

fat, fucked up & fucked over

I am depressed. When I say “depressed” I mean times, days, sometimes weeks, or moments, or an afternoon, or morning when I feel: there’s nothing worth getting out of bed for, tired and easily exhausted, often crying, alone, hopeless, extremely self-conscious, unable to perform simple jobs or make decisions, I can’t make sense of anything because it all seems so hugely complicated, I can’t ever imagine a time when I didn’t feel like this, transfixed with grief, horror, fear, ugliness. Big feelings.

My first memories of depression are of myself as an eight or nine year old girl crying, feeling desperation and loneliness, (coincidentally [?] this is around the time when I was first put on diets). I am now twenty-six and I’m beginning to realise that these feelings have not left me, that over my life I have experienced many cycles of depression; sometimes I feel up, mostly I feel sort of “medium,” often I feel total despair and emptiness.

I know I would still be depressed if I were thinner, some of the sources of my feelings, such as the deaths of my mother, Rosemary, and my beautiful brother Paul, have nothing to do with my fatness. On the other hand, I want to acknowledge that being fat gives depression quite a distinct flavour.

This period of depression, up-and-down roughly since Xmas 1994, is the first time I’ve spoken publicly about the way I feel. In the culture in which I grew up depression is taboo, it is unspeakable and shameful, and passed off as a kind of self-indulgent, trivial “pull your socks up dear” sort of thing. Therefore it has been important for me to show people how I’m feeling, to recognise my feelings as real and valid. The responses I’ve had have been mixed; some understanding and caring, others bemused, like it doesn’t fit with their image of me and what I’m like, or rather their image of me as a fat woman.

One woman wondered why was I depressed, she’s only ever seen me witty, wisecracking, and articulate, so how can I feel so awful? I am painted into a corner, like I’ve got to show them that I’m not this laffin’, eye-rolling, jolly lady stereotype they might have been expecting. I relate very much to what Lea said in Fat Girl #2, about having to be brilliant, and having to be endlessly adaptable to different environments. I feel this too, that I can’t be myself, and actually, that I’ve never really had a strong sense of my identity. So ... I’m starting to show people who I am, and that includes being depressed. My friends have to acknowledge the real me, not my mask, and because I often feel lonely I need to know that it’s the real me they know, and that I am cared about.

Being fat and depressed to me means harbouring overwhelming feelings of alienation and uncomfortable difference. I am different, indeed, I’m very proud to be different, but when I’m depressed I wonder if anyone could understand me and where I’m from, especially since a fat body is so widely regarded as indicative of a deep set pathology. No wonder she’s crazy, have you seen her size? Alienation is real too, even now, even after I’ve talked myself hoarse, many of my thinner friends don’t get it, they aren’t sensitive and I feel silenced. I keep plugging away, but it’s so tiring, and will I get any results? Like this: Someone invited me out dancing the other week. I love to dance. I haven’t been out dancing for a long time. I know that at this club I’m going to it’s very important to have the right look. Shit, I don’t have anything that would work so I set about making myself a new dress. At the last minute I cancel. I can’t face it. I haven’t told my friend why. I think she’d try and persuade me to go and I don’t feel strong enough, and besides, I don’t think she’d understand. I don’t want to go because I want to dance and I don’t want the shit and the stares and the comments that would go with it in this straight nightclub.

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by charlotte cooper

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When I am depressed I start to get agoraphobic. How can I face a world which shouts at me, or comments, or lifts its eyebrows disapprovingly?

When I'm strong I fight back, I shout and sneer and give them the finger. Last year I hit a man who was in a group making obscene fat-phobic comments about my lover and me;

I went up to him, jabbed my pointy fingers in his throat and kicked him hard, and I got away with it too, I fight back, but it takes a lot of energy, sometimes energy that I don't have or can't give, and I am shocked by how easy it becomes to just stay at home and avoid confrontation. Reasons for going out become fuzzy; I'll post that letter tomorrow, I can't go out without my bra cuz I don't want people staring at my tits clanging together and it's too cold to take off my clothes and put it on, I'll go out later when my lover is here.

Excuse me whilst I fulfill those lies about sad fat girl couch potatoes, friendless, unlovable, munching junk, with stains down the front of her badly fitting clothes. Intellectually I know this is a vile distortion, politically I know why these misrepresentations exist, but sometimes, emotionally, I can't undo it. I live in a fat-hating world which wants to destroy me. I start wanting to destroy myself. It's not that diets look attractive, it's just the pervasive myth that weight loss cures everything. I would never diet, but I still get those "what if" doubts, invalidating the empowerment I have fought for; what if I were thinner, what if they're really right about early death/heart disease/my knee joints?!

What if I'm deluding myself and living a lie? I want to wake up from this. I'm casting a spell to vanish my years of self-hatred. Another spell to disappear the insidious lies.

WAKE UP!

Here's something else: It's a couple of years ago, it's late and I'm on the phone to my father, Stewart. I'm blubbing, and I think he is too. He tells me words to the effect of "Buck up, or Simon will leave you."

Simon is my lover. I can't believe what I'm hearing. No matter how secure I am in my relationship, no matter how loved I am, Stewart gets to the root of it all. I'm fat, how can anyone love me? Fuck, and I know how difficult it was to find a lover who was so totally accepting of me. Fuck fuck don't leave me Simon, don't leave me, I am not worthy of you please don't

leave me. Fucker. Don't be depressed, fat girl, because it's not sexy or endearing and you are unlovable enough without any added hassle. Isn't this depressing?

Okay, there are some practical details to consider if you are fat and depressed. The bottom line is that, contrary to the images of fat cat capitalists and coquettish rich fat ladies, fat women tend to come from the poorest and lowest socioeconomic strata. Poverty is depressing. I live on Income Support and Housing Benefit, which is a sort of Brit version of Welfare. Where I live is expensive, has no adequate heating and my landlord (Mr. Slum, I call him) harasses me. I can't afford to move, I haven't got enough money for a deposit on my own place. I hate this.

Poverty also means I can't afford a private counselor or therapist. Programmes for free or very low cost counseling are few and far between and are either booked up and/or concentrate on specific social or ethnic groups (I am white). I have started co-counselling with a fat friend, but I feel angry that channels by which I might start to heal are closed to poor women. The National Health Service was a dead end for me; I was referred from pillar to post by my doctor, seen by a stream of professionals with clipboards, Doctor this and Doctor that. I got away fast, knowing how easy it would be for a psychiatric label to be slapped on this poor fat depressed woman. Knowing, also, that the hallowed sources of knowledge for mental health professionals would mean that they would probably have internalised pathologised definitions of my fat body. I didn't want the shrinks pressuring me to shrink.

So I'm depressed. I'm not a victim, not a two-dimensional stereotype, not a jolly dolly, not all powerful, not addicted to feeling bad, I'm mostly pretty ordinary, but I'm depressed. I've lived with depression for a long time, and probably will continue to do so, but I know I'm not alone with it, I know there are probably other fat girls who feel like this too, and I hope there is something useful to be gleaned from my experiences. ✨