

Big bodies can also bend it

Not looking the part is no reason to avoid exercise classes - or to teach them, writes **Thea O'Connor**.

When I tell people I'm a yoga instructor, they usually look at me in a funny way, like I'm joking," says Sarah Harry, of Ashwood, Melbourne. The thing is, Harry is a yoga instructor with thighs that touch, all the way down.

She is also a counsellor and heads up Body Positive Australia, a provider of treatment services for people with eating disorders and body image issues. She took up teaching for the sake of her clients. "I'd suggest yoga to my clients, as it can really help them connect with their bodies in a positive way," says Harry. "But many were reluctant to even try it. All the yoga journals tend to feature

When I tell people I'm a yoga teacher .. they try and figure out if I'm joking or not.

young, thin, white females doing acrobatic poses, which would put them off. And if they did try a class, they struggled to find a teacher who could include them, and make adjustments for their body type."

"It's actually not that hard to make adjustments for boobs, bellies and bottoms, it just takes time and care," says Harry whose clients range from the very thin to the very large, from 18 to 70-year-olds.

Anna Guest-Jelley, founder and CEO (curvy executive officer) at Curvy Yoga in Nashville in the US, trains other yoga teachers in conducting inclusive classes that accommodate full-figured students. Guest-Jelley, who is "curvy" herself, attracts a similar response to Harry when she reveals her

trade. "When I tell people I'm a yoga teacher, I typically get one of three responses: a quizzical look while they figure out if I'm joking or not; over-enthusiasm to show how "with it" they are - 'oh, how cooooooool!?', or a guffaw - usually followed by a sheepish grin when they figure out I'm not joking," says Guest-Jelley. "These things do happen to me as a fat yoga teacher, but most of the time people come into class, see me and feel palpable relief."

Fat prejudice runs deep in Western culture, including among those who are at the forefront of promoting physical activity. Physical education students displayed higher levels of anti-fat prejudice than their fellow psychology students or other health professionals, according to a 2007 study published in the *International Journal of Obesity*, involving 344 university students.

"There's a fear that if you accept fat people, you are condoning an unhealthy lifestyle," says Guest-Jelley. "But I want to challenge the notion that shame is what's going to encourage people to be healthy. What could make you less excited about being healthy than feeling like you're worthless?" says Guest-Jelley.

Cassandra Barrett, 24, of St Kilda, struggles to put into words just how much her experience of exercise has been damaged by the stigma associated with fatness.

"The perception of fat people as inactive and unfit is so pervasive," she says. "I had completely internalised the stereotype of fat people as lazy and disgusting, such that just the thought of exercising in public provoked extreme anxiety



Balancing act: Sarah Harry, counsellor and curvy yoga teacher.

"As a child I would feign illness on the day of the sports carnival, begging my parents to let me stay home. I was terrified of being slower than the other children, or teased because of my body. My primary school 'friends' always wanted to play 'Jenny Craig' at recess - a game that involved making me run laps around the schoolyard while they shouted about how fat I was."

As an adult, she avoided walking outside, because of the "insults I've had hurled at me from passing cars, such as 'fat bitch,' 'keep running fatty,' or 'lose some weight'".

Since immersing herself in therapy and learning to critically examine cultural dictums about how women's bodies "should" be, Barrett no longer allows fear of judgment to hold her back.

She's started yoga with Harry, and has bought real bathers and started swimming

Fat facts

Health at Every Size (haescommunity.org) promotes acceptance of diverse body shapes and sizes, supporting people to adopt healthy habits for the sake of their wellbeing rather than weight control.

Fitness matters more than fatness

"Fat but fit people tend to have better health outcomes than those who are normal weight but unfit," says Professor Steve Blair, of the Department of Exercise Science at the University of California. He bases his finding on 25 years of research and a sample of more than 80,000 people.

Fat-prejudice is prevalent*

- 28 per cent of teachers said becoming obese was the worst thing that could happen to a person.
- 24 per cent of nurses said that they were "repulsed" by obese people.
- Parents provide less college support for their overweight children than they did for their thin children.

*These findings are from a review of discrimination against overweight and obese individuals published in *Obesity Research 2001*. Since then, weight discrimination has increased by 66 per cent in the US, making it comparable to racism, according to a review in *Obesity 2009*.

which she hadn't done since she was 10.

"Until now, it never occurred to me that exercise could be something I actually enjoyed, something that I do to respect and nurture my body," Barrett says.

"I wistfully think how different it could have been if, from a young age, I was encouraged to be active because it was fun, or made me strong, rather than something I had to do to lose weight."

At the end of March, Harry is doing her bit to put the fun back into moving, offering Australia's first "body positive" retreat in Byron Bay, specifically catering for women of all body types.

"Many larger women simply can't imagine exercise being fun, but if it's not enjoyable, people won't stick with it," says Harry, who embraces the paradigm that health and fitness come in all shapes and sizes.