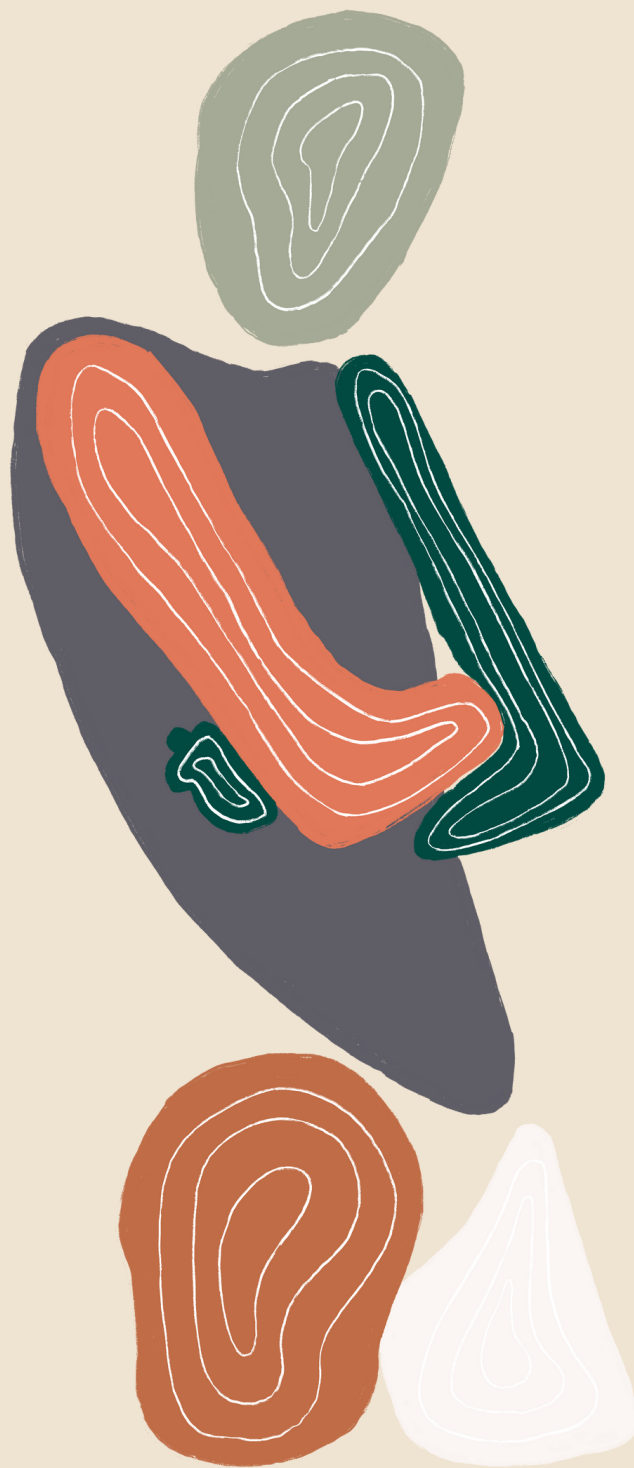


vessel

my body, my home



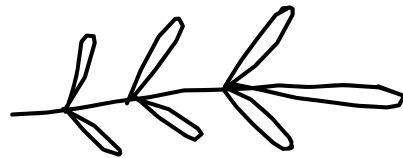
body positivity pds





vessel

my body, my home



body positivity pds

Miss Natalia - supervisor

Emilka - editor, art pieces

Jagoda - coordinator

Lubaba - portraits

Gabi

Hania

Wiktoria

Matteo

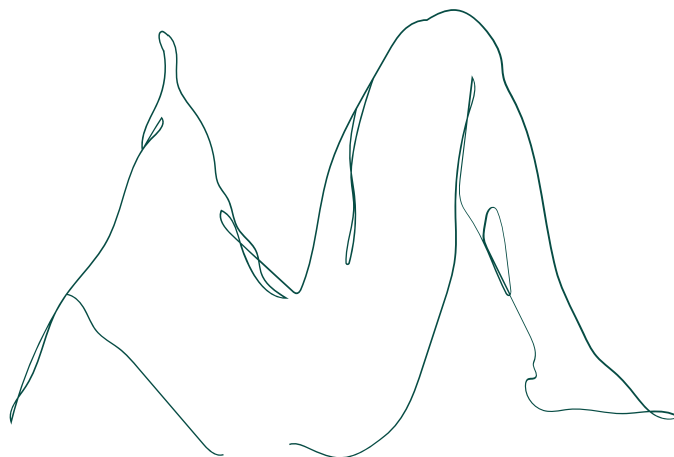
Monika

we want to thank Natalia Mialik for
support and inspiration



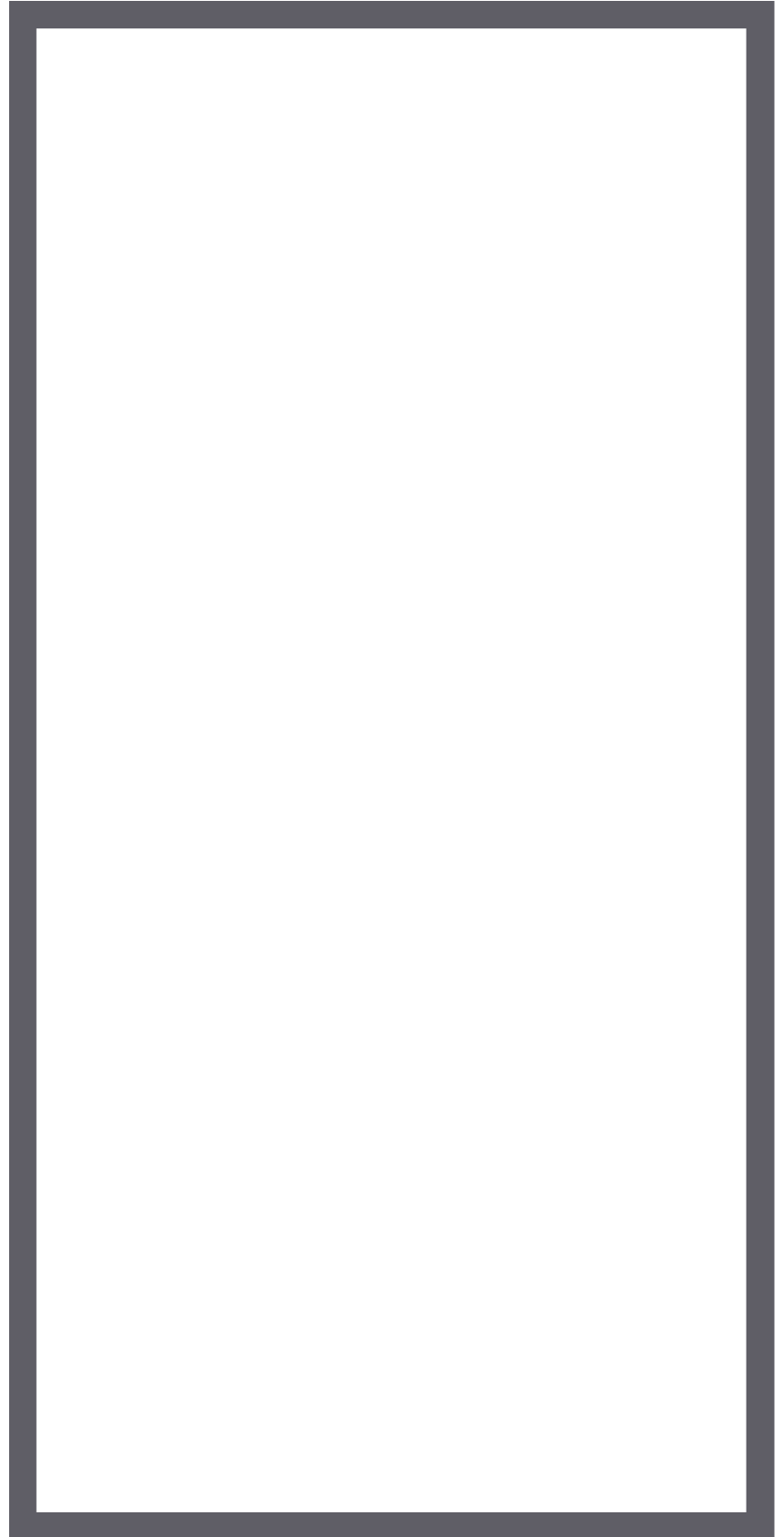
For the past 6 months we have been working on creating a collage of personal stories about body positivity. Our PDS group has focused our efforts into writing a series of essays and short stories, which we managed to turn into a book. Our goal is to spread awareness, encourage people to talk about their experiences, let people feel comfortable with their bodies and improve their mental health. Our intention is for our readers to see how genuine and authentic we are, hence hoping they will relate to our stories on a personal level.

We hope our efforts will serve as a reminder of the fact that whatever you're going through, you're not alone.





Lubaba





Fatphobia vs Skinny Shaming

by Lubaba

Skinny shaming and fatphobia are both aggressions towards people in regard to their weight and size which cause traumatizing experiences however, they shouldn't be seen as interchangeable or comparable as the latter goes far beyond personal attacks or harassment – it is a deep-rooted systematic oppression. This piece aims to validate these nuances, encourage understanding of the danger of both, but in due course point out that fatphobia and thin shaming are not reverse discrimination.

On average 30 trillion cells consisting of water, nucleic acid, carbohydrates, proteins, and lipids – or better known as fat – work together to create the human body as we know it. Just like how our bodies are made up of multiple layers of cells and tissue, body shaming comes in different layers, ranging from unsolicited comments and advice, harassment and bullying to deep-rooted institutional oppression. In response to oppression, revolutions emerge – the concept of body positivity gaining popularity as an engineer, Bill Fabry, forms The National Association to Advance Fat Acceptance. Body positivity later starts becoming inclusive of not only fat bodies but thin and disabled ones and challenges the patriarchal beauty standards. Nowadays, the movement is focused on promoting the acceptance of all shapes and sizes of the human body regardless of race, gender, and physical abilities. Within the movement however, a debate takes place – fatphobia versus skinny shaming. When women of all races, heights, and weights band together to fight the system a question emerges – “who has it worse – fat or thin women?” Our bodies function thanks to organ systems meant to basically keep us alive – the patriarchy functions from the body shaming system meant to feast on our insecurities. This essay focused on the insecurities of women tells the tale as old as time – pitting women against each other to benefit the patriarchal society.

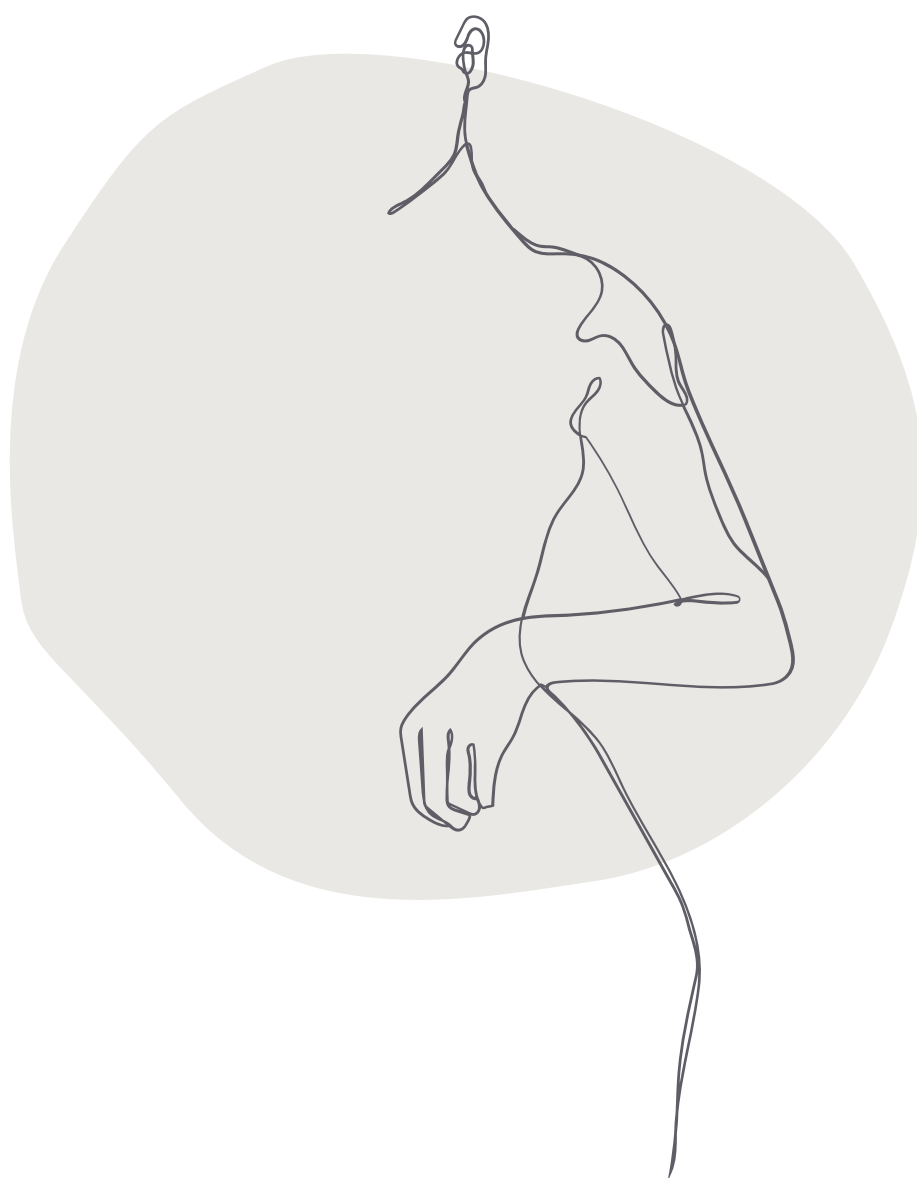
The basic and easiest way to deny women their agency persists in critiquing and policing their bodies no matter how they look. Hence the goal of this essay is rather to discourse about biases without making it competitive because the two are simply not the same. Skinny shaming and the harm it causes are undoubtedly valid problems in our society and stating otherwise denies the many awful experiences of thin women. In order, however, to dismantle discrimination of bodies it is crucial to understand that both stigmas are not interchangeable. Fat phobia is institutional exclusion.

There's no doubt social media is a major placeholder in our lives. It's an everyday tool to learn new information – both true and false – and share opinions which induce a spectrum of feelings among viewers. Access to platforms, especially TikTok with over a billion users, allows creators to post content, shared globally within seconds, that sometimes isn't fact-checked – some tiktokers aren't educated enough to speak about a topic and not show a personal bias. This is a platform where this debate on “who has it worse” is much more persistent. Thin bodies are constantly being criticized and associated with anorexia or eating disorders, and when that issue is raised, accusations are swiftly denied and concerns invalidated. What ends up happening then is thin people comparing their bullying to fatphobia and fat people responding to it defensively, further continuing this cycle of internet war. Skinny shaming is an issue people should be sensitive and aware of. What should be done instead is talking about skinny shaming without bringing up the topic of fatphobia. People of heavier bodies react to this comparison in a defensive manner as it invalidates the difficult experiences thin people will never have to face. Skinny shaming shouldn't be invalidated. The topic deserves to be talked about separately and fatphobia should only be brought up in the conversation of skinny shaming, not to compare the nuances and claim that they are on par with each other, but to acknowledge thin privilege to aid in dismantling internalized fat phobia. It is an individual topic that should not be a response to fat people sharing their traumatic experiences.

It is an individual topic that should not be a response to fat people sharing their traumatic experiences. Awareness of the privileges of a thin body – of having a socially accepted body that meets the Eurocentric beauty standards – is crucial in understanding why fatphobia isn't just internet trolls in a fat person's comment section – but how it's the toxic systems of diet and fitness industry, beauty industry, the food industry, etc. that exclude and benefit from dehumanizing fat people. It should be realized that, unlike fatphobia, skinny shaming is not a historically prevalent form of discrimination or institutional oppression. Fatphobia and fat bias are outright denial of medical care. It is the failure to listen to a fat patient's symptoms and gaslighting them due to prejudice. It is refusing to hire or promote a person just because they are fat.

As Melissa Fabello points out, “Fat stigma, like sexism and racism, is another oppressive cultural institutional system—one that degrades people of size to the advantage of people who live in more socially accepted (read: thin) bodies.” Body shaming thin people induces anxieties regarding body image and triggers disordered eating symptoms. The inexcusable judgments and disrespectful events faced by thin people should not be invalidated but neither equated to people with heavy bodies being denied the right to have access to public goods and services and to simply exist! And failure to understand this leads to further marginalizing, especially considering the larger context within which the stigma exists, and the terrible consequences faced daily. Conversations about skinny shaming should not be used to dodge accountability or avoid responsibility for anti-fat behaviors. We cannot ignore the different levels of bigotry faced by different groups. Furthermore, these conversations should be handled with extreme care, with an open mind – and not in the form of unfruitful arguments and unwarranted opinions in TikTok duets and comment sections. Empathy should be shown in both cases but with the understanding of the differences in severity. Thin people should not be told to ‘eat something’, and fat people should not be judged for ordering dessert. And as Aubrey Gordon explains “the independent acts of shaming a thin person and shaming a fat person may look similar in this moment. But what differentiates them is all the moments leading up to that, and all the moments after”.

In the journey to body positivity or self-acceptance coming to the understanding that judgement is different from systemic exclusion is necessary – necessary to true liberation for fat people and to achieving better self image. Both are legitimate problems but not equal considering the automatic respect society gives thin bodies which aren't given to fat bodies. Body shaming towards any human being is wrong as it can cause physically and mentally jarring responses. Our bodies aren't any one's to comment on, in judgment or in praise. Anyone can be victims to negative emotions or experiences regarding their body, not everyone are victims to the systemic discrimination faced by fat people. No, skinny people should not be shamed. Nor should fat people be systemically excluded from most simple human needs: employment, health care, housing, and so forth.

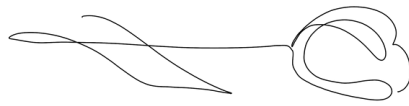




Hania



Hania is passionate about psychology and social contacts, since she was little. Since she was little she has had many hobbies, for instance the piano, the ukulele, singing as well as dancing and many other sports. Unfortunately, at the age of 12 she has found herself in a hard situation and had developed anorexia. She has struggled for years now. She wrote a speech – about anorexia as well as eating disorders in general. Hania wants to educate others on a healthy relationship with food, as well as with their body. Your body is your home, and you should treat it with respect.



Your Life Is More Than the Gap Between Your Thighs

by Hania

TRIGGER WARNING: discussion of anorexia, vivid descriptions

Anorexia has the highest mortality rate out of any mental illness. Every 52 minutes, one person with this disgusting voice in their head dies. I was almost one of them. Anorexia, like many eating disorders, is not booked for teenage, white, underweight girls that strive to be as thin as they can. It does not discriminate. It concerns and affects every gender, race, age, or sexuality. Anorexia is not a choice. At my lowest, I heard my mum screaming at me to eat. As if I could decide to do that. I cried, she cried.

But it is not a choice. I often come across this statement, when I discuss eating disorders with people. It's an addiction, something that haunts you every second of your life as long as you haven't recovered, not something that you pick up one day when you feel like it. Something you wake up to each day and have to live with. It's not you, but something next to you, whispering sickening thoughts to your ear. You are not your illness in any way, shape, or form.

Many often ask why? Why does one choose to harm oneself, starve and exercise to oblivion? The answer is quite simple – they don't. It's a coping mechanism, a way to run away from problems, a safety blanket. You feel a lack of control, and trying to gain it back, you restrict food.

People with restrictive eating disorders see themselves differently. That comes as a shock to many. How come can you see yourself differently? - you may ask. I can't count all the times I came up to a mirror, and my body was changing shapes while I stood there. But it's hard. Imagine coming up to a mirror and wanting to scream, crying because you went over your calorie limit, hating your body so much that the only thing you want to do is shrink to nothing but only skin and bones. That's anorexia - a restrictive eating disorder.

It all started with mean comments from my so-called "friends." "Your fate," "Fat pig," and "Fatty" along with every other synonym of fat phrased in the most disgusting way possible. I think I've been called every single body-shaming comment out there. I was just 8. That's when I started to hate my body. I didn't do anything about it, but every stare in my pink-colored childhood mirror made me want to cry, scream and start punching the walls. A few years have passed, and I have turned 12. People around me began to argue, and my anxiety started to increase. I wanted to cry – but I couldn't. Everyone was already so busy with themselves, and no one paid attention to me. No one. And so I came across Tumblr pages on which people promoted anorexia and other mental problems. According to them it was cute to starve, exercise to oblivion, count, weigh and measure every single calorie you eat. Anorexia is not cute and pretty. Nothing is appealing about your parents crying when they look at you. Feeling so bad for them and wanting to change, but at the same time wanting to kill them for forcing you to eat.

ANOREXIA is not a pretty illness. It ruins your life and shatters it into pieces. By losing all this weight you lose your friends, your family, the ability to love and act. I remember when my mum was forcing me to drink my first nutridrink. I was screaming, punching her, and spilling it all over the kitchen. We fought and fought, she cried, and I screamed. It felt like a horror. I didn't want to be alive. I wanted to die. If I have to eat – I'd rather die. Shaking while eating and not breathing because your tears are flooding your face is not cute. It's not okay to promote this illness. And I'm telling you the most honest truth; anorexia has ruined my life in every way possible. I was dying – mentally and physically.

My heart beat 20 times per minute and I couldn't walk. I was so weak, felt so cold, I couldn't go outside. At this point, my parents told me that I was going to a hospital, and so did my psychiatrist. I couldn't even attend school because my doctors were scared that writing with my pen would make me lose weight. They told me that all the weight I lost has contributed to my almost dying now. And so, I went to a treatment center.

This was probably the most emotional and scary moment of my life. I remember entering the room and my parents signing the papers. I was meant to stay there for a month, which despite being an objectively short period, to me seemed like a lot of time. Then the lady surprised me by saying that I was to stay for three months. It was already scheduled. I was sick; my parents would leave me for a quarter of a year, over 120 days. The rules were simple – you get better, you go home. But I didn't want to get any better. Anorexia has veiled my eyes, making me want to stay in this sickness for longer and longer.

I remember completing the x number of squats I had to do daily while feeling so faint and weak. That one voice in my head would always say, "You owe it to me." Right now, this seems absurd. I owed absolutely nothing to this illness. It has ruined my life in every way possible. Not only do I not like it. I hate it. It's the worst thing that could have happened to me. And while I'm aware that my parents and sister have not experienced what I have, I know that it was hard for them as well. I saw them cry multiple times due to my affliction, and I never want to see it again. My primary motivation to recover was to improve my family's life. Trust me, if you're hesitant on pursuing recovery, when you do, it will change your and your family's life to the absolute best.

How do I change things? How are my parents going to care for me? Everything fell so out of control from my point of view. My life was slipping from my hands. For years, this feeling grew inside me and when I turned 13, I started to act. Because already, I hated myself so much, words cannot explain it. I had a nauseous obsession with calories, food groups, and demonizing every product. Food induced fear in my eyes, and each takeout made me want to cry. But I pretended. Pretended to be okay.

Starving oneself is not the purpose of life. You're so much more than the starvation process, you put yourself through, so much more than your body, what you eat, or how tightly or loosely your pants fit today.

In December 2020, each day I woke up, I had this feeling of not wanting to live anymore. I would wake up, brush the grey of my teeth, comb hair off of my scalp, take a shower in horrendously hot water to chase away the constant icy sensation. I would go downstairs – and each time, without fail – a war began. I wouldn't want to eat when my parents asked.

Parents screaming, sister crying, dog barking – and me. Running away. I couldn't take it – (not) eating was my reality.

And I may not be the best person to say this since I am aware that I was the most stereotypical 'anorexic' you can imagine. The truth is that do not have to be underweight to be one. I struggled at a weight too high for my age and height, so this measure indicates absolutely nothing. I think I deserved the same amount of help at my highest as well as my lowest point. You can be underweight and have a fantastic relationship with food while the people obese on the BMI scale are having a hard time. Only 4 % of those affected by eating disorders are underweight. Surprised?

At first, people praise you for, what you later learn to be, disordered behaviors. Wow, you're so strong, so in control, they say. But after refusing dinner for the 20th time, they start to worry because they see you walking down the wrong path. Eating disorders are not only about food. They are about isolating yourself from others because you are scared of unfamiliar people, places, and numbers.

Your loved ones see you getting thinner, paler, weaker. They watch your energy levels decrease further and further. You slowly become a prisoner of your own body. A body you want to escape very badly. You don't have the energy to wake up anymore, and each time you stand up, your head hurts. Imagine waking up and wanting to die because you know that you're either going to be forced to eat by yourself or they're going to put a nasal-gastric tube in your nose and that will be the end of discussion.

After some time you want to stop. But you can't. You find new reasons to stay with your anorexia. And more reasons why you're still not sick enough, why you should lose more and more weight.

Diet culture has programmed us to think that restrictive diets are a good thing and skipping dinner is healthy. But I'm here to tell you that it is most definitely not. You are not good for missing meals. You are not healthy for overly exercising. And you should not be praised for looking skinny in a photo. The first thing we notice about a person is their looks, but no one is friends with somebody just because they like how skinny or fat they are. Your looks don't matter, and the only thing that truly matters to your friends or loved ones is your soul, heart, personality, and behavior. Have you ever heard someone say, "I like this person because they are skinny" or "I don't like them, because they are fat"? No? I know I haven't.

'But how come can you not eat?'

'Just force it, if you have to'

'Can't you just eat a sandwich?'

'Eat normally. It's not that hard.'

These are comments people with EDs receive daily. Just eat - you may say. But it's not that easy. You can't *just eat*. Your head is screaming at you. Your head is commanding and you obey.

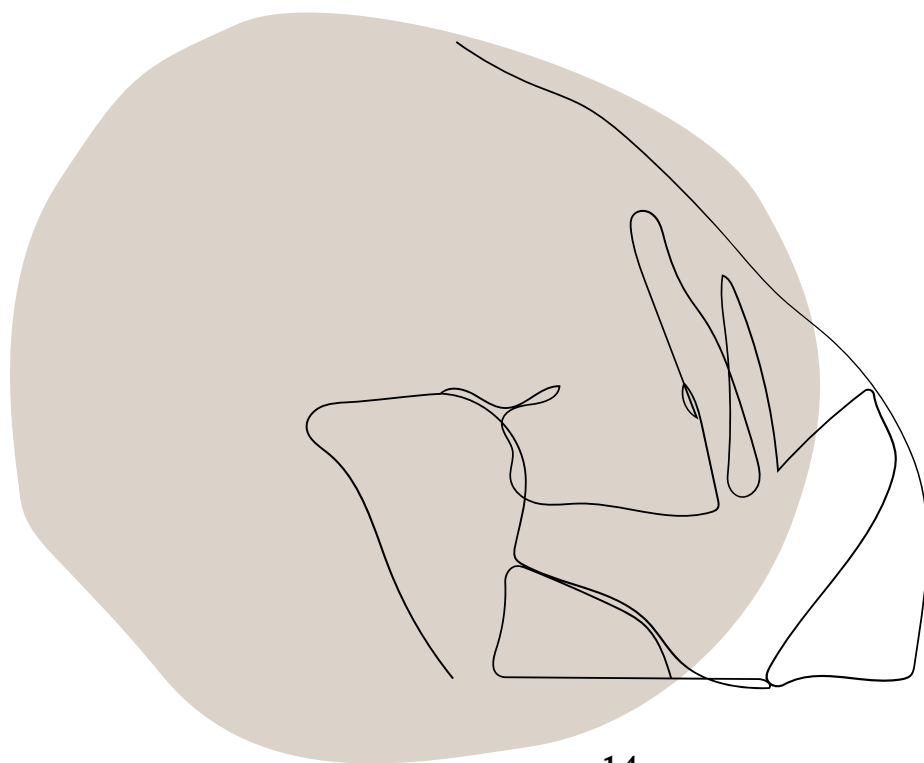
I'm tired of going to the supermarket to stare at the food I deprive myself of. I'm tired of body checking every time I pass a mirror, and I'm tired of having this sick feeling of being in control. I'm not in control. The only thing that is in control here is anorexia. It tells me not to eat. It tells me not to meet with my friends. This illness is lying to me.

Eating disorders are very competitive. I wanted to be a perfect anorexic. Gorgeous, skinny, and so delicate. Praised for her actions, her skills in refusing and refraining from eating anything. But I don't want to be the perfect anorexic. Not anymore. I remember looking at the scale displaying 20 kilograms less than it currently does, and still thinking that it was not enough, that I can only recover once I lose another 5, 10, 15 kilograms. But, that is not true. A perfect anorexic doesn't exist. A perfect anorexic is the one who's dead.

I don't want to be choking with tears over a spoon of 0% yogurt. Nearly a year ago, my heartbeat was around 20 beats per minute. For context, an average pulse for a teenage girl my age is around 80 bpm. Every 52 minutes, a person with anorexia dies. My heart had phases of stopping to pump entirely for a few of seconds, both during the day and the night.

I was almost one of them. I was practically dead. People lose lives to this awful illness. That's 10,200 deaths a year. That is equivalent to a small village in Iowa.

When I first got diagnosed, I thought I was weird. I couldn't accept that I may have a problem with fueling my body the way it required. I couldn't recognize it. I was addicted to seeing the number on the scale go down and down. I was addicted to making my calorie intake smaller and smaller until it was almost at zero. Anorexia is a severe illness, but an addiction primarily. An addiction you love and hate at the same time. You want to get better and worse at the same time. Right now, as a person in recovery, I want to say that it is hard. Very hard. But, I know that it will be worth it in the end. If you recognise early signs of EDs among your friends, loved ones, or even in yourself, please report it to someone. Eating disorders are very devious. An affected person does not notice it at the beginning. And only after a while, do they realize the magnitude of troubles they got themselves in. Eating disorders are not a choice, but recovery is, so if you are struggling, please seek help.





Am I Sick Enough?

A Speech On Anorexia

by Hania

Most eating disorders have the aspect of not being sick enough. And yes – it may sound absurd for a person not struggling with one. Why would you want to be sicker? Believe it or not, most people with eating disorders do. They want to suffer; they want to die from malnourishment. Die from exhaustion, from tiredness.

At my lowest, I thought I'm not a normal anorexic. I thought *I'm too "fat" to be suffering*. But I was not. Looking at it from my current perspective, I'm actually wondering how I was still alive back then at such a low weight. I always thought I'm not sick enough, since I was diagnosed. But you are sick. Sick enough. You can suffer while being obese, your weight does not indicate anything here. Eating disorders concern every body, no matter its weight or size.

Searching up anorexia I came across many blogs asking various questions : “Can I have a mild form of anorexia?”, “Can I be anorexic at a BMI of X?” and many others. And while yes – your disease may get worse with time, there is no superior or inferior anorexic. Most of them are the same – sick and sick enough. So obsessed with each calorie, every gram.

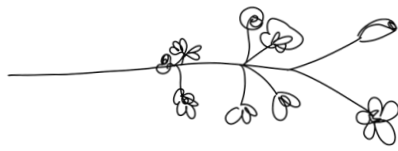
Remember you are not a better or worse an anorexic whether you're bigger or smaller - your weight does not signify anything in this case. You are sick enough. And trust me, I didn't believe it when people told me that I may be sick, but with time it will come – and while gaining a healthy-person perspective, you will believe the fact that you are and always were sick enough.



Emilka



Writing has always been a big part of Emilka's life. She has been drawn toward books and writing itself. Emilka's first piece is about body dysmorphia - a disorder she has struggled with for a few years now. In her story she tried to capture the everyday uncomfortability caused by the inability to feel like one belongs in their body. Her second piece touches upon Gen Z and their relationship with food. The article touches upon everything from popularisation of healthy eating habits to body image. The concept of body positivity for Emilka is about finding space and time in which you can be comfortable with yourself. You might not feel well with who you are every day, but growing towards acceptance and empowering others is essential.



It's Under My Skin

by Emilka

I slowly wake up to the sun's bony fingers caressing my cheeks, lips, getting under my eyelids. Twisting my head, I try to avoid it, avoid getting out of bed and surviving through another uncomfortable day. I finally open my eyes just to see the dirty room around me, piles of clothes on the floor reminiscent of dead bodies, stacks of empty plates staring at me with reproach.

The sunlight shines right at me, making all of my skin's imperfections stand out even more. I stare down at my legs, wrap my fingers around each thigh, then cover them up with a blanket in disgust.

My reflection in the bathroom mirror is repulsive, but I know it's the truth, so I accept it, even though it hurts. Sometimes I imagine that I'm actually attractive and that I feel good in my body. But I haven't experienced anything like this. I've never grown to like, never so much as accepted myself. I tried every diet, every type of exercise, but nothing ever changes, sometimes not even the numbers on the scale.

Black coffee burns the roof of my mouth and makes my stomach growl, but I continue drinking it because it's the best I can do.

It makes me feel better.

I don't dig through all my clothes for over an hour, like I usually do. The dress I choose is long and hides my legs. I run my fingers over my stomach, making sure I can feel my ribs. I ignore the fat on my stomach.

Before I leave, I look in the mirror a couple of times, making sure that every angle looks good. It takes me five, ten minutes, and I really should leave already because I'll be late, but it doesn't matter; I have to make sure I look good.

The café is busy and filled with people. I sit in the corner, another cup of black coffee in front of me, trying my best not to have a panic attack.

The dress slips up my thighs, tightens around my stomach, itches my armpits that slowly start to sweat. Why did I wear this? I should've settled for sweatpants, maybe jeans, just anything other than this dress.

My hair sticks to the sweaty back of my neck as I wait for her. I message her a couple of times and she says she's on her way, but that stresses me out even more. Maybe she doesn't care at all. People around me sit down, drink their coffee and leave, staring down at me, sitting alone with a cup of coffee still full, an empty chair in front of me.

She finally comes; Jenny is tall, slick dark hair falls down her back, a short skirt and a shirt wrapped tightly around her nice body. I haven't seen her in a few weeks, but she's gotten even more perfect.

I really want to go home.

She sits in front of me, clear skin glowing, straight teeth showing when she tells a story with sophisticated vocabulary, skinny fingers wrapped around a latté. But I don't listen to her, I can't focus because I don't want to be here anymore. In an hour I'll get back into bed, close my eyes, let my thoughts be muffled by loud music and fall asleep. No, I should exercise. But then I'll get hungry, and I really shouldn't eat, so sleeping is better. Maybe I'll exercise and then go to sleep?

I hear her say my name from far away.

“What?” I blink, trying to bring my thoughts back to the present.

“I asked if you're,” she looks around, as if speaking of something illegal, “still struggling with that, *you know*.”

“Body dysmorphia?” I raise my brows, confused. She nods her head with an expression of theatrical worry. “Yeah, I do. But I think I’m getting better with the help of my therapist.”

She nods even more. “That’s really good to hear,” she treats it as if it’s a disease. “I hope you get better soon.”

I smile politely as she puts her palm over mine, maybe trying to appear more caring.

She continues to tell me college stories while I express the bare minimum of signs of engagement. After twenty minutes I apologise and excuse myself, saying that I have a very urgent matter and that I have to leave.

I know she knows I’m lying, but she says it’s fine, she hopes that I’ll feel better soon; it seems that she’s glad to leave early as well.

I walk back home in the heat, making me feel dizzy; I’m about to break down, but I have to continue, I have to get in my daily number of steps. My mind gets louder and louder with every one of them, telling me that I’ll never be good enough, that everybody hates me and that I look horrendous.

I don’t look at myself in the mirror when I get back home. I know that my makeup is smudged, my dress wrinkly, my hair a clumpy mess, my legs huge, my breasts soggy.

I rip the dress off my wet body, quickly wash my face, tears slowly gathering on my eyelids, throat hurting from blocking sobs from taking over my body. I won’t let myself cry because it will make me feel even more pathetic.

My bed is messy, but I don’t bother to clean it up, just crawl between the covers and put my knees below my chin.

I close my eyes, hoping that sleep will take me in its arms, stealing my consciousness away. But it won't happen, so my thoughts keep spiralling - I can feel my stomach touching my legs, the double chin, thick calves.

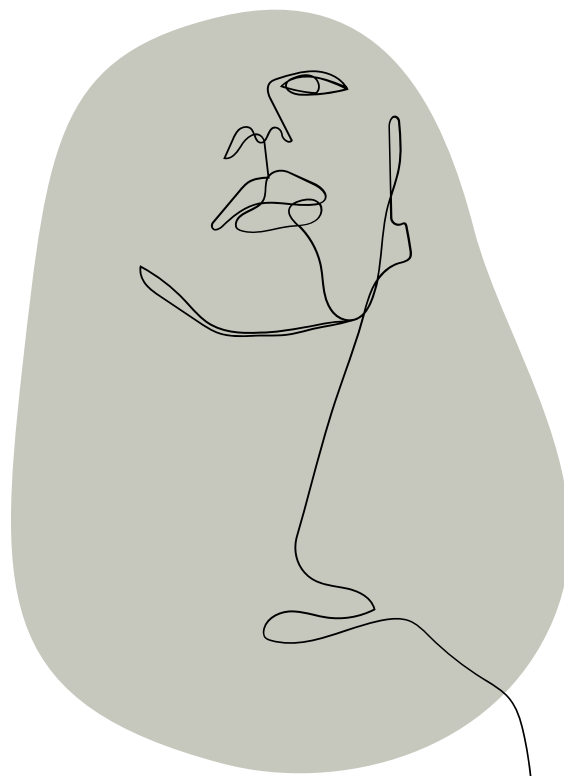
I turn around, switch positions, just to get more comfortable, but I can't. Everything hurts, my thoughts get louder, and I seem to get bigger and bigger. The bed is too small for me now, I'm taking up too much space, the blanket is too short, and my body is so itchy.

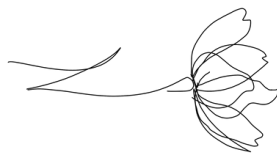
I take my phone and play music as loud as I can, just to distract my mind. My body and thoughts still can't calm down, so I take melatonin, maybe too much, but I don't care because I just want the feeling to go away.

I focus on the lyrics of the songs, as full albums play in my ears on maximum volume.

My eyes finally shut close as the sweaty sheets envelop my body tightly. Sleep starts to take over and a wave of relief swallows me whole.

The pain, the itching finally go away as I fall into a deep sleep, foolishly hoping that I will get better when I wake up.





Social Media, Health and Diets – What Is Gen Z Up To?

by Emilka

Every generation is different. Racial and ethnic composition of the time they live in, changes in political and ideological orientations all influence it. But when we look at differences within the younger generations, there is one factor presenting an unheard-of contrast – technology.

Millennials were introduced to the Internet when it was still something fresh and unknown. While they explored this new invention, social media such as Facebook, Tumblr or Instagram were only emerging. These platforms obviously still exist. They're thriving, constantly growing. But they were drastically different five, ten years ago compared to what they look like today. Generation Y is well known for feeling entitled, valuing straightforward recognition, collaboration, skinny jeans and Harry Potter. Discovering the Internet during their teenage years has shaped them and changed who they are, so we can only imagine the influence the digital age has on Gen Z and Gen Alpha, who have been born into a world already entangled in the World Wide Web.

Pre-teen and teenagerhood is a time of the most intense identity development, growing independence, self-esteem but also emergence of mental health issues. Spending this time of your life that shapes you the most primarily online, scrolling endlessly and sometimes having nothing else to do. Being in the most influential life-stage and experiencing a global pandemic that prevents you from leaving your house and seeing your friends, being confined and consuming hours of content daily, is harmful for your brain development. For example, the short format of TikTok videos affects short-term memory, attention span and concentration negatively. Not only that, but this content also impacts the opinions and values of teens and has a destructive effect on their mental health.

Lifestyles and diets are a prevalent topic on social media. We can be easily educated on balanced eating habits by a simple Google search but diving deeper into YouTube or Instagram we discover specific meal plans, dietary regimes and tips on what to do and what to avoid. This results in Gen Z being better-informed about their food intake, being aware of how it affects their physical and mental health. According to a survey conducted by Opinium, 72% of people view proper nutrition as an integral part of their physical and mental health, with 71% actually trying to implement this conviction into their routines. Gen Z prefers organic and plant-based food, a clear majority considering processed foods unhealthy. About two thirds of the survey participants said that nutritious food is now in fashion.

And I would say it's true. Nowhere on social media can we escape "What I Eat in a Day" videos, often made up of vibrant vegan meals, workouts, little tips and tricks on health-improvement. Over the past few months, a phenomenon called "the It Girl" has appeared, a way of becoming the perfect, most productive version of yourself. The so-called It Girl would wake up early, eat a clean, aesthetically-pleasing breakfast, journal, go to the gym... and this is who a majority of Gen Z want to be.

Compared to Millennials, this generation isn't often described as "foodies". While Millennials pay much attention to their food, plan meals ahead and eat out more, they are found to be less healthy than the previous generations. This is due to the popularisation of delivery and fast food, paired with the usage of social media, resulting in Millennials being more obese than their predecessors. Gen Z is different. Realising that healthy food is rather expensive, they still prioritise making reasonable choices for their mental health. Their obesity rates are lower than Millennials', but more of Gen Z have described themselves as overweight, tried dieting and experienced greater depressive symptoms. This generation is more open about their mental health and eating habits, but battles with anxiety and depression on a scale never seen before. Only 45% of Gen Z think that their mental health is very good, compared to 56% of Millennials. We can find the cause of these statistics in social media, more specifically in the intensified sense of isolation and loneliness, as well as fear of missing out and shame of not conforming to the Internet's standards.

On top of that there's the constant fear of global warming, growing up and the political situation. It's difficult to be a teenager and feel safe in a world like this.

No matter the relationship with one's body, the idea of dieting faces harsher critique from Gen Z. It has gained negative connotations and few people would dare to admit following a diet. Nowadays, more young people choose not to eat sugar or go vegetarian/vegan. They do sports on fresh air instead of counting calories and striving for a calorie deficit. The very idea of exercising took on a different meaning – the priority now is not changing the looks of one's body, but bettering oneself and becoming healthier. I would say that maintaining sustainable calorie restrictions has been destigmatised and is not frowned upon anymore. Still, the word “diet” is used less and less. It's because of the body positivity movement, but the idea relates more to body neutrality. Eating healthy is meant to support your body with the fuel that it needs and make you feel good, not so much to change your appearance. It is important to mention that connecting body positivity to eating habits might be toxic – people steer clear of calling their habits “diet” because they think that not feeling confident with their bodies is embarrassing. It is not. Understanding and connecting to your body is a process that lasts a lifetime. Food is its fuel, meant to support, not sabotage it, but it doesn't mean that the word “diet” should be avoided.

Let's dive deeper into the relation between the pandemic, social media and teenagers' mental health. Globally, we witness its drastic deterioration. Isolation, uncertainty about the future, possible loss of income and housing trigger psychological issues. Depression, anxiety, drug or alcohol abuse, eating disorders. Teens and young adults were found to be more likely to report symptoms of depression and/or anxiety during the pandemic – as much as 56.2% for ages 18-24. That's over a half. It's much more compared to ages 25-49, where 48.9% of people report symptoms of these mental disorders.

I want to touch upon the rise in reported cases of eating disorders in teenagers. The pandemic brought on a lot of spare time and stress, which led to young people seeking refuge online. We can't fully control what gets recommended to us on websites such as YouTube, where we can find a lot of diet and weight-loss videos.

Moreover, on Instagram or TikTok, there appeared a concept of “glowing up” before the pandemic ends. When the crisis first started and we thought that a month would be the most we’d spend at home, many people felt pressured to come back as new people after that “break”. For some it meant getting a haircut or changing the way they dress, but losing weight was arguably the most popular of trends. Healthy recipes spread widely, workout videos gained popularity. After two weeks, “before and after” pictures started appearing. If a stress-sensitive person insecure about their body didn’t feel compelled to change before, they certainly started at that point. As the time passed, the goals of eating “healthy” and getting “in shape” escalated into rapid weight-loss and disordered thoughts and behaviours. Many people, who’d recovered from eating disorders have relapsed during the pandemic. It’s hard to completely abandon disordered thoughts; they come back stronger due to pressure and triggering trends present all over social media. There was no one to turn to – people didn’t see their peers almost at all, teachers were out of reach, parents were either working or worrying about their financial situation. So young people resorted to the Internet itself to seek comfort.

Pro-anorexia and bulimia websites aren’t an exotic concept. They grew side by side with the Internet, even in the early 2000s. The idea was certainly known to Millennials, as Tumblr was one of the places where pictures, quotes, journals, motivational paragraphs towards unhealthy eating habits and persevering in achieving a severely underweight body have boomed. As more people struggled with body image and eating habits in the pandemic, eating disorder communities have grown on social media such as Twitter. Not all of them were pro-ana (shaming others for eating and their body, calling each other slurs and offensive words, openly posting about low BMIs and calorie limits), some people just wanted comfort. Talking to someone about struggles and, at last, being understood led to more and more posts on that part of social media, causing people to consume more triggering content and worsening their mental health.

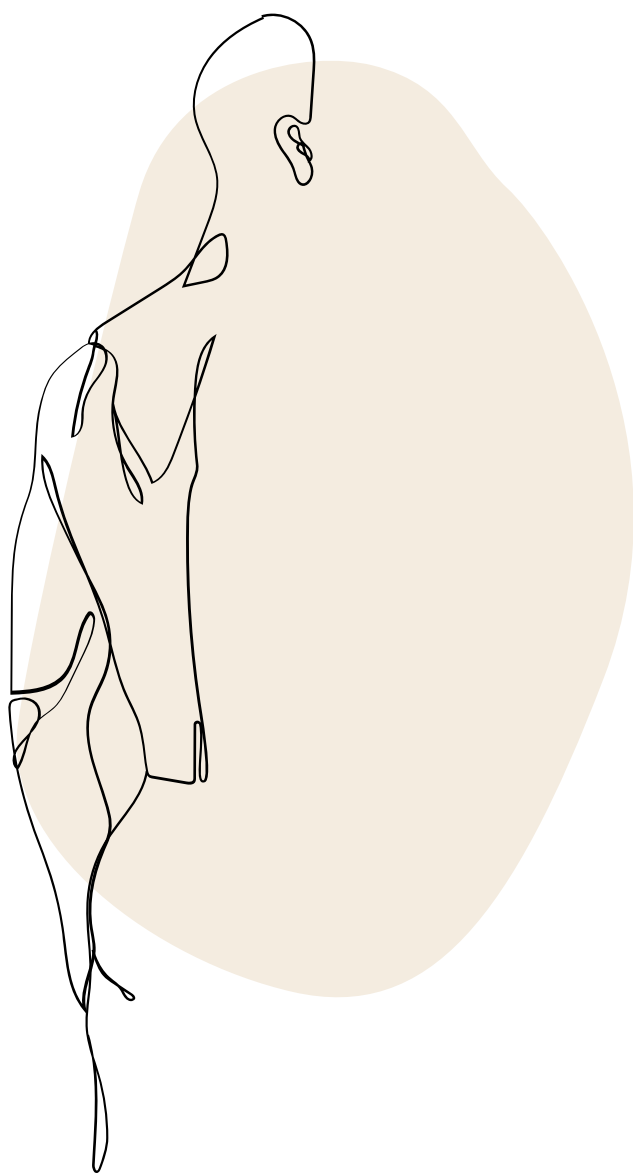
Eating disorders target all genders and ethnic groups. A lot of queer people struggle with self-acceptance, and unfavourable perception of one’s body image commonly relates to that. Furthermore, transgender and gender-nonconforming people often struggle with eating habits.

Gender dysphoria, distress and strong desire to be of another gender, is often linked with eating disorders. Experiencing body dissatisfaction is one of the stressors that can trigger going to the extremes to change it. For example, to ease gender dysphoria, people assigned female at birth (AFAB) might often bind their breasts. Desiring a smaller chest might lead them to think that losing weight will have that effect and naturally they try everything to achieve that result. It's important to see the link between members of the LGBTQ+ community and mental illnesses, as they are less likely to reach out for or get help, and they are among the high-risk groups for suicidal thoughts, depression and anxiety. It can be caused by social rejection when coming out, homophobia and transphobia. But being accepted, feeling confident with oneself and having a sense of belonging in the community is bound to improve mental health among queer people.

The male gaze has contributed greatly to negative body image and the increase of eating disorders cases. It has been a hot topic recently, the concept frequently explored on TikTok and Instagram. But what is the male gaze? It's a way of looking and portraying women that delivers power to men while sexualizing and putting down women. For example, female nudity in video games and movies is directed towards the male audience and the so-called "fan service", while setting unachievable standards for women, who think that they must look like that. It's the fruit of a patriarchal society that we grow up in, learning that women are objects that can be used by powerful men. The unrealistic standards set for women contribute to depression, suicidal thoughts, bad body image and eating disorders. We will do anything to be accepted by the society and appeal to the standards set in our early childhood, because we've been shamed and put down for years. Cellulite, stretch marks, asymmetrical breasts, uneven skin tone. Everything's wrong with us. We're supposed to drink black coffee, run every day and look pretty. We're expected to change for men. But if we ask them to listen to us talk about our passions, they get offended, deeming it too feminine or too masculine. The negative comments and sexualisation lead many women to wanting to change their bodies as quickly as possible and as drastically as they can. But sometimes a tiny waist, flat stomach and height below 180 cm are unattainable.

Our bodies cannot change completely just to fit a man's preference. I think that growing up and learning about yourself should mean not satisfying the male gaze. Rather looking at oneself as another woman would and finding oneself attractive.

What sort of adults will Gen Z be? How will Gen Alpha's relationship with food and bodies look like? Hopefully our reality will improve, but the pandemic and social media make it impossible to predict. It's hard not to be affected by the constant talk about bodies and dieting, but we can try and change the world for the better. We can teach young people not to set impossible standards for bodies. We can educate others about the causes of teenage depression and eating disorders. We can share facts about proper nutrition. We *can* change the world for the better.





Gabi



Although they are a biochemistry student, Gabi spent almost half of their life exploring their artistic side. They have played the piano since they were five and quickly became interested in expressing themselves in creative ways, such as music, drawing or writing.

Gabi identifies as non-binary and they want to bring that perspective forward in their piece.

It is important to them that non-binary people are also included in the conversation about body positivity and body neutrality.

Gabi touches upon a topic of beauty standards within the non-binary community and how hurtful, invalidating and triggering they can be. For Gabi, body positivity is for all bodies, no matter the gender.



Non-binary People And Gendered Beauty Standards

by Gabi

Some of you may or may not be familiar with the term “non-binary”. If you’re confused or even if you’re not, you might wonder how does it relate to concepts such as body positivity or body neutrality?

Well, let’s begin with breaking down the term itself. A non-binary person is someone, who doesn’t identify with either the male or the female gender. Everyone experiences being non-binary in a different way. Some may lean towards masculinity, some enjoy femininity more, and some are perfectly in between. Pronouns are an important component here. Many non-binary people prefer to go by they/them pronouns, but not all of them, so make sure to ask before referring to someone. It is important to mention as well that some non-binary people still use she/her or he/him pronouns, even though they don’t feel fully male or female. Usually it’s more about the way those pronouns make you feel rather than them suggesting your gender and how you present yourself.

Now, how does it relate to our book? Well, what I think isn’t talked about enough is how beauty standards started creeping into the non-binary community. Though the term itself is supposed to be about breaking gender norms, the recently-established standards are, to a major extent, gender-expression based.

The phenomenon revolves around the idea that people, who were Assigned Female At Birth (later referred to as AFAB), in order to be „properly” non-binary, have to present as masculine and people Assigned Male At Birth (later referred to as AMAB) have to present as feminine.

Not only that - best case scenario for a non-binary person would be to possess natural characteristics of the sex opposite to which they were assigned at birth in the first place, so for AFAB people it would mean more defined facial features, a flat chest, short hair while for AMAB people it would mean softer lines and longer hair.

Obviously, besides that, the beauty standards of the modern times also play a huge role in how a non-binary person is perceived on the Internet and how they are treated. Similarly to cisgender people, who would receive less support due to not being conventionally attractive. What is different though, is that a non-binary person has to meet the beauty expectations of both the male and female sex, which is what makes it even more difficult to be present on social media. What I mean by that is this – let's say a non-binary AFAB person presents themselves in a more masculine manner. They have to be seen as attractive from the perspectives of both the female and the male standard, while also being looked at through the lens of the recently formed non-binary standard.

To add on to that, your appearance or body features are not the only aspects taken into account here. A person's body type matters as well. An extremely toxic standard has developed for AFAB people, which praises being tall and skinny if not bony as well as leaning towards a square frame. I don't think there's any need to explain, why setting those features as the conventionally desired standard is harmful, especially for people who struggle with mental health issues or eating disorders. And obviously it is equally difficult for AMAB people, whose universally acclaimed model of appearance, contrary to the one of AFAB people, is having a nice, preferably short figure. Considering how male and female bodies are structured, you can see that some of these features cannot be obtained naturally, but rather through surgery.

The reason I decided to write about this problem is to simply start a conversation. There is so much more to say that I haven't mentioned here, because I am only one person and there are so many other people out there with their individual opinions on this topic. And though every opinion is valid, please listen first to non-binary voices to, hopefully, solve this issue.



Jagoda



Jagoda is a seventeen-year-old high school student, who always prioritised combining academic work with her passions. Dancing since she was five, she's tried her hand at Jazz, Contemporary and Cheerleading blending styles, attending workshops and competing at small and large-scale tournaments. She believes any activities one undertakes should stem from a thirst for new experiences and creation of individual meaning rather than societal pressure. The movement of Body Neutrality is to her a solution to the overwhelm of living in today's world, which constantly emphasizes the significance of aesthetics. Instead, concentrating on our bodies' abilities over their looks is the way to go and the simple appreciation of what we were given should gain more recognition. Sharing and implementing one's explorations and observations in fiction writing is one of the means to do it.



Muscle Memory

by Jagoda

Facing the mirrors stood a row of young women, each so flat that if one were to erect two walls, one in front, one behind them, they would fill the narrow gap almost entirely, except for the space surrounding the head, since that one stubborn body part was impossible to shrink any further. No bumps blemished the perfectly sculpted expanses of their taut stomachs, save for the intentional ones – proud, regular rises of trained *recti abdominis*. But it wasn't only that. The arms, the legs, the backs were all deliberate, forged by the fires of determination in the hellscapes of our dance studio's gyms. Strained to the point of trembling first, agitated juddering eventually, they endured so much calculated torture that one couldn't help but stare and admire.

That's what I was doing. A bit removed from the group I lingered by the tiled wall of the changing room, careful not to step into a heap of somebody's clothes. Which, admittedly, was an impossible task. Eyes hanging on the backs of the dancers I weaved my way toward the mirrors, forced to keep untangling my feet from scattered costumes, sheets of tulle grazing the skin of my ankles. The place was littered with sweatpants, jumpers and sequined dresses sticking out of sports bags and backpacks. Mine were folded and neatly tucked into a tote left somewhere on the hangers beneath multiple layers of coats, sweaters and unidentified outerwear. Hidden so deep, I couldn't see it but firmly believed it was safer there, buried below all that fabric than exposed on the benches or, common sense forbid, the floor.

All the corners were already claimed and occupied, the most prestigious spots taken by the first dancers to arrive. Tournament group's members were a safe guess. They were always there, long before anybody else entered the venue, overtaking the technicians, stage maintenance crew, lighting experts.

Every time I had to pass them on my way backstage, huddled a little ways off the dance floor, splayed on the black vinyl panels in impossible over-splits, curving their spines in backbends, leisurely kicking back and forth between a front and a back walkover through a smooth, steady handstand.

If the studio wanted to acquire some gold medals or the Grand Prix cash during World Cups they sent them. My team for instance was a potential eighth choice if the transport coaches managed to fit us all.

There were nineteen of them – thirteen women in front of me and six men in the dressing room two doors down the hall. The navy blue of their costumes for this particular choreography, which they were to perform today bordered on black, the rich sapphire glint all the more visible under toned, dim lighting of the stage. The vulgar white of backstage LEDs wasn't doing them justice. Rounding the group I approached the mirror on the farther right, squeezing between jostling bodies, the constant hum of conversation fading and merging into one unintelligible, frustrating chatter.

The venue was loud everywhere you went. Pushing open the front doors you entered into noise. Pure noise, no mercy. Music was blasting from the speakers sneakily positioned all over the place, so that you wouldn't miss your category, that is, only if you knew what the people before you were supposed to dance to. I focused on the melody rattling the walls. *Old Friend* by Elderbrook. Piano, strident, whiny vocals and a languid beat suggested the acoustic rather than original so it must have been Contemporary Solo. The placement of age category however, escaped me.

One of my fingers slid across my cheek, trying to wipe away a stray flake of eyeshadow. Squinting at my reflection, slowly, very slowly I rubbed underneath my left eye to sharpen the black liner into a cutting edge. A burst of laughter erupted in the adjacent room and as a jolt tore through my shoulders, my breath hitched and a nail skated across my eye. I blinked ferociously, leaning forward to examine the damage done to my make-up. There was none.

Thank the Higher Power, now leave it alone or you'll mess it up for real.

A sigh of relief escaped my lips, evenly coated with a matte, crimson red lipstick. It stuck like a shield, drying them out more than a week of persistently not moisturising would. I checked myself in time, not to lick them, straightened and casting a last, scrutinising glance at my dress I backed away. Headed for the door I had to parade through the entire crowd, which on one hand hid me quite effectively from the mirrors and my own unfavourable opinion of myself but on the other restricted breath so I had to admit, it was a relief to be spat from the horde out into the hallway.

My gaze lingered on the competition's schedule, copies of it plastered onto walls throughout the venue. Given there was no delay, the thirteen women will have to file out of the changing room onto the stage in around 10 minutes. They were in Jazz Unit Open, the finale. Them and four other teams – three to be soon bathing in their own glory on the podium, two who will leave home without so much as a medal. The category was estimated to last no more than a half hour, judges' debate time included. Immediately below the green stripe containing that information was a red one, stating Solo Modern 16+, semi-final. That was me. I would dance then. In my wildest dreams, I wasn't expecting to get this far. *Maybe quarters*, I thought but even that was highly unlikely, yet here I was. Qualified to semis. Good enough, apparently.

My legs strolled down the corridor but my mind wasn't controlling that. My mind rushed over the steps of my piece, lips muttering the eight count under my breath. I rounded the corner and climbed the stairs to the first floor, continued forward until I passed the food counter, gaze lingering on the chalkboard menu a little too long. Fries (small, medium, large); tortilla; burgers (quite a variety); pastas; pancakes.

Carbs only, pretty much. Guess I'm not eating here.

I winced at the image of all the oil, the liquid calories sizzling, bubbling, spilling from the roasting pans in the kitchen. Whatever that would do to my stomach. I'd rather not imagine.

I took one more left and ten rows of seats sloped down before me, terminating their advance right before the vinyl parquet. The lighting shifted, as expected, from harsh, unflattering white to that atmospheric glow, designed purely to elevate the dancer's appearance to godly standards. That lighting could make even the most muscular person, so ethereal, so flitting yet firm they seemed otherworldly, graceful and superior, better. Better than me.

I took a seat in the fourth row, counting from the bottom and rested my arms over my front, pushing imperceptibly down as if to straighten the folding skin just as the music hushed and the announcer's voice flowed through the speakers instead. Something rumbled beneath my hands but I suppressed the sound, fingers drilling with more urgency. Strange, how these noises emerged out of nothing. An emptiness. My stomach was hollow, the void left there on purpose since I couldn't afford my dress to look unflattering, not during today's competition. Many a time have I wondered at the biology behind it but never looked it up, afraid, perhaps, to find it a warning sign or a prelude to future health problems. Unless this hunger was a permanent state, I figured it couldn't do much harm. It hadn't so far, for what it's worth.

An eruption of applause and shrill shouts brought me back onto the dancefloor. The lamps over the audience dimmed in inverse proportion to the spot lights above the black vinyl. The tone of the beams was on the warmer side, though still possessing an ice-like glint. The cheers faded as it lingered on the bodies entering the stage.

Thirty eight beige, see-through socks assemble in a starting pose. The steps are muffled, lightweight, tapping the ground with precision of clockwork. The stream of them flowing before my eyes diverged, circled and settled into a V, like a spear pointed at my heart, missing only its spike until the last dancer sauntered between the two branches to complete the form. She lifted a piece of paper with their starting number, 28 printed on it, holding the audience's attention in one grip with the card and leaned forward to lay it on the floor, right before the judges' desk. Then two other women positioned directly at her sides came up behind her, while the next dancers in line, a pair of rigid men of equal height offered their shoulders, squeezing which she sprang from the ground.

They caught her legs in a side split and straightened their arms, making her stature tower over all the people in the room, while the women stretched to catch her palms in theirs for her to remain the unyielding sovereign of the spectators that she was. In the meantime the fourteen remaining people forming the shape's arms collapsed onto one another, wave crashing from upstage toward the acrobatic monument in perfect unison, each leaning on their neighbour in an elegant display of skill. The very front had their backs turned on the main woman, arching their spines to reach for her but not quite touching as if in Michelangelo's *Creation of Adam*. The arrangement solidified.

Their collective force pressed into the audience, elevated like the structure, accumulating until it reached the focal point and their stillness was dynamic, as if charged with a circuit-breaking current.

Weak, mellow wails seeped through the speakers. The form began to unwind. The metallic edge of the voice echoed in the silence soon joined by a keyboard's subtle chords. Elliot Moss's *Slip* poured over my ears.

The bodies were veiled in poise exerting an almost hypnotic effect on me. Each limb moved in accordance with the rest, muscles shifting beneath their taut, gleaming skin. Proportion, harmony, intention presided over their figures. Faces expressed awareness of their own perfection. No softness, no doubt or insecurity in those dancing marble sculptures. Flawless.

A hand rested on my shoulder. I jumped and turning around came face to face with my coach. Concern bent her brows, thin dents grooving her forehead as she whispered:

“Hey, sorry to bother, but I just got word from scheduling that your category had been postponed. Seems like we have to stay for more or less two additional hours,” she looked at her watch. I did as well. It was a few minutes short of seven pm, the sun was beginning to paint the sky outside. And we came here twenty past six in the morning.

“Look, I’ve informed the drivers already and they’ll wait so don’t worry.”

Still quite possessed by the charm of the spectacle at my back I needed to gather my thoughts. We were in the venue for over half a day, I haven’t slept much save for the scant few hours on the bus and the persistent turbulence in my stomach wasn’t helping.

“Shouldn’t you and the team go ahead to the hotel and I’ll join after I’m done?”

A scoff escaped her lips. “We wouldn’t miss you qualifying to finals for the world.”
If that happens, I thought and offered only sceptical quiet in reply.

“Did you eat something?” she inquired after a moment’s silence.

“I did.”

I didn’t.

“Great,” she patted me on the left arm and like a second-thought, “good luck.”

After an instant she was only a misty presence ascending the auditorium steps. The song had finished and everyone around me was clapping, sending out vibrations of respect and admiration, awe flowering on their faces. Claiming the ubiquitous reverence, the dancers had condensed in the centre of the parquet, aware of their indisputable victory. Already, they were bowing, nineteen as one, singular organism, filing off the stage in a double column, gone behind the backdrop’s expanse. But I was elsewhere.

First instincts dictated that I go and make good use of the additional time I was just granted – find a broader hallway to practice my routine, stretch myself a little further. Reason interjected, politely postulating for me to stay seated watching the performances until it was my turn – it knew I knew all the moves better than my own face. The last plea however, came from my stomach, which, without asking, made me get up and trail, trance-like toward the food counter I had passed earlier. Foot after foot, I climbed the stairs, weaved through the corridors and halted a few paces away from the source of the smell.

And what a smell that was. An intoxicating, greasy scent shrouding nostrils and clouding judgement. Would pasta show underneath my dress? Hunger reckoned to the contrary. I would dig up my wallet from somewhere in the changing room, eat with the speed of light so that it had enough time to digest and nobody would ever notice. A lanky woman in four-inch heels trained a questioning gaze on me, right eyebrow crinkled as she pattered by and vanished behind a bend in the hallway, regular needle-point beats resonating with her each step. My head shook as I came to my senses and realised how I must have looked lurking by the counter, unmoving, mutely glaring at the chalkboard menu. Willing my legs to resume their gait I searched, quite frantically, for a sliver of logic in my reflex-usurped brain. Back down the main staircase, into the changing room as brimming with bodies as it was before and I was pulling out a battered paperback from my tote, shoving the clothes to its bottom again. Clutching a phone in one hand, the slender novel in the other I made my way toward the venue's entrance eager to escape, even for a moment from the suffocating, unventilated interior saturated with sweat and desperation.

At the first blow of crisp, evening air my mind somersaulted, leaving me staggering towards the nearest bench and I collapsed, physically depleted. The sky was mulberry, stricken in spots with apricot ribbons of seeping sunlight. The bench sat underneath a streetlamp so the pages of my book reflected the glow, clusters of black letters all the more prominent. The breeze lashed at my cheeks in accord with the shuffling hiss of cars in the distance. My eyes slid over lines of text but none of their substance remained, wiped away as soon as I lost sight of sentences. Minutes ticked by on their ceaseless course and I sat and read and understood nothing of what I was reading.

Realising I finished a chapter, I shut the covers, shifted to stand up, did that and crumpled back onto the bench, eyes still open yet seeing only black.

...

Clamped on my shoulder, as I found later, was a hand of my coach, just as it was earlier, when she told me of the delay, except now she was shaking it with increased agitation. At that point I registered her touch, fingers ramming into the hollow below my collarbone but reacted no sooner than she'd let go, drawing in a breath to, I presumed, call for help. Catching hold of her wrist I opened my eyes also inhaling sharply, head bolting back as if it was re-enacting a tacky resurrection scene in some low-budget science fiction film. The forearm I was gripping trembled beneath my hold as she spun around and darted her gaze into mine.

“Christ, you’re alive,” she muttered. “I was getting worried.”

She stuck a palm to my forehead, splayed my eyelids and leaned in to examine the startled gaze that latched onto her own. Breaking away I blinked violently to shake away the last remnants of my momentary indisposition. A bone in my shoulder clicked as I twisted to sit up and tested the stability of my legs. Though before I had chance to do that her arm wound through mine as she transferred our collective weight onto herself. The more offended glances I shot her, the more firm her hold had grown. Still not quite capable of constructing a sound explanation of the recent events, I forsook attempts of regaining my dignity and propped against her staggered back towards the venue. A cramp on her face kept her lips sealed and we didn't exchange any words until she was leading me up the stairs on our way to the first floor.

My calves and quadriceps contracted and tensed. The arm tangled in my coach's was stiff and sore. I flexed my core against her pull. And still, one step at a time we ascended and I could hear our feet land, blunt and flat, on the tiles. The stairs ended, we rounded a bend. Before me was the food counter. No more than a meter wide, a narrow breach in the wall, a space so confined yet enclosing so many calories. I got sat down on a chair, a tabletop's glass chilled my elbows.

Next thing I knew my coach was standing at the counter, exchanging a couple of coins for a flimsy paper plate, overheated so that steam condensed and collected at its bottom. Droplets fell to the floor. She set it down, pushed it below my chin. Placed a napkin bundle with plastic utensils next to it.

“Eat,” she said.

Fuming whitish vapour, twelve dumplings slick with oil sat against a side of fries and quite a heap of them. Saliva slid down my throat as I swallowed. From the plate my gaze wandered up to meet the eyes of my coach. Both her eyebrows were now higher compared to their initial positions, their hooked curves firm in urgency. The utensils’ temperature was indefinite beneath my fingers. They folded away the napkin, curled around the plastic, picked it up. The fork steered toward a dumpling. Settled on its surface and pierced the dough. Then it veered up to my mouth and I bit it, chewed it. And I ate it. I reached for the next one and the next and another. Like a paper shredder, my lips caught the food, minced it and leaving me no time to taste it were already occupied with further business, more dumplings, occasionally a fry. The entire time my coach’s eyes were fixed on me, scrutinising. Towards the fifth one she spoke up:

“Finish them, take your things and we’re leaving.”

That’s when I stopped and for the first time in a while had a chance to breathe a bit deeper. But my breath, instead of accepting the opportunity, caught and so did a piece of dumpling in my trachea. Coughing and hitting my sternum I looked up at her, eyes glazed with tears.

“No way I’m letting you strain yourself any longer,” she said twisting her back and grabbing her purse, she pushed the chair away. Standing up she added, “I’ll be waiting in the hall,” and turned to leave. Fist tightening around the fork, I rose as well. My head spun, while vision momentarily tipped, blurred and I had to blink away a darkness.

“No, wait, I’m fine. I can dance. I’ll be fine.”

“What you’ll do is take it easy. I will see you in twenty minutes.” And she walked out on me.

I crashed back down on the chair. No. At the edges of my perception I became aware of the taste of a dumpling. As automatic as the movement of my hand was, I ate all that remained on the plate, thoroughly, until not a crumb was left. No. Slower than previously I stood up, one hand resting on the table for support, the other crumpling up the plate, soaked through with grease and water, still retaining some of the heat. Tossing the lump into a bin, I reached the staircase and perhaps a little too rapidly, given my current state, bolted down two steps at a time. Again I was overcome by a fit of blinking, the incessant veil threatening to descend over my eyes at any moment.

Looking up at the wall on my right sobered me up. The hands of a clock that was hung on it pointed out fifteen to nine and I couldn’t conceive of when the time had passed. At the mouth of the hallway the changing room door was ajar but the light that should have been seeping through the crack was cut off a person’s silhouette inside. There were voices and the closer I got, the more I heard and the first words whose meaning I fully comprehended were the following:

“... so dancers with numbers from 36 to 55 please wait backstage. You’ll be called on in five minutes.”

The hinges creaked when I was a few paces away from the entrance, a man emerged, most likely the stage traffic organiser who’d been speaking and in the haste I almost slammed into his chest. He retreated in time and releasing an offended huff looked down onto the sheet of paper safety-pinned to the bodice of my dress reading 52. I also gazed in that direction but the things he noticed weren’t a priority of mine. Lightly nudging me aside he went in the direction I’d come from. For my part, I stood suspended mid-motion, eyes drilling into my stomach.

There was a bump. The tight fabric of the dress hugging my body wasn’t running along my front in a straight line. There was a bump where there shouldn’t have been any.

My hand splayed over the dumplings hidden beneath layers of tissue, skin and cloth. The other joined covering the right palm. I sucked in a breath, my shoulders lifted, fingers carving into the soft surface. A hollow was heaving below my ribs in accord with my quick, shallow inhales as I tried my best to plaster my internal organs to the kidneys, better yet squeeze them so hard they would vanish. But they didn't and the bump reappeared when I let go of the hold I had on my muscles. Ripples went through the air coming out of my trembling nostrils.

A moment later the changing room door opened again and a cluster of twenty dancers spilled out – some chattering in a high pitch, others with eyes to the ceiling, gazes absent, seeing their choreographies play out in their minds. My hands flew to the sides of my body having torn away from my stomach as if guilty, humiliated. I sucked it in. Nobody bothered to look at me, so I let myself be swept away by the group marching backstage.

The only light dispersing the dimness of the backroom was trickling from the overhead reflectors of the parquet. Thick curtains hung stiff like a wall blocking the view but being hopelessly defenceless towards the sounds. Our eardrums assaulted by the music were at the point of bursting, confusion stemming from the lack of spatial recognition enhancing our uneasiness. All talk ceased, virtually pointless in the face of the speakers' thuds. Outlines of faces consisted only of the most protruding facial features, noses, foreheads, cheeks. When I think about it, I remember seeing mostly noses and the gleam of glitter catching the scant light on their tips. Bodies were immaterial, lost in darkness, anticipation and excitement. The music quietened reduced to a low hum thrumming at the backs of our skulls. The void left by so sudden a change oozed alarm. The man, who I bumped into a few minutes before, strode onto the middle of the vinyl flooring and flashed a dazzling smile in the direction of the audience. He was clapping, his head nodding rhythmically. When the enthusiasm mellowed he cleared his throat.

“What a stunning performance that was. And now a round of applause for the semi-finalists of Solo Modern, 16 and over.

Out of these twenty marvellous dancers only five will compete for the gold medal and in a moment we will learn, who they might be. Please welcome them warmly,” he said with a sweeping gesture of a hand towards the wings. “The floor is yours.”

Retreating to the right he exited the stage. Once more, applause erupted and there was nowhere to run. Only forward. So I did. Following the girl number 51, I surged through the curtains. The lights were blinding. Sounds deafening. People sat and stood in masses, filling every corner possible. Human bundles jostled at the parquet borders. Eyes squinting I bowed my head and inevitably faced the stomach. Through the mouth I drew in a breath sucking it in. In this position, I braced my abdominals but couldn't make them stop vibrating from the ridiculous effort of concealing that which wasn't meant to be hidden.

My head was pounding as I stared into the faces of reflectors. Vision blurring, sharpening and flashing in vibrant colours like a kaleidoscope I tried concentrating on the audience, on the judges. All the dancers dispersed on the dancefloor to find sufficient space for their routines. I darted towards the front-centre and posed sideways jutting my right hip forward, hands on the waist to display my starting number. At the edges of perception, I registered my abdominals metrically pulsating. We waited for the song, each to dance their own choreography at the same time, contrast allowing the judges to distinguish the outstanding.

Applause faded, lights dimmed their tone changing to a warmer hue. One hand at the nape of my neck with the elbow extending upward, the other arm clasped over the waist I kneeled, sitting on my heels assuming my starting pose. Seconds passed, one after another, the only sound audible being the whispering shuffle of spectators, of bodies. I waited and waited, motionless. Anxiety building up, I lifted my head to look for the cause of the music's delay and noticed a commotion ahead on my left. Someone was nudging their way through the crowd accompanied by a chant of “Excuse me. Sorry” over and over again. A reddened face emerged to the front of the line and my breath hitched. Its eyebrows were drawn, half in worry, half in fury and from below, the eyes glared straight at me. My coach's eyes.

The arm over my stomach squeezed tighter as the speakers clicked and a singer's voice resonated in the air. And so it began. With the first phrases everything moved around me, all dancers stirred into motion. Uncoiling, stretching, leaping they started their routines, faces inspired, glides graceful, kicks controlled and I still sat on my heels, gaze arrested on my coach, fingernails digging into my back. The song, *Hunger* by Florence + The Machine, kept playing, ignorant of my inability to move. The intro was coming to a close. I had to move.

Every one of my trainings poured into view in my head and I saw myself dancing, I remembered having practiced my routine countless times yet I couldn't pick out any particular move, not one helping hand offered itself to me. Throwing my head sideways I glimpsed a girl doing a backward shoulder-split roll. So I did it too. The lyrics commenced.

The smooth vinyl surface was soothing beneath my hands as I pushed up and held onto it during a front walkover. The curved arch of my foot rested softly on the floor when I rose from a backbend with arms overhead and already I was sliding forward, passing by a spinning dancer, his posture rigid but ductile in fouetté turns. My core gave, I felt the plasticity of my muscles, knew I could rely on their strength. But as I moved I realised – not only strength. The routine, the steps I'd been tirelessly repeating – they were there with me. In my mind as mere images, flashes of recognition but in my legs, arms, my back as a living being. Like an animal with a will of its own, my body danced and only when the keys of the intro were joined by a drumbeat did my thoughts catch on. The mirrors of training rooms reflecting my past selves pictured in my brain matched up with what I was doing then. Methodically I flew through the choreography. Not having to think of my next action, avoiding collision with people around me I danced like the wind adjusting form to its surroundings, a force with fluid, adaptable shape and grace – imposing at times but rightfully revered for its organic power.

I needed that boundless liberty of the dancefloor. I felt free. And at that moment my stomach didn't matter one bit, the bump was lost to emotion, gone among the core twisting, heaving, swift movements erasing all guilt, eradicating shame. How I loved dancing... At that moment I remembered why, sensed the overflowing passion and the best thing about it was that it showed – surged forward, embedded itself in the tiniest fibres of my muscles and exuded outward. The costume, the makeup, the hair were irrelevant faced with my euphoric ardour, my body's skills in action.

I leapt, bent, bowed and straightened, stretched and spun. My body recalled everything. I threw one fist forward letting myself follow the impulse. Placing the left foot before the right I crouched down in preparation and brought my legs up in the final jump, a centre leap. Landing on the right I stamped my left foot on the vinyl in time with a beat and let the other join. I was done. The end.

Others took on their final poses. We went still. Except, maybe for our chests heaving, catching oxygen to make up for the past minute's shortage. For a while heavy breaths were the only sound. Then the audience exploded, cheering, clapping, chanting. Lights flashed brighter. Among all this I stood and I was happy. There is no simpler way to put it and I also don't suppose there's need to elaborate. Quite plainly – I was happy.

Figures lifted from deep bows and retreated towards the backdrop, once more assembling in a line, numbers increasing in magnitude from left to right given judges' perspective. Checking that the two women at my sides were indeed 51 and 53, I settled in the spot, inhaled, exhaled and with each repetition kept slowing down my breathing rate by a fraction.

Before us the judges were leaning into the middle of the table, hushed voices undecipherable from such distance. Some heads nodded, while others raised brows casting sideways glances at our line but briskly reverting back to their notepads.

The man on the rightmost chair was punching in numbers, dictated to him by his neighbour, to a calculator. He must have hit equals and slid the device to the central woman, who caught it between two of her red, pointy acrylics, then held it up closer to her face. A little ways off the table my coach, absently jostled around by the swarming populace had her eyes stuck on me. Turning my head to confront her, it instantly tilted, muscles orchestrated by suspicion bordering on distrust. Her mouth was turned downward in a deprecating smile, features loose, weary from having to deal with the obstinacy of yours truly. A snort escaped my lips and I could see that she laughed as well.

The middle woman, designated as the committee's chairperson, rose from her seat crumpling a piece of paper between her knife-sharp fingers. She sent a scrutinising look racing over our bodies starting at 36, finishing at 55. The audience hushed when she cleared her throat.

“Qualified to the finale at tomorrow's Gala are dancers with numbers,” she paused eyeing us again. “Numbers 37, 45, 46, 49 and 52. Thank you all for participation.” Disappointed sighs sounded around me. She said 52. Did she say 52? Neck darting downwards to see my waist, I sought confirmation of whether it was my number. It was.

This was the last category of the night. Audience thinned, the dense mass leaked people through the exits. Dancers sauntered off the stage. But I stood, inert. And as I did I wondered, if it was anyhow worth it to have had tormented myself over the way I looked, when I could do things I deemed out of reach. What did it possibly matter that my thighs weren't as sculpted as I wished, that the curves didn't quite have the angles I desired, that the scale always jeered in my face offering me numbers I hated? I knew very well that as intact as this reasoning was, in the future I would reproach myself again but maybe, just maybe the memory of this evening would diminish the accusations a little. Maybe I will be more forgiving and understanding of the fact that the food I ate was fuel, imperative for my abilities to flourish. Perhaps I'll develop a new trust.

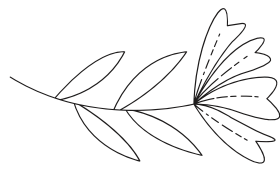
The muscles of my face contracted around my lips, which bloomed into a smile.



Wiktorija



Wiktorija is an athlete, and artist, and a campaigner for body positivity. During the project, she focused her efforts on raising awareness about skinny shaming. Wiktorija believes that for body positivity to be a uniting movement, we have to make sure that there is space to communicate the unobvious and oftentimes trivialised facts about our relationship with our bodies. In the world that glamorises lean and toned bodies, it is important to remember that even though it might look like you have almost reached the ideal, you also have to deal with hate. For Wiktorija, body positivity is about staying away from judgement and accepting ourselves.



Skinny Shaming

by Wiktorina

Nowadays, we often hear about eating disorders. It is a popular topic, which people can read easily about on the internet. Unfortunately, a lot of schools around the world don't educate their students about such important topics. It often causes the spread of false information. Teenagers hear about problems that their peers of the same age struggle with. It usually seems to be weird and not normal for them to live a day and overthink every single part of their bodies. In this essay, I would like to present an objective perspective on skinny shaming which is an often forgotten side of body shaming.

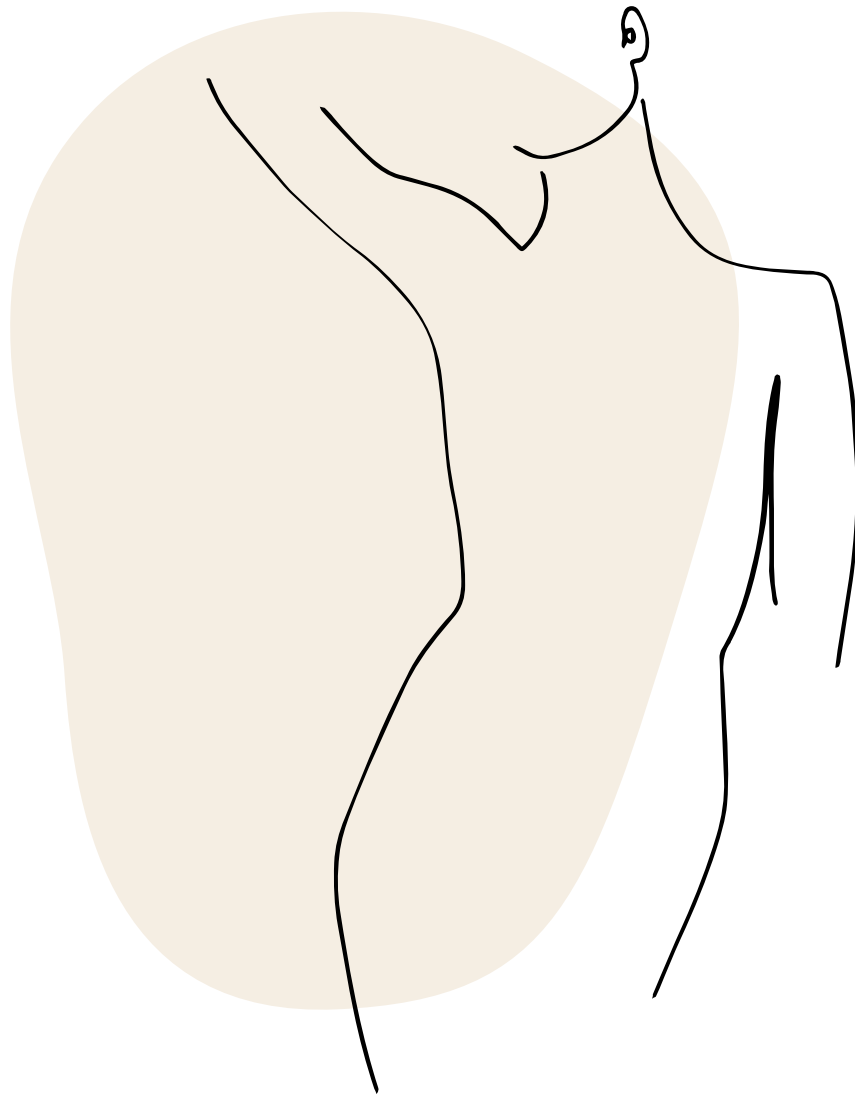
Over the years people with bigger masses were picked out and made fun of. In the past, chubby people were perceived as rich because they were able to afford food in comparison to peasants that were starving most of the days. Throughout the years the beauty standards drastically have changed. Nowadays the thinner body is a goal of many young people because a healthy life is promoted. Many people want to lose weight and everyone can easily find an article about it. Multiple girls write about wanting to be skinny and how the life of such a person is better. But is it?

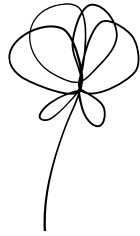
Throughout the last decades, social media became very popular and were used by many young people. The popular influencers that teenagers often look up to create unachievable beauty standards that make younger audiences self-conscious. Celebrities use filters and photoshop to model their bodies which creates a lot of pressure on people with smaller mass. The younger generation is used to following trends and looks that are presented by their favorite artists, which can cause a lot of contravention. The body is viewed by thousands of people daily and can create doubts in adolescents' minds. Encouraging to look unnaturally creates more pressure on skinny people because not everyone can be skinny for various reasons, and it's perfectly fine. Every size of the body is perfect in its way, smaller or bigger.

The modeling industry is unhealthy for people. Not only do many producers require models to look unnatural (which is sometimes really unhealthy) but also many photographers have no shame to say to a model's face that they are 'too fat'. Many of them are extremely skinny and that kind of requirement can mess with their heads. On the other hand, on the internet in the comment section many models receive comments from 'specialists' about how unhealthy their habits are. Many of those models, work out regularly and eat healthily and they do not starve themselves to have a thin body. We can see muscles and toned abs that prove their hard work. Many people mention them looking hungry. Of course, we can hear about a model starving themselves just to get to a dream show, but it's not everyone! We have to remember that we can't just assume things just because it looks like that.

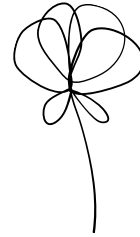
All over the internet multiple different accounts write how they wish to be skinny, that a skinny person have so much better and easier in life. Unfortunately, many people don't see things that thinner people struggle with. The pressure from the environment and comments such as; "I wish I have a body like that", "I wish I were skinny", "you cannot complain about your body, because you are skinny" are not helping. In my situation, it made me feel more guilty and after hearing these kinds of "compliments" I have started to cover up more often. Wearing oversized clothing made me feel so much better than tight clothing, because no one could see my body. The thoughts such as "Why can't I just appreciate the way I look?" occurred in my mind and I blamed myself for it. Grabbing my ankles or even comparing the size of the wrists made me self-conscious. They bothered me and I couldn't stand hearing the comment about my weight. I had a battle of thoughts in my head all the time and I couldn't stop but feel guilty. Even though, I wanted to gain some weight it was hard for me. Often after gaining a few kilograms, I lost them quickly and it all happened all over again. Saying that someone would want to look like them makes them uncomfortable and they overthink everything. "Why am I complaining?" were my thoughts after hearing people 'compliment' me. It made me even more scared to show my body. I was afraid of people's stares thinking "is something wrong with me?". I had multiple friends and even adults who pointed out my weight and said that I am only skin and bones. I heard also from multiple people words such as "wieszak" or "patyk". Is comparing a human being to a stick or a hanger fun?

Being skinny is not that easy. Personally, at some point in my life, I started to hate the word 'skinny'. Many people use that word and use it with an insulting tone. Is it okay to insult people just because you think they are underweight? It's not okay to insult people just because you think they are underweight? It's not acceptable to offend people with bigger masses and that goes both ways. Although people nowadays talk a lot about the topic of body shaming while talking they often exclude the part about skinny shaming. Making stupid comments about being not a woman because ' a real woman is curvy' or making a spectacle of the fact that you could wrap a hand around someone's wrist or ankle is not and never will be fun. People think that because they don't call a person fat, it is perfectly fine to say unnecessary comments





Matteo



Matteo is a professional fencer, a traveller and a polyglot. His broad perspective on the world allows him to see beyond what's on the surface of human experiences. In our Body Positivity PDS Project Matteo was concentrating his efforts on raising awareness about body positivity as he firmly believes that we should all be allowed to feel comfortable and accepted in our own bodies. Matteo appreciated the transformative power of sharing our universal human experiences.

