

## Don't Hate Me Because I'm Fat

**Obese women have been passed over for jobs, denied decent medical care, and even told they aren't fit to be parents. But many of us think it's really their fault.**

By Alexis Jetter



**Valerie:** 395 pounds. She can't get a job.

**Nadine:** 280 pounds. She was ordered off a plane.

**Mary Ellen:** 350 pounds. She had trouble adopting.

**MARY ELLEN GWYNN** loves babies. For 19 years, she's looked after them in intensive care nurseries in Maryland and Virginia. She also teaches adoptive parents how to care for infants. And in her spare time, Gwynn, 43, a registered nurse, is an adoption consultant. But when Gwynn herself tried to adopt a child, with her husband, she encountered outright hostility. "Are you going to be able to bend over and pick up toys?" a social worker asked her during an interview. Then he went even further: "Is your sex life normal?" he inquired.

The social worker apparently felt entitled to pose such questions because Gwynn, who stands five feet six inches tall, weighs 350 pounds. But she was deeply wounded. "You're not sure where your rights start and stop," she says now.

Finally, Gwynn was cleared to adopt — which led to another series of disappointments. Gwynn found out from the adoption counselor that on many occasions, she had been passed over by a young mother who took one look at her picture in the adoption album and turned the page. At last, after three years of trying, the Gwynns, who live in Upper Marlboro, Maryland, were able to complete their family. They now have two children, Elena, eight, from Eastern Europe, and Michael, five, from California. Michael's birth mother chose her, Gwynn reports, "partly because I'm a large woman — and she is also."

Despite the happy ending, Gwynn's story points to an unspoken truth: Americans don't much like fat people. When we see an obese woman on the street, in a restaurant, or out shopping, we often have an instinctive negative reaction: What's wrong with her that she can't lose weight? Even knowing that some people have a chronic condition or genetic makeup that predisposes them to weight gain, we still blame them. "People are enraged at fat people because of the very strong Puritan ideal that we should control our desires," says Esther Rothblum, Ph.D., a psychologist and a professor of Women's Studies at San Diego State University, who is an expert on weight discrimination. "They see fat people, especially women, as lazy gluttons who lack self-control."

Those attitudes are so widespread, Rothblum says, that even fat people share them. Given that 65 percent of American adults — roughly 130 million of us — are overweight or obese, many of the people discriminating against the overweight may be heavy themselves. "Fat people hate fat people," says Rothblum, who describes herself, matter-of-factly, as fat. "They are just as likely to discriminate as anyone else."



weight discrimination is, because it's so hard to measure. Unlike race and gender, weight is not a protected category under U.S. law, so no federal agency maintains statistics on the number of overweight people denied jobs or basic services. But a 2001 report issued by the Yale Center for Eating and Weight Disorders suggests that when it comes to hiring, firing, wages, and medical care, big women are not getting fair treatment. "People don't like to think of themselves as racist or sexist," says Rothblum. "If you ask them about those things, they won't tell the truth." But weight is different, she insists: "You can be openly hostile, and you won't get punished."

## Hiring: Overweight Women Need Not Apply

**VALERIE MILLS**, 38, is a telecommunications specialist with a master's degree in computer engineering and 16 years of international expertise. "I can get you any job you want," Mills says one headhunter bragged after she aced a series of telephone interviews with his technical staff. But the man changed his tune when Mills, who is five feet six and a half inches and weighs 395 pounds, met with him in person. "You're too fat to sell," she remembers him telling her, implying that he could never find an employer who would hire her.

Mills, a friendly former Army brat who lives with her mother and two poodles in a house near Atlanta, has certainly struggled with her weight: She has gained and lost more than 2,000 pounds over 23 years of dieting. But she knows these issues are irrelevant to her professional qualifications. She had no trouble finding work when she lived in Montreal and Paris a few years ago. But in the United States, Mills hasn't been able to land a job in three years. "When I get to the interview, they say, 'You don't quite fit in,'" she says. Refusing to give up, Mills is starting her own telecommunications company, though it has been difficult to get it off the ground.

Several studies have underscored the reluctance of American employers to hire obese people. In one conducted by Chicago Medical School, actors wearing prostheses each played two different-size — but otherwise identical — job applicants: one average weight, one overweight. Viewers then watched videotaped interviews and decided whom they would hire. The result: Thin got the job, hands down. Body weight was the most powerful factor — regardless of whether the fat applicant was asking for a job as an analyst in the back office or as a retail salesclerk dealing with the public.

Employers often argue that obese people have more health problems than others, which ends up costing companies more in health insurance. But while rates can go up, protections are in place in at least 36 states to restrict how much an insurer can raise rates because of increased medical expenses among the company's employees.



Even if an obese woman does get hired, she's likely to be penalized: Obese women earn up to 30 percent less than their thinner counterparts. Research suggests that obese women have often been fired because of their weight. Peggy Howell, now 58, spent eight years working at jobs ranging from librarian to student counselor at a missionary college in Northern California. One day, she says, her supervisor told her, "You have to lose weight or you'll lose your job. Your weight makes you look undisciplined." Dismayed, Howell, five feet nine inches and then a size 20, went to Weight Watchers, lost 120 pounds, gained it back, and left the job. She now runs a "fat-friendly" Internet art gallery and gift shop.

## Adopting: Heavy Women Don't Get Chosen

As Mary Ellen Gwynn can attest, many birth mothers won't give their babies to overweight adoptive parents, no matter how good a home they can provide. "Some of these mothers are very young, and they've been influenced to think that skinny people are better people," says Len Carey, cofounder of Hope 4 Kids, a foster care and adoption agency in Dana Point, California. Carey's agency discourages such attitudes, but, he says, "Birth mothers are looking at pictures of families, and a few may think that someone who presents a more fit lifestyle will provide a healthier place for their child."

Most prospective parents trying to adopt through U.S. agencies have to undergo a physical exam to demonstrate that they are in good health. Yet even if they pass — as Mary Ellen Gwynn did — overweight people may still run into obstacles. One Midwestern couple had decided they wanted to adopt a Chinese baby. But they were told by their local agency that their weight made them unacceptable candidates — even though their doctor, a clinical instructor at a respected university hospital, assured the agency after a detailed medical examination that the pair would be fit and active parents. "We jumped through all the hoops," says the husband. "But it didn't matter." The couple changed agencies and were soon able to adopt a nine-month-old girl from China.

While China doesn't shun overweight adoptive parents, some countries do. South Korea, for example, has a list of possible disqualifying factors, and obesity is right up there with communicable diseases, psychiatric problems, a criminal record, and alcohol or drug abuse.

### Justice ahead? Maybe

Size discrimination is currently against the law in only four places in the United States: San Francisco and Santa Cruz, California; Washington, D.C.; and the state of Michigan. However, other states (including Maryland, Massachusetts, and California) are considering similar legislation. In addition, the Americans with Disabilities Act has enabled obese people to file lawsuits if they believe they have been discriminated against because of their size.



And attitudes toward overweight people may start to soften as more Americans take another look at the people they've sneered at — and see their own reflection. "Weight does increase with age," says San Diego State's Esther Rothblum. "When baby boomers were in their 20s, it was easier to believe that weight loss was possible — and that they'd never look like their mothers. But now they do." The booming sales of plus-size clothing reflect this fact: The market grew 5.5 percent to \$16.7 billion in 2004, almost twice as fast as women's clothing sales as a whole.

For now though, the battle for size acceptance must be fought by individuals like Peggy Howell, the gift-shop owner, who has become a spokeswoman for the National Association to Advance Fat Acceptance. "I walk into a room with a big smile and look people in the eye when I speak with them," she says. "I'm a very outgoing person, and I accept my own size." That obviously encourages others to do the same. As Howell puts it, "I don't give people space to mistreat me."

### Unfriendly Skies: The Airline Wanted Her to Buy Two Seats

Most everyone has seen a person coming down the bus, train, or airplane aisle and thought: *Yikes, I hope she's not sitting next to me!* Overweight passengers know that look, and many fly off-hours to

avoid the embarrassment. But Southwest Airlines has taken a tough stand: If a traveler can't fit in the airline's standard 18-inch seat, she has to buy a second, adjoining one. Despite several legal challenges, Southwest has prevailed in court.

But frequent flier **Nadine Thompson**, a mother of two, wife of a minister, and CEO of a cosmetics firm in Exeter, New Hampshire, believes that the airline has gone too far. She met its size guidelines — and still got harassed. On June 9, 2003, Thompson, 45, settled into her seat on a flight from Manchester, New Hampshire, to Chicago. Moments later, a Southwest Airlines ticket agent came on board and asked her to step off the plane.

When they got to the jetway, the man told her she'd have to buy another ticket. "Why?" asked Thompson, who is five feet eight inches and weighs 280 pounds. She pointed out that the seat next to her was empty — and that she'd been able to fasten her seat belt and lower her armrest. (According to Southwest policy, if you can't do that, you may be asked to pay for two seats.) Red-faced, the man left, and Thompson returned to her seat. But the more she thought about it, the less she wanted to fly on Southwest. She started to get off the plane but was met in the jetway by two uniformed sheriff's deputies sent by Southwest to force her to disembark. They escorted her to the terminal. "Crowds of people were watching me like I was a criminal — or a bomber," Thompson says.



Later that day, a Southwest representative called her to apologize, saying that the ticket agent had erred. But the airline stands by its rules. "We get far more complaints from customers whose seats have been infringed on than from customers who object to the policy," insists Brandy King, a company spokeswoman.

Thompson is currently suing the airline, arguing that Southwest doesn't enforce its policy consistently, using it disproportionately on blacks and women. She also believes that Southwest should inform passengers in advance that if they're overweight, they risk paying double. "I was so humiliated," Thompson says of her experience. "I've never felt worse in my life."

## Too Fat to Teach Fitness

In 2001, Jennifer Portnick, an energetic five-foot-eight-inch, 235-pound workout buff, was asked by her Jazzercise instructor to try out as a teacher. Then 37, Portnick trained intensively, taking six aerobics classes a week.

She aced the audition — but flunked the flat-abs test. "Jazzercise sells fitness," the company wrote to her in its rejection letter. "Consequently, a Jazzercise applicant must...look leaner than the public." Portnick filed a discrimination complaint with the San Francisco Human Rights Commission, charging that Jazzercise had denied her a position as an aerobics instructor on the basis of her weight. "I want to be judged on my merits, not on my measurements," she says.

The case drew international attention and its share of wisecracks. On CNN's *Crossfire*, one conservative critic challenged the "civil rights" of anyone to "be a lard butt and lead an exercise class." But on May 6, 2002 — International No Diet Day in San Francisco — Jazzercise issued a statement saying it would no longer require its 6,000 instructors to be thin. "It may be possible for people of varying weights to be fit," the exercise chain conceded.

"I'm in really good shape," says Portnick, who now runs an exercise program called Feeling Good Fitness. "I work out ten hours a week. I weight-train. I dance. When we focus on weight loss, we're

getting away from the true goal, which is fitness."

## **How Fat Is Fat?**

For a woman who is 5'5"

- Underweight under 111 lbs.
- Normal 111 to 149
- Overweight 150 to 179
- Obese 180 to 239
- Morbidly obese 240 or more

For more info, visit [consumer.gov/weightloss/bmi.htm](http://consumer.gov/weightloss/bmi.htm).

<http://www.goodhousekeeping.com/health/womens/dont-hate-fat-oct05>