

“Any Questions?” Podcast Transcript

Episode _ : Body Neutrality

[Jazzy Instrumental Intro Music]

Breannah: Welcome to this episode of the Any Questions Podcast. I’m Breannah, my pronouns are she/her and I am a peer leader through HPWS.

Leah: I’m Leah, my pronouns are she/her and I am a peer leader through HPWS.

Breannah: And as a quick disclaimer to both Leah and the Any Questions Listeners, this podcast was recorded during the COVID-19 Pandemic and as such was recorded over Zoom and my kitten who currently has separation anxiety due to being raised during quarantine does not appreciate it. So if you hear a random meow throughout the episode, he just wants to make his presence known.

Leah: Today we will be diving into a lot of the controversies with the current body positivity movement, acknowledging the intersections between culture, representation, and language that define the current movement.

Breannah: Our goal for this conversation is to shed light around why the term body positivity has gotten pushback, as well as to introduce you to the idea of body neutrality, which reinforces the idea of coming to terms with and accepting oneself despite what the rest of the world’s expectations.

First we would like to touch on the differences in culture as it relates to body image.

Leah: Since the 1960s thinness has been emphasized in American culture, however body image and beauty standards differs between different cultures.

Models typically are a size 2 while the average American woman size is a 16.

Breannah: A lot of brands, like Aerie, have included more POC models in their campaigns, but they usually stop here with their inclusivity. If they do include anyone in their campaign over size 16 or 18, it’s usually only one or two models and never the majority even though the average size for American women is a 16!

Leah: For American women, particularly white Americans, thinness is typically the ideal - even in an era where we are starting to see American society value “curvy” bodies, they only seem to value curvy bodies that have a tiny waist and flat stomach.

Breannah: For many cultures and races such as many black, LatinX, or Pacific Islander communities, a curvy and full figured body type may be more valued due to being seen as a sign of fertility and womanhood.

For East Asian women thinner bodies are more endorsed unassociated with the America ideals of thinness. It’s important to note that Asian American is typically used to refer to individuals of East Asian descent.

Leah: This can also be seen in the rise of fast fashion, with places like SHEIN. You may have to upsize in many styles due to it being in Asian sizes - these typically run smaller than the average American size.

Breannah: Studies have found that no matter an individual's culture, what matters more when it comes to body image is the economic background of the individual - not culture. While different cultures have different body ideals, issues with body image occur more frequently in more "affluent" countries

Leah: There is still a slight difference in body image however, and that's where individuals feel the most pressure about their body size and shape. White individuals feel a lot more pressure from social media and their peers while black and Latinx folks experience a lot more pressure stemming from their families to conform to their culture's body standards. However social media and peers are still modes in which most cultures feel pressure about their bodies.

Breannah: The body positivity movement has been incredibly white washed which conflicts with the different body ideals between cultures. If BIPOC are only seeing white beauty standards and white individuals in media this could negatively affect their body image

Leah: Also for cultures where thinness isn't valued, only seeing white body ideals in the media can be incredibly jarring - their culture is telling them one body type is preferred while the media is saying something different. Especially if they feel they fit neither body type it can be incredibly disheartening.

Breannah: Our society has regarded white femmes as the "standard" for beauty while society prohibits darker skin femmes from being able to celebrate their bodies as freely. For example, Lizzo was heavily criticized and dehumanized for being confident in her skin while the Kardashian sisters are praised for their curves.

Leah: While many of the Kardashians had curvy bodies to begin with, their surgical enhancements have co-opted traditionally black features which darker/poorer women have historically been shamed for.

Breannah: And while we are on the topic of culture, body and preference this is a great moment for us to address black bodies and how they are regarded. History has affected the representation as well as the perception of Black people, especially in America. From cultural to current events, to what we have read in our textbooks growing up, we have not always seen Black people represented to their full capacity as human beings.

Leah: To understand the perception of Black people in America we first must acknowledge the ongoing affects slavery continues to have. During slavery, Black people were not seen as human beings but rather as commodities to be bought, sold and exploited, sexually and for labor. (Mary Elliot NY Tribune) Even in textbooks, we learn about the contribution of black people in the form of slavery and their economic impact during that point in time in American History, but often times overlook the contributions that were made in aiding to build the America we know today.

Breannah: In the case of the body positivity movement, there is a general consensus that black women started the modern movement, but there is little information available regarding who these women were. Because of this, the history of the modern body positivity movement has been extremely white-washed, and often is accredited to two white cisgender men. Even during the current movement where we have seen a rise in the movement's presence on social media, Gabi Gregg (@GabiFresh, a fat Black woman) is often credited as the original creator of the social media body positivity movement, but her name is not as well-known unless you do extensive research. Instead, the faces of the current body positivity movement on social media

pretty much all consist of white women, further contributing to the erasure of Black femmes as founders of the movement.

Leah: Although white women are the face of the body positivity movement, black bodies are seen and used in other ways.

One way this occurs is through the oversexualization of black bodies. Black men Black women are often times regarded as sexual objects at the hands of the media, and especially in the sex industry where Black women are payed less than other women for the same work, which was thoroughly discussed in an npr article with sex educator Herbert Samuels . Also stereotypes and the overrepresentation of physical features for black men such as phallus size and voluptuousness for black women, perpetuates the notion that black men and women are objects of pleasure. It also causes body dysmorphia for black individuals who do not fit these body standards, especially during puberty.

Breannah: And that isn't the only part of society where Black bodies are used as viewing pleasure, sports can be seen as the biggest area of opportunity where Black excellence is recognized and appreciated. And while Sports brings together all races during times of good and bad, and African Americans are the majority sports players in American popular sports such as basketball and football, sports can also objectify Black sports players. In general, the body positivity movement often centers athletic and muscular build as the "example" body type. This is a stereotype that is especially upheld for Black individuals. First it is important to acknowledge not all Black people are athletically gifted or athletically built. Outside of stereotypes that black people have been given such as heightened athleticism or a different genetic and musculature makeup that makes Black people more prone to athletic success, people also tend to overlook a person's race and their experiences due to the fact they are athletically gifted. This in turn reinforces the idea of accepting their athletic impact without accepting the person them self.

Leah: For example athletic women such as Serena Williams are accepted for their athletic ability as being one of the greatest tennis players of all time but in the same hand is criticized for her body, often times comparing it to that of a man. However, it is her body, muscles and strength that has allowed her to be as successful as she is. The body neutrality movement calls attention to the diverse bodies of all men and women, and acknowledges and respects the various bodies of black men and women that allow them to function in this world.

Breannah: Finally the prison system is another place where black bodies are highly represented, and also where next to free labor occurs. Some individuals who are imprisoned are there on petty crimes, but due to laws such as the three strike rule, may be there for life. The prison industrial system generates millions of dollars in revenue off the labor of prisoners and has been compared to modern day slavery. Being treated as only having value in your ability to perform physical labor is similar to being treated as only having value in your physical attractiveness, and that is antithetical to the idea of body neutrality.

Leah: Often times the perception of Black people and their purpose in society may affect Black people's perception of themselves. The idea of body neutrality reinforces the idea of coming to terms with and accepting oneself despite what the rest of the world sees, as well as creating a call to action for others to begin to work to change their perception of what a person is supposed to be and look like.

Now stepping away from culture we would like to address how the body positivity movement has unintentionally excluded folks who are not cis or abled bodied, through language.

Breannah: Body positivity and body image are not exclusive to just weight, transgender folks, or folks whose gender identity does not match their sex assigned at birth, and disabled bodies may experience negative body image and stigma due to their bodies.

I cannot speak for Leah in this regard but mentioning that as a cisgender and able-bodied person I am not speaking from experience here but got research from opinion pieces online written by trans and disabled individuals* particularly from the mouths of Sam Dylan Finch, a Trans Psychologist, and by an anonymous writer at Self.com under the pseudonym Your Fat Friend, who speaks on how they find the body positivity movement ableist from their chronically ill perspective.

Leah: Many trans and disabled individuals may feel isolated from the body positivity movement due to its nature of only focusing on the good about a person's body when many trans folk are not content with their bodies and want to change them to make them feel more at home within their bodies.

Much of the language with the body positivity movement can ostracize transgender individuals such as "all bodies are good bodies" or "your body does not need to change, society needs to change". If a trans individual experiences gender dysphoria related to their bodies, if a trans individual wants to medically transition, they may not think of their body as a good or perfect body - but a body that needs to change in order to flourish.

Breannah: Some Disabled folks may feel left out of the conversation if we continue to use phrases like "I don't care what your body looks like as long as its happy and healthy" because they may not equate health to the way their body is functioning. Particularly if they are chronically ill or in chronic pain. Saying that you only respect a body when it is "healthy" disincluded many individuals where physical health and wellness may feel out of reach. Also, it is important to note that wellness is not defined by achieving a balance- some people may need to prioritize different aspects of their lives depending on their own needs. For example, someone prioritizing their emotional wellness over their physical wellness is completely valid and real.

Leah: The body positivity movement focuses on negative body image as it relates to societal beauty ideals, but not all negative body image comes from this. Some trans folks may dislike the way their body presents itself because it does not match their gender identity.

Breannah: Especially if an individual experiences gender dysphoria with their body or if an individual is pre medical transition or early on in their transition process. If their body and how it is perceived socially does not match their gender identity that can particularly affect their body image.

Leah: It is incredibly important to note that not all trans and non-binary folks have the same experiences - some may not have gender dysphoria when it comes to their bodies or may not want to medically transition at all and that is completely valid!

Breannah: But acknowledging that some trans individuals do and this can cause negative body image unrelated to societal beauty standards is so important.

Disabled folks may dislike their body because it may cause them chronic pain or difficult navigating the ableist infrastructure within our society which is a completely different topic we will not be engaging in during this podcast.

Leah: These folks should not have to always have positive feelings about their bodies or just accept their bodies as is if their bodies bring them mental and physical pain

Breannah: This is in no way saying that these individuals are not affected by societal beauty standards - because they are, but rather acknowledging that their body image is not just affected by these standards.

Changing up the language can help mitigate some of these issues!

Leah: While it can sometimes be harmful to say that all bodies are perfect or that all bodies are good bodies, it is not harmful to say that all bodies are valued, that all bodies deserve respect, care, and kindness - no matter what they look like, which is exactly what body neutrality is vouching for!

Breannah: Instead of telling people how they should feel about their bodies, enable them to make personal decisions about their bodies based on their own perspectives and lived experiences. "my body, my choice"

Leah: Now that we have a better understanding of how body positivity has not been fully representative of all bodies, we would like to explore the importance of shifting from the term body positivity to the term body neutrality.

What is body neutrality?

Breannah: Body neutrality is a concept that rejects mainstream body positivity, which focuses on what someone looks like, and shifts its focus to what your body can do for you to keep you alive.

Recognizing and being mindful of what our bodies do for us in our daily life. Our bodies breathe, give us energy, and keep us warm.

Leah: Body neutrality spreads the message that we aren't expected to always feel positive. We are allowed to be neutral or hold ourselves to a neutral standard of perceiving our bodies. We are taught to always love our body and the skin we are in however that can be difficult, especially for some ideas/topics we mentioned earlier.

Breannah: We believe Body Neutrality is a better approach/title for the wellness of everyone. Body Neutrality relieves the pressure of having to feel content and positive towards yourself all the time as that could feel unattainable at times.

What could body neutrality look like?

Leah: We talked to Jane Jakubczak (Juh-KOOB-check), a registered dietician from the Health Promotion & Wellness Services at the University Health Center, and she mentioned a few ways that we can practice this: Teach people how their bodies work or learn how your body works.

Breannah: It may be exciting to learn about the anatomy of the human body and the physiological processes that occur. This could really show us how much our bodies do for us on a daily basis

Leah: We mentioned before that body positivity often encompasses this idea that you have to love your body, no matter what it looks like. But, what if you don't like what it looks like?

Breannah: Many people may feel like they have to resort to food restriction or indulgence in order to obtain this body that they can finally feel positive in. We want to acknowledge the validity in this, as this is a byproduct of how society has conditioned us to feel about our bodies.

Leah: The relationship between body neutrality and food intake is much different than the apparent relationship between body positivity and food intake. When we talked to Jane, she talked about the idea of intuitive eating.

Breannah: I have heard of a lot of people talking about how their bodies have changed since the COVID-19 lockdown in March 2020. Why do we look at weight gain as a failure rather than a means of survival especially during a pandemic, a social justice movement, and an election year happening concurrently?

Leah: Other ways that body neutrality can be represented include: Practice gratitude. Once a day, once a week, or once a month (whatever makes sense for you), write down or tell yourself one thing about yourself in which you are grateful for.

Breannah: For example, you could say "I am grateful for my strong thighs because they help me walk and get me to where I need to be."

Leah: Do a social media cleanse. Unfollow people who do not serve you! Social media can be super toxic as we examined before, and stepping away from Instagram and Twitter isn't not staying in the loop, it's self-care.

Breannah: Before closing out this episode of Any Questions we want to touch on a few resources you can use here at the University if you are experiencing any body image issues or want help practicing body neutrality.

Leah: One, the University Health Center - wellness coaching (how to be well in various aspects life; body image could be one of them; through creating microgoals) and behavioral health unit which has professional services for Eating Disorder Assessment and Referrals, Transgender Healthcare Assessments and Support, and tools for behavioral health crisis, all located within the UHC.(talking about three resources)

Breannah: Two, Nutrition coaching where you can speak with either a professional dietician like Jane or speak with dietician students for free at UHC where you can discuss intuitive eating and other ways to fuel your body in ways that feel good to you.

Three, Counseling. There are professional counselors at the Counseling Center where you can touch on a variety of concerns you have about your body image.

While body positivity focuses on loving your body all the time, and oftentimes a certain type of body, body neutrality recognizes the moments where you may not feel as content with your body as society tells you you should be.

Leah: Body neutrality takes a more inclusive stance on diverse bodies and abilities, and creates a call to respect all bodies no matter what they look like. It recognizes and acknowledges various feelings that may come with your relationship with your body,

Breannah: and validates those feelings as long as you are respecting, valuing, and nourishing your body in ways that feel good to you. We want to send a big thank you to Jane for her interview with us! And also we thank you for listening to this episode of Any Questions?

Leah: And don't forget to tune in to the next episode where we will be focusing on (insert sound bite here).