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### Diets? Not for these folks

**Weary of counting calories, some overweight people have a new goal -- to be happy and healthy, not thin.**

By Mami Jameson >>>

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By any measure, Maria Canul is full-figured. The single, 37-year-old public relations specialist is 5 feet 2 and a curvy 180 pounds. And like an increasing number of people who fall outside the normal weight box on BMI charts, she's fine with how she looks, thank you. The striking redhead is healthy, fit, happy -- and has no problem attracting men.

Canul now sees society coming around to her view as well.

"I see it in the reaction from men and even in the media. There's more appreciation of larger women. I'm getting hit on a lot, so apparently my weight isn't an issue for some. I think I look pretty average. Thin is on the way out."

That could be because fat is the new normal. According to the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 66% of Americans are overweight, and 32%, almost one in three, are obese. These figures are based on body-mass index tables, which calculate an adult's body fat based on height and weight. A normal BMI is 20 to 25. From 25 to 30 is overweight, and above 30 is considered obese. Canul's BMI is 32.9.

Seeing more cultural images of larger-sized women makes Canul feel more accepted. "I never used to see larger women in fashion, but now they're common." She's a size 12, and would prefer to be a size 10, where she feels more comfortable. "But 12 is the average size of women today, and I don't have to be a size 2 ever again."

When so much of the population falls outside the normal BMI range, acceptance can't be far behind. Media messages, books on body diversity and organizations promoting fat acceptance are urging heavy people to accept their size and focus more on their health.

#### A shift in strategy

Linda Bacon, author of "Health at Every Size: The Surprising Truth About Your Weight," says shifting the focus to eating healthfully and exercising is much more productive and liberating, for people who struggle with their weight.

When her overweight and obese clients come to her complaining that their diets haven't worked, therapist Judith Matz tries to help them move from a diet mentality to a wellness mentality.

"For these people, the preoccupation with food and weight takes a lot of mental energy. When you quit dieting and free up that mental energy, your work, relationships and life improve," says the director of the Chicago Center for Overcoming Overeating. "If you can honor the body you have and stop beating yourself up, you are in a much better position to take care of yourself, seek healthcare regularly, find exercise that suits you and feel more entitled to live fully in the world. People love the shift."

Although some people worry that if they start breaking their dieting rules their weight will skyrocket, that doesn't happen, says Matz, author of "The Diet Survivor's Handbook." Usually, she says, they settle at a weight where their body is genetically set to be.

Krista Niles of Oakland took this message to heart. Now 26, she recalls that even in kindergarten she felt that her body wasn't like her friends'.

"I was never skinny, and all my friends were. I really needed to fit in and wanted to be like them." She went on and off diets until she was 20 years old. Toward the end of high school she got down to 145, which, for her 5-foot-7 frame, put her well into the normal BMI range but wound up being unsustainable for her. "I was hungry all the time."

A therapist she eventually started seeing about her weight issue told her that for some people dieting doesn't work, and pointed Niles onto a path to self-acceptance. When she finally said no to dieting, her weight at first went up but has remained stable for three years. Today she's at peace with her body.

"The emotional stress of being on a diet is completely gone. Before, everything I ate was a struggle. The focus on food controlled my life. Once that stopped, this whole new world opened up. I could just relax about this main thing that was dominating my life. It was very, very freeing."

Experts say genetics plays a significant role in determining body size, and that more than 95% of diets fail.

"So let's focus on what we can control," says Bacon, also a professor of nutrition at City College of San Francisco.

"I'm not saying there aren't a lot of people who are not at a healthy weight. I am saying, if you address the healthy behaviors, a healthier weight will follow. Let's target health, not fat."

#### The pressure's off

For Canul, who worked as a runway model from age 15 to 22 and struggled to keep her weight less than 105 pounds, the shift in society is a relief. "When I was modeling, I felt a lot of pressure to stay thin. I did a lot that I wouldn't feel comfortable doing now, including weight-loss drugs and extreme diets."



Today, she feels better and happier. "I don't eat whatever I feel like, but I'm not starving myself. I try to make nutritious choices." She also exercises for 30 minutes almost every day on her StairMaster or treadmill, does light yoga daily and takes walks.

As for Niles, she now carries about 30 pounds more than is ideal, but would rather not focus on that number. "I date regularly, have fun, go to the beach, exercise and don't restrict myself from doing anything because of my size." Five days a week she walks, jogs, does yoga or takes a dance class. "I take the same approach toward exercise that I do toward eating. I do what I enjoy."

Though she occasionally struggles with living in a culture where thin is the ideal, she says, "I don't for a second miss giving up dieting. I feel great. My health is great. I don't think I will ever diet again."

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