



## Is it OK to use the word *fat*?

As with any label applied to a group, each individual within that group will have a different preference. But generally, *fat* is the acceptable, preferred term to describe someone who is outside the medically and culturally defined average weight or physical build.

*Fat* is—and is not—a complicated term. Too often, it's a word used to describe a feeling. Fat is not a feeling; it is a physical aspect of a body. *Fat* is also not an OK word to use to make someone feel bad, to use as an insult, or to use as a basis for discrimination. Fat is a thing a body can have, just like hair or fingernails or a nose. Some bodies have more fat than others.

Fat activists have reclaimed the word *fat*, and if someone self-identifies as fat, it's not only acceptable but encouraged to use that same language to describe them. A person who describes themselves as fat has elected not only to embrace the word but also to celebrate it.



BODY TALK

FAQS

# FAT OUT LOUD

BY ALEX GINO



I was twenty-three years old the first time I said the word *fat* out loud. I had already discovered the concept of genderqueerness and embodied it. I had already graduated from college, ditched one career, and started another. I lived on my own, had a full-time job, and was on my first-ever solo vacation: two weeks in the Pacific Northwest. But I had never said the word *fat*. OK, maybe I had whispered it to myself in the dark, but I had never said it at full volume, and certainly never in front of someone else.

At least, I don't remember saying the word *fat*, and I do remember avoiding it more adamantly than I avoided butter. If I never tried butter, I could virtuously say I didn't like it, and I wouldn't end up getting fat because I liked it too much. If I never acknowledged that I was fat, it wouldn't matter to me and I couldn't feel shame about it.

As if my grandmother hadn't given me a book called *Teenage Fitness* for my twelfth birthday because "I could go either way": thin success or fat failure. As if I hadn't grown up watching my mom lose the same twenty pounds over and over, only to find them again like the cat who came back the very next day. As if my ex hadn't told me that part of the reason he was no longer attracted to me was that I had put on weight during a winter bout of depression.

Avoidance isn't how butter works, and it's not how shame works. Not knowing what butter tasted like didn't mean I wouldn't be fat, and not naming my shame didn't mean I wasn't filled with it. Shame lives in the shadows. I was fat and needed to be able to talk about my body. I deserved to be able to talk about my body. I didn't want to hate my body—I never had. But I had never

heard of someone loving their fat body, and that meant I didn't really know it was an option, much less how to do it.

So there I was, visiting my good friend Beth in Seattle. She's about my build (if a little taller) and wanted to share something with me, something she had just been introduced to herself. She handed me a brightly colored book with the title *FAT!SO?* emblazoned on the cover, above a delighted and delightful blond woman, a cartoon representation of author Marilyn Wann. Beth showed me that if you flipped the pages, a tiny, round Marilyn in the corner shook her stuff. It was a book filled with funny pictures and snarky commentary, and it said "FUCK YOU!" to the ideas that had been implanted so deeply in my mind that I hadn't even known I wasn't born with them.

Beth and I took turns reading out loud to each other. She went first. It was a life-altering moment to sit in that sunny Seattle room and hear the word *fat* as an honest descriptor, not as an insult. Fat as a source of joy, maybe even something to be proud of. I felt full, seen, and solid, beneath our giggles at Marilyn's effervescent style.

And then it was my turn. I don't remember stumbling or whispering. Like the title of the book said, I was fat. So? Shame about my shame multiplied into shame armor. It felt important to read the word *fat* as though it weren't a big\* deal, when, in fact, it was massive.\*

I was three thousand miles from home. None of it counted, like ice cream you were allowed to eat on that weird carbs-for-one-hour-a-day diet I tried for that ex who told me I was a lot less attractive when I was slightly fatter. I could claim it wasn't really me saying the word *fat*, acknowledging its existence in the world, in my body. (Back then, I still thought about fat as something people have, rather than something people are.) I was simply reading what Wann had written, with no personal attachment to any of the ideas. I was just experimenting with being the kind of person who said things like *flabulous* and *chub rub* without a second thought.

We must have read fifty pages aloud, and at some point, I realized we wouldn't be able to read the entire book together. I couldn't put this all on Beth, Seattle, and Marilyn, anyway. I would have to take on my own empowerment of my fat self. And you'd better believe I have. I bought my own copy of the book and finished it back home in Philadelphia, reading out loud when it felt like I needed to hear the words more deeply. I learned to smile at my body in the mirror. I rubbed my belly. I stroked my sturdy, dimpled thighs. It took time and focus, but once I stopped avoiding my own avoidance of my body (a full\*-time job), there was nowhere for the shame to hide.

Since my trip to Seattle, I have grown quite fond of the word *fat* and of fat bodies. I've made lots of incredible friends and acquaintances who love their bodies and mine, and love to celebrate them. Many of us are soft and squishy and give great hugs. Radically self-loving fat people are some of the most fun, caring, thoughtful, special people I know, and lots of us are amazing cooks who are happy to share our tables. That doesn't mean we don't have rough days when the world gets to us, but we have each other. In hard times, I have been buoyed\* by my fat queer community.

I've also learned that mine is only one of a wide\* ranges of bodies and that this body I always saw as having "excessive" fat is really rather middling. I remember looking at myself in a mirror during my first NOLOSE conference (a radically feminist, fat-positive, queer space) and feeling smaller than I had ever felt. Not with pride or shame or anything but the realization that my archetype for people had been skewed to the thin for so long that I had seen myself at the high end of the spectrum. At four feet ten and having been in the range of 150 to 180 pounds my entire adult life, I am nowhere near the high end of the spectrum.

To be clear, *FAT!SO?* is not a perfect book, and I'm thrilled more books—both fiction and nonfiction—that respect fat people are being published, especially those by Black people, Indigenous people, People of Color (BIPOC);

disabled folk; poor people; LGBTQIA+ individuals; and people from other marginalized groups, and I hope there are many more to come. In particular, I can't recommend *The Body Is Not an Apology* by Sonya Renee Taylor highly enough.

But oh, the shame I shed that day in Seattle. Not all of it, not nearly. But I had a new word to try on for size.\* Language is powerful. It can provide connection and validation. It can also cause hurt and shame. My shame of the word *fat* was a mirror of the shame of my own body that was so deep I couldn't even name it. Changing my reaction to the word *fat*, and embracing it, has been a vital part of loving my fat body. I'm grateful that there was a tool for me when I needed it, and I'm excited for books like the anthology you're reading right now. The more we share honestly about our bodies and listen to others talking honestly about theirs, the closer we get to self-love.

Diets don't work. (Check the science.)

You are amazing right now. (Without a single change.)

You can choose to love yourself for who you are. (Not despite it.)

Good luck. (You got this.)

\*All puns intended.

# BENEATH THE SURFACE

BY ABBY SAMS



“But you don’t *look* sick.”

The words hit me for the hundredth time, intended to be a compliment but never taken as such. Instead, they remind me of the blatant issue society has toward people with invisible illnesses and the deep-rooted ignorance on the subject of disability as a whole.

An invisible illness is one in which the patient’s appearance does not signal to a bystander that they are disabled or ill. This lack of visual representation too often leads able-bodied people to make snap judgments that may be incorrect or downright rude. Since more than 10 percent of the United States population has an invisible illness, why do we still have to fight through a world that is often uneducated and impolite toward the chronically ill community?

I have Ehlers-Danlos syndrome as well as reflex sympathetic dystrophy. Both conditions are incurable and cause me to be in a great amount of constant pain in my legs as well as the rest of my body. I wear knee braces and ankle-foot orthotics to help reduce the pain and the risk of dislocation when I walk. More often than not, I opt for my wheelchair when I go out for long periods of time.

On the days I wear all my braces, I am constantly met with “What happened?!” by strangers. There is this idea that if you don’t actually look sick—because you’re young, pretty, fit, etc.—then you must be able to get better. The assumption that whatever is “wrong” with me isn’t permanent is the biggest problem with the “you don’t look sick” mentality. Because I look like a generally healthy young adult, even in my wheelchair, it leads people to believe that my condition must be curable or, better yet, that they have the solution.

My inbox is flooded with links to diet plans, yoga classes, and essential oils that are supposed to cure me. I'm constantly told I'm "too pretty to be in a wheelchair" or "too young to be disabled" when the truth is that I can be pretty *and* be in a wheelchair and I can be young *and* disabled. Disability does not discriminate; people do.

When people say, "But you don't look sick," they are suggesting that being sick or disabled or chronically ill is a bad thing or that it makes you less of a person. It's supposed to make the receiver feel better about themselves. As children, many of us were raised to not stare, not point, not acknowledge people with illnesses or disabilities because it was "rude." Unfortunately, those behaviors taught us that people with illnesses and disabilities were meant to be overlooked and avoided and weren't meant to be talked to. The general lack of education about disability only furthers the stigma.

"But you don't look sick" can also be an accusatory statement. People with invisible disabilities and illnesses are accused of "faking" and "lying" about them.

When I received my first (of many) windshield notes accusing me of faking my disability, I did not leave my house for weeks afterward, because I was too afraid to face the public. What if it was more than a note next time? What if I was alone? Because there is so little education on what disability and chronic illness actually look like, many people believe any deviation from a stereotype *must* be fake.

These stereotypes grow because of the severe lack of representation—especially accurate representation—of disabilities across the spectrum in TV shows, in movies, and on the runway.

Wheelchair users are often shown as completely paralyzed. Deaf characters usually either are profoundly deaf or are completely "cured" when they use a hearing aid. Diabetes patients (both type 1 and type 2) are either severely overweight or extremely malnourished. The representations of invisible illnesses fed to the public are starkly one sided, and whether or not those

establishments know it or care, they perpetuate the idea that those depictions are the only true versions.

The truth is, nearly 90 percent of wheelchair users have at least some function in their legs. But when the only representation of wheelchair users in media is complete paralysis, able-bodied people will virtually always ask a wheelchair user if they are “better” or “cured” or “faking” because they moved their leg or walked out of their car to grab their wheelchair. Ambulatory wheelchair users will hear shouts of “It’s a miracle” when they brave the public. And smartphones with the ability to record at a moment’s notice allow “miracle” videos to spread like wildfire on social media.

For the invisibly ill, harassment is a regular occurrence, and fear becomes instilled in our hearts. There have been many times when I’ve visited a store alone and, once there, decided to use my wheelchair so that I could explore it more easily. But because I’ve had to walk around my car to get my wheelchair from the trunk, I’ve been confronted by strangers in the store who saw me walking in the parking lot. They come up to me furious that I would “fake such a serious disability just because I’m too lazy to walk.” Or they tell me that I should “leave that spot for someone who’s actually disabled” before stomping away in a rage without giving me the opportunity to explain or educate. These experiences have forced me to learn how to put my wheelchair together from the driver’s seat, or to go shopping with friends so they can get my chair for me—all so I can avoid the conflict and the hate that too often come with trying to exist in an uneducated world.

Many disabled people hoped the book *Me Before You*, and later the movie adaptation of it, would be the representation we had been waiting for. However, that was not the case. In the story, the disabled protagonist’s caretaker falls in love with him. He doesn’t believe they can live a fulfilling and good life together because of his disability, so he kills himself to “free” her from living a compromised life. This harmful narrative perpetuates and feeds the notion that disabled people cannot have full lives. I’m a young disabled

woman who is engaged, and this kind of narrative has been used against my own extremely loving relationship. Many people have told me that my fiancé should leave me because I'm disabled and he shouldn't have to "deal with that." We both want to, and can, live fulfilling lives with love and happiness and adventure with one another. I do not experience life less simply because I am disabled.

The "but you don't look sick" mentality is one that can and will be changed. First, though, we need to break the stigmas that surround disability.

I had the opportunity to do just that, thanks to the Aerie Real Me campaign, in 2018. Before I applied for the campaign, I had only ever seen maybe one person in a wheelchair in the media. It was one picture, and the model was wearing a tracksuit. It was trending on Twitter for all of thirty minutes before something else came up and it was swept under the rug forever. That was it. I had never seen a model in a wheelchair wearing a cute dress, lingerie, or even jeans anywhere in the media. That drove me to apply for this campaign—I wanted to be the person I wanted to see and to be that person for so many other young women like me. After the campaign launched, many girls and women messaged me and thanked me for participating. I had one mom message me saying that her young daughter, who had recently started using a wheelchair, felt so left out and underrepresented while she was flipping through magazines and shopping. When they went to the mall and saw my picture in the store, she practically exploded with happiness and yelled, "MOM! This is it; this is what I was talking about. She looks like me!" Being able to be that for so many people really lit a fire in me to do more of this and to encourage more companies to do it too.

That campaign got the ball rolling. More recently companies like Target, Zappos, and Tommy Hilfiger have released adaptive clothing or used disabled models in their shoots. I even got to be a part of another shoot for LimeLife beauty products as their first disabled model. More and more companies are diversifying their models and realizing that by doing so they are subsequently

diversifying their entire brand. They are telling the public that their products are truly for everyone—and meaning it.

*Speechless*, an ABC sitcom, made giant strides when it came to disability representation. The show navigates the lives of a family with a child who has cerebral palsy and uses a wheelchair, as well as a word sheet and caregiver to speak. The family lives in a severely judgmental and inaccessible world, and the show tackles a lot of problems many school-aged disabled kids face, with grace, humor, and seriousness. The way *Speechless* highlights problems is sharp and poignant without a “this is today’s lesson to be learned” kind of cadence. Not only that, but the actor who portrays JJ, the character with cerebral palsy, also has cerebral palsy himself. Seeing a portrayal of disability by someone who is actually disabled and has actually lived the narrative he is acting is such a liberating and educating experience. Not only is his portrayal accurate, but it’s a huge step in the media to use a disabled actor for a disabled role.

We need to demolish the stereotypes around what disability looks like. But in order to break these stigmas and stereotypes, we have to be willing to actually do the work. Learn what wheelchairs are and how people really use them. Educate yourself on what kinds of disabilities are out there, both invisible and visible. Catch yourself before you judge someone who walks out of their car in a disabled parking space. Ask questions and be open to receiving answers you may have never heard before. Dig into the representations of disability you see in the media and why they might be harmful, especially to the disabled community. Breaking the stigma around the “but you don’t look sick” mentality starts and ends with you. So even though I “don’t look sick,” I am, because it’s so much more than looks. Disabilities and chronic illnesses are not, nor have they ever been, a one-size-fits-all style.