



POSITIVITY AND WEIGHT MANAGEMENT:
A Look at the Gains

A Perspective by Dr. Renee Engeln

Psychologist and Body Image Expert, Northwestern University



Imagine you overhear two women talking about their bodies.

WHAT DO YOU THINK THAT CONVERSATION WOULD SOUND LIKE?
CHANCES ARE IT WOULD SOUND SOMETHING LIKE THIS:



Researchers call this particular type of conversation “*fat talk*.” If this griping sounds familiar to you, you are not alone.

In my Body and Media lab at Northwestern University, we have been studying fat talk for several years. All of our evidence suggests there are a lot of reasons to be worried about fat talk. The good news is that a new study by **Special K** suggests there are a lot of good reasons for women to try more positive ways of thinking and talking about weight management.

But before we get to that, there are a few important things to know about fat talk.

First, lots of women are doing it. Converging lines of evidence from several labs, including my own, suggest that fat talk has become commonplace behavior. In fact, women who don’t engage in fat talk are unusual.

Women tend to think sharing this distress with other women will help them feel better. However, a growing body of evidence suggests fat talk is a recipe for more dissatisfaction and worry, not less. What is more alarming is that even *overhearing* someone else fat talk can make a woman feel worse about her body. Research conducted in my lab has also documented how fat talk can be contagious, leading to a destructive cycle that leaves everyone feeling worse and ultimately undermines healthy choices.

THIS NEW STUDY BY **SPECIAL K**, ENTITLED “POSITIVITY AND WEIGHT MANAGEMENT: A LOOK AT THE GAINS,” TAKES A NOVEL PERSPECTIVE BY FOCUSING ON WHAT WOMEN CAN GAIN WHEN THEY ADOPT A POSITIVE APPROACH TO WEIGHT MANAGEMENT. AMONG THE FINDINGS ABOUT POSITIVE THINKERS:



They are substantially less likely to engage in self-disparaging talk (only 18% of positives admit to making negative comments about their bodies, compared to more than 77% of negative weight managers).



Even more promising, they are more likely to intervene and put a stop to fat talk when others complain about their bodies, a key step in breaking this negative cycle.



They are more likely to have reported that they met their specific weight loss goals, and they also report that they are 25% more likely to have succeeded in maintaining their weight.



They were actually eight times less likely to report having gained weight than women who think negatively.

From my perspective, the most compelling finding from **Special K**'s research is that 92% of positive weight managers say they appreciate their body for what it's capable of doing. This is a fantastic cue to all women. Let's change the way we view ourselves. Let's acknowledge and appreciate all the amazing things our bodies do for us every day, no matter what size we are. We are not defined by a number on a scale. Let's choose inspiration and let that be our motivation for change.

In summary, this study underscores the fact that *words have weight*, both positive and negative. It's up to us to make the smart choice — to choose the power of positive attitude to shape our bodies and our communities in healthy ways. In the end, when we lose the negative attitudes, we all stand to gain.

RENEE ENGELN, Ph.D.



Dr. Renee Engeln is a psychologist and body image researcher at Northwestern University. The focus of Dr. Engeln's research is women's body images, with a particular emphasis on cultural practices that create or enforce the frequently contentious relationships women have with their bodies. Dr. Engeln is committed to conducting research that can help move women toward a way of being that focuses more on the type of person one is instead of the way one looks.

