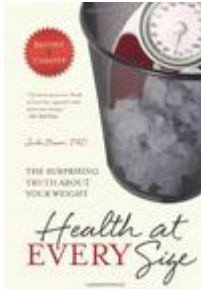


Ending the War on Obesity and Starting a New Peace Movement

A review of



Health at Every Size: The Surprising Truth About Your Weight (2nd ed.)

by Linda Bacon

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Reviewed by

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“First do no harm”: This is a basic tenet for health professionals worldwide. What if you found out that the information you are giving your patients or getting from your doctor is likely to be harmful to health? In *Health at Every Size: The Surprising Truth About Your Weight* by Linda Bacon, you will see how that is exactly what is happening today with our weight-centered health paradigm.

The war on obesity is not benign. It causes much collateral damage: increased yo-yo dieting (Prentice et al., 1992), giving up on exercise (Vartanian & Novak, 2011), eating disorders, stigma, bullying (Janssen, Craig, Boyce, & Pickett, 2004), and low self-esteem for adults and children alike. In addition to the damage done, the war on obesity is also not effective: Long-term follow-up studies document that the majority of individuals regain virtually all of the weight that was lost during treatment, regardless of whether they maintain their diet or exercise program (Mann et al., 2007). Bacon points out, “Not one study has ever

shown that diets produce long-term weight loss for any but a tiny number of dieters. Not one” (p. 47).

Why continue a treatment with such a failure rate? Perhaps we have stuck with the weight loss paradigm because we cannot imagine another way to health. However, one option is to deemphasize weight and instead focus on the behaviors of healthy living. That would be a focus on health at every size (HAES; Provencher et al., 2009).

Bacon’s book is essential reading for anyone who has ever dieted or cared about someone who has dieted. It is especially important that both medical and psychological health professionals read this book to understand the full ramifications of the common advice given to patients and clients on a daily basis: “Just lose some weight.”

On June 4, 1998, 29 million Americans awakened to find out that they were “overweight” according to the National Institutes of Health Obesity Task Force (with seven of the nine members being directors of weight loss clinics). Nobody had gained a pound; the task force simply changed the obesity standards. When you hear of the increased rates of obesity from the 1990s to today, do you take into consideration that the definition of *obesity* has changed? Did you ever wonder about the scientific basis upon which these decisions were made? If so, you are one of the critical thinkers who will devour the logic, facts, and studies included in Bacon’s book, which entreats us to focus on HAES. This is a fundamentally new health paradigm that promotes healthy lifestyles, independent of weight.

Myth Busters and New Options

In the first six chapters, Bacon deconstructs the science and folklore of body weight to convince the reader that lifestyle, not weight, is a more effective path to health. You are likely to find many of your own assumptions in the list of eight weight myths described in Chapter 6: Hang on to your seat belts and your logic as Bacon takes you on a roller coaster of facts and studies that blow these myths out of the water. For example, everybody knows that fat kills, right? Wrong (Troiano, Frongillo, Sobal, & Levitsky, 1996). A comprehensive review that pooled 26 studies concluded that overweight individuals were actually living longer than those of normal weight based on current body mass index charts (Bacon & Aphramor, 2011).

In Chapters 7 through 12, Bacon encourages readers to change their minds, stop obsessing over the scale, and take better care of themselves in mind and body. It is these behaviors of self-care and attitudes of self-acceptance that result in the health benefits that we usually ascribe to weight loss. This is demonstrated in multiple studies comparing the HAES paradigm with the weight loss paradigm. The results of these studies are clear. HAES participants showed greater improvements in health than did weight loss participants as

indicated by better blood glucose levels, lower blood pressure, healthier body image, and improvement on a depression scale (Flegal, Graubard, & Williamson, 2005).

60 Year-Old Truths Now Integrated Into Modern-Day HAES

The idea that calorie restriction causes problems for human beings is not new in the field of nutrition and health. In 1948 Ancel Keys demonstrated the negative effects of dieting and the lack of long-term weight loss (Franklin, Schiele, Brozek, & Keys, 1948). In 1983, in *The Dieter's Dilemma*, Bennett and Gurin described the weight set point and the futility of calorie restriction for weight loss.

What is new in Bacon's book is the common sense and scientific proof that there is something else we can do besides lose weight when body size is an issue. To improve the health of every body, at any size, we can focus on the actions of healthy living and give up the anxiety of watching weight.

Internally vs. Externally Motivated Choices

I consider Bacon's book to have many strengths; however, I have an important concern: The placement of Chapter 4 could trigger diet thinking in those addicted to dieting. Admittedly, the logical sequence of the book required that the chapter titled "We're Eternally Hungry" belongs in Part 1, Deconstructing Weight. However, I was concerned about having so much food information given to readers who are likely to be dieters looking for the next program to follow. Indeed, Bacon addresses this issue very well in the section Respect, Not Rules when she writes:

The information in this chapter may fuel your fears, tempting you to create a new set of rules about what and what not to eat. Be careful. If you do, you'll only be sabotaging yourself and your ability to learn how to truly satisfy your physical hunger. (p. 72)

Notwithstanding this caution, I found that my lifestyle coaching clients almost always did begin to make a new "program" for themselves with the information in Chapter 4. Therefore, I now tell my clients to read Chapter 4 AFTER reading Chapter 9, "Take Care of Your Hungers," which deals with intuitive eating among other topics.

A Paradigm Shift for Individuals and for Society

It seems to me that Bacon's goals in writing this book can be summarized as those listed below. I believe she has succeeded splendidly in accomplishing these four goals in that *Health at Every Size*





1. Realistically explores the truth about dieting for weight loss and how this affects health while substantiating Bacon's position with logic and copious scientific studies.
2. Provides readers a clear explanation of an alternative to weight watching, a better understanding of their own weight issues, and steps for implementing this new health-centered paradigm.
3. Gives a plethora of resources for readers' further exploration as they partake in this new peace movement that can end the war on their bodies and the war with food.
4. Gives clear information to help health- and governmental policy makers to implement better choices when addressing the issues of weight and health.

The appendix is pure gold when it comes to understanding how to cross the bridge from weight watching to healthy lifestyles independent of weight. You will find letters that can be given directly to friends, family, and health-care providers when embracing HAES. There are messages from Bacon directly to people with illnesses associated with weight, considering their next diet, or considering bariatric surgery.

Bacon specifically addresses health-care providers, legislators, school administrators, fitness professionals, and others. There are important messages to the media, therapists and counselors, and those who have lost weight. Bacon comments on "thin privilege" and has a message for health professionals resistant to HAES as well as for those who consider size acceptance as dangerous.

If you have ever questioned the effectiveness of calorie reduction for weight loss and health improvement, then you should read this book. If you are certain that body weight is a simple matter of calories in/calories out and if you think a focus on health at every size sounds postposterous, then you must read Bacon's book.

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