

The Australia Institute

Research that matters.

TITLE: Obesity, a cure for loss of identity

AUTHOR: Clive Hamilton

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Fat people are disgusting. They take up too much space and offend our sense of attractiveness. They are lazy, unfit and unhealthy. They let themselves go and don't have any self-respect. Can't they exercise a bit of self-control like the rest of us?

These harsh sentiments about obese people are widely held in Australia. Yet the hostility that fat people attract is way out of proportion to any offence they might cause.

Usually we hate what we fear becoming, or more so, what we won't admit we already are. Fat people expose our guilty secret of overconsumption. The evidence of their chosen form of over-indulgence goes wherever they do but is it any more conspicuous than the thin person who builds an ostentatious house or drives an expensive car?

We all engage in strategies to bolster our sense of self. Several psychological studies have shown that, for all of the consumer and lifestyle choices the market has opened up to us, we feel less in control of our lives than ever and more prone to the invasions, slights, and anxieties of a hostile world.

Some eat their way to security. Almost one third of adult Australians take drugs or other substances to bolster themselves psychologically. Others dream of escape. Many devote themselves to their appearance, and millions just go out and shop.

None of these coping strategies works in the long term and when they fail we feel defenceless. One woman spoke of being plagued by obesity. She described how she worked hard at returning herself to a healthy weight.

She succeeded but now feels much more vulnerable, as if the layers of fat were a suit of armour worn to protect her from the intrusions of the outside world. When she was fat, people gave her a wide berth at the shopping centre; now they brush past her, invading her space and making her feel exposed.

Losing her armour was a double blow, for previously, she could overeat in response to her distress; now she has lost both her protection along with her means of dealing with anxieties that get through her weakened defences.

Another woman wrote on the website of Overeaters Anonymous: "In the insanity of it all, I was surrounding my body in fat as a protective layer, so bad things and nasty comments couldn't pierce the protective fat layer."

Most of us are thin-skinned in this way. In a world where we feel out of control and overwhelmed, the home becomes ever more important as a sanctuary. Our need for it makes it all the more irritating, indeed distressing, when this sacred place is subject to invasions by neighbourhood noise or other incursions. The purchase of large four-wheel-drives and the spread of private security can also be understood in these terms.

The claim that overconsumption is a method of dealing with modern insecurity and everyday anxiety is supported by those who understand us best: the marketers. Affluenza, and especially the boom in spending on so-called luxury goods, reflects not so much the growth in prosperity but the spread of the anxiety and self-doubt.

One marketing executive put it bluntly: "Most people don't have a sense of self-worth. Buying luxury goods makes us feel special and successful. They make us feel valuable in a world that often tests our sense of self-worth."

This is how we are seen by the marketers, whose job is to get us to keep spending. And they are right. After all, the relentless pursuit of higher incomes among those already wealthy must have a powerful driving force.

At least obese people are honest about their foibles. "Here I am," they declare, "take me or leave me", while those who spend up in the boutiques and the prestige car yards want us to believe that they are as their purchases make them appear.

While we stigmatise fat people, perhaps they are behaving normally in a sick social environment. The answer then is not diets, drugs and surgery but a wholesale change in the culture of consumption, which itself is a reaction to the emptiness of affluence.

Maybe we need a new organisation, Overconsumers Anonymous, to provide us all with a 12-step plan in which we first must admit we have lost control and then submit ourselves to a higher power. It may turn out to be a less painful way of coping with our addiction to stuff than being swallowed up by consumer debt when the economy turns sour.

Clive Hamilton is executive director of The Australia Institute and co-author of Affluenza.