

Fat Talk

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Imagine two close friends, Amanda and Charlotte, trying on clothing at their favourite store on the weekend. They each put on a new outfit and emerge from the change-room.

Amanda: “Do I look fat in these pants? My thighs are so big!”

Charlotte: “No way! You're so skinny. Me, on the other hand, I need to start going to the gym more often. This dress makes my hips look huge.”

Amanda: “Stop it. You have a great body!”

Charlotte: “No, I don't. Look at my stomach! It's not flat at all.”

Amanda: “Ugh, I need to cut back on junk food immediately. I feel so fat.”

Does this conversation sound familiar to you? For Amanda and Charlotte, this type of body-related language comes up frequently in their daily conversations with one another. These friends are engaging in what researchers and clinicians call “fat talk”.

What is “fat talk”?

Fat talk is the term, coined by Mimi Nichter, for negative body-related conversations that often take place between friends.¹ Typically, these discussions involve negative comments or criticisms about parts of your body or your body as a whole. Additionally, fat talk can involve statements about wanting to change your body through physical activity or dietary changes, such as planning to restrict what or how much you eat.

There is often a back-and-forth nature to fat talk conversations, where you and your friends might reassure one another that your body-related concerns are not accurate.² Often, however, you may not necessarily feel better or reassured by your friends' comments to you. Fat talk is a common social behaviour in today's society, and while this particularly true for women, other it also occurs among individuals of other genders.^{2,3} This is likely because physical appearance carries significant meaning in society. The current North American body ideals are slender and toned, or muscular and chiselled. Such bodies have become symbols of many valued attributes, such as self-discipline, good health, and success in all areas of one's life. There is a false assumption that one can tell a lot about an individual based on their body size and shape, so conforming to the ideal has become highly desirable and something that one is told is achievable with enough self-control. This occurs despite evidence that we inherit a genetic predisposition to a particular body size, weight, and shape, and that dieting and physical activity do not guarantee a socially ideal body.

Fat talk often takes place among friends, but some individuals might also engage in fat talk with other loved ones, such as parents, siblings, cousins, or romantic partners. You might even hear strangers making comments about their own bodies, such as in a change-room or at a swimming pool. Fat talk may be more likely to occur in places where the body is a significant focus: for example, when trying on clothing, when exercising, or when eating, but this is not necessarily the case. Individuals who are struggling with eating disorders, or food and weight preoccupation, may actively participate in fat talk discussions or, alternatively, they may completely avoid these types of conversations to not draw attention to themselves or their bodies. You may find, however, that hearing others say fat talk comments, or making them yourself, might be triggering and lead to urges for eating disorder symptoms.

Why do people participate in fat talk?

People participate in fat talk discussions for different reasons. Among women, fat talk may promote bonding within friendships, allow for the expression of personal concerns regarding body size and shape, and provide a manner through which to ask for support and seek reassurance from friends.⁴ These reasons for participating in fat talk could be viewed as positive or helpful, which may help to explain why making negative body-related comments and criticisms is commonplace. There is also perceived social pressure, particularly among women, to participate in fat talk conversations; women are more likely to verbalize fat talk language if they hear other women making similar statements.⁵ Fat talk has also been linked to a sociocultural pressure to be thin⁵, with thinness and self-control around food and weight issues being highly prized in North American society as proxies for both good health and character.

Consequences of fat talk

Many people view positive aspects to fat talk; therefore, it makes sense that they might talk about their bodies in this manner with friends. Unfortunately, fat talk has been associated with a variety of potentially negative consequences. It has been linked to more negative body image, low mood, and internalization.^{6,7} It is also possible that fat talk might contribute to problematic eating patterns in individuals with and without eating disorders. Research has found that after exposure to fat talk, women who report high levels of restrained eating further restrict their dietary intake or are more motivated to do so.⁸ Other preliminary research suggests that exposure to fat talk increases body dissatisfaction, negative affect, body-checking, and disordered eating behaviours.¹⁰ Considering these findings together, an explanation could be that participating in or overhearing fat talk trigger preoccupation with one's perceived negative aspects of their body, which may in turn lead to body-checking and eating disorder symptoms with the aim of altering their weight and shape.

Strategies to stop fat talk

- Consider the risks and benefits of continuing – versus not continuing – your participation in fat talk conversations. This will help clarify the role that fat talk plays in your life as well as help to identify potential barriers to changing your behaviour.
- Speak to your therapist about fat talk. They may be helpful in determining the role that fat talk plays in contributing to your eating disorder or self-image. If you don't have a therapist, speak to a close and supportive loved one about your concerns.
- Become more aware of how often you're engaging in fat talk by keeping a journal. Keep track of your fat talk conversation partners, where fat talk is happening, and what impact it has on your mood and behaviours. For example, does participating in or hearing fat talk lead to urges for eating disorder symptoms?
- Try stopping fat talk as an experiment to see what impact this has on how you view your body or the types of interactions you have with your friends or family members.
- If you feel comfortable, let others know that you wish to not engage in negative body-related conversations. It might be helpful to first practice being assertive about your wishes in more neutral situations, such as with individuals with whom you are less emotionally close.
- Think of strategies you could use “in the moment” when fat talk language comes up in conversation. One strategy you could try is changing the subject to something neutral.
- If you are comfortable, promote positive body-related talk. For example, you could focus on what you appreciate about your body and what your body does for you, as opposed to how your body looks. In fact, some research shows that women who make more positive body-related comments are perceived more favourably by others than those who make negative fat talk comments.¹⁰
- If you hear fat talk around you and it feels risky because you are concerned that you may have eating disorder symptoms, it is your right to politely remove yourself from the situation.

Note: “Fat” should not be used as a word to insult someone, criticize other people’s bodies, or to describe a negative emotional state. Doing so implies that fatness is bad and perpetuates weight stigma. “Fat” can be a neutral term for describing bodies, just as “short” and “tall” are. Some people in larger bodies have reclaimed the word and choose to refer to themselves, and to identify, as fat.

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