the public about the failure of weight loss programs to bring about lasting change. And there is widespread concern for the harm they cause.

“Healthy bodies come in all shapes,” says Steven Blair, PhD, Senior Scientific Editor of the *Surgeon General’s Report on Physical Activity and Health*. “We need to stop hounding people about their weight and encourage them to eat a healthful diet and exercise.”

The healthy living or health at every size approach frees people to take pleasure in food again, to enjoy activity without the goal of calorie burn. It frees children from struggling to fit unrealistic size expectations, and parents from the confusion of conflicting advice. It frees girls and women who have kept themselves thin but limited by restricting food, so they can live in fulfilling ways and get on with what is important in their lives. Through this approach, people of all sizes are moving on to a more enriching life of wellness and wholeness.