

“If you’re fat what does that make me?”

The research on “fat talk” and body image and strategies to combat self-disparaging talk on campus

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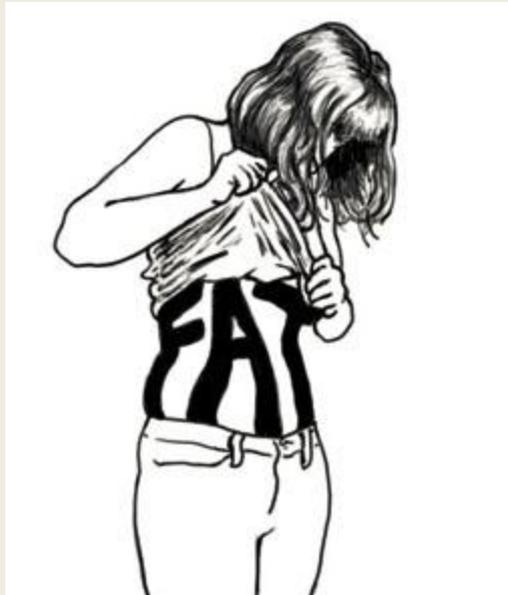
Body Image

- Body Image
- Body Image Disturbance
 - Body image dissatisfaction
 - Body image distortion



Body Image: Normative Condition

- A “normative condition” since the mid-1980s
- Up to 90% of college students report that they worry about body image.



1917

Body Image and College Students

- Highly prevalent and severe problem among female students
- Recently identified as a growing problem among male college students
- Factors specific to college environment may foster or facilitate body image disturbance
 - Lack of structure, academic demands, food services, etc.

The Effects of Poor Body Image

- Risk factor or even a predictor for:
 - Eating disorders
 - Other dangerous eating and weight loss behaviors
- Associated with:
 - Low self-esteem
 - Depression

Diversity and Body Image

- While many images depict fat talk as a problem of young, privileged white women, eating disorders do not discriminate.
- With the exception of anorexia, eating disorder rates are similar across ethnic groups (National Eating Disorders Association).
- “Fat talk” and “old talk” are linked phenomena
- Both males and females engage in fat talk.
Recent studies

Diversity and Body Image

- Both males and females engage in fat talk.
- Over one-half of teenage girls and nearly one-third of teenage boys use unhealthy weight control behaviors.

Neumark-Sztainer, D. (2005). *I'm, Like, SO Fat!*. New York: The Guilford Press. pp. 5.

- Greater male media consumption is associated with less acceptance of one's real body (hair, sweat, etc.)

Schooler, D. and Ward, L.M. (2006) *Psychology of Men and Masculinity* Vol. 7, No. 1, 27-41.

Men and Fat Talk at MIT

- At least two popular comic strips at MIT – created by men – depicted male overeating and fat talk in the MIT student newspaper.

A SILENT EPIDEMIC?

EATING DISORDERS AMONG MALES

- ① FACTORS ② PREVALENCE ③ IMPACTS

NOTABLE FACTORS



MUSCULARITY IN MEDIA

The muscularity of ideal male body representations has increased from the 1970s to 1990s, presenting a largely unattainable muscular body type.



LESS LIKELY TO GET HELP

Higher levels of gender role conflict and traditional masculine ideals are associated with negative attitudes toward seeking psychological help.



SEXUALITY

Gay males are estimated to comprise 5% of the general population, but among men with eating disorders, 42% identify as gay.

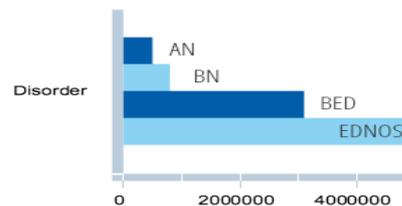
PREVALENCE

OF EATING DISORDERS

10 MILLION

MALES IN THE UNITED STATES WILL SUFFER FROM A CLINICALLY SIGNIFICANT EATING DISORDER AT SOME TIME IN THEIR LIFE.

THE BREAKDOWN



HEALTH IMPACTS

33% of adolescent males use unhealthy weight control behaviors



37% of men who binge eat experience depression



Up to 43% of men are dissatisfied with their bodies



EVERYBODY KNOWS SOMEBODY

who has been affected by eating disorders. Visit www.NEDAawareness.org for more information and resources.

Fat Talk Bingo!

- What thoughts went through your head when you saw the candy and fruit on the table?
- Did you engage in fat talk with your neighbors?

The function of Fat Talk

- To “fit in”
 - conforming to perceived social norms
- To gain affirmation
 - “What are you talking about? You’re so thin!”
- To assuage guilt when eating certain foods
 - “I’m sorry but I’m going to eat this whole thing. At least thing I’m going to the gym.”

College Fat Talk

- In a recent study with women at a mid-size private university in the Midwest:
 - Nearly all reported engaging in fat talk with friends
 - One third described it as “frequent” or “very frequent”
- ***Not*** associated with being overweight
 - Overweight women may actually be less likely to talk in ways that call attention to their bodies

What does fat talk sound like?



Content of Fat Talk

“I’m so fat.”

“You’re not fat!”

- **Most prevalent response:** “You’re not fat.”
 - Majority reported that this is how they want a friend to respond to them
- **Most Common Type of Fat Talk:** Back-and-forth exchange where both deny the other is fat
- **Also common:** Women making plans to support each other in losing weight or exercising
 - These plans do not come to fruition, serve as means to temporarily assuage guilt

Fat Talk Deception

- Most college women do **not** report feeling worse when they hear fat talk
 - Often reported that fat talk made them feel **better** or **reassured**
- However, frequent reminders that one's normal-weight or under-weight friends believe themselves to be fat is not helpful or healthy

“A concern is what seems like a useful coping mechanism to many women may actually be exacerbating body image disturbance.”

-Salk and Engeln-Maddox (2011)

Negative Effects of Fat Talk

- Fat talk is associated with:
 - Greater body image dissatisfaction
 - Thin-ideal internalization
- May be a risk factor for eating pathology
 - Young men and women with eating pathology engage in more fat talk and may take it more seriously than those without eating pathology
 - Fat talk may be vehicle to legitimize pathological beliefs about body weight and shape
- Harmful at societal level
 - Reinforces normalization of body image disturbance
 - Silences women with positive body image

The Sweater/Swimsuit Experiment

- 82 female undergrads at Yale



- Exposure to fat talk associated with increase in negative emotion for women trying on sweaters, and decrease for women trying on swimsuits

The social role of fat talk



Impression Management

- Social dimension of fat talk creates pressure to express body discontent to fit in
 - In one study, female athletes with positive body image still engaged in fat talk
 - Middle school girls believed that if they didn't participate, they would appear conceited
- Fat talk is a form of “impression management”
 - A way of behaving based on desire to be accepted by a group and avoid rejection

Impression Management



Confederate Interview Experiment

- Undergraduate women talked with a confederate who spoke about her body in a self-derogatory manner, self-accepting manner, and self-aggrandizing manner.



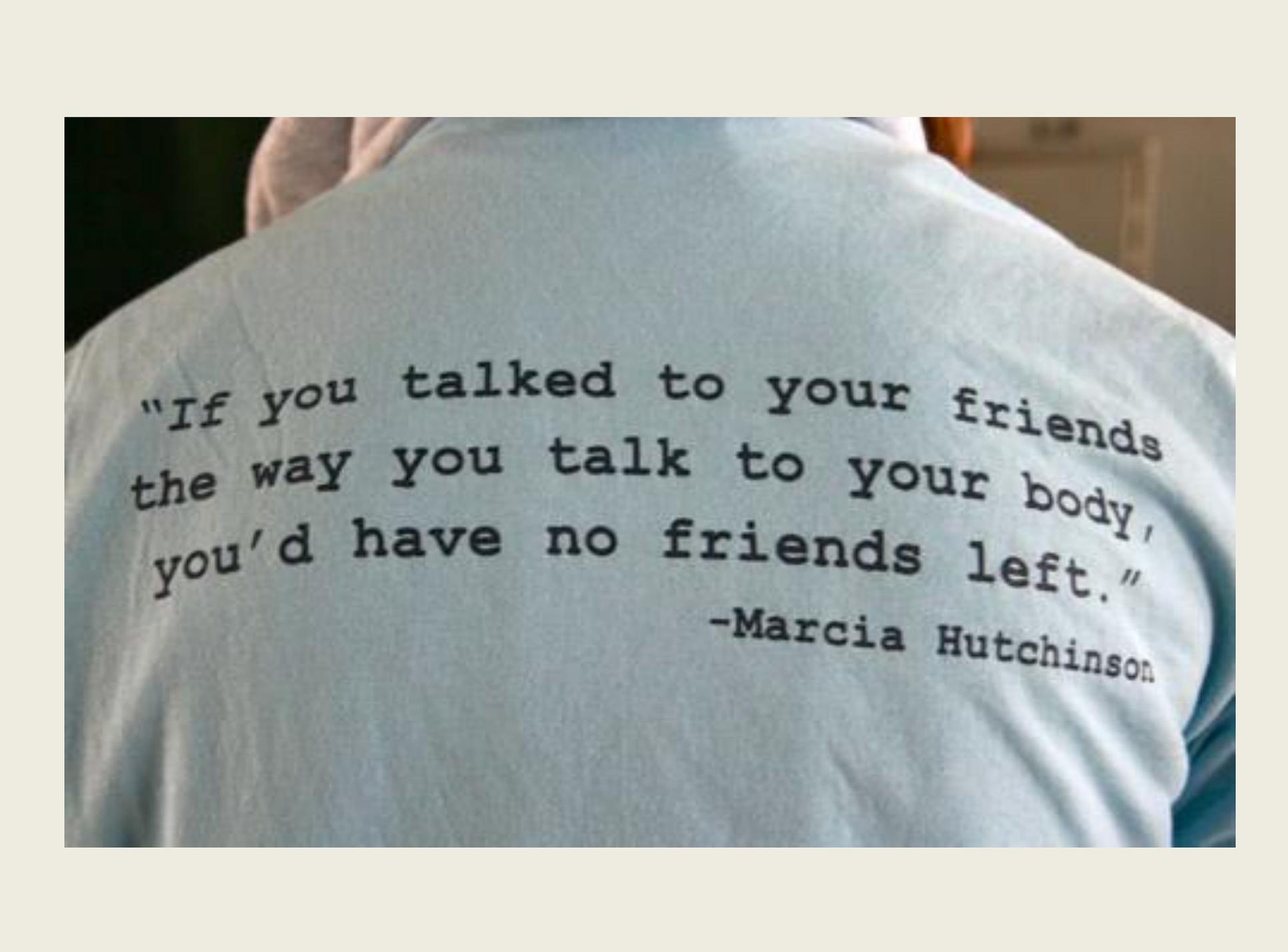
- Participants reciprocated the presentation style of the confederate

Men vs. Women?

- Male and female students predicted how a female target would respond in a fat talk dialogue
- Both male and female participants believed:
 - The target would respond by engaging in fat talk
 - That this would increase her likeability among the group
 - That **women** would find the target more likeable when she engaged in fat talk, but that **men** would find her more attractive if she presented positive body image

Social Likeability Study

- Participants watched “Jenny” interact in a conversation with other women where fat talk was taking place
- Researchers hypothesized that “Jenny” would be least liked when she responded to fat talk with positive body talk, and most liked when she participated in negative body talk.
- Participants felt Jenny was most likeable when she did not conform and responded with positive body talk
- Participants thought the other women in the group would like her more if she conformed and engaged in fat talk

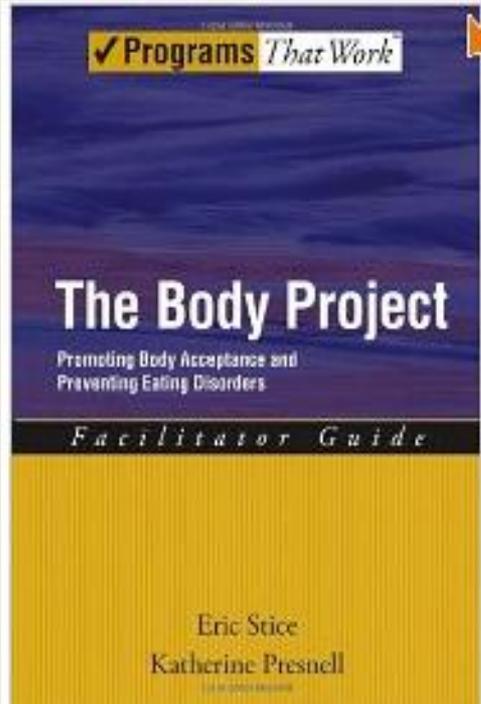
A close-up photograph of the back of a light blue t-shirt. The shirt has a quote printed in a black, typewriter-style font. The quote is: "If you talked to your friends the way you talk to your body, you'd have no friends left." Below the quote, the name "-Marcia Hutchinson" is printed in the same font. The background is slightly out of focus, showing what appears to be a wooden chair and a wall.

"If you talked to your friends
the way you talk to your body,
you'd have no friends left."

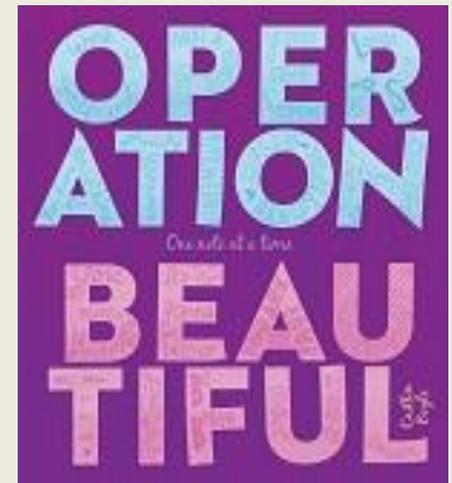
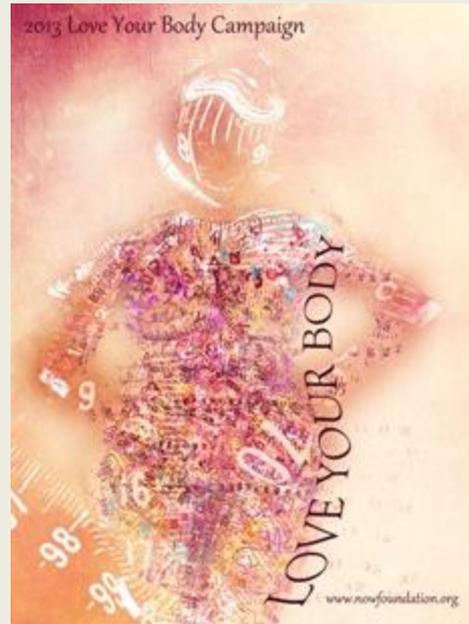
-Marcia Hutchinson

So what can we do about it?

Key Curricula



Key Campaigns



Fat shaming leads to weight gain

- 'Fat shaming' actually increases risk of becoming or staying obese, new study says

Melissa Dahl, NBC News July 26, 2013

The Body Project

- Dissonance-based
- Recruits young women with elevated body dissatisfaction
- Facilitators may be mental health clinicians, educators, school nurses
- “Currently the only available eating disorders prevention program that has been shown to reduce risk for onset of eating disorders”

Reflections Body Image Program

- Developed by Tri Delts
 - a body image education program
 - an eating disorders education and prevention program
 - a self-esteem development program
 - **Implementation**

Reflections is currently implemented in and among Tri Delta collegiate chapters. All chapters receive individualized information regarding implementation with their members.

Fat Talk Free Week

- *FTFW* is the first and only high-profile, national campaign to address fat talk.
- Designated for a week in mid-October, the program encourages participants to sign a pledge that they will “end fat talk” in their conversations with friends, family, and one’s self, and that they will strive for a healthy ideal rather than the thin-ideal (Tri Delta CLLL, n.d.a).

Operation Beautiful

- A low profile campaign, founded by night school student Caitlyn Boyle of Charlotte, N.C., in 2009 (Weich, 2012).
- The project's mission is to end fat talk.
- The behavior change component is to encourage participants to write inspirational or kind messages on Post-It notes and leave them anonymously in bathrooms and other places for women to find.

Love Your Body

National Organization for Women (NOW)

- The NOW campaign designates a day in October as *Love Your Body Day*. Their website offers numerous ideas for events and programming on college campuses, including panels, movie nights, art shows, rallies, and a *Love Your Body Day* fashion show (National Organization for Women, n.d.).
- The goal of the *Love Your Body* campaign seems to be raising awareness of body image disturbance and the media's role in promoting the thin-ideal, rather than changing behavior around fat talk.

Body positive campaigns working?

- A competing norm to express body satisfaction may be preexisting or emerging among young women
- New research suggests that women have less positive views of other women who engage in fat talk





Negative Self Talk

- Starting to notice the pattern in other areas:
 - “Age talk”
 - “Health talk”
 - Really, negative self talk patterns can occur around we can feel guilty about or “not good enough” at.
- Can be silent or internal



UnHealth Talk

My Task:

- Create an original social marketing campaign to address fat talk and reduce body image disturbance that speaks to the unique experience of female students at MIT



Methods

- 3 Expert Interviews with MIT Staff
- 1 Focus group with 6 students
- 4 Student phone interviews

Results

- Students hate the term “fat talk”
- Students perceive the prevalence of fat talk at MIT to be lower than average
- Students believe fat talk helps motivate them to lose weight/exercise

Perfectionism

- Perfectionism is part of the culture at MIT
- Students need to be perfect in all aspects of their lives
- “Suffer in silence”; asking for help is tantamount to admitting failure



Stereotypes

- Caught in the “pretty” vs. “smart” false dichotomy
- Judged for putting too much effort into their appearance; judged for putting too little effort into their appearance
- isawyou.mit.edu website

“Third Person Effect”

- Students are well educated and highly analytical
- Aware of body image disturbance; understand that they should reject the thin-ideal
- Therefore, students feel they should be “above it”
- Admitting they struggle with body image is shameful

unHealth Talk

(noun):

Self-disparaging thoughts, statements, and conversations about body image, eating and exercise habits, stress, studying, and stereotypes.

Strategy:

- Persuade students to replace unhealth talk with positive health and body talk
- Why?
 - It will make you *feel better*.
- Because?
 - It will help you focus on what you are accomplishing rather than what you are unable to accomplish
 - It will help you focus on positive, health-based reasons to eat healthy and exercise rather than negative, appearance-based reasons
 - It will provide a more effective source of motivation to engage in healthy behaviors

Message Concept 1

~~I need to get to the gym because I need to lose 10 lbs.~~
I want to go to the gym because working out makes me feel
good.

unHealth Talk = unHealthy

Speak smarter. Feel better.

Message Concept 2

~~I only studied for two hours last night.~~

I got two hours of studying done AND hung out with my friends last night!

~~un~~Health Talk = ~~un~~Productive

Speak smarter. Feel better.

Message Concept 3

~~I saw you today in class. You're too cute to be at MIT.~~

I saw you today in class. You're as smart as you are cute.

~~un~~Health Talk = ~~un~~Kind

Speak smarter. Feel better.

Tactics: Print Media

- Posters featuring campaign message concepts
- Fact Sheet
- Take What You Need flyer



Tactics: Events

- unHealth Talk Free Study Breaks
- unHealth Talk Free Dinners
- Bash unHealth Talk



Tactic: Web-Based

- Facebook page
- Social media initiatives, including “Hack iSawYou.mit.edu”



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Fat Talk Bingo

I shouldn't eat this.	I am definitely going to the gym today.	You look great, have you lost weight?	My diet starts tomorrow.	I need to lose 10 lbs.
She should not be wearing those leggings.	I need to watch what I eat.	My arms are so flabby.	This chocolate bar is evil.	Shut up, you're so thin!
Today is my "cheat" day.	This is going straight to my butt.	BINGO	Does this make me look fat?	I'm so fat.
I don't normally eat this, but I worked out for like two hours today.	I haven't worked out all week, I'm such a fatass.	I need to lose weight to fit into my dress.	I hate my thighs.	Are you sure? That has a lot of carbs.
You're so thin!	She needs to go on a diet.	You think you're fat? Look at me!	Ugh, look at these fat rolls.	You look great. <i>I'm</i> the one who's fat.