



When Self-Love isn't Enough: Cultivating Body Liberation in an Unjust World

LINDA BACON, PHD

CONFERENCE KEYNOTE, ASDAH 2018

In the decade since I published my first book, *Health at Every Size: The Surprising Truth about Your Weight*, my perspective – and the HAES® movement – has evolved to include deeper recognition that privileges and oppressions shape how we are treated and how we experience our bodies.

I appreciate that the book has been transformative for many. I'm proud to hear ongoing stories from people who tell me the book saved their life or invigorated their professional practice, inspiring a much more rewarding path. Yet I can also see many ways in which my unexamined privilege compromised the book, convoluted my own path to healing, and leads readers astray.

The most conspicuous example is the focus on personal behavior change as a route to liberation. This approach denies the reality that lifestyle factors account for less than a quarter of health outcomes. It puts the burden on the individual to assume personal responsibility for discomfort around food and weight and disease, deflecting attention from the more pernicious problem: systemic injustice. The emphasis on lifestyle change can also add a new stressor, giving people a way to blame themselves for not doing better or for bringing about their diabetes, heart disease or eating disorder.

To be clear, behavior change is valuable. But what it can't do is remove the stressors you face. No matter how you change your eating or activity habits, the factors that make up your lifeworld - things like stigma, insecure work, poverty, and caring responsibilities - remain unchanged. These factors play a much larger role in health and well-being, and they also affect your ability to make those lifestyle changes. Moreover, it is well established that lifestyle changes result in greater health improvement for people with more privilege.

Health at Every Size continues to sell well today, introducing readers to this outdated, neoliberal model of the Health at Every Size approach. I am sorry for that. To acknowledge the ways my view has changed, and to advance the field, I co-authored a second book, *Body Respect: What Conventional Health Books Get Wrong, Leave Out, or Just Plain Fail to Understand about Weight*, with Lucy Aphramor. I hope that readers can continue to find value in the storytelling, self-help advice, and scientific information that have captivated audiences reading *Health at Every Size*, and better situate the information by also reading *Body Respect*, which contextualizes personal stewardship within a social justice perspective.



My next book, to be released in 2019 and provisionally titled *When Self-Love Isn't Enough: Cultivating Body Liberation in an Unjust World*, builds on the previous books.

True belonging. That feeling of being seen and appreciated for who we are, feeling connected to others and respected for the unique value we bring to the community. We all want this: to belong, to know that who we are matters. Yet it's a feeling that few of us achieve. Our toxic culture of privilege, oppression, and exploitation denies most of us that feeling of true belonging. Simultaneously marked by social identities that place us on the margins while rooted in other, privileged, social identities that deny us access to our full humanity and true connection with others, all of us suffer.

This book has the ambitions of a manifesto - a culture-wide call to action. I want to help people heal from the individual and collective trauma of injustice and support our transition from a culture of othering to one of belonging. I discuss the political, sociological, psychological and physical findings documenting the damage caused by body-based rejection and oppression. I also propose strategies you can use to build your resilience, to survive and thrive even as the world doesn't treat you well, and to undermine the oppressive systems. It goes well beyond that, too, to help you arrive at that place of belonging – at home in your skin and feeling welcome and valued in community.

Below, I share with you an 8 point blueprint for body liberation.

1) **Develop your cultural humility**

Cultural humility is about opening to others rather than projecting your beliefs onto them. It requires ongoing commitment to self-reflection on one's own assumptions and practices and that we approach others with openness and curiosity, asking questions rather than making assumptions and striving to understand rather than to inform. It's about trusting that others know more about their experience than you do and recognizing that even when you don't understand someone else's perspective, you can still respect that it's valid. It's also about bringing our own, unique lineage and inherited ancestry into the collective wisdom, rather than appropriating it from someone else.

2) **Be accountable**

Accountability means engaging in the growth work. It means opening to and being responsive to the experiences and needs of others.

We're not going to always get this right. It can be painful when we recognize that we're not the people we want to be and that we make mistakes and unintentionally hurt others. We need to accept our fallibility as a part of being human and take responsibility for our mistakes. We can apologize, do what we can to correct for it, and commit to doing better. Acknowledge, apologize, repair.

3) **Identify the root problem: Injustice**

There is a reason for body dissatisfaction: It's because we know that we have to manage other people's impressions of us. Every time we walk into a room, our body precedes us, triggering reactions from other people rooted in prejudice.

Remind yourself: the problem is in a culture of injustice, not your body. Place the blame where it belongs and treat your body and others' bodies with the respect and kindness they deserve.

As you heal from the injuries inflicted by a hostile world and develop your appreciation for your body, remember too the need to stop the systemic oppression that causes the harm in the first place. Let's also build



our social analyses and implement collective practices that create a culture of belonging in which every body is welcome.

4) **Centralize marginalized experience**

When we challenge the narratives that centralize privileged people and underrepresent, marginalize, and violate others, we provide everyone – no matter the intersection of their dominant or marginalized identities – better opportunity to understand themselves, heal, and grow. In other words, challenging oppression by centering the experiences of underrepresented groups is not just about liberating others, but vital to everyone's liberation.

5) **Support body autonomy**

The feeling that our bodies don't properly represent us or cause us to be treated in a way we don't appreciate extends well beyond weight, to include factors such as gender, age, skin color, ability status, etc. Some of these stay consistent – like skin color – but many of the other cultural indicators change over time.

You can make choices about the cultural signifiers under your control, like haircuts and clothes and body modification. You can also move to greater comfort in how you feel about yourself. What you can't control is what others and social systems project onto you.

Body autonomy is about claiming ownership over our bodies, regardless of external messages. Sometimes that means allowing our bodies to just be as they are, wearing fatkinis and embracing our stretch marks. And sometimes, as in the case for some trans people, claiming our autonomy requires change, perhaps surgery, transitioning to a body that feels like home, like it represents who we are.

6) **Cultivate resilience**

This is your body to inhabit regardless of what it may telegraph to others or how it may influence how you are treated. It's our challenge to build the resilience that can manage fatphobia, misgendering, racism, or any of the other ways our social identities can make us targets for stigma, discrimination, marginalization and invisibility.

There is always someone who wants to confiscate our humanity – and stories that restore it. We don't have to live our lives forever defined by damaging things that happen to us. What lies in us can never be completely colonized or taken away. Your history of trauma, marginalization or invisibility can be integrated with a story of resilience, one where you are a better person for what you learned in getting here. The adversity you have experienced has contributed to you becoming the unique and awesome person you are today.

7) **Embrace brokenness**

We are all wounded individuals, suffering from the individual and collective traumas of injustice and finding our way in a world that doesn't give equal access or respect.

The primary cause of unhappiness, distress and disease is not in our bodies, it's in an unjust culture. We're biologically wired to need connection. Injustice and the disconnection it causes become embodied through a physiologic stress response. Eating disorders, substance abuse, depression, anxiety, diabetes, heart disease, heartburn, irritable bowel syndrome, anger, fear, hypervigilance, distrust, loneliness and isolation,... these are



all adaptive strategies or emotions, helping us survive short-term and manage these vulnerable bodies. They are normal responses to the collective trauma we experience in a world that doesn't treat us well.

Be tender as you sit with your frailties. Practice self-compassion. The brokenness you feel is not a flaw in you, it's your humanity. This human vulnerability – the need for belonging, for feeling valued and connected to others - and the distress we feel without it, connects us to one another.

8) Build community

The search for individual solutions is a trap keeping us mired in injustice. The real solution is not an end point, but rather lies in the collective struggle. Bonding together and supporting one another as we sit with our vulnerability and collectively resist systemic injustice creates a culture of belonging in the present as it also works to catalyze social, cultural, and institutional change. It's in connection and the shared struggle that the beauty and tenderness lie.

This is what is needed from each of us, whether it is in our role as friends, health professionals, or members of a global community.

This is my hope for our HAES community: Let us create a brave space to sit with one another amidst our human frailties, a sanctuary, where all of us feel respected and valued, not in spite of, but because of the uniqueness we each bring.

With love, *Linda*

BIOGRAPHY

Dr. Linda Bacon is fostering a global transformation – away from our obsession with body weight and to body respect. Her mission is to provide the critical thought, inspiring vision, and practical strategies needed to empower individuals, organizations, and institutions to respect all bodies and support compassionate self-care. Dr. Bacon holds graduate degrees in physiology, psychology, and exercise metabolism with a specialty in nutrition. A professor and researcher, for almost two decades Dr. Bacon has taught courses in social justice, health, weight and nutrition; she has also conducted federally funded studies on health and weight and published in top scientific journals. Dr. Bacon is co-author of the paradigm-shifting *Body Respect: What Conventional Health Books Get Wrong, Leave Out, or Just Fail to Understand about Weight*. She also wrote the iconic and bestselling *Health at Every Size: The Surprising Truth about Your Weight*. Dr. Bacon's advocacy for body respect has generated a large following on social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter, health and nutrition listservs and specialty blogs, and the international lecture circuit. She is committed to centralizing the ways in which power, privilege and disadvantage complicate our experience of our bodies. A compelling speaker, writer and storyteller, Dr. Bacon delivers a unique blend of academic expertise, clinical experience, and social justice advocacy, all couched in a raw honesty and compassion that touch and inspire.

Health At Every Size and HAES are registered trademarks of the Association for Size Diversity and Health and used with permission.

Thanks to Kelly Diels and Holly Truhlar for thoughtful criticism and review.



HAESCommunity.org

HAESCommunity.org is your space. The HAES Pledge helps you channel your energy and make your support for HAES known. The Registry helps you find HAES practitioners and let others know about you. Make use of the lists of HAES-sensitive books, websites, podcasts, and other Resources.

Please, help grow the HAESCommunity by encouraging HAES-sensitive individuals and groups to pledge and add their listings.

LindaBaconSpeaks.com

What do I offer? Critical thought. Inspiration. Transformation.

Please pitch your Human Resources Department or whoever makes speaker decisions at your worksite, school, professional organization, or community group.

- Educational and motivational talks for employee wellness programs, schools and community organizations
- Inspirational talks that challenge workplace culture
- Keynote talks for eating disorder, health/medical, and social justice conferences
- Trainings for medical, dietetics, psychotherapy, and eating disorder clinics
- and much, much more

Social Media

Follow Linda on Facebook and Twitter to stay on top of news and get inspirational tidbits. Subscribe to the newsletter for occasional updates and otherwise unpublished insights.

Spread the love!

Have you been influenced by Linda's speaking? Consider contributing a testimonial at <https://lindabacon.org/submit-testimonials/>. Have you been influenced by Linda's writing? Consider adding a review at Amazon and elsewhere.

"Social proof" is apparently the single most influential motivator! Help me get this message to others.



LINDABACON.ORG



**FACEBOOK.COM/
LINDABACONHAES/**



**TWITTER.COM/
LINDABACONHAES**



**LINDABACON.ORG/
NEWSLETTER**



LINDABACONSPEAKS.COM

