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## Krysia Canvin

# "There is a person behind the flab!": Young people speak out about their weight problems

A great deal of concern has been expressed recently in government, academic and health circles about the 'obesity epidemic', especially amongst children and young people.

The Foresight Report 2007 predicted that Britain could be a mainly 'obese' society by 2050 while the 2002 Health Survey for England described over a third of 16-24 year olds as 'overweight' or 'obese'. The voices of the young people at the centre of these concerns, however, are largely absent. Moreover, although there are an increasing number of interventions for children who have been identified as 'overweight', support for teenagers is not widely available.

### Young people's experiences

Researchers at the University of Oxford are currently interviewing young people about their experiences and views in order to develop a new section for the website [www.youthhealthtalk.org](http://www.youthhealthtalk.org) about Young People, Weight and Health. The website aims to give a voice to young people and to provide them with support and information. Unlike other health information sites, [www.youthhealthtalk.org](http://www.youthhealthtalk.org) features video, audio and written 'clips' of young people talking about their real-life experiences, problems and achievements. This combination of features not only helps young people feel less isolated, but also helps parents, friends and those working with young people to understand young people's perspectives and therefore how best to help.

### In-depth interviews

The new section on Young People, Weight and Health will be based on in-depth interviews with approximately 30-40 young people aged between 12 and 20.

These young people will be recruited from different backgrounds, be of all shapes and sizes and will represent as wide a range of experiences and views as possible. The interviews are conducted by an experienced researcher, usually in people's own homes, and cover a wide range of issues related to weight and health, including: body image, size and shape, exercising, struggling with weight, food and eating, dieting, being told you're overweight, and losing and gaining weight.

### Themes

So far, several themes have emerged in these interviews, some of which are described here and are illustrated by Sami's story.

The young people interviewed described themselves as being 'overweight' either now or in the past or as engaged in ongoing attempts to control their weight. Some found diets and exercise difficult to stick to, too time consuming to fit into their busy lives or too expensive. Others felt that having the support of family, friends or a particularly friendly and motivated health professional was a key factor for helping with weight control.

Many of these young people revealed that they had a poor body image and low self-esteem. Some, like Sami, held conflicting views about their body: they

spoke at length about the importance of accepting their size and shape, but often concluded that they would like to lose weight if only they could. This seemed to be driven by their desire to fit into smaller, mainstream clothes and to be more like other young people, but they also wanted to be 'healthy' and to improve their self-esteem.

Many of these young people believed that health and fatness were incompatible, and most identified numerous risks to physical health. They also identified risks to mental health. Most had been subjected to hurtful comments from others (including family, friends and health professionals) and bullying. Many, including Sami, also described periods of being low or depressed and feelings of low self-esteem.

### **Sami's story**

"I have always had problems with my weight which fluctuated from overweight to obese throughout my life. I was never skinny like other girls at my school and I was picked on and bullied every day from my very first day, until I left aged 18. Day by day, my depression got worse and I started to self harm - I even tried to commit suicide - yet still no help was offered to me."

"I went to see the doctor, who told me I needed to lose weight because I was 'fat', but never gave me any support or help. He didn't tell me how to eat healthily, or how much exercise I should be doing, and I began to lose all hope. He eventually put me on anti-depressants and referred me to counselling where I slowly learnt to talk about and understand my feelings and to cope without self harming."

"I have learnt to like myself now, but I still have days where I look in the mirror and can't stand to look at my body. I find it hard to lose weight because I love cooking and I love food, and I don't know how to increase my exercise within my hectic lifestyle. I know that I am still classed as obese - I have a BMI of 39.2 - but I am

comfortable with myself, and I know that I have the power to change myself if I want to. If I did, I would be doing it for myself, not for anyone else. I recently started a degree in an aspect of healthcare, because I would like to help people make the changes in their lives that I had to fight to get help with."

"I decided to do this study because I wanted people to realise that weight loss is not always simple, and that there is a person behind the flab! We have feelings too! Weight is such a sensitive issue in the public eye at the moment - with obesity levels rising, and government targets being set. I would like to be one of those people who people can look at and say, 'she is happy with her weight - so why shouldn't I be'. You are worth it, we are ALL worth it." (Sami, age 18)

### **The completed website**

The young people we have spoken to so far have highlighted the pressures on them to be a particular size or shape and the difficulties that they experience when they try to make changes to their weight without adequate support.

They also emphasize the social and psychological implications of being labelled 'overweight', suggesting a need for improved emotional support and counselling.

The completed website will contain young people's stories, like Sami's; summaries of the most common topics, such as bullying, depression and self-esteem, what helps when trying to lose weight, messages for other young people and many others; a resources section with links to other websites, helpful organisations, and support groups; and a dedicated discussion forum.

The site will be available in late 2009, but for those wishing to support each other right now, the general youthhealthtalk.org forum is available at:

<http://www.youthhealthtalk.org/forumhome>