

CAN FITNESS AND FATNESS PEACEFULLY CO-EXIST?

A Fitness Trainer for Plus-Size Women Explores the Myths Around Fatness and Fitness

By Jill Terry

Though Sharon Snyder is a personal trainer, most of her clients aren't striving toward buns of steel or abs you could serve martinis on. Their weights exceed those outdated numbers on the insurance charts but these women don't come to Snyder to slim down. They come to get fit – whatever their size.

Snyder pioneered her small business, Bumblebee Fitness, last year. Why Bumblebee? "With its short fat body, little short wings and small wingspan, some experts claim that the bumblebee is theoretically incapable of flight — using conventional rules of aerodynamics, at least. Despite all the experts' contentions and conclusions, the bumblebee defies those rules. It symbolizes those of us who are fat women, and so often told we cannot be physically fit. However, I believe — and my clients prove every day — that fitness is independent of weight and size. Very fat people can be very fit."

Yet, plus-size women are subjected to ongoing derision and assumptions that their size precludes health, let alone fitness. Here, Sharon Snyder addresses some of the more unique issues facing plus-size fitness and the women who pursue it.

It's impossible not to be affected by the constant health warnings that excess weight is the enemy. Yet, weight loss is not part of the program you structure for your clients. Why is that?

Because, simply, weight-loss programs have an abysmal success rate. More than 95 percent of people who lose weight through diet and/or exercise gain that weight back (and often more) within five years. I don't think that setting up unrealistic and often unachievable goals helps promote health, much less self-esteem.

Fitness goals are very achievable and can be maintained over time and that's what I work on with my clients: how to get and stay fit, active, healthy, and strong for a lifetime.

Excess weight is not "the enemy." Not getting enough exercise and being cardiovascularly unfit are much greater contributors to poor health than any poundage can be. Steven Blair's research at the Cooper Institute shows that fit fat people outlive thin unfit people.

Has the medical profession presented an accurate picture to the public of the so-called hazards of obesity? If not, why do you think they're promoting images for women that conform more closely to a cultural aesthetic than medical fact?

The medical profession presents as distorted a picture of healthy bodies as the media does. The medical profession in general would rather a woman be underweight than overweight, when studies show that it's healthier to be moderately overweight than underweight.

The medical profession and many medical studies are funded by the diet and weight-loss industry, which have a vested interest in doctors promoting weight loss.

The real issue is: is weight loss effective at improving health, and, most importantly, is having a weight loss goal a realistic part of a healthy lifestyle? We know that the vast majority of people who attempt to lose weight through diet and exercise either don't lose weight, or they lose weight and regain all of the lost weight (and more) within five years. The yo-yo effect is much more harmful to our health than being overweight or even obese and having a healthy lifestyle at a stable weight.

Weight loss is about a product: it's about buying a new book, or paying money to Weight Watchers or Jenny Craig or buying special foods or supplements, all because we're sold a package that "thin is better." Simply promoting healthy eating of non-processed whole foods and exercising at least 30 minutes a day most days of the week? There's no money in that, so few people are interested in promoting the simple facts about health: movement is good, eating whole foods is good. Living that way may not make us thin, but it sure will make us healthy and fit. Which is better for quality of life? I'd choose the latter, wouldn't you?

Do you discourage people from losing weight?

No, not exactly. What I do is encourage my clients to set up healthy, achievable goals for themselves. I encourage people to make small, incremental changes that are sustainable over time. Sometimes those changes result in weight loss, and sometimes they don't.

I discourage my clients from setting up weight loss as a goal, especially as a primary goal, because I believe in setting my clients up for success both in the short- and long-term. I want to support my clients in making a long-term commitment to fitness without regard for a weight loss outcome.

I never weigh my clients or encourage them to have their body composition measured. I do not judge my clients for their size or their fitness level, and I encourage them not to judge themselves, or compare themselves to others.

What I've found happens if someone is exercising primarily to lose weight is that they get discouraged if they don't lose weight -- and they stop exercising. Or they exercise until

they meet their weight-loss goal, and then they stop exercising. Or they adopt unhealthy exercise programs that lead to overtraining injuries, and they get hurt and discouraged and stop exercising. By and large, gyms and exercise programs encourage the fantasy around permanent weight loss for minimal effort.

Our bodies want to exercise, they want to move.

Every community has its zealots and those members who have an almost militant stance about what being a member of that community is all about. Is there a Fat Community? How has it responded to the positive work you're doing?

There are many fat communities, and people who make up "the fat community" and almost every person has a different vision of what "Fat Community" means and who's "in" and who is "out."

I have had very mixed reactions to the work that I do, which I expected. Many people are encouraged and excited by athletic training programs that are welcoming to plus-size women, and are specially designed for plus-size women. Others would rather do dance-aerobics style classes, and that's fine – that's why there are instructors who specialize in dance-style aerobics classes.

My style of training appeals to women who really want a fitness challenge, who want to be engaged by a fitness program tailored to them and their interests and who enjoy athletic training. Not everyone wants to train, and that's fine.

My philosophy is about being judgment-free and shame-free about our bodies and what we bring to a fitness experience. I create that for my clients, they respond to it, and become not only more fit but happy with themselves.