

# An appetite for self-improvement is more embarrassing than overeating

Getting help with weight loss is a confession of weakness and need that few are comfortable displaying publicly

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There are lean times ahead for Britain's high streets: [Weight Watchers](#) is opening a chain of shops. And, if you hated that joke, take comfort from the fact that its days are numbered. As obesity rather than thinness becomes established as the west's poverty signifier, lean-equals-broke will have no resonance in the shiny, sweaty, globulous and wheezing future.

The rich thincats of the decades to come will pay good money to remain skinny, and the aspirant plump to become so, which is presumably why Weight Watchers thinks it's on to a winner with these new "Lifestyle Centres", which will provide one-to-one weight-loss consultations and "express weigh-ins" and in general will, as spokesman Chris Stirk puts it, "offer a more personalised and flexible service for busy people like working mums and office workers who can pop in when they have time".

You can see the way they're styling themselves: it's weight loss for today's busy, connected, results-orientated fat person. It's for the fatty on the move, wobbling dynamically from one meeting to the next: they've only got time to hop on those scales and get a pep talk from a dietician, before whizzing off to their next appointment, executive moo moo billowing in their wake. If they haven't had time for lunch (unlikely but possible), they might get one of the centres' "grab and go" meals, such as their 243-calorie prawn mayonnaise sandwich, which would probably leave you hungry, but that's OK because, on a British high street, there's bound to be a [KFC](#) next door.

But will this catch on? Won't people be embarrassed to be seen wandering into a high-street weight-loss centre, however much it adopts the rhetoric of business class? Going there is still an admission that you're worried about your weight, of lack of confidence. In normal-sized people this might betray poor self-esteem; in the skinny, it looks anorexic; and, even in the demonstrably obese, it would be a sign that they're not as proud of "who they are" as we're all supposed to be nowadays. Getting help with weight loss is a brave confession of weakness and need – but few are comfortable displaying those traits publicly.

[A survey into women's attitudes to exercise](#) conducted for [mental health](#) charity Mind suggests this sort of embarrassment might be a problem for the centres. More than half of those questioned said they were too self-conscious to exercise in public. Fears of unforgiving Lycra, "wobbly bits", sweating or going red, lead them to try to get fit, if they try at all, very early in the morning or late at night. So that's why

everyone you see jogging looks intimidatingly fit! The flabby do their running under cover of darkness.

It's easy to understand their feelings. Watching a fat or unfit person jog evokes two main responses. First, it's funny – in the way a pratfall is funny. It's a physical misfortune that's happening to somebody else. The sweaty, panting discomfort, the glazed-over expression of dread, the pink-and-cerise-pocked face, the hilariously slow rate of progress that has nevertheless proved so exhausting, the thought of the cakes and ale that went before – you want to laugh. And the runner knows you want to laugh.

Worse still is the other simultaneous response: sympathy, empathy, even pity. Most of us have been there or think, if we broke into a run, we'd soon find ourselves there. But those feelings are seldom welcomed, any more than it is soothing when you bump your head for someone to say: "Ooh, that must have hurt!" On some deep evolutionary level, we reject this pity – maybe we sense that it leads gradually but inevitably to people concluding that we may be surplus to the tribe's requirements.

Our aversion to sympathy for quite trivial misfortunes is laid bare when you watch someone narrowly miss a train or bus. Almost everyone, in the moment it becomes clear they're not going to catch it, tries to make it look like they didn't really want to. "It's fine, I was just kind of jogging anyway – I'd rather get the next one" is what they're desperate to convey, in the face of all the evidence to the contrary. Even



those who go the other way and express annoyance usually do it in a slightly performed way; they are portraying an annoyed person, but concealing their true desire, which, more than to have caught the train or bus, is now for the ground to swallow them up. It is very rare to see annoyance unselfconsciously or unashamedly expressed in those moments – I certainly can't do it myself.

As a species, we seem much more comfortable with implausible shows of empty pride than unremarkable admissions of weakness. This may explain the existence of the [Heart](#)

[Attack Grill](#) in [Las Vegas](#), which offers free meals to anyone weighing over 25 stone, and where last week a woman suffered a cardiac arrest while eating one of their "double bypass burgers". She was also drinking a margarita and smoking a cigarette, but was being abstemious compared to the establishment's previous heart-attack victim, a man tucking into a "[triple bypass burger](#)" in February. Presumably one of the things those customers are trying to say is: "We know what we're doing – we're going into this with our eyes open. We're unafraid, we're not running away from

anything, and that's not just because we'd immediately be drenched in sweat if we tried."

We humans have a deeply conservative instinct that we should know our place: paupers should stay in hovels and kings on thrones. Gyms should be full of fit people exercising, diners full of fat ones eating. Everyone just being and no one trying. It's the trying, the aspiration, that people find threatening – trying to get a better job, move somewhere nicer, lose weight. And that's why those who are doing it feel vulnerable.

Can Weight Watchers outlets thrive on the high street? I hope so, but I doubt it. More than they're ashamed of over-eating or buying pornography or missing a train, people are ashamed of wanting to change themselves. They fear they can't and that others will resent the attempt. That's why fat people exercise by night.

- 1 What are the main points the writer makes? (8 marks)
- 2 How does he use language? (16 marks)