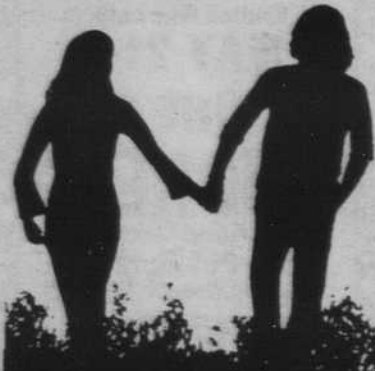


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# Body psychology

## Obesity is a feminist issue, say 'fat' counselors

**O**verweight women need to realize that they're not awful people because they're fat, say leaders of two groups which deal with the psychological aspects of being overweight.

The groups are aimed at women who feel "disgusted" with themselves because they are overweight. They explore why overweight women feel inadequate and how the women can control their eating and gain a more positive image of themselves.

Nina Bernstein, clinical social worker, operates one group and Mary Dieters, Jan Krumbule and Candy Reynolds run a group through the University counseling center. The women stress that most participants in their groups are not obese, but usually only 10 to 15 pounds overweight.

"These women use food as a weapon to suppress their inner emotional feelings about themselves like anger, anxiety, depression and boredom. Food fills an emotional need not met otherwise," says Dieters.

"They are disgusted with their bodies," adds Krumbule. "They don't see themselves in the mirror. They restrict their actions — don't wear a swimming suit or jogging clothes. They postpone life and say they can't do it until they get thin."

The sessions try to teach the women that they don't need to take out their frustrations on food. "They are bombarded with foods and overuse food as a support," says Bernstein. "When things get hard for them, they eat. Overweight people overuse food and underuse other kinds of body pleasure such as massage, sauna, facials, making love and bubble baths."

Both groups use exercises from the book "Fat as a Feminist Issue" to help the women "explore what fat means to them and what it would be like

to be thin," according to Bernstein.

"It's a good place to start because we make food choices every day," she continues. "You will feel better about food and the choices you make" after doing exercises to decide what types of food — creamy, boiled, fried, sweet, sour — give the most enjoyment. "Food should feed the spirit as well as the body," she adds.

Reynolds and Krumbule also lead their group in guided fantasies to help them become more familiar with themselves. For example, they may tell the women to imagine themselves at a party. First, they imagine they are getting fatter and fatter, noting others' reactions and their appearance and behavior, then they imagine losing all that weight.

"We tell them to note the differences in the way they present themselves, their clothing and their reactions to others," says Krumbule. "There is an awareness to seeing themselves both ways."

The groups also work on changing the "cognitive messages" that society imposes on women. For example, they try to deal with feelings like "I'm not OK because I don't look like Cheryl Tiegs" which is a cognitive message women unconsciously believe and that "we must learn to change," says Reynolds.

Both groups emphasize that they are not a diet program.

"We are moving away from diets because diets do not solve the problem," says Dieters, a nutritionist at the student health center.

The group leaders agree that part of the problem for the women they counsel is that losing weight is perceived as easy by most of society.

"People think that fat is easy to change and within people's control," says Krumbule. "That just complicates the problem. The media also tends to give people the belief in the magic formula to lose weight. That is an unrealistic

expectation. They say overweight is easy to solve — it's not. Then women try it and if it doesn't work then they blame it on themselves, not on the formula."

The women blame the media for giving society a "false picture of what the 'ideal woman' should look like and placing a great emphasis on thinness."

Krumbule notes one study where people rated pictures of kids with different physical handicaps and of different races. "When they rated likability, fat children were at the bottom," she says. "Not only with their peers but with adults."

"The whole idea of being beautiful, real young, and real thin with a pre-adolescent body is

impossible for some people to ever achieve," says Bernstein.

"Women should look how they want to look, not how society says they should," says Dieters. "Women have a distorted image of themselves and how they should be."

The counselors agree that despite the disadvantages of being overweight, many women have an "investment in being heavy" and so subconsciously don't want to lose weight.

"It protects them. They are less likely to be taken advantage of sexually," says Krumbule. "Also, you know what you're liked for. It has to be more than appearance. You can be more secure in the relationships you do have."

per day. About 90 percent are women.

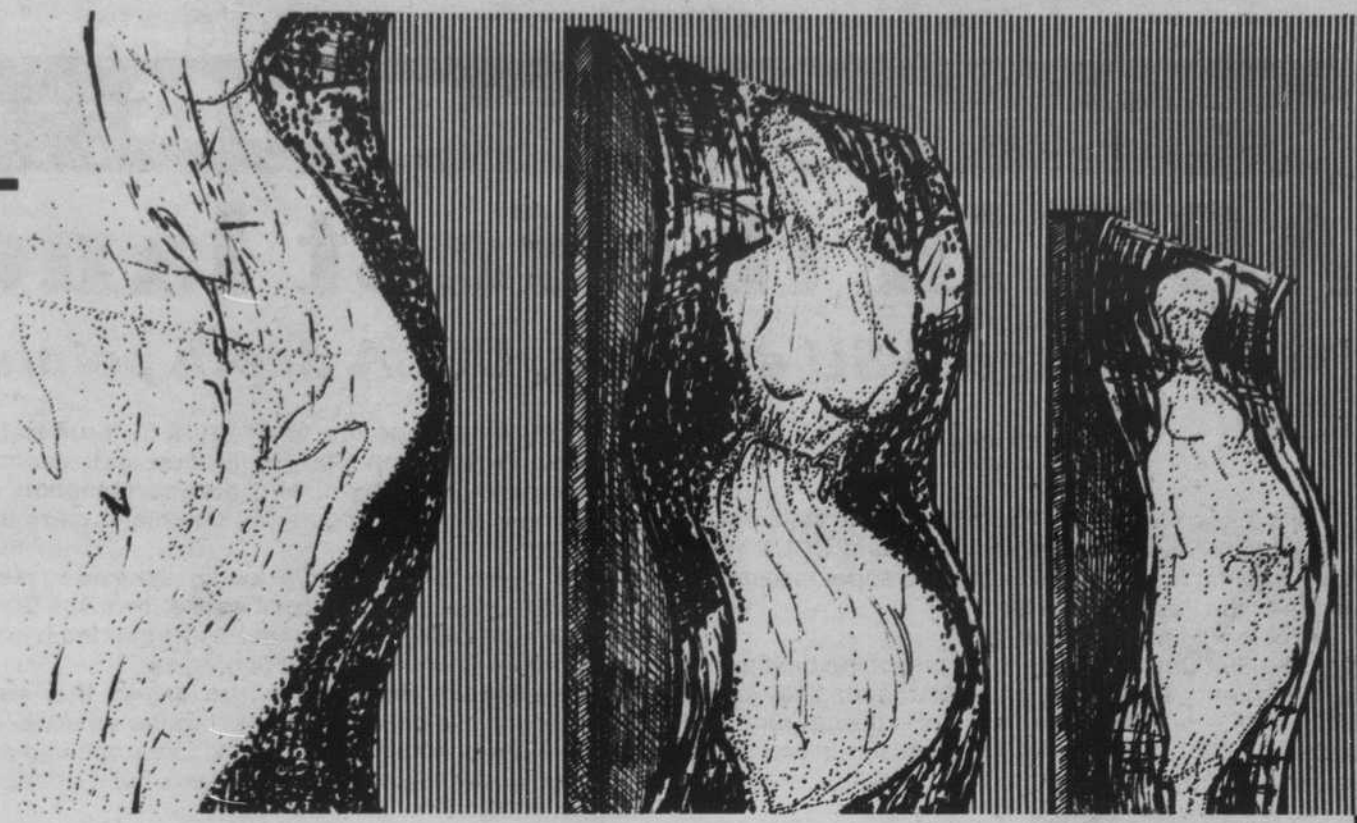
Kinley says many of the women are housewives and women who have recently had babies who are "going into the job market. A lot of people want jobs and the best quality and the best looking people are hired."

"Women want to look their best and if they take off the weight they do look their best."

The clinic offers a three-part program of weight loss, stabilization, and maintenance. They "start behavior modification from day one."

Kinley explains there are three types of fat - subcutaneous fat right under the skin, normal fat which provides everyday energy and storage fat which has no function. Unfortunately, she says, most diets aim at the first two types of fat instead of the storage fat.

Kinley says the program is "teaching Americans what good nutrition is." The clinic



## Losing weight can mean gaining a new self image

**"F**at is a national obsession," says Tami Kinley, director of Weight Loss Clinic.

"Weight does matter," she continues. "Women have no confidence when they are overweight. They are lethargic and flabby. They don't feel comfortable. When they lose the weight they can feel confident with being comfortable with themselves."

However, she admits that becoming thin will not change women's perception of themselves.

"Men can look in the mirror once they lose the weight and adapt their minds to the weight loss," says Kinley. "Women need much more behavior modification to credit themselves or appreciate themselves. They have to deal with themselves as thin."

The clinic sees between 120 and 140 people

provides an individualized diet for each person, depending on their age, medical background and activity level.

She said 80 percent of the people on their program achieve their goal weight, and 70 percent of those people keep the weight off.

She says places such as Weight Loss Clinic are necessary "because a lot of people can't diet on their own. They are like alcoholics. Some people can't control their eating properly. We are a training device for those people."

Overeaters Anonymous also sees overeating as a problem comparable with alcoholism. In fact, they use the same techniques as Alcoholics Anonymous — treating overeating as a disease and using group support to control the urge to eat.

"OA is a fellowship that allows members to share their experiences, strength and hopes. It deals with more than just food — it deals with why

we eat," says Lea, who refused to give her last name in keeping with the group's anonymity.

"OA tries to reach inside and try to find out why you're letting it happen to you and overcome the need to eat," she says. "We talk about needing to eat — and that seems to eliminate part of the need to eat by getting the emotions out."

Dieting is the program's main emphasis. Each member has a food sponsor who helps regulate the member's eating habits. Members call their food sponsors every morning and tell them what they are planning to eat all day.

"Overeaters feel 'food is my best friend. Food comforts me when I'm sad. I turn to food for comfort,'" Lea says. "Overeaters tend to be isolationist and very lonely people because they turn to food for companionship instead of to people. We try to teach them to turn to people not food."

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Stories by Sandy Johnstone

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