

## Quotations on Body Image

Quotations from life stories related to body image  
shared by adults in rural Idaho, Montana, and Wyoming  
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[www.uwyo.edu/wintherockies](http://www.uwyo.edu/wintherockies)



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Quotations collected from one-on-one interviews and focus groups conducted in Lewistown, Montana; Preston, Idaho; and Powell, Wyoming; March/April 2002

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Wellness IN the Rockies (WIN the Rockies) is a community-based research, intervention and outreach project that seeks to improve people's health in Idaho, Montana and Wyoming. The philosophy of the project is that people have responsibility for their own health, but communities have responsibility for helping create environments that foster good health and provide healthy options.

The qualitative research phase of the project included the collection of narratives or life stories related to physical activity, food and eating, and body image from 103 adults in three rural communities. The interview team conducted 56 one-on-one interviews with 29 women and 27 men, and six focus groups with 28 women and 19 men. Interviewees ranged in age from 17 to nearly 90 years. The interviews and focus groups were recorded on cassette tapes, which were then transcribed. Over 55 hours of conversations were recorded, resulting in almost 2300 pages of transcripts. From the transcripts, the research team highlighted 1680 quotations that were then grouped and coded into 146 categories.

Our purpose in gathering the narratives was to elicit experiences that illustrate the challenges people have faced, the successes they have achieved, and the insights they have gained related to physical activity, food and eating, and body image. Our goal is for these stories to guide future educational efforts and help make these efforts more meaningful and relevant. We hope to help people make lasting changes to improve their health.

## **Satisfaction**

“I’m at peace with [my weight]. I don’t own a scale. . . . And I think that when I let go of worrying about what everybody *else* thought, *that’s* when I realized, ‘I’m an okay person, I don’t have to be skinny.’ I’m healthy, and . . . I’m at *peace* with that.” *Female, late 40’s*

“I feel blessed to be able to stand up and look in the mirror and have [a body that] functions and I think it’s great. I have a good loving family, friends. What [more] could you want?”

*Male in his 50’s*



## **Dissatisfaction**

“I think all of us have a kind of an ideal of what we think that perfect body should look like, and we can mirror that on what we currently look like and feel bad about it. I think that in every case, you feel bad about it. . . . I don’t think anybody believes they look like what they should.”

*Male in his 50’s*

“I just feel bad about myself when I can’t take my weight off.” *Female in her 60’s*

## **Struggles**

“I was just thinking how incredible it is that [all women] have the same kind of insecurities [about our bodies]. . . . We may *look* different, but it’s the same *feelings* that we have, the same heartaches and trials.” *Female, 40ish*

“I stand before the mirror and say ‘this is ridiculous, you look like a walrus.’ . . . But on the other hand, . . . [A friend is] going to be my friend no matter what I look like.” *Male in his 70’s*

## **Perception of appearance**

“I guess it’s a human characteristic if you walk past a big plate glass window, you’re eyeballing yourself and checking out . . . what other people see – finding yourself sucking your gut in and trying to make yourself look decent.” *Male, mid 50’s*

“I’ve lost almost 25 pounds now, . . . and I still look in the mirror and I still see the same person. . . . I still see me as being obese. Actually, I think I’ve always seen myself as obese. I look back and I see my pictures and I think, ‘Wow, I was so thin!’ But if I think about what I thought at the time, I thought I was fat.” *Female in her 20’s*

“I’m unique looking. Every time people see me, babies cry. . . . [Being fat] is one of the most unattractive things in our culture. . . . I was never beautiful by any stretch of the imagination. I’m just a fat guy. . . . I don’t know if it was because I was heavier or what, but . . . I became a loner. Then the overweight thing got worse. . . . But I don’t consider myself unhappy. And I don’t remember ever being unhappy. . . . Just sitting home watching TV, that’s how I spent most of my adolescent years. . . . I was just living in my own little fantasy world.” *Male, 30’s to 40’s*

### **Hinders activities**

“I know I have to get my weight *down* again . . . so that I am comfortable even just walking down the block, with the cars driving by. . . . But it’s a little scary when you’re that heavy. . . . I let my weight get so out of hand, that it’s kept me from a lot of things and it’s got to change.”

*Female in her 30's*

“There’s certain things I can’t do because of my weight. . . . I have a rough time . . . getting up on roofs . . . so my [kids] have kind of helped me out with some of those things, which makes me feel bad too. [It] makes you feel handicapped, and I don’t want to feel that way.” *Male in his 40's*

### **How viewed by others**

“Sometimes I feel that I’m the recipient of *that look*. That’s all it ever is. It’s just a look. People are far too polite to say ‘*Hey, can you go drop some pounds, fatso?*’ . . . That is a pretty painful look to get . . . especially having dealt it out.” *Male, mid 30's*

“I always claim that when you become heavy, you become invisible. You go in a room and you want to be social with people, [but] . . . you can’t because of [your] size. . . . You totally become invisible.” *Male in his 40's*

“You spend your whole day thinking, ‘I’m overweight.’ But I look at other women that are overweight and I think, ‘How do I look to other people?’ I am so tired of thinking, ‘How do I look to other people?’ ” *Female in her 40's*

### **Comparison to others**

“Every time you see somebody, you have some kind of a mental battle with yourself. . . . We’re always passing judgment in our minds, whether we share it or not.” *Male, early 40's*

“One time . . . my [daughter] said something about that I was the fattest lady in our [church], and I thought, ‘*no way*’ and then I thought, ‘*Let’s see, who is fatter than me?*’ And there weren’t very many possibilities. And that kind of downed me a little.” *Female, mid 40's*

“I think as heavy as I am, I notice people that are *heavier* than me and I think it’s because it puts the fear in me of where I could be. I know I’m over the edge now, but this isn’t as big as I can stretch.” *Female in her 30's*



### **Thin**

“My little sister . . . had such a hard time in middle school. She’s *really* tall and skinny . . . and the boys thought she was an Ethiopian because she was so skinny. And I’d never really thought of how hard it must be to be *skinny*. I mean, everyone knows that it’s pretty hard to be larger, but I’d never really thought about how hard it was to be skinny.” *Female, early 20's*

“I get tired of hearing these women that are [skinny] telling me how fat they are, and how they need to lose weight. That’s very frustrating and I sometimes think it’s a slap in the face. And then I stop and think that they’re probably wrapped up in themselves. But it’s very frustrating to hear that.” *Female, early 40's*

## **Heavy**

“When you see a fat person, your first impression is they’re just kind of an unattractive loser. . . . When I see a fat person, I look down my fat nose at him or her.” *Male, late 30's*

“Size is not relevant to me. A woman can be appealing no matter what her physical stature. It depends on attitude, attitude, and attitude. . . . You can marry a beauty and she can be a real h---cat as far as making life miserable, or you can marry someone that’s 400 pounds and she can make life real enjoyable. Which would you rather be married to?” *Male in his 60's*

“I know that bodies do make a difference . . . [on] how people accept you. . . . An extra heavy person . . . [tries] to do something and you can see it by the look in people’s eyes or their body language, that they sometimes just don’t listen to that person. [Heavy individuals] don’t have as much influence.” *Female, late 60's*

## **Short/Tall**

“I’ve known some men that I think have complexes because they’re too short. So I suppose that’s their issue, rather than the weight, it’s the height.” *Female, mid 30's*

“I forget how short I am until somebody reminds me.” *Male, 30ish*



## **Acceptance**

“If I can’t accept [my friends] because they’re big, then it’s just like them not accepting me . . . because of being *thin*.” *Female, late 20's*

“I have [known] people that were absolutely [physically] beautiful that I really didn’t want to associate with . . . and other [heavy] people [who were] genuinely true sincere people. So, I mean the quality of their character meant more to me than their physical appearance.” *Male in his 50's*

“I really don’t have time to judge people. I have too much to do.” *Male, almost 50*

## **Pity/Sympathy/Compassion**

“Friends who are larger than me, I pray for their health and to protect them from the comments and the stares.” *Female, early 40's*

“I guess I have compassion for the real skinny and the real fat. The rest of us, in the middle, you got that bell shaped curved thing. . . . But when you get people who are pencil thin or hay-stack large, I kind of wonder if it’s bothering them just a little bit. . . . If it bothers them, I feel for them. If it doesn’t, well, they’re as hard-headed as I am, so they deserve themselves.” *Male, 70ish*

“I love people of all sizes. My best friend . . . has got to be 400 pounds and I feel so bad for her. . . . I don’t look down on people, but I just feel sad. And I think that for the grace of God go I. . . . [Being heavy] cuts down your opportunities.” *Female, early 60's*

## **Nonacceptance**

“I never really put together why body fat bothers me, but it does. That is just honest. [My body fat] or anybody else’s, it just kind of disgusts me. I don’t know why.” *Male, early 40's*

“[Heavy people] kind of turn me off if they’re really, really obese. . . . I don’t want to know them. I don’t want to know who they are, or anything about them.” *Female, late 70’s*

### **How others present self**

“I have this friend that’s heavier set, but she is absolutely gorgeous, absolutely beautiful hair, beautiful make-up, beautiful nails. And I always look like an orphan child. . . . But I truly admire people who are heavier who still take care of themselves instead of putting on that, ‘Oh, I’m big so I’m just going to look frumpy.’ ” *Female, late 20’s*

“I read people really well and I’m almost always right. It’s not an ego. It’s just a lot of practice. I could think of one person here in town who is really heavy. But it’s his attitude that stinks. I know some other people that I guess people classify as heavy. They’re wonderful people.”

*Male, late 50’s*

### **Stereotypes**

“I know a teacher that lost a lot of weight and she said the best evaluation she’s ever gotten was when she was [thinner], because she gained the weight back. . . . The only thing that really changed was the size of her body . . . . So you can’t *tell* me that [size] doesn’t *matter*. Because it does.” *Female in her 30’s*

### **Race/Ethnicity**

“I think [fat acceptance is] harder in white communities because we feel like we have to look more like the super models. . . . Because I was watching one movie, . . . and there was a big black lady there, and . . . she knew that she was really sexy even though she was fat and big. [Large black women] just know they’re sexy, and I thought, ‘Well we need to be like that too.’ And so just watching that movie made me think ‘I can still be [sexy].’ ” *Female, mid 40’s*

### **Weight/Size/Shape**

“It seems to me the more I think about [losing weight], the more I gain.” *Female, mid 70’s*

“I *hate* being overweight. Absolutely hate it. I don’t like it when my pants are tight. . . . And it drives me nuts . . . . I think about it every day. I think about it constantly. And my wife says ‘Don’t worry about it.’ [But] I do worry about it.” *Male, 30’s to 40’s*

“It’s always been a real *issue* in [my mom’s] family to be slender, and . . . I came to the point where I just got *tired* of hearing that.” *Female, mid 20’s*



### **Battle to control**

“I never liked my body. . . . Never been able to get it to where I was happy with it. Even when I was young . . . and in really good shape. . . . But even at that, I still didn’t like, never have liked, my body. Always felt it was too big. . . . I started dieting when I weighed 250, and I dieted myself up to 350.” *Male in his 60’s*

“Probably all my life I’ve struggled with weight . . . and/or gained weight, and/or lost it for years. It was probably the yo-yo.” *Female, 50ish*

## **Dieting**

“People say they’re going on this diet and then they’ll really be slim. And then next time when you see them, they’re all fat again.” *Female, late 70's*

“I am an addict when it comes to *everything*. . . . I go all or nothing. When I was on drugs, I got pretty skinny. . . . And then I quit doing drugs, and food became my addiction. . . . I put on *a lot* of weight . . . . Then I met this girl . . . who used to be really heavy, and she looked *great* . . . and I wanted what she had. So she started me on this [diet] program and *that* became my addiction.”  
*Female, late 20's*

## **Smoking**

“[My friend] smokes like a chimney . . . because she’s so afraid of gaining weight. I keep trying to get her to quit smoking. [She says], ‘I would rather be dying of lung cancer and be skinny. . . .’ And [the fear of gaining weight] petrifies her.” *Female, mid 30's*

“I’ve smoked for 35 years. My doctor forced me to quit 10 years ago due to my health problems. After I quit smoking, I gained a lot of weight.” *Female in her 60's*

“[When I see a slender person, I] look for the underlying fact. Do they smoke all the time and not eat? . . . [My mother-in-law] never eats and she smokes all the time.” *Female, late 20's*

## **Teasing/Criticism**

“I have a younger brother. . . . He would eat five times the amount of food that I did. . . . And he’s still not heavy. . . . I remember going to a church meeting one day when I was a kid and the . . . lady turned around and looked at my mother . . . and said, ‘*What do you do, starve one and feed the other one?*’ ” *Male in his 60's*

“I went through that awkward stage where I was just legs and arms and neck and nose. . . . [The boys] used to call me turkey, and they would gobble when I would get on the bus. But you know what? It really didn’t matter. . . . I *would* get a little fed up with nose jokes.” *Female, mid to late 40's*

“Being fat turned me into a *b----*. I was the *niciest* kid that you’ll ever meet in your life, *I was*. . . . I loved everybody. . . . I started putting on weight, and I started getting *teased*, . . . [teasing] turned me *mean*.” *Female, late 20's*

“Nowadays, I don’t care if somebody calls me fat. . . . But as a kid, it was a traumatic experience . . . . I’ve been teased about my size my whole life. [People] used to ask me if I got my suits at . . . Tent and Awning.” *Male in his 60's*



## **Praise/Verbal support**

“[My husband] is so wonderful to me. And the first time he told me that I was beautiful I was like, . . . ‘I’m not, . . . how can you say that?’ And he goes, ‘To me you *are* beautiful, and I love *you*, and I hope someday you will learn, because you love *me*, to trust what I say.’ . . . I know he loves me, and . . . he *treats* me with respect all day long.” *Female, 40ish*

“If you perceive yourself as having a bad body type, that can be hard on your self-image. So, I think that’s something that I will pass onto my kids. To make sure that they’re confident in who they are, no matter what their body type is.” *Male in his 30's*

## **Family/Parents**

“[When it comes to my large body size], I’ve always felt like I came from that kind of background and that kind of family and it was just going to be that way. That I guess, maybe I didn’t have a lot of control over it. And the teasing just became more of a fact of life.” *Female in her 30’s*

“I think the women in my family have affected the way that I think about myself. . . . They have never been happy with their bodies and so I’m constantly confused. What is wrong with my body? And so I look at myself in the mirror in the morning, and I feel like I should change this . . . or I should change that.” *Female, early 20’s*

## **Peers/Friends**

“In junior high, you kind of compare yourself with other kids. ‘This person’s bigger and more muscular, or taller than me.’ And . . . there’s a lot of that at that age. There’s a lot of judging. You judge who you are by your peers.” *Male in his 30’s*

“I was never overweight in high school, but I had a friend who was. . . . [My friend] was really obsessed with not ever being fat again. . . . She would talk about it all the time. Even now when I see her, she’s like, ‘Oh I’ve gained a few pounds.’ And with my other friends, we don’t even go there. We don’t even talk about weight.” *Female, mid 30’s*

## **Age**

“I graduated as a 98-pound senior. . . . Even after I was married for a long time, my wife was frustrated because I wasn’t putting on any weight. Once I reached about 38 years old, it’s just kind of like she put glue in all the food, because it was sticking to me.” *Male, early 50’s*

“At this age, . . . everything’s starting to go south, . . . including the face. [I have] the ol’ flabby things under the arms. Everything’s just kind of going south. But heck, I’ve earned it. I don’t mind it.” *Female, late 40’s*



## **Gender**

“I think you are finding the normal psychological profile of males. You know, at [age] sixty-two, with a forty-two [inch] waist and thirty-eight [inch] chest, a guy can walk down the street with his bald head and think he’s looking good. You ask any woman if she gets just a half a pound past a size six, ‘Oh I’m fat, I’m fat!’ ” *Male, 70ish*

“I don’t think that men that are overweight are looked at [negatively] near as much as women are. . . . But honestly, sometimes [men] also seem a lot happier. . . . They don’t seem to have near the self-image problems that women do.” *Female, mid 30’s*

## **Genetics**

“I am a firm believer that so much of whether we are thin or fat is a genetic thing. I follow somewhat in [my Dad’s] footsteps. I’ve always been able to eat anything that I’ve wanted and never had any weight trouble.” *Male, almost 60*

“I have a sister that’s like a bean pole . . . . And it just irritates me. I mean, . . . she cannot gain a pound if her life depended on it. Then there’s *me*. I have to watch what I eat ’cause man, I can just put [weight] on. . . . It’s genetic. It’s irritating.” *Female, late 20’s to early 30’s*

## **Having children**

“I guess I’m probably more conscientious [about my weight] now ever since I’ve had children, just because of . . . the example that I set every day for them.” *Female in her 30's*

“I’ve had [multiple pregnancies] and it seems like every child I’ve had has added pounds on me, and I haven’t been able to take them off.” *Female, mid 40's*



## **Media/Society**

“They project images . . . on TV that show a guy that’s got wash-board abs and pecs to die [for], and a woman that’s a size . . . three with ample breasts . . . and everything is perfect, and so you think ‘Well, this is the way I’m supposed to be. Why do I look the way I do?’ I really think that generates a lot of mental unrest in a lot of people trying to get to that level of perfection. . . but it’s not going to be obtainable for some of us common folk.” *Male, mid 50's*

“On TV, they’re always talking about . . . you have to be physically beautiful. You can be as dumb as a post, but you have to be physically beautiful . . . I’m just more amused by it, because I know that’s superficial.” *Male, late 30's*

“Advertising and media . . . does impact the way we think about others, . . . [and] the way we think about ourselves. It makes a big difference. That is why they do it. That's why they'll pay a million dollars for an ad in the Super Bowl. You know, it makes a difference.” *Female, late 30's*

## **Other Environmental**

“I have a [female relative by marriage]. She is a trophy. She’s gorgeous. And she’s had lots of things done. She’s half my age and she’s had things put back in place. . . . But to talk to her, I cannot hardly carry a conversation with her. . . . It’s just so *about her*.” *Female in her 30's*

“I have this big friend and I [think] *how does she fit in chairs* at places like theaters . . . and airlines? . . . And I thought, . . . we are being wheelchair adaptable, maybe we need to be fat adaptable and have things more accessible.” *Female, mid 40's*

## **Medical**

“Medical professionals can be so insensitive to a person with weight problems. . . . He wrote ‘obesity’ in my chart even though I’d lost 40 pounds. These aren’t tears of sadness, they’re tears of anger. I got a different doctor.” *Female, early 40's*

“You stop going to the doctor because you know what they are going to say every time you go, and you still gain weight.” *Female 30's to 40's*

“You go in for that annual physical thing . . . and [the doctor] gets a little ugly with you and says ‘I’m going to force you to do this’ and I think to myself, ‘I don’t know how you can force anyone to do anything unless you lock them in a room and chain them to the wall.’ ” *Male, mid 50's*

## **Mental health/Emotions/Feelings**

“Body image is tough because it goes beyond just how [you] look, it goes into how [you] feel.”

*Male, early 40's*

“One thing that has always been fascinating to me is the psychology that takes place when you lose a bunch of weight rapidly. When I was about 13, . . . a doctor prescribed amphetamines for me. And I lost 45 pounds. . . . But I found that I got angry at the positive attention that I got because I thought, ‘I’m the same person inside I was before. How come you’re being so nice to me and giving me all this positive attention because I have shed some pounds?’ And I had a hard time not letting that [anger] control my emotional behavior.” *Female, 60ish*

“Sometimes when I look in the mirror, I still see the woman that was 250 pounds, even though I am much less than that . . . And I realize that weight loss is as much of a *mental* exercise as it is a physical exercise, in changing how we feel about ourselves.” *Female, early 40's*

### **Happiness**

“I’ve got pictures of [me at] all sizes and I did look better when I was slimmer, [but] I can’t say that I was a happier person.” *Female, early 60's*

“[My sister is] so skinny and she’s still not happy with herself. Why am I even trying? I will never be that thin. But she’s not happy and she is that thin. . . . So I tied being thin and being skinny with self-fulfillment and that you’ll be popular and . . . the world’s . . . laying at your feet, just because you’re skinny. . . . Thin doesn’t equal happiness.” *Female, early 40's*

### **Changes in perception**

“At 25, would I look at somebody who was my size with disgust? You bet. At 35 plus, that view is much different. Now I can look at somebody and say ‘D---, you got a lot of crap going on in your life.’ . . . Being on the receiving end of the big guy story, I see things much differently now.”

*Male, mid 30's*

“As I’ve gotten older, [body type] kind of seems irrelevant anymore. It’s not my goal to be Mr. Universe. I don’t care as much. . . . My wife and my kids are what are important. I don’t really focus on me as much I guess.” *Male in his 30's*



### **Weight as a shield**

“So, when I start losing weight, and all of a sudden men start flirting with me . . . *I am so uncomfortable*. . . . And sometimes the weight is *comfortable*. It’s a good shield to have between yourself and other people.” *Female, early 40's*

“When I was thin, I was, for the lack of a better term, *hit on* a lot . . . . I wasn’t any great goddess. . . . I’ve been a pretty open person and . . . perhaps this was misinterpreted. . . . I think I thought what I need to do is make myself less attractive, [so I started gaining weight].” *Female, mid to late 40's*

### **Search for mate**

“About [the] single issue. . . . I give thanks for the fact that I get the rewards from [my work]. . . . And I’m achieving, . . . but I [don’t] have a boyfriend or the husband who appreciates me. . . . So when people think, ‘Well, I’m big, I’m never going to get somebody,’ you know what? I’m thin and I’m not getting anyone either. And it’s hard.” *Female, late 20's*

“As I looked for a mate, . . . body shape and composition was very important to me. And that’s just brutally honest.” *Male, almost 50*

## **Health/Wellness**

“You can see me, I’m quite a bit overweight. I know I need to do something. I want to be around to see my grand kids.” *Male in his 40's*

“I am paying big money every week to go to this meeting [to lose weight]. I was really starting to feel the weight. It wasn’t so much feeling uncomfortable with myself, as the way I felt. The shortness of breath . . . and some different things that. . . And, and I think different bodies react differently. But mine is not comfortable being so overweight. And it was screaming at me to do something.” *Female in her 30's*

