
Weighing Ourselves Down

Scale Stories

ABSTRACT Bodyweight—the number on the scale—has been constructed as an objective measure of health, and weight loss as synonymous with healthier. Weight has been used as a way of *classifying* and *controlling* people, ignoring the embodied, relational, and cultural meanings attached to health and weight. Instead, these subjective experiences are lumped into a numerical category. Our society's obsession with weight is weighing us down and most of us should toss out our scales. Scale stories offer a departure from canonical narratives about physical health and body image by emphasizing emotions and lived experiences instead of bodyweight and numerical categories. **KEYWORDS:** Weight loss; BMI; Obesity; Body image; Autoethnography

More than four decades ago, 249 businessmen from Minnesota stripped down to their skivvies for physiology professor Ancel Keys and his colleagues. Each man was weighed, measured from head to toes, and pinched with calipers on his tricep and upper back. Based on these measurements and those of other men from around the globe, Keys and colleagues argued that the Body Mass Index (BMI), the ratio of the weight in kilograms divided by the square of the height in meters, was the best measure for relative bodyweight and obesity.¹ This was great news for life insurance companies. They now had a measure for squeezing more dough out of the pockets on our expanding waistlines.

Belgian statistician and sociologist Adolphe Quetelet developed the Index in 1832 to “define the characteristics of the normal man and fit. . . the distribution around the norm.”² The BMI assigns you a number, placing you into one of four categories: underweight, normal weight, overweight, obese. Because it is cheap and easy, the BMI has become one of the most popular health measures in the United States, despite its imprecision in measuring a variety of health outcomes and distortion of health and obesity statistics:

Our society has accepted these BMI standards as absolute criteria for health. The unfortunate consequence is that we have forgotten the call

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to reduce weight to improve health and replaced it with the cry of weight loss at any cost.³

Arkansas even passed legislation requiring public schools to calculate students' BMI and print it on their report card.⁴ *Sorry little Suzy, that big number on your report card isn't your GPA. The school thinks you're obese, not smart. Have a great day.* When you hear politicians blabbering on about the growing problem of obesity in the United States, the statistics they spout off are based on BMI calculations. I happen to be one of the United States' growing problems, according to their rules. It only took a few seconds on the National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute online BMI calculator for them to tell me I am overweight and about a Twinkie® away from obese.

Keys warned that the BMI is not meant for individual cases because it does not discriminate among fat, muscle, and water, and because it ignores gender and age. He did not ask any women to strip down, at least not in the name of science. And all those nearly naked men were between 18 and 59 years old. Many people treat the scale as if it offers an impartial truth about their health. We are led to believe we can predict and control our health by predicting and controlling the number on the scale. "Weight has become synonymous with health status, and weight loss with healthier."⁵ But the number on the scale does not always match up with the categories of health we are *supposed* to attach to the number. Bodyweight is constructed differently across contexts, families, relationships, and individual bodies.

WEIGHT ≠ HEALTH; WEIGHT ≠ BODY SHAPE AND SIZE

Scale stories are a departure from canonical narratives about health and body image. The number on the scale only matters insofar as we learn the *meanings* one attaches to that number. Scale stories call the number into question, showing that scales tell us little about our health and bodies, and sometimes even mislead us. The number ignores the embodied, emotional, relational, and cultural meanings of health and weight. The scale is a sneaky servant of science: turning the body into an object that can be measured and reduced to a number—a cause of unhealthy body images and eating disorders.

Who might benefit from reading, writing, and sharing scale stories, other than those itching to be swept up by a story? Those who are making conscious efforts to improve their physical health, perhaps by exercising more and focusing on a healthier diet; those who are trying to change their bodies—make them smaller, remove fat, make them bigger, add

muscle (notice I did not say “those who want to lose or gain weight”); those who are struggling with their body image; those who have been diagnosed—clinically, culturally, self—with an eating disorder; men, who are often afraid to talk vulnerably about their bodies; and doctors and health policymakers who still use bodyweight and the BMI as a standard for health procedures and policies.

27 May 1988, 4:58 p.m.: **7 lbs, 15.5 oz**

“It’s going to feel like you’re taking a poop,” says the doctor.

“That’s it. Keep pushing.”

My mom looks up at the blurry ceiling and puts all her weight into one final push. She falls in love “the moment she lays eyes on me” despite me being naked and crying. Doesn’t seem like a good first impression to me. My dad stands beside the hospital bed protecting the heart he helped make beat.

Moments later, a nurse lays me down on a metal basket tray.

“Any guesses?” she asks.

“Eight and half” another nurse guesses.

The number reveals the *truth*. 7 pounds, 15.5 ounces.

August 1999: **190 lbs**

“Alright, Nathan go ahead and step on.” I step onto the scale and the nurse moves the bottom slide to 150, then moves the top slide to the right. 160, 170, 180, 187. . . 188. . . The beam starts moving toward the middle. 189. . . 190. The beam levels out.

“190 pounds,” the nurse says. She measures my height and takes me to a private room.

“Okay, I need you to lift your shirt up. We’re going to do a body fat test.”

I can’t remember the last time I received an A on a test, and I have a feeling my luck isn’t about to turn around on this one. I nervously lift my World Wrestling Federation t-shirt. She stares at the flesh hanging over my 38-inch waist, then uses her metal calipers to pinch a handful of fat from my lower stomach. She continues the test, pinching flab on my tricep.

“Looks like you’re 32%, Nathan.”

I fail.

After the sports physical, I spend the basketball season as the heaviest sixth grader on the team. Andrew Jones, one of the players who didn’t score *only* two points the entire season is forced to run sprints after practice when the coach overhears him calling me a *fat ass*. Of all things to call fat? He’s not the only one

though. I've heard it all: *Fatty. Fatso. Chubby. Tubby. Put down the brownies. Put on a bra.* It's not just words either. My fat boobs make easy titty-twister targets. And when my friends squeeze my fat rolls, the anger that escapes from my gut finds another victim—someone poorer or richer, dumber or smarter, fatter or skinnier. Like my friend Tyler, that dumb, four-eyed fatty.

After basketball, I start my second year of wrestling. The highest weight class in my age group—Novice—is 140 pounds with a + added for each 30 pounds after. I wrestle Novice 140++. My dad introduced my brother and me to wrestling last year at the local youth club. We grew up listening to his wrestling stories, a state runner-up in the 98-pound weight class as a senior for Crawfordville High School.

“Didn’t even wrestle varsity my freshman year. Too damn little,” Dad says, reflecting on his glory days. *83 pounds, that’s what he’s going to say he weighed,* I tell myself, having heard the story countless times.

“Only weighed about 83 pounds soakin’ wet. Lightest weight class was 98 pounds.”

Now that I was a wrestler, I needed a wrestling dummy to practice on. My brother is 100 pounds lighter and better at everything we both do—sports, grades, video games—but don’t tell him that. He always has been, but who wants to be the second-best brother? Not me. If you can’t beat ’em, beat ’em up. That’s my philosophy, at least until I find a way to stand out.⁶

Working my way to this super-super heavyweight class doesn’t come easy. I earn it with a strict diet of bologna, oatmeal cream pies, macaroni and cheese, and pop. As a kid, I eat whatever my parents buy and tell me to eat. Mom says, “We bust ass just to put food on the table. You’ll eat what’s on your plate or go hungry.” I never go hungry. Fried bologna sandwiches are my favorite. Mom cuts an *x* in the middle of the round lunchmeat to keep the meat from bubbling up and looking like a meaty sombrero while it sizzles in the pan. Put on some cheese, put it in between two slices of white bread, grab a bag of ’tater chips, crack open a pop, and you get an idea of what most of my lunches look like. Breakfast is for cereals—the kind that tastes like candy and has games on the box. Mom says all that sugar is gonna’ rot my teeth out but she keeps buying them. *When you work long, exhausting hours and live paycheck-to-paycheck, healthy nutrition and exercise aren’t exactly your top priorities.*⁷

February 2001: 165 lbs

I step off the scale in the men’s locker room. I’m already down 25 pounds in my first season of junior high wrestling. It’s the first time I ever remember losing

weight. Loss is progress. I weigh before and after practice Monday through Friday. Weighing every day, I develop a consciousness of my weight I'd never had before. I think in tenths of pounds. Throughout the day I think about how a drink here, sweating there, a meal here, a walk there, and a pee here, impacts the number on the scale. Weight becomes something I can predict and control more than anything else in my life. I simply consume less and expend more.

But our bodies adjust to our efforts to change them. All of a sudden the same actions aren't producing the same results and so I begin questioning whether I'm doing everything right, whether I'm simply not working hard enough or making enough sacrifices, or whether I'm just a failure. Cut out carbs. Cut out carbs and fats. Cut calories in half. Cut calories in half again. Maybe I don't need any food today. Run. Run and lift weights. Run, lift weights, and run again. Sometimes it's hard to tell whether we have control over our weight or our weight has control over us.⁸

August 2002: 114 lbs

I wake up to the sun shining on my face. I feel light, empty. The pipes feel unclogged, pure. I get out of bed and walk to the bathroom. A little apple juice-colored pee dribbles out of my dehydrated body into the toilet. I strip off my clothes to check my weight. The number the dial stops on will determine how I plan the rest of my day.

118 pounds—*A great start! There's a potential to hit an all-time low today.*

I turn toward the mirror and tighten my stomach. I'm unhappy about the excess skin in my lower stomach from losing so much weight. I squeeze it, frustrated. "Being obese for so many years had permanently stretched the skin of [my] torso. To [me], the folds that pooled around [my] navel and hung from [my] pecs looked like fat."⁹ I've researched different plastic surgery options for removing the skin. I imagine slicing off the excess and stitching it back together so it is tighter. I suck in my stomach allowing my ribs to jab sharply against the skin. My hand fits nicely under my ribcage.

I admire my jutting collarbones and dip my fingers into the hollow above them. Satisfied, I wrap my hand around the other wrist, touching my thumb and index finger together. No room for excess flesh. I want others to see what's on the inside—not emotionally, but physically. I want my anatomy revealed through my skin—skin that's a size too small, a thin fleshy cloth pulled tightly over my muscles, bones, and blood vessels. "Unfortunately. . . . This excessive body is worn as an unwelcomed flesh costume."¹⁰ I continue the "body-checking routines,"¹¹ sucking in my neck and examining my jawline, making sure there

is no turkey-like flesh hanging down. I slip on mesh shorts, held up by my hipbones. I touch the point of each hipbone, which stick out further than the flesh in between them. Before leaving I look into the mirror at my favorite part—my eyes. They look like they're being sucked into my skull. I would be disappointed to look into the mirror and see vibrant eyes. What I like about my body is that it looks unhealthy, like my bones are eating my flesh. I don't want a *normal* body.

I go to the kitchen and pour exactly eight ounces of Gatorade into a cup. I drink all of it except the last swallow, which I swish around in my mouth, then spit in the sink. I'm proud that I drank less than the amount I poured. I've added *not* half a pound, but less. I eat the top half of a whole-wheat bagel, saving the bottom half for after my run later. I go back to the bathroom and sit on the toilet, trying to make more weight come out of me. I spend a significant time on the toilet throughout the day because of frequent constipation.

After fifteen minutes of failure on the toilet I go to my bedroom and read the newest issues of *Men's Health*, *Men's Fitness*, and *Flex Magazine*. I write a detailed meal and exercise program for the next few weeks as well as daily weight goals for the month. This isn't about being healthy. Although I'm interested in changing my body—in removing the excess—I'm motivated and driven by the numbers: bodyweight, calories, running times, weightlifting reps. This is about making extreme sacrifices to achieve goals. The goal, of course, is perfection. My weight can always be lower. Keep the number moving down no matter what. It's a predictable process, yet a process of waiting. I'm always waiting on weight loss.¹²

After I finish writing my goals, I walk to the kitchen and pull a black trash bag from underneath the sink. I stretch the bottom, ripping a small hole to put my head through. I rip two smaller holes for my arms. Standing in our trailer without air conditioning in the heat of a Midwestern August, I'm already dripping sweat. I'm careful not to rip the holes any larger since the purpose of wearing the trash bag is to keep as much of my body enclosed as possible. I layer on the rest of my running outfit: shorts, sweatpants, t-shirt, hooded sweatshirt, stocking cap. I put on my shoes and grab my stopwatch. Looking like I'm dressed for a blizzard, I step outside into the hundred-degree weather and begin the familiar three-mile run down a gravel road.

Arriving back at the trailer, I stop the timer at 18:30, nearly a minute slower than my personal record. Disappointed, I spend the next ten minutes sitting inside my dad's broken-down Dodge Dart with the doors closed and windows up, sweating like a sumo wrestler in a sauna. *What would Mom do if she saw me like this?* I moved out of her house partially to continue my

weight loss away from her concerned, watchful eyes. I stagger dizzy-headed back to the trailer bathroom. I strip off my clothes and wipe off my sweat with a towel, even though I continue sweating as I wipe. I step on the scale.

The red dial spins. A few centimeters shy of 114 pounds.

No way! This scale can't be right! I step off and back on just to be sure.¹³ The dial points at my failure. A cold, calculated display of my worth.¹⁴

I put the sweatpants and sweatshirt back on and walk to my bedroom. I lie on my back, staring at the heat radiating from my hands, one of the few parts of my body not suffocating under fabric. Staring down at me from the ceiling is a poster I cut out from a wrestling magazine: **Obsessed is just a word the lazy use to describe the dedicated.** I crank out a hundred crunches then muster some spit from my dehydrated mouth into an empty Gatorade bottle on my dresser, even though it feels like someone vacuumed out all my saliva. Pushups are next. Sweat drips from my nose to the carpet, my chest filling with lactic acid. I go to failure, wait a few seconds and do more. Then I grab a loaded barbell off the floor and hoist it overhead for military presses until I'm unable to perform another rep. Dizzy and exhausted, I lean against the wall. *Stop being a little bitch! Where's your fucking dedication?* I don't have an angel on one shoulder and a devil on the other. Two angry drill sergeants killed both of them.

I walk out the front door of the trailer and line up in front of the Dodge Dart for sprints. *I don't give a shit how you feel. I'm more powerful than you'll ever be.* Mind and body are at it once again. Guess who wins.

I run twenty sprints across the grass, dodging molehills and Peaches' piles of dog shit, then jog back inside. Disoriented and emitting heat like a furnace, I strip off my clothes as the scale beckons me. "Step on, step on, I promise to tell you something true. You want to know the truth, don't you?"¹⁵ Toweling off, the thought of putting those sweats back on wears me out. Black numbers and tally marks stare up at me from the compact analog scale. The red dial is lined up on the scale's biggest number: 0. I visualize the dial pointing at 114.

I step on.

September 2002: 127 lbs

I step onto the scale backwards and wait a moment as the psychologist records my weight. I catch sight of the number as she writes it down.

"Thank you," she says. "You can step off."

Not seeing my weight is a coping mechanism. The scale controls how I see my body. The higher the number, the higher my disappointment, so it's best I don't know. Without a scale, I can't obsess over my weight. The number is

what drove me to not eat or drink, work out three times a day, and feel disgusted about my body. The obsession for more than a year has been to make that number keep going down. It's taken as much willpower to start eating and gaining weight again as it took for me to not eat and lose weight. *Did I seriously just weigh almost 130 pounds? I'm going for another run when I get home.*

Being the only guy in an eating disorder therapy group brings mixed feelings. As my dad drives me to the clinic each week, I turn the music up so we don't have to talk. We live in a society in which men struggle to talk vulnerably about their bodies and body image, especially with other men.¹⁶ We can talk about weight when it's in the context of making weight for wrestling, because it's not about body image or emotions then. It's about competition and determination. It's about being tough. It's about being a man.

As a member of a group, I now have a label. I've become a *kind* of person¹⁷: a person with an eating disorder. I hate this label. My brain isn't infected with some "disorder." I've chosen this lifestyle. If people choose to pathologize my eating and exercise behaviors, that's their problem.¹⁸ *It's just because they don't have the willpower to do what I do. Lazy fat asses.* And there is nothing disordered about my eating. In fact, it's the most ordered thing in my life. I have it completely under control and can tell you exactly what I've ingested the last week, even a breakdown of the micronutrients. It's more under control than the rest of this group. They gorge themselves and throw up. No discipline. I'm not some emotional girl throwing up her food. I'm in complete control.¹⁹ What I'm doing is the most masculine form of self-discipline. I've created an extreme, rigid lifestyle for myself. I don't want to talk about how fat I am or what I see when I look in the mirror. I want to talk about going on grueling runs, lifting weights, being strict and regimented with my diet in order to have a lean, disciplined body. *This is an impressive logical compulsion*, a self-mantra designed to retain my sense of masculinity.

As the only guy in the group I am even more aware of my body, one of the reasons I am here in the first place: Body image. *Body image is relational*, even though most discussions about the topic make it seem like we're injected with body standards from celebrities and advertisements like they're hypodermic eating disorder needles. Images from the media matter, but more important are the people we interact and build relationships with in our everyday lives. Part of my drive to change my body stems from my desire to stand apart from my brother. Changing my body became a way of standing out. My brother tells me, "I get zero attention at home. Everybody is always worried about you and your stupid eating disorder. I hate it." Those early years of being teased by peers also made

me see my body negatively and want to change it. *I'll build a body that will show them!*²⁰ It's not just past interactions that influence how we see our bodies though.²¹ When I'm in the gym surrounded by bodies that work out, I compare and question how lean or muscular I look. When I'm around family or peers who don't work out, they often comment on how muscular or lean I look, making me feel different in my body. Even alone in front of the mirror, the imagined reactions from others influence how I see myself. Sometimes I become an other to myself. *Who is that in the mirror?* That may be my body, but that's not me.

11 February 2006: 160 lbs

Carrying a 33–0 record into the Indiana High School wrestling postseason, I'm one of four undefeated 160-pounders in the state. I'm in the best *shape* of my life. Muscle fibers and veins present themselves through my skin. Only 6% of my body is composed of fat, according to the caliper test at the beginning of the season. Not as much to pinch this time around. My conditioning is incredible. "This kid never gasses. Better watch out at 160," I read on a high school wrestling message board.

I'm *classified* by my weight. I'm a 160-pounder.²² The unintended consequence of creating weight classes is that individuals within the same class are perceived as being more similar than those not in that class. For example, the weight class beneath mine is 152. A wrestler could weigh 151.9 and be a 152-pounder and another could weigh 152.1 and be a 160-pounder. Yet, the categorical distinctions make it appear the most significant distance is between the person who weighs 151.9 pounds and the person who weighs 152.1 pounds. This is especially seen when wrestlers don't "make weight," meaning they barely weigh over the limit for their desired weight class, therefore having to wrestle up a weight class.

Even if two people weigh the same, it does not mean they are the same size. People are different shapes and sizes, with various levels of muscle and fat. Some *look* big for their weight. Some *look* small for their weight. Some *feel* heavy. Some *feel* light. Wrestlers know not all pounds are equal:

"He's a huge 145-pounder."

"He's a small heavyweight."

"The scales are light today."

Even though weight classes are used as a classification system for trying to equalize competitions (wrestling, powerlifting, mixed martial arts, etc.), what does it mean to be equal? Is weight the best measure for making sure competition is fair? This is something I hadn't given much thought to until 125-pound wrestler

Anthony Robles won the 2011 NCAA²³ National Championship for Arizona State University. Even though Robles weighed the same as his opponents on the scale, some wrestling fans actually thought he had an unfair size advantage because he was born with only one leg. As illustrated by these comments from his National Championship match video, equal bodyweight does not mean equal bodies:

Sheepdog40able: *Does anybody see the upper body mass difference between the 2 opponents. I have never wrestled but this seems like an advantage for Robles. I am assuming they have the same weight because of the missing leg of Robles. Thoughts??*

birdy nuccah: *Robles has the upper body of an 185 pounder but since that leg is missing it takes off alot [sic] of weight*

codyanddalton1: *what a freaking unfair advantage. . . in life, sure it sucks for him and he's inspiring. in wrestling, it's truly unfair to his opponent.*

pengo242: *feel free to saw your leg off and gain his advantage²⁴*

August 2007: 200 lbs

Muscle weighs more than fat, I tell myself. I start my second year of college 25 pounds heavier than the end of my first year. During the summer, I devote myself to getting bigger and stronger. I lift weights intensely six days a week and lift food to my mouth nearly every waking hour seven days a week. I spend most of the money I make working in a manufacturing factory on nutritional supplements. Branched Chain amino acids. Pre-workout nitric oxide boosters. Creatine. Multivitamins. Whey protein powder. Casein protein powder. *Weight gain is a luxury not all can afford.* I take my vitamins in the morning and my other supplements before and after workouts. I carry an empty milk jug of water around with me, making sure I drink at least a gallon every day. I enjoy seeing my weight climb on the scale along with my weights in the gym. I am a bigger, stronger me. Sure I have a little more fat, but that doesn't mean I'm unhealthy. According to the BMI calculation, I am a 28: Overweight and at high risk of hypertension, high cholesterol, diabetes, stroke, gallbladder disease, heart disease, respiratory problems—on my way to becoming another statistic in the obesity epidemic.

July 2009: 169 lbs

An hour after stepping off a scale in the Porter County Fairgrounds restroom, I'm locked in an octagonal cage. "The Babymaker"—a 38-year-old amateur mixed martial artist and father of eight—has my left arm straightened out between his legs trying to snap it at the elbow. I grab hold of my

left wrist with my free arm and stand up, slowly lifting him into the air while he wraps his body around my arm like a Burmese python. It feels like more than an 11-pound weight advantage as I curl my arm up, raising him above my waist. He may look light, but he feels heavy. I slam his 180-pound body onto the canvas but he stays leeching around my arm. I kneel over him, and smash my fist repeatedly into his face like a sledgehammer. Over and over, I bring my right hand high up into the air before bringing it viciously back down onto his face. I feel the anatomy of his eye socket through the thin lining of my gloves. Strength leaves his body like a balloon quickly losing air, and his grip releases from my arm. The referee runs in and stops me from delivering further blows. My brother, step-brothers, and stepdad cheer from the bleachers as the referee raises my hand. I stare at my brother through the cage, and realize I miss his chubby cheeks and pudgy belly, and how his whole body would jiggle with joy when he laughed. Much of the joy disappeared with the weight. His weight loss has nothing to do with a healthy diet or exercise program. Well, in our rural town I guess you could call methamphetamine a dietary supplement.

18 April 2012: 174 lbs

“You look so skinny, bubby,” Mom says. “Have you been eating? You need to put more meat on your bones.” I have been eating. Today marks my three-year anniversary of not eating meat, not *being* a vegetarian. I don’t need another label. I spend enough time reading nutrition labels. I have spent the last several months eating only non-processed foods: cage-free organic eggs, nuts, a variety of raw fruits and vegetables, potatoes, mushrooms, and organic almond and peanut butter. I have never been leaner and had more energy. I also notice other small changes. My teeth look whiter and I rarely have bad breath. My skin looks smoother. And strangely, I don’t seem to be producing as much earwax. For a month, I avoid all animal products. I spend these weeks bloated and farting from all the carbohydrates, and my strength in the weight room quickly plummets. I also discover I can be vegan and eat a steady diet of preservative-filled, chemically-injected junk food, as long as it doesn’t have a trace of animal parts in it: Oreo® cookies, Frito® chips, and frozen dinners with dissertation-length ingredient lists. I’ve met people who call themselves vegan who’d eat deep-fried meatless hotdogs rolled in Chernobyl waste and sprinkled with FD&C #’s 1–100, but wouldn’t get within tonguing distance of a boiled egg from a family-owned, free-range, vegetarian-fed chicken. My raw food diet has also allowed my organs, especially my heart and lungs, to function at their highest level.

On a whim, I sign up for a marathon a week away. I finish the race in a little over three hours, despite limited preparation. As we're leaving the gym, my friend stops and decides to weigh. He asks me what I weigh to compare. I have weighed myself exactly one time over the course of the last year, purposefully avoiding the scale. Although I am bombarded with messages every day that tell me I am not the expert on my own body—that I need a doctor, a personal trainer, medicine, etc. to be healthy—I listen to my body and learn just how important putting the right things in my body is for staying healthy. Who knows my body better than me? I know I am healthy because I *feel* healthy. I breathe and move easy. I haven't had any significant physical discomfort, not even a runny nose, headache, or joint pain, since making the commitment to eat healthier. And I'm physically and mentally energized in a way I've never been before. However, I'm still obsessed with food and exercise even if I'm not obsessed with weight.²⁵

Trying to live a life at top speed on the treadmill without ever stopping off is physically and emotionally exhausting. How can I live life at a lower speed or a life that lets me off the tread every once in a while? However, I don't want to be average or just run-of-the-mill. How can I find a balance between masculinity and femininity, between standing out and fitting in, between obsession and indifference? How can I find a balance between extremes but also find a way to stand out?²⁶ Obsessions can elevate us, but can also weigh us down.

10 October 2013: 213.8 lbs

I avoid weighing myself as long as I can. Since joining the University of South Florida Wrestling Club, I've walked by the scale twice a week at practice, not wanting to see the scale's judgment. Whenever the coach or teammates ask me what I weigh, I just tell them around 200 pounds. Not having weighed in more than a year, I am unsure of how much I weigh, but have a hard time believing it is much more than this. The other guys believe me. I don't *look* heavier than that.

The coach asks me what I weigh and since we have a tournament in nine days, I decide to step on the scale. I strip down to my spandex shorts and a t-shirt. Leaving a few items of clothing on, I know I can subtract from the number the scale shows me. The coach sits beside the digital scale to watch me weigh, adding to my anxiety. No lying now.

The scale flashes: **213.8**.

"Holy cow!" coach says. "213?"

Even I am shocked. I don't feel 213.8 pounds. Others don't think I look 213.8 pounds, especially the coach.

I am the heaviest I have ever weighed in my life, but being in a long-term relationship has also changed my body image. Seeing my girlfriend's attraction to my body makes me feel more comfortable in my own frame. My diet, which was full of non-processed, organic foods before I moved to Tampa just over a year ago, has shifted to "eating out": peanut butter smoothies, egg-and-cheese croissants, tomato and mozzarella paninis, Taco Bus, and even pizza, something I never used to eat. I shifted the focus of my weightlifting from bodybuilding to powerlifting and limited my running to once every week or two. Whereas bodybuilding is about building muscle, powerlifting is about lifting heavier weights. I'm less concerned with how I look and more concerned with being stronger. I have new weight goals, but they're not on a scale. They're in the weight room. Even though I load a specific amount of weight onto a barbell, the weight plates don't tell me how the weight will feel, and it never feels the same. Some days picking up a 405-pound barbell can feel like trying to lift a Volkswagen®; other days it feels like a baby weight.

I don't go for leisurely jogs or do "light" circuit training. I attack all my workouts with a relentless intensity. I work out by myself and mentally force myself to go beyond what my body thinks it can. I view physical exercise as a chance to develop mental self-discipline and an appreciation for experiences that are challenging and painful. I inherited this intense approach from my uncles, two of whom were competitive bodybuilding champions—Mr. Indiana and Mr. Georgia. Uncle Jim (Mr. Georgia), professionally known as The Ultimate Warrior, the larger-than-life professional wrestler from the 1980s and 1990s, sprinted to the ring like his blood was on fire, heaved enormous men overhead for Gorilla Press Slams, and looked like a real-life action figure. We swim in the same gene pool. I also learned how to exercise this way by growing up in a working-class family.²⁷ The working class has a whatever-it-takes work ethic regardless of how much we might hate the task. We know how to struggle and survive, an understanding of how to make it when no one gives you a break.

Although I am the strongest I have been in my life, I also can see that I am carrying more fat than I have in several years. The lines from the abs that were well-defined a year and half ago, are fading, along with the muscle fibers and veins that used to show themselves through the skin. I stay focused on my goal of becoming stronger, not letting the changes disappoint me. I can't expect to be a power lifter *and* a marathon runner. Something has to give.

19 October 2013: **196.6 lbs**

“One ninety-seven, South Florida.” The black-and-white striped official announces that it’s my turn to weigh in.

I step off the locker room tile floor onto the small digital scale to be classified and categorized for competition.

I’m making my return to the wrestling mat after a four-year layoff from competing. Having “cut” almost 17 pounds in nine days, I am dehydrated and feel weak. My mouth feels like it’s full of dry cotton balls. I restricted my liquid, drinking less than 16 ounces of water in the last 24 hours, despite having run on three occasions in sweats to help lose weight.

I open a bottle of Pedialyte[®], a rehydration formula for babies with diarrhea, and also a popular drink after weigh-ins among wrestlers. After finishing the Pedialyte[®], I drink another one.

Then two bottles of Powerade[®].

And two bottles of water.

I also eat two peanut butter sandwiches and some granola bars. By the time I wrestle two hours later, I’m 10 pounds heavier.

As I step on the scale my BMI labels me as an overweight person, yet I feel like someone who is underweight—someone who has lost too much weight too quickly. I am severely dehydrated. My head is cloudy. I have little energy. At the same time, I am the strongest I’ve been in my life. My endurance, while not the best it’s ever been, is still good. I ran two consecutive miles in under 12 minutes yesterday to lose weight. How many “overweight” people do you know who can do that?

After a successful day of wrestling, I log on to my computer and see that my cousin has sent me a Facebook message:

Hey cuz just seeing what’s going on and how you’re doing? So Katie and I have dropped a lot of weight and I want to start lifting. I have the basics of what exercises to do, but not really sure on what to eat for meals and when? There are so many protein formulas out there and it’s all confusing. Could use some pointers when you get a chance.

Thanks love ya!

We exchange messages about weight training and nutrition. I respond with this message:

My advice is keep it very simple! Stay away from processed food. The fewer steps the food went through to get to your dinner plate, the better. Farmer’s market and produce aisles are your friend! When buying food, get stuff that hasn’t been treated with chemicals (look for organic, free-range, grass-fed).²⁸ The best

advice I can give you is to throw away your scale. When you start lifting and eating healthy, you'll naturally gain a little weight/muscle and having a scale around can make you obsess over it!

4 July 2014:

Most Floridians complain about the heat during the summer, but to me the hotter the better. I love sweating. I'm not just talking a little moisture in the armpits either. I often wear hooded sweatshirts to work out and love getting drenched in marathon sauna sessions. Right now I look like I just climbed out of the pool I'm next to. I lie on my back holding an iPad® above my head to read my manuscript reviews. A river of sweat runs between my pecs into an overflowing pool in my bellybutton. I pick up my shirt next to the chair, scaring off a gecko, and wipe the stinging sweat from my eyes. The pool area is crowded with students celebrating Independence Day by doing what Americans do best: eating and drinking. I like reading in the midst of this revelry because it brings together my multiple selves. I continue reading. Zero for three on the number of reviewers who like my original ending: "6 May 2014: **Who cares?**"

"Presumably you do care or you wouldn't write, and I do care, or I wouldn't read," one reviewer writes in response to the ending.

Well damn if that logic doesn't slap me right in my supposedly indifferent mouth.

I set the iPad® on the chair next to mine and close my eyes, soaking in the sun while the sweat flows out.

They're right. Writing that I don't care about my weight doesn't make it true. If only it were that simple. What is a truthful ending to this story, one that shows how the scale no longer controls my life, yet shows the tensions in letting go of the desire for extreme control over my body?

In January 2014 I injured my left ankle and knee during a wrestling match and have been unable to wrestle, run, or perform many lower-body weight-training exercises. My body grew throughout the injury, but I avoided the scale in my bathroom bought specifically for making weight in wrestling. After the first run since my injury, I decided to weigh myself to see where I stood now that I was able to get back into my regular exercise routine.

Covered in sweat after running, I strip off my clothes, drop them on the bathroom floor, and hesitantly step on the scale. A familiar feeling of worthlessness returns when I see the highest number I've ever seen on my scale. I've gotta' do something about this.

For the next few days, I completely change my diet, ridding myself of the junk food I'd been eating, avoiding processed foods, loading up on veggies, and drinking almost a gallon of water a day. The high number on the scale actually encouraged me to get back to my healthy eating habits and inspired me to return to my usual exercise regimen. Then one morning, I woke up, peed, and walked to the scale assuming I would weigh less than I had previously. I didn't.

I squeeze a handful of stomach flesh, determined to see a lower number. I set a goal to reach by the end of the day: Five pounds. After a day of skipping meals, limiting water intake, and working out twice, I reach my goal. I step off the scale victorious. Sort of. I stare back down at this little tool that brought me such disappointment and satisfaction in the same day. I'm still tempted by the appeal of objectivity, by the crispness of a number. But wanting to see a number on a scale does not mean I should. It's alluring, but it's also dangerous and misleading. In just a few days, my health has already taken a backseat to the number. It's an abusive relationship that keeps repeating itself. The scale sweet talks me, encourages me to change my life for the "better" and makes me feel great about myself when I do. But within a few days, that damned no-good scale is back to its cold, emotionally detached ways and I feel dejected. It makes me hate myself and even hurt myself, through not eating and drinking. I've gotta' do something about this.

I pick up the scale from the tile floor, carry it downstairs to the dumpster and toss it in.

STEPPING OFF

After months of revisions, I email the manuscript to one of my professors for feedback. She responds:

Nate, I have scales at both houses. Don't like to be without them. I find them helpful to know when I have gone up more than a pound or two so I can moderate my food intake/increase my exercise to try to stay within a set point range. The other way I tell is whether I have to loosen the button on my pants. Ha ha. I don't weigh every day, just if I think I have gone up or down (and down does make me feel good and motivates me to live a healthier life, though the down rarely lasts long). But isn't an obsession.

I am aware not everyone who owns a scale weighs obsessively. Some people can live with moderation and indifference more easily. I am also aware some use the scale to help them be healthy and others simply don't care about their weight. I also realize I have the luxury of worrying about things like a number on a scale when there are many people who cannot even afford food, let alone a scale. However, there are many, including me, who struggle

with their body image and physical health, who could benefit from tossing out their scale.

Getting rid of the scale does not solve all my problems, but this tool strongly influences what I consume, how much I exercise, and how I view my body. Without a scale or flawed scientific formula like the BMI, being healthy requires interpretive effort from me, departing from the canonical narratives about physical health. Being healthy requires me to pay attention to my body, listening to and sometimes arguing with it. I storied my motives for extreme control over my weight and body: early experiences of being teased, my desire to stand apart from my brother, a working-class family culture rooted in wrestling and bodybuilding, and my desire to stand out. What about you? What are your scale stories? The dial is spinning. ■

NATHAN HODGES is a PhD student in the Department of Communication at the University of South Florida. Thank you to the two anonymous reviewers for the hefty feedback. Art Bochner and Carolyn Ellis, thanks for the heavy editing, and for encouraging academics to not let scales replace the blood and guts of lived experience. Krystal Bresnahan, thanks for lifting me up throughout the writing process. Correspondence to: Nathan Hodges, Department of Communication, University of South Florida, 4202 E. Fowler Avenue, CIS 3057, Tampa, FL 33620, USA. Email: nlhodges@mail.usf.edu.

NOTES

1. 7,426 men were used as subjects for the 1972 article. Ancel Keys, Flaminio Fidanza, Martti Karvonen, Noboru Kimura, and Henry L. Taylor, “Indices of Relative Weight and Obesity,” *Journal of Chronic Diseases* 25, no. 6–7 (1972): 329–43.

2. Garabed Eknoyan, “Adolphe Quetelet (1796–1874)—The Average Man and Indices of Obesity,” *Nephrology Dialysis Transplantation* 23, no. 1 (2008): 49.

3. Wayne C. Miller, “The-Weight-Loss-At-Any-Cost-Environment: How to Thrive with a Health-Centered Focus,” *Journal of Nutrition Education and Behavior* 37, no.2 (2005): 90.

4. Anne Gerbensky-Kerber, “Grading the ‘Good’ Body: A Poststructural Feminist Analysis of Body Mass Index Initiatives,” *Health Communication* 26, no. 4 (2011): 355.

5. Nicole Glenn, “Weight-ing: The Experience of Waiting on Weight Loss,” *Qualitative Health Research* 23, no. 3 (2013): 348.

6. Read Ernest Becker’s discussion of “heroism” in *The Denial of Death* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1973). Young sibling rivalry reflects the basic human condition, “the desire to stand out, to be *the* one in creation. . . to feel himself [sic] an object of primary value: first in the universe, representing in himself all of life” (3 original emphasis).

7. There is an “assumption [in our society] that an individual’s weight is determined by their willingness to make healthy nutritional choices. However, the emphasis on personal choice deflects attention from factors (e.g., nutritional knowledge; affordability and availability of foods) enabling or inhibiting others from making ‘correct’ decisions” (Gerbensky-Kerber, “Grading the ‘Good’ Body,” 358).

8. “We might believe we have control over weight loss, and convince ourselves that if we do the right things we will be rewarded with lower numbers on the scale. However, this might not always happen, and so we find ourselves asking if muscle weighs more than fat, or if we look different, even though the numbers have not changed. Thus, weight loss becomes uncertain, potentially out of our control” (Glenn, “Weight-ing,” 352).

9. Nathaniel Penn, “20% of Anorexics Are Men,” *GQ Magazine*, September 2012, accessed 6 May 2014, <http://www.gq.com/story/male-anorexia-gq-september-2012>.

10. Glenn, “Weight-ing,” 351.

11. Penn, “20% of Anorexics Are Men.”

12. Glenn, “Weight-ing.”

13. See Risa J. Stein, C. Keith Haddock, Walker S. C. Poston, Dana Catanese, and John A. Spertus, “Precision in Weighing: A Comparison of Scales Found in Physician Offices, Fitness Centers, and Weight Loss Centers,” *Public Health Reports* 120, no. 3 (2005): 266–70. Different scales produce different measurements. As a wrestler, I learned to question the reliability and generalizability of scales as I constantly weighed on different scales for practices and tournaments. In a sport in which a tenth of a pound can keep you from competing, you question these “objective” measurements and put forth the “subjective” effort to ensure you are far enough underweight that regardless of what scale you weigh on, you will still “make weight.”

14. Glenn, “Weight-ing.”

15. *Ibid.*, 354.

16. Matthew Brooks, “Man-to-Man: A Body Talk between Male Friends,” *Qualitative Inquiry* 12, no. 1 (2006): 185–207.

17. Ian Hacking, *The Social Construction of What?* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000.

18. Obesity is also now officially recognized by the American Medical Association as a disease. Harriet Brown, “How Obesity Became a Disease: And, as a Consequence, How Weight Loss Became an Industry,” *The Atlantic*, 24 March 2015, accessed 12 August 2015, <http://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2015/03/how-obesity-became-a-disease/388300/>.

19. See Lisa M. Tillmann, “Body and Bulimia Revisited: Reflections on ‘A Secret Life,’” *Journal of Applied Communication Research* 37, no. 1 (2009): 98–112. Tillmann discusses bulimia as a purging of emotion (98), and a “sense of lack of control over eating” (100). My approach to my eating, exercise, and emotions was strict control. Both extremes are unhealthy in their own way.

20. Many bodybuilders tell stories of being made fun of for being small and/or fat when they were younger. These early bullying experiences inspired them to build bigger, stronger bodies. The problem is many still feel insecure. Strong exterior, weak interior. See Brandon O. Hensley, “Performing Heteronormativity, Hegemonic Masculinity, and Constructing a Body from Bullying,” *Florida Communication Journal* 39, no. 1 (2011): 55–65.

21. Female bodybuilders, with their massive muscles, compare their bodies with other female bodybuilders, not skinny supermodels. They build their social identity through their own tight-knit bodybuilding community (Leslee Fisher, “Building One’s Self Up: Bodybuilding and the Construction of Identity among Professional Bodybuilders,” in *Building Bodies*, ed. Pamela L. Moore [New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press,

1997], 135–61). FatClub.com, an online community of men who collectively pursue bigger bodies and weight gain, “offers a safehaven for those who enjoy being fat” (Tony E. Adams and Keith Berry, “Size Matters: Performing (Il)logical Male Bodies of FatClub.com,” *Text and Performance Quarterly* 33, no. 4 [2013]: 315). Each social group illustrates how one constructs one’s body image through one’s relationships.

22. “Grouping does not just classify weight, it classifies people” (Stuart G. Nicholls, “Standards and Classification: A Perspective on the Obesity Epidemic,” *Social Science and Medicine* 87 [2013]: 9).

23. National Collegiate Athletic Association

24. SynysterSnipers, “NCAA Wrestling National Championships Division 1 Anthony Robles vs. Matt McDonough (Full Match),” *YouTube*, 20 March 2011, accessed 6 May 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c5W4RZq1NRg>.

25. Tillmann also questions her desire to replace one body project with another when she replaces her desire with thinness for muscularity (“Body and Bulimia Revisited,” 104).

26. “The desire to stand out, to be a hero, is natural, and to admit it honest” (Becker, *The Denial of Death*, 4). It is the basic way in which humans try to deny death, to outlive their bodies.

27. See Daniel Duane, “How the Other Half Lifts: What Your Workout Says about Your Social Class,” *Pacific Standard Magazine*, 23 July 2014, accessed 6 August 2014, <http://www.psmag.com/health-and-behavior/half-lifts-workout-says-social-class-85221>.

28. See Nathan Hodges, “The Chemical Life,” *Health Communication* 30, no. 6 (2015): 627–34.