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Being the Fat Kid

“Baby Seal.” “Wario.” “Fatty.” At first, I wasn’t used to the comments. People would make fun of me and my reaction would be emotional and explosive. Eventually, though, I started pushing that down and began acting like I didn’t care, or that I thought they were funny. This led to many of my peers and friends thinking it was fine to constantly make jokes about my weight. Hey, look, I get it, joking around with your friends and making fun of each other can be fun, especially for adolescent friend groups (which very often revolve around putting each other down as a sign of trust and bonding). Kids and teens poke fun at each other’s insecurities, in this case body image, either because it’s an easy joke to make, or because they want to see their friend improve. Societal imaging, particularly popular media, portray being overweight as shameful and undesirable. However, it’s unacceptable to joke about my weight even if I didn’t react or just because I make fun of myself as a defense mechanism. Anytime I do speak out or even start crying, others claim I’m being a softy and can’t take a joke. Weight loss is an extremely difficult and emotional road to go down for many who attempt it, contrary to what some people will say.

I’ve had countless people give me nicknames based on my weight, and they thought it was acceptable because I didn’t have an emotional reaction. If they used even a little bit of empathy, they would realize that it isn’t okay. A specific instance that comes to mind is one kid

throughout middle school who had a nickname for me that he always called me, never even using my actual name. He always called me “pizza roll,” a nickname he thought was funny because I was “round and greasy, like a pizza roll.” He continued to do this because I never corrected him; I chuckled and moved on. In reality, my not correcting him had nothing to do with how I was actually feeling about the nickname, but instead was due to the fear of being socially outcast or criticized for standing up for myself. So, I dealt with it, despite it damaging my self-image and mental health for months and months. He had no clue that it had this effect on me because he never stopped to think about it, and I never stopped him from doing it. Additionally, nobody around ever stood up for me, which I didn’t consciously think about but it hurt me internally.

In other cases, I would have friends who made jokes about my body just because I made jokes about myself. Making fun of myself is a defense mechanism for my insecurity, and it is not a free pass for others to make fun of me. One of my managers at work was a close friend of mine for a long time. After some time of being friends, I once made a joke at my own expense, something along the lines of “I need to go on break soon, my fat ass needs to eat.” This opened the floodgates. Every day, every time I wanted to go on break, anytime I mentioned a food I liked. It always resulted in “BECAUSE YOU’RE... FAT?” It was to the point where I would avoid even interacting with him because it always ended the same way. He thought it was hilarious, however I did not. I made the initial joke at my own expense because I felt that it was how people perceived me any time I mentioned wanting to eat or taking a break from work. I made the joke in an effort to lighten the mood and “say what everyone was thinking” (or at least what I assumed they were) and he took it as permission to joke about my weight non-stop. Me voicing my insecurities to try and be funny is much less hurtful to me than a close friend preying

on said insecurities in an attempt to be funny. If a friend of yours is ever doing this, consider supporting them or discouraging them from speaking that way about themselves. Even if they seem alright, it hurts them inside.

Conversely, sometimes I do speak up for myself. This is frequently met with comments about how I “can’t take a joke” or am “too emotional.” A friend of mine in middle school would frequently make fun of my weight. Any time I spoke up or told him to stop because it was upsetting, he would tell me he was just joking and that I shouldn’t take him so seriously. He made comments several times a day, and it harmed my mental health. All I would do is ask that he stop mentioning my weight so much, as it was hurting my feelings. What did I get for confiding in my friend about my insecurity? Belittled, called oversensitive, and even called a crybaby at one point. It would take little to nothing for him to respect my request, dropping the jokes and finding something less harmful we could joke about. Instead, he elected to continually and knowingly disrespect me. Him making fun of me would make my chest hurt and make it hard to breathe. I would fight the urge to break down and start crying because I knew it would just lead to more insults, but I really wanted to just let go and cry. It was embarrassing too, there was almost always a small group we were talking with while he insulted me.

Perhaps the most common thing people have said, not just to me but in general, is that overweight people should just lose the weight, thinking “it can’t be that hard, right?” Wrong. There are many factors that contribute to someone being overweight, so I’ll start with diet. Growing up, my mom raised my brother and I on her own for a long time. Money was scarce, and she hardly had time to cook between all the hours she had to work to support us. Consequently, we found ourselves eating fast food quite frequently. McDonald’s happy meals were much cheaper and quicker than any healthy alternative. We simply couldn’t afford to eat

better. Another thing people argued to me about weight loss is that exercise is an easy habit to form. They seem to ignore the fact that the larger you are, the harder and more painful that work is. It's much easier to let the mental block get the better of you and just ignore the problem. One point I will concede is that once you do start exercising, it can be excellent for your mental health (although starting is the hardest part, and being told it will make you feel good isn't usually enough to get over that hurdle). Personally, weight loss has never been able to be a high priority in my life. Between growing up poor, moving frequently and having to start at new schools, and trying to graduate through the COVID-19 pandemic, my body weight and health had to sit on the back burner. Even if I had been motivated to attempt weight loss (which I never was), my circumstances would've made it more difficult than most people realize.

In short, many people think it's acceptable to make fun of me because I either don't respond or target myself. Neither reason makes targeting my insecurities acceptable. They argue that I should learn to take a joke, or just work to lose some weight. Slights being intended as "jokes" don't change the way they make me feel, and losing weight is much harder than most people think. Planning (and later writing) this essay has made me realize that I've never talked or wrote about my experiences being overweight before. Getting some of this out through this essay has definitely been therapeutic for me. The writing process has made me consider why people feel making fun of me is acceptable, and helped me think of ways to communicate to them why it isn't. Also, looking back on the way things were as I was growing up has made me feel much better about where I am now, and what I am doing actively to better myself. Insecurities. Everyone has them, whether they admit it or not. Take some time to consider that next time you think about making a "harmless" joke at someone else's expense.