

AT FACE VALUE

Is it possible to be plus-size and healthy? Body Positive Influencer **Tracey-Lee Lusty** provides an inspiring example.

WORDS BY LISA ABDELLAH





TRACEY-LEE LUSTY NEVER INTENDED TO BECOME A BODY POSITIVITY ADVOCATE. When she started her Instagram account, fitnessgirl_za, she couldn't have been further from it. She'd grown up thinking that to be worthy, she needed to replicate the images she saw in magazines of slender caucasian women, and initially used social media solely to document her weight-loss transformation. "I'm naturally curvy, so I went to great lengths to try to achieve that beauty standard," she says, "but for all the wrong reasons, motivated by aesthetics rather than ensuring my body was functioning healthily and optimally."

But she evolved into a curvy fitness activist. What changed? First, she discovered a lifestyle beyond appearance, the simple joy of moving her body and eating food that was good for her helped shift her focus away from weight as the only indicator of health.

For years, she hadn't been able to find a decent sports bra and had to resign herself to training in baggy men's tracksuits. Fortunately, brands have begun championing plus-size activewear in various styles and colourways with better technical capabilities, making working out more comfortable and enjoyable. And in 2018, body positivity, normalising all bodies regardless of shape or size, changed how she viewed women who look like her.

While Tracey-Lee's under no illusion that carrying extra weight doesn't pose a risk, she acknowledges the role diet and exercise have played in offsetting the threat. "It's possible to be plus-size and healthy if, like me, you're active and free from chronic illnesses such as hypertension," she says.

WHAT THE EXPERTS SAY

"Tracey-Lee is physically active, and that's important because physically active people generally have a higher cardiorespiratory fitness. This is ideal because studies show that people with a high cardiorespiratory fitness tend to live longer. An active lifestyle also strengthens bones and





muscles and improves your ability to perform daily activities, among other benefits. But while exercise improves your health, having excess body fat may still be associated with some health risk," says Professor Lara Dugas, AXA Research Chair in Non-communicable Disease Epidemiology at the University of Cape Town and Loyola University Chicago.

"Studies show that people who have excess body fat are more likely to develop type 2 diabetes. If the excess body fat is mostly around your mid-section (apple shape), this may be associated with more cardiovascular disease. This is why being physically active is so important. Irrespective of your body size, it can improve your health."

Should BMI (Body Mass Index) be the go-to guide for ticking the box labelled 'healthy'? "For individuals, no. For populations, yes," explains registered dietician Yolandé van der Riet. "BMI is a tool to establish whether a person's body weight per height is acceptable. The different classes range from underweight to obese, and the formula is: weight (kg) divided by height (m) squared. A normal BMI would be between 18.5 to 25."

"A benefit of BMI is that it's an easy, quick-to-use tool to gauge whether or not a person is within a healthy body weight range. No equipment is required, only noting a person's height and weight. Another benefit is that it works well for researching and evaluating obesity within populations (as opposed to individuals).

"But there are numerous disadvantages related to BMI. Firstly, you can't use it during pregnancy, it doesn't apply to children, and it isn't very effective in the case of the elderly. It doesn't consider a body's composition, such as gender, lean muscle mass, body fat distribution or bone density. So, a very muscular person – with very little body fat – may be categorised as obese based merely on their body weight. On the other hand, someone who's thin but eats unhealthily, smokes and doesn't exercise ('skinny fat') is metabolically unhealthy. Their weight or BMI is usually OK, but their body fat percentage is relatively high around their organs compared to their healthy counterparts."

Many studies show regular exercise and a healthy diet have positive health benefits independent of weight. For example, a 2018 study by an international group of scientists led at Harvard T.H Chan School of Public Health found that implementing just five healthy habits may increase life expectancy by 12 years for men and 14 for women: healthy eating (and drinking), not smoking, regular exercise, alcohol intake and maintaining healthy body weight.

Furthermore, a 2020 study by the *British Medical Journal (BMJ)* confirmed that healthy living could add more disease-free years to life. According to this study, healthy women over 50 can anticipate another 10 years and healthy men over 50 another eight years. The study added: 'Women who reported satisfying four or five of the healthy habits lived on average 34 more years without those diseases after age 50 compared to 24 years for women who said they didn't follow any of the healthy habits. Men lived an average 31 more years free of disease after age 50, while those who adopted none of those habits lived, on average, 23 more years after age 50'.

To truly determine whether a person is healthy, you can't dismiss factors other than BMI, such as fitness and diet. So, let's delve into Tracey-Lee's.

"It's normal to feel that way in an environment historically catered for slim people"



"Body fat can also fight against your efforts to lose weight"

PHOTOGRAPHY: SUPPLIED

FITNESS?

It's not lack of fitness that's preventing Tracey-Lee from shifting more kilograms.

"I aim for three to four strength and two cardio training sessions per week," she says."Outlifting the men at the gym boosts my confidence, but more than personal bests on the squat rack, it's about showing up for myself (and other women) every time I commit to moving my body."

LIFESTYLE?

Until recently, Tracey-Lee was a full-time attorney with an online-fitness side hustle. Today, that side hustle is a thriving business, so much so that she's a full-time body-positive content creator in the fitness, lifestyle and travel space. Being on set for brands requires a level of fitness. "The days are long, often hot, and without my training, I don't think I could keep up with the demands," she says. Even in her free time, she isn't sedentary. You'll find her in a swimming pool, the ocean or walking her French bulldog on the Sea Point Promenade.

DIET?

Food isn't the culprit either, as Tracey-Lee ensures she gets enough protein, carbs, veggies and fats from every meal. "I don't believe in cutting out food groups – there's no 'good' or 'bad' food. My typical breakfast is a scrambled egg, tomatoes, avo and sourdough bread, lunch is chicken or tuna salad with half a cup of grains and a cup of veg, and dinner is usually the same as lunch but with added protein, green salad and veg. I rarely snack, but if I do, it's on fruit or biltong.

WEIGHT LOSS IS AS SIMPLE AS EATING LESS ENERGY THAN YOU EXPEND, RIGHT?

It's not that simple. If everyone did the same amount of exercise and ate the same diet as Tracey-Lee, the outcome would still be a broad range of different body shapes. Some people will always be more prone to being overweight than others and therefore have to work harder to maintain a healthy weight. "Numerous factors influence your shape and size, including genetics, gender, age, hormonal functionality, skeletal frame and bone density, body composition and medical history," says Yolandé.

She identifies three somatotypes of bodies: ectomorphs, mesomorphs, endomorphs, and a combination of some of these. Ectomorphs are typically lean, narrow-framed people with low body fat and lean muscle, for whom gaining weight is hard. Endomorphs generally have high body fat, are quite muscular and can gain weight quickly. These people, though heavier and rounder in shape, may not be overweight. Mesomorphs are strong, athletic-type individuals who aren't usually underweight or overweight. They don't gain or lose weight with too much effort.

Body fat can also fight against your efforts to lose weight. Professor Dugas and a group of international scientists analysed the energy expenditure of 1 754 adults, finding that when people exercise at a very high intensity, especially very obese people, the body starts to compensate for this extra energy exertion. That's because it perceives high-intensity exercise as a sign of stress, slowing your metabolism to preserve and store fat for future energy. This means the kilojoules you burn during exercise don't reflect in your total daily energy expenditure.

"Are these people heavier, in part, because they energy compensate more, or is it that they energy compensate more once they're heavier? We don't know," said Lead Author Professor Lewis Halsey from the University of Roehampton in an interview with *The Guardian*.

Tracey-Lee's accepted she doesn't have to be the sort of perfection you see in magazines to call herself healthy. Her parting words for plus-size women who feel self-conscious about going to the gym? "It's normal to feel that way in an environment historically catered for slim people. But if we continue to stay away from these environments, nothing will change."