

052 – The other F-word – talking about fat

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English**

TRANSCRIPT

Hi English learners,
Lori here, your teacher from betteratenglish.com. In today's episode you are going to hear various people's thoughts, opinions and feelings related to the f-word. No, not the swear word you hear all the time in movies and TV. I'm talking about the other F-word: fat. Yes, fat.

Madison A Krall

Let's talk about fat bias and thin privilege | Madison A. Krall | TEDxMileHigh

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Gak58BcuPh0>

Madison: When you hear the word fat what thoughts and images come to mind? Some of you might think of fat as the extra 10 pounds you're currently trying to lose. Others might be thinking, "Hmm, I wonder what the fat content was in the bag of potato chips I had for lunch?" And some of you when you hear the word fat, might think back to that time in middle school when someone called you fat, and how it has affected the rest of your life. Let's just admit it. Fat can be a pretty loaded word, no matter who you are.

Kelli Jean Drinkwater

Enough with the fear of fat | Kelli Jean Drinkwater

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bzIYyhh3X0w>

Kelli: I'm here today to talk to you about a very powerful little word, one that people will do almost anything to avoid becoming. Billion-dollar industries thrive because of the fear of it, and those of us who undeniably are it are left to navigate a relentless storm surrounding it. I'm not sure if any of you have noticed, but I'm fat. Not the lowercase, muttered-behind-my-back kind, or the seemingly harmless chubby or cuddly. I'm not even the more sophisticated voluptuous or curvaceous kind. Let's not sugarcoat it. I am the capital F-A-T kind of fat. I am the elephant in the room.

Fat | Eating Disorders | One Word | Cut

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UWXwIPs-xWg>

Speaker 1

There are lots of good fats, and I don't think fat on your body is a bad thing. And I don't think fat in your food means fat on your body but it's been used as hate speech.

Speaker 2

Fat can be a hateful word. It can destroy some people. But in some ways fat can be good. And depending on how you image yourself, your fat can actually be great.

Speaker 3

I see a lot of mothers with their daughters say, don't eat that or else you're gonna get fat. It's like, is that really the one thing that you don't want your daughter to be?

Yes, a fat is a loaded word that raises a lot of feelings, emotions, and associations. I'm taking a risk with this episode, because, as you'll hear, conversations around fat and body size can quickly lead you into precarious

territory, even if you have the best of intentions. It's a highly charged topic. But I think that's all the more reason to understand different people's perspectives on fat and being fat, and to have language to talk about it sensitively.

Apart from vocabulary related to the topic, in this episode you'll hear many registers or styles of English: conversations, extracts from prepared talks like TED talks, segments from interviews, and even monologues from people on Youtube. You'll also hear many regional varieties of English, as well as at least one non-native speaker of English.

All in all, you will hear a wide variety of authentic English, illustrating many of the ways people talk, think and feel about fat bodies. You'll also be hearing people describe concepts such as body positivity, body shaming, concern trolling, and lots general vocabulary related to the overall topic.

I have put links to all the sources you are going to hear in the transcript for this episode, which you can find at betteratenglish.com/transcripts . They all come from videos, so I encourage you to follow the links so you can see as well as hear the language in context.

So let's get started. We'll begin with a question. Is it appropriate to tell someone, "You look great! Have you lost weight?" At first glance, it seems like it could be a compliment. But is it really? I'm going to play an extract from the podcast "Inappropriate questions." Listening to this podcast is what sent me down the rabbit hole of inquiry that led to this episode. In this podcast, the two hosts, Elena and Harv, talk to people who identify as fat or plus size to find out what they think about this question.

Elena is from the U.S.A., and Harv is from India. They start off by talking about people's general attitudes toward weight in their different home countries.

Inappropriate Questions podcast

<https://www.cbc.ca/listen/cbc-podcasts/414-inappropriate-questions>

Elena

Harv, when you were growing up in India, what were people's attitudes about weight like?

Harv

Oh, India had different beauty standard, at least at that time...

Elena

Right.

Harv

So if somebody was a little, what is considered an overweight here [it] was considered good. Because that person had enough money to eat food.

Elena

Right.

Harv

So so they used to use the word healthy. Then again, things have changed there as well, because again, obesity have, has become a problem in India. So again, the attitudes have changed. But at that time, it was very, very different.

Elena

Huh! That's interesting. Do you think right now India's beauty standards are kind of, like, the way they are here?
[In the U.S.A.]

Harv

Pretty much, pretty much.

Elena

So thinness is really valued.

Elena

Now, yes.

Elena

And thinness is kind of associated with beauty and health.

Harv

Yeah, all those good things you, you know, even if you don't go to the gym, it's assumed that...

Elena

Yes!

Harv

...you work out.

Elena

Yes. You get the automatic

Harv

Yes.

Elena

benefit of the doubt.

Elena

Absolutely. Absolutely.

Elena

I love seeing more body positive stuff on the internet these days. I love seeing people who are trying to encourage more self love and self care. But sometimes I can't put that into practice. I go home and I look at Instagram. And then I look at myself in the mirror. And I'm like, I know in my head that every body is beautiful. But then I look at my body. I'm like, no, I still feel bad about it.

Harv

So sometimes they say ignorance is bliss.

Elena

Yes.

Harv

Where I am, millennials have a whole lot of tools. The social media tools.

Elena

Yes.

Harv

All I have is a mirror.

Elena

Right.

Harv

That helps me tie my turban.

Harv

Yeah, so I don't even look at my body.

[laughter]

Next you'll hear Elena and Harv talking to a woman of size for her perspective on the question "Have you lost weight?" Her name is Steph Conover, but she likes to go by her state name, Ivory. Here is how Ivory describes herself:

Ivory

I am a mixed-race, six-foot, dragon lady. I'm a fire breather, stage performer, and a whole lot of woman.

Ivory is also an athlete, a plus size model, and is an active promoter of self love and body positivity. You'll hear more about body positivity later. In the following extract, you'll hear what Ivory thinks about the question "Have you lost weight?" You'll also hear her talk about what it was like growing up and living in a larger body, and how the way she describes her own body has evolved over time.

Elena

Can you tell us about a time someone asked you, "Have you lost weight?"

Ivory

Oh boy. It happens all the time. It happens so often that I actually don't take it in anymore.

Elena

Right

Ivory

You know, I'll style my hair differently. I'll wear a different article of clothing. And people think that it's complimentary to say Wow, you look great! Have you lost weight? And it's weird because as somebody who's recovered from eating disorders, as somebody who still battles depression, there's part of me that actually has that instant boost of serotonin where I go, "Ah! I look great! I'm skinny"

Group

[Sounds of sympathy]

Ivory

I'm like, "Bitch, you are a plus sized lady, you have not lost any weight and if you have it will probably find you and that's okay. You can exist at whatever size you exist at and be happy there."

Elena

When's the earliest memory you have of me receiving messaging or internalizing a narrative about your body?

Ivory

Oh, God, probably five, six years old.

Harv

Wow.

Ivory

Like, you'd get invited over to a friend's house for dinner when you were a kid. And there's three other kids around the table who are average size, and then a little fat me, and their parents would portion control me as I'm sitting at the table. And we've all just come from gymnastics practice, we've all just come from playing tag and riding bikes in the backyard. And I get half of what they get. Because their parent feels like,

Harv

Wow.

Ivory

They need to, you know, gauge my portions appropriately.

Harv

Wow.

Ivory

You're not even my parent, what are you doing?

Elena

Yeah.

Ivory

I still remember developing early. And being a young gymnast in a bigger body. And my mother and my coach banded together to force me to wear a training bra when I was eight. And none of the other little girls had to wear a sports bra. But quote, unquote, the spectators were "disturbed by my jiggle."

Elena

Oh, my God,

Ivory

What is that? I'm eight.

Harv

Okay.

Ivory

Right?

Elena

The mention of jiggle has Harv on edge.

Harv

I'm feeling uncomfortable here.

Ivory

And how do you not carry that with you?

Group

Yeah, yes.

Ivory

You know? And I don't think they they knew, that they meant anything by it, by...that harm still carries with you. That harm still sticks. Whether we realize it or not, kids are really impressionable, and they are consistently picking up and then parroting what, what they hear and what we say to them. And so then that narrative was sort of etched into my daily life. And that's when these behaviors started with, you know, me having to justify where I eat when I eat, you know,

Elena

Mmm. I'm never sure what words I should be using when it comes to describing bodies.

Harv

Mmm.

Elena

So whether it's *plus size* or *bigger bodies* and *smaller bodies*, or *fat* and *thin*, what words do you use to describe bodies?

Ivory

If you got me three years ago, I would say don't use that word [the word fat] around me.

Elena

Yeah.

Ivory

It is a weaponized word. And it's a word that we don't reclaim.

Elena

Yeah.

Ivory

But absolutely I do not feel that way now.

Elena

Right.

Ivory

I use fat all the time.

Elena

Yeah.

Ivory

Fat bodies are a cool thing. It's a descriptive term.

Elena

Cool.

Ivory

I'm trying to use it more often and get people to use it in a term that's sort of a generic descriptor versus carrying all this weight, you know...mind the pun!

Group

[Group laughter and agreement]

Ivory

And, and really, though, it is a loaded word, and it is also just a plain descriptor. And I think the more that you disassociate it from, the pain that it may have caused, the easier it is to sort of reframe what that word can mean to you. And just the same way that I wouldn't mind if you called me a brunette. That's a descriptor. I shouldn't mind that you called me a fat babe. You know?

Harv

As long as it's babe.

Ivory

As long as it's babe, now we're making no negative connotation.

As you heard, Ivory is perfectly OK using the word fat to describe herself. She is even trying to reclaim the word, rob it of its power to be hurtful, and just use it as a neutral descriptive term. As she points out, and as we heard in the beginning of this episode, the word fat has not always been used that way. What does it mean to say that the word has been weaponized?

Harv

Yeah, I want to just delve deep into two things.

Ivory

Sure.

Harv

One, you said the word has been weaponized.

Ivory

Yeah.

Harv

Can you elaborate on that?

Ivory

Oh, absolutely. I mean, growing up fat, your your weight is often the topic of discussions that it should never be part of. And people feel the right to be able to comment on you and your worth, and your size, based on how much space you take up, you know, literally, but also now I've got to learn metaphorically, right? And so the way that that word is sort of loaded up and fired at you perpetually, when you're growing up when you're still discovering your identity and who you are. And still finding your way is just atrocious. It's like...

Harv

To put you down.

Ivory

That's it. Absolutely. And like as with many other marginalized groups, it just, although it's a descriptive term, all of a sudden, it's used against you. And it's used to describe you as "less than." Because you're more than.

Elena

So is using it more commonly kind of taking the sting out of this word?

Ivory

That's it. And I think it really is the community at large who has turned around and said, we're going to embrace it. We're going to turn around and we're going to make it ours.

Elena

Yeah.

Ivory

No, totally okay with that. I also use curvy interchangeably.

Elena

Cool.

Ivory

Plus size. Yeah. There's all sorts of great ways.

Elena

Great.

One thing I learned when researching this episode for you was the concept of concern trolling. I had not heard about that before, but once it was pointed out to me it I could think of lots of examples of where I had seen or heard it. Let's listen.

Inappropriate Questions podcast

<https://www.cbc.ca/listen/cbc-podcasts/414-inappropriate-questions>

Ivory

I think that the problem that gets thrown at fat people a lot is concern trolling.

Elena

Mmm.

Ivory

There's a term for you. Have you heard of that?

Harv

Nope.

Ivory

Okay. So you know, trolls, right?

Harv

Yes.

Ivory

So concern troll,

Harv

My kids call me...

Ivory

So concern trolling is a term for people who veil their criticisms, and usually their prejudices of a marginalized group with...

Harv

Concern

Ivory

...the underscore of concern, right? So "I have nothing against fat people. I'm just worried about her health. It's not healthy." It's B.S., because at the end of the day, you don't see people saying that about straight sized humans.

Elena

Yeah.

Ivory

Do why do we feel like we can pass that judgment?

Elena

Yeah.

Ivory

And I think that we can absolutely try to encourage all of us to live our best lives, but at the same time, at some point, we have to butt out, right?

Elena

For sure.

Now I hesitated about including this next example, because some people might find it offensive. But it is a great example, I think, of the thinly-veiled-as-constructive "concern trolling" that Ivory is talking about. Concern trolling is a way to be critical or even hurtful toward a person of size by expressing your criticism as concern for

their health. In short, it's a form of body shaming that gives you plausible deniability. Here is an example from a Youtuber. The context is that he is complaining about people taking offense at what he calls constructive criticism. He believes that instead they should use criticism, whether constructive or not, as a way to make themselves mentally stronger and tougher. He compares sparring in martial arts to improve your skill as a fighter with turning people's criticisms into motivation to make yourself a stronger person.

Tai Lopez

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ELm_jp7Ksts

How To Turn Negativity Into Motivation

Find a friend be like "Yo, point out my biggest weakness and make fun of it." Because one or two things are gonna happen. One, it will be motivation to fix it. Let's say you're fat. And yes, I said it. I'm not saying fat shaming. I'm not, because being overweight is not healthy. Ask any doctor in the world. I'm not talking about be a little chubby, you know, I got a little chub here [grabs stomach]. But I'm talking about, you know, when you're...we got 35% of people in America are obese. And we're afraid to say anything. So we actually harm them, we ain't helping them. No, no, no, ask a medical doctor you think you know, all you people triggered by talking about—in the right way—I'm talking about constructive criticism, because when I box when I Muay Thai, or I do jujitsu, it's constructive, that they're they're sparring with you, so you get better. So yes, it is true, that you could say it in a certain way about Mexicans or being obese, that would be not constructive. But you know what, even that's good training because some people in the world don't like you. And the sooner you grow up and learn that some people aren't gonna like you, and they're just gonna call you out just to har...hurt you just to hurt your feelings, the tougher you get. And it's world's getting weaker, and weaker and weaker. As the tweets go by, and the triggered people go by.

Here is another example, and extract from an interview, talking about mean online comments and concern trolling. You'll also hear how the online community can be a source of positive support.

How to be yourself: Rosie Waterland, All About Women 2016

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BnL0aCLOv7I>

Interviewer

There's a lot of hate on social media. Like there's a lot of dickheads and trolls just waiting to cut people down.

Rosie

Yep.

Interviewer

But there's also a lot of positivity. And what I found as a chick is that there's often a lot of other girls out there feeling the same as you and you kind of get a bit of a sense of that collective hell yeah, we're in this together. I get that. What are some of the more positive experiences you've had on social media?

Rosie

Oh my gosh, I have a really good one, actually. I'm not really active on Twitter anymore because Twitter has just kind of turned into this cesspool of hate. [...]. Twitter I'm not on often. But when I used to be on it a lot I remember once, I went to a doctor just to get a prescription for the pill. Like I literally walked in there, I just was like I need to like get a prescription, I know what I need, thank you very much.

And this doctor then gave me like a ten minute lecture about being fat and about you know, she was basically concern trolling me, having no idea of what my history is. Like the fact that you know, I have had eating disorders and despite what I may look like on the outside like I'm actually the healthiest physically and mentally that I've ever been. And I just felt so fat shamed and so upset. And I was crying and I went to the bathroom afterwards. And I just tweeted like I just got fat shamed by this doctor. Like I can't even believe, I can't even remember what I said. And I just got flooded with supportive tweets from people.

Earlier in this episode, Ivory mentioned the concept of body positivity. Body positivity means different things to different people. You'll now hear various people talking about body positivity and what it means to them:

Marinashutup - Youtube

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UoUudSKYDO8>

And body positivity. At its core it's the idea that we should love our bodies whether they be dark, light, thin, fat, abled, or disabled.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ITuwVqXAXXo>

Aoeife Martin – Senior software engineer at MasterCard

Discussing Online Hate | Finlay Wilson & Aoife Martin | Talks at Google

Aoeife: Body positivity, yeah, that's a huge thing for me. It's something I struggled with myself. And like I said, I'm a middle aged, fat, trans woman, and I...the word fat is something I find it very difficult to say, I find it very difficult to actually...it's probably the first time I've used this publicly to say that word...and ...the f-word as I call it. Mmm...and yeah, it's something I struggle with, like I look at myself, I hate photographs of myself. I hate seeing pictures of myself online...and...I do it because I'm trying to be more positive about...that..."This is me, this is this is what I look like, accept it or...or walk away." And but I still find it very, very difficult.

Body Positivity ft. Grace Victory | Voice Box | Childline

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ITuwVqXAXXo>

Grace (presenter – last name unknown)

So feeling positive about our bodies can be really difficult. And I think we live in a society where sometimes it feels like there's a lot of pressure to look a certain way. And I think media and social media can really make people feel like there's an ideal way to look. [Yep.] And how do you think we can go about getting around that?

Grace Victory

The pressures there, because society is like that. It's not just an illusion, you look on Instagram, or you look through magazines, and there's a certain type of body type that you'll see, especially for women, and you rarely see rolls [of fat] or a larger body or a disabled body and stretch marks and cellulite. But one thing I'll say is there's no wrong way to be a woman, there's no wrong way to be who you are. And just because you see a certain type of body in the media, that does not mean that your body is not okay the way is, it's just because society is messed up. And that's why I think it's really important to create your own social media world to follow people that empower you, follow people that make you feel good about your body that's on YouTube, Instagram, Twitter, everywhere. And also get outside. If you go to an actual beach, you'll see women of all different shapes and sizes, and you'll see stretch marks and cellulite. And that's the beauty of kind of getting out and seeing the world. But it is difficult. But, like, self love starts within and you know, it takes a while to build up eventually. And I think that everyone can get to a place where they love who they are.

So body positivity sounds like a good thing overall, but that it can be difficult to put into practice. It sounds like something that can help many people develop a positive relationship to their own bodies. But things are never as clean and simple as they seem. Some people are critical of the body positivity movement for various reasons. You'll now hear the actor, author and neuroscientist Mayim Bialik talking about an aspect of body positivity that she finds problematic. As a general language note, her talk is a great example of how you might structure a talk or essay that is designed to present an argument with supporting evidence. This is just a short edit of a much longer talk that you can find on Mayim's youtube channel.

Why Is Everyone Getting Naked? | Mayim Bialik

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EbCnaXkzp-c>

Here's what's going on in my life lately. I can't look at my news feed without another story about a plus size model taking her clothes off in the name of empowerment, and it's making me a little bit nuts.

"Mayim you're just a prude. Mayim, you're just jealous because you're not a skinny model. Mayim you're sexy shaming. Mayim [mispronounced] you're fat shaming." First of all, it's Mayim, and second of all, I'm not a prude.

While I may be socially conservative, and I prefer that intimacy for the most part be a private matter. I understand that we live in a culture that celebrates sexuality, and that sexuality is beautiful and healthy. And I'm not gonna lie. I have spent some of my life wishing I was pretty and skinny like other women. But I'm not constitutionally jealous of women. I'm mature enough to separate my issues and insecurities from the issues that I have surrounding women disrobing in the name of empowerment.

The positive aspects of this uptick in women taking off their clothes are severalfold. One, plus sized models show themselves as desirable and beautiful, it opens up our society's notions of beauty, and that's a good thing. Many people do have rounder bodies and it's a wonderful thing to celebrate women who actually exist. In addition, many women who have felt shame about their bodies not being model perfect, are seeing that bigger women can and should be celebrated for their beauty.

This is empowering a lot of women to feel more comfortable in their relationships and their lives...also a good thing. So what's Mayim so upset about now? Almost all of the models I see embracing their curves and talking about female empowerment, are doing so by getting naked. So what's wrong with this? Well, I think the trap that we're falling into, is that we start to equate empowerment, not with strength or intelligence or confidence, but with sexiness.

Whether or not you agree with Mayim, her argument does add nuance to the concept of body positivity and how it is put into practice in public on social media.

We all understand that talking about other people's bodies in disparaging terms is offensive, cruel and hurtful. But it's not as obvious that the things we say about ourselves and our own bodies can also cause harm. This is called fat talk.

Madison A Krall

Let's talk about fat bias and thin privilege | Madison A. Krall | TEDxMileHigh

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Gak58BcuPh0>

Fat talk is a term coined by researcher Mimi Nichter that refers to the disparaging way that friends talk about their bodies, things like, 'Do I look fat in this?' or 'She really shouldn't be wearing that dress' and 'I can't

believe I ate that last doughnut. I feel so fat." Sound familiar? For many women, this is a normal part of life. But fat talk is also occurring when you compliment a friend on their weight loss. How many of you have ever told a friend that they looked good after they lost weight? Yeah, absolutely. Unfortunately, this positive affirmation tells your friend two things. One, that they didn't look good beforehand. And two, that fat is a bad thing.

I don't know about you, but when I was on social media, there was no escaping this kind of fat talk. Especially around the holiday season, which, in the Western world involves lots of food, and lots of social gatherings that revolve around food, and people tend to gain weight.

Some body positive activists recommend eliminating any possible source of harmful fat talk from your life. Here is a Youtuber in the body positivity community giving advice for how to stay body positive over the holiday season by ruthlessly curating what you expose yourself to on social media:

Bodyposipanda

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g2kp9rZGIck>

DIET CULTURE HOLIDAY SURVIVAL GUIDE | How To Stay Body Positive Over The Holidays

That one friend that you have on Facebook keeps trying to sell you wraps or like Herbalife or some shit, get rid of them. If you're scrolling through Instagram, and you see a celebrity holding up a bag of detox tea, and they're saying, "Oh, I indulged so much over Christmas, time to get it right." Get rid of them. If your social media feed is just filled with people saying how bad they are and how guilty they feel and how much they're going to have to work out or deprive themselves and restrict their diet. Just block, delete, unfriend, mute, do what you've got to do, for the love of god do it. We don't get to control what we see and what we hear every day when we go out into the world. But we can at least control what is on our social media feeds, what we are consuming online. So if you've got anything on there that is detrimental to your mental health, that is making you drown in diet culture and feel like you're a failure, just get rid of it. Again, it is more important for you to have that safe space than to be polite to a bunch of people on the internet, most of whom you probably never see or have never even met.

So, having heard all of this, let's circle back to where the whole thing started. Have you lost weight? Is that an appropriate question? Ever? Here's Ivory's take:

Inappropriate Questions podcast

<https://www.cbc.ca/listen/cbc-podcasts/414-inappropriate-questions>

Elena

Do you think "Have you lost weight?" is an inappropriate question?

Ivory

I'm trying to think of it in the context where it wouldn't be. If somebody is going really public with their weight loss journey, and they need you to champion them, and you see them and they're hoping that you notice that they've lost weight. I guess it could be positive. But again, as somebody who's recovered from an eating disorder, I worry about that kind of disordered thinking. [Right, right.] Where we're rewarding each other for having less mass. [Right.] It's such an alien thing, right? Like, like, I truly believe there's life on other planets. And I wonder if they want...run around worrying about how much gravity affects them...[Yeah]...the way that we do here. [Yeah] You know? Because it's nuts! And why? Like, why do we need to comment on each

other's mass? But it's still this weird, attainable, tangible compliment to some people. Like for me, I just kind of don't comment on people's weight at all. But it's weird because we have no problem being like, "You cut your hair, it looks great!" So I guess it's like "You lost weight, it looks great!" Weight seems like an okay zone. You you have to understand the context that happens behind that. You don't necessarily know. Has the person been sick? Have they been stressed? Did they just lose someone? You know?

Harv

Yeah, but if somebody is telling you each day, "I started going more to the gym and I started cutting down on my carbs."

Ivory

So how about just "You look great!"?

Harv

Very good. Yeah, very good. Excellent.

In this episode, we've only scratched the surface of what is an extremely complex and nuanced topic. But I hope that it gave you something to think about, something to discuss, as well as lots of interesting examples of authentic English around the topic of fat and weight and talking about bodies. We all have bodies, whether they're fat, thin, or somewhere in between. But do we really need to comment on them? I don't have an answer, but I do think it's worth thinking about.

Remember that links to all of the extracts you've heard today are listed in the transcript and show notes for this episode, which you can find at betteratenglish.com/transcripts

Until next time, this is Lori, signing off from Better at English headquarters, wishing you an inspired and productive day. Bye for now!