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the HAES® files: I Am No Shadow

BY HEALTH AT EVERY SIZE® BLOG

by Stacey Nye, PhD, FAED

“It looks like you have lost weight”.

I hear this periodically. It’s always said with a big smile, some knowing head nods, and usually a “you look great!” attached to the end.

It makes me so uncomfortable.

I know, it’s almost universally said as a compliment. This is how most people in this thin-obsessed culture compliment each other.

But as an eating disorder therapist, I know how harmful these words can be. Oh sure, when I was yo-yo dieting through my teens, 20s and half my 30s, those words were magical. “It looks like you have lost weight” was better than hearing “you have won the lottery” or “you will live forever”. In fact, I recall what a sorority sister once said to me. I had dieted hard and lost a lot of weight during the summer of 1986 and we were back in school, standing in the bathroom together, looking in the mirror, when she said this:

You are a shadow of your former self”.

I remember thinking at the time that this might have been the greatest compliment I had ever received. But now, I am just creeped out by it. What does it even mean? According to The Free Dictionary, a shadow of one’s former self is a smaller, weaker, or less important form of someone or something. Why is this a good thing? Why would anyone want to be this? What the hell was wrong with me?

I started re-reading my college journals looking for answers. Amongst the lists of boys I had kissed, at least half of the journal entries contained critiques of my weight or goals for weight loss. I was certain that losing weight would result in love, happiness and acceptance, and there were numerous rather painful entries bemoaning my inability to lose weight and keep it off. I harshly blamed myself countless times for my lack of will power and self-control. I felt like a failure and feared I would never be loved. My entire identity and self-esteem were wrapped up in the way I looked, and specifically, my weight.

I wish I knew then what I know now, that dieting wasn’t a long-term solution for health or weight loss. I wish I knew then about the HAES® philosophy. It would have helped me to acceptance and respect all body shapes and sizes, eat for well-being based on hunger, satiety, nutritional needs, and pleasure, and engage in life-enhancing movement for health

and not appearance. But no, instead I clung to the promise of weight loss and all that I thought it could deliver, for many years thereafter, in fact.

Furthermore, what is wrong with our culture, when looking like a shadow is even a compliment? I remember the last time I complimented someone on their weight loss. It was at my wedding, 24 years ago. One of my father's business colleagues, John, was there looking very svelte. "Wow, John" I said, "You lost so much weight, you look great". He politely smiled, nodded and thanked me. He died 3 months later from AIDS. We didn't even know he was ill. I still wince at the memory, and at the thought that I was probably one of dozens who might have complimented him on his weight loss, when in fact he wasn't trying to lose weight at all. He was DYING.

I hope whoever is reading this never forgets this story, and never again makes a similar assumption about someone's weight and health. Instead, consider these points:

There's more to our appearance than weight. Beauty comes in all shapes, sizes and colors and everyone deserves to have a positive body image. Consider how personality, confidence and self-esteem contribute to attractiveness.

There's much more to us than our appearance. Acknowledging someone for his or her kindness, wit, career success or creativity will contribute to their identity as a whole person, not just an object to be looked at.

And finally, there are many ways to be healthy, including, but not limited to, good nutrition, regular physical activity, plenty of sleep, teeth brushing, wearing sunscreen, access to healthcare, etc. Being healthy takes time, effort and money, and it's no one's business but your own whether you choose to engage in healthy behaviors.

I'm not trying to be a Debbie Downer. And I love compliments as much as the next person. Next time, though, feel free to acknowledge how color coordinated I am, how artfully I have applied my eye makeup or arranged the six bracelets on my arm. Recognize that I am now able to walk long distances since my ankle surgery, create a beautiful photo book, or tell a great story. Praise me for my success at delivering an important speech, writing a thought provoking blog, or playing a killer game of Mahjong. This is who I am now. I'm no shadow.

Dr. Stacey Nye specializes in the field of eating disorders, body image, women's issues, depression and anxiety. She treats adults and adolescents using individual, family and group psychotherapy at her practice in Mequon, WI. She has written articles, book chapters, spoken at professional and community lectures, appeared on television and has more than 20 years of clinical experience in the field. Visit her website at www.nyepsychotherapy.com.