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Scaled: What We Gain, and What We Lose

by Deborah Svec-Carstens

Naked, I step on the digital scale and wait for the flashing red zeros to settle on a number. *My* number. After a few seconds, it appears. Two pounds lighter than when I stood here a few days ago.

"Oh, what a lovely surprise," I say to myself.

I'm not trying to lose weight. Pulling the scale out from under the bathroom sink is no longer a daily ritual. But thirty years after completing treatment for anorexia, I still feel a familiar rush of pleasure as I step off the scale and get dressed.

When did I start measuring my self-worth by a number?

I can learn from the word "scale." It comes from a noun derivative of the Proto-Germanic word skæla, "to split, divide," and German or Dutch words meaning bowl, dish, cup, or shell. This etymology reflects the use of a split shell as a pan for weighing in the earliest scales, which date back to around 2000 BC in Egypt, Mesopotamia, and the Indus Valley. These were used primarily for commerce.

A divided self. One part focuses on a number. The other knows she is more than this.

At one time in my life, there was no division. When my two sisters were six and eight and I was ten, we performed songs from the *Grease* soundtrack for my parents. We styled and sprayed our hair and slipped on one-piece swimsuits. Sang into a vacuum cleaner microphone and danced. The performance ended with the three of us piled on the floor, arms and legs flailing as we sang, "We Go Together." I wasn't self-conscious or inhibited. I wasn't preoccupied with my physical appearance or my weight. I was laughing and having fun with my sisters.

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Self-tracking began long before the Fitbit or Apple Watch. In the 16th century, Venetian physician, scientist and professor Santorio Santorio—a friend of the astronomer and physicist Galileo Galilei—constructed a “weighing chair” to track his and his patients’ weight. For years, Santorio weighed himself—and everything he ate and drank—daily. He measured his urine and feces, too. None of it to measure his self-worth, but rather to observe and gain insights into the human body. He published the first systematic study of basal metabolism. I wonder if Santorio understood that his data, like the data our self-trackers collect today, do not reveal the whole picture of ourselves.

As my body morphed from child to young woman, I regularly pulled the pink scale from the corner of the bathroom I shared with my mom and two younger sisters. I watched the needle bounce around and finally stop.

Images on TV or in the movies and in magazines such as *Seventeen* portrayed what a female body “should” look like. There was Meg Ryan, attractive and sweet; Molly Ringwald, with her red hair and pouty lips; and Madonna, sexy and gorgeous. I dreamt that trading my frizzy hair and freckles to look like one of them would alter my entire life: I would be happy, popular, successful, vivacious, outgoing, confident. Whole and worthy of belonging.

The week of senior prom, I stepped on the scale every morning to assess the results of the previous day’s intake—no breakfast, bran muffin for lunch, and a regular dinner. Mom had sewn an emerald green mermaid dress for me, using a Vogue pattern designed for an ideal 1980s female figure. The dress fit my slender frame snugly and I was determined to look thin in it. By the end of the week, I’d lost a few pounds. On Saturday, with my hair in an updo and makeup carefully applied, I zipped up the dress, fastened the clasp on my gold shell-shaped necklace, and turned to look in the mirror. I felt transformed. Beautiful.

In the early 1940s, Metropolitan Life Insurance Company (“MetLife”) used data collected from five million policyholders in the US and Canada to create an “ideal body weight” chart. MetLife later revised and renamed it a “desirable” height and weight chart. The company had identified obesity as the leading cause of premature death in the US

and it wanted its policyholders to live longer and continue paying premiums. The validity of these tables has been criticized because some people were weighed and some were not, some wore shoes and clothing and some did not, and frame size wasn't consistently measured. Nevertheless, a decade after the charts appeared, doctors began suggesting that their patients strive to fall within their parameters. Thus, a standard was born.

By the mid-1980s, doctors were using body mass index (BMI), which measures body weight in relation to height, as a marker for "normal." Today, BMI calculators are readily available online, although in recent years researchers and health professionals have recognized the flaws in relying on BMI as the sole predictor of "normal." They have suggested including waist circumference and waist-to-hip ratio to health risk screenings.

What is "normal" shifts over time like the changing tides, gradually reshaping the shoreline of our understanding.

There were no scales in my college dorm, so I weighed myself at least weekly in the locker room after water aerobics class. The number slowly ticked up. My runs, swims, and Jane Fonda workouts couldn't compete with easily accessible desserts and generous second helpings. At graduation, I weighed twenty pounds more than I had four years earlier. Graduating summa cum laude and Phi Beta Kappa, I proudly accepted my diploma. But I had failed the one test that mattered more to my twenty-two-year-old self—avoiding the "freshman fifteen."

Along with my cap and gown, I felt like I deserved to wear the pink plastic pig nose that got passed around on college choir tours—an "award" for the person who had eaten the most at the previous evening's pre-concert potluck meal. Rather than feeling accomplished or successful, I only saw myself as fat, even though I wasn't—at least not according to my BMI or my doctor.

Capitalism and our bodies are closely linked. Consider the penny scale, first imported from Germany in the late 19th century. Users put in a penny to find out their weight. Within a few years, American-manufactured penny scales could be found in movie theaters, grocery stores, train stations, or drug stores. They developed into slot machines:

drop in a penny, guess your weight, and get your money back if you were exactly right. In 1927, about 40,000 penny scales reaped profits of $5 million per year.

A few months after college graduation, I moved to Paris to nanny for a French family. The day I arrived, the woman I worked for took me on a tour of the neighborhood. When I stopped to linger over the beautiful mouthwatering tarts, éclairs, petit fours, and mille-feuilles in the window of the *boulangerie*, she told me all her daughter's au pairs had gained weight in Paris. "Too much bread and patisseries," she said. I vowed to myself not to be *that* au pair and started a regular running routine.

During the week, I jogged with a friend at a track near the Eiffel Tower. On the weekends, I ran alone in the Bois de Boulogne, a densely forested park a few minutes from where I lived. I discovered the park after sharing with the woman I worked for that I was a runner. She told me she used to run there before her daughter was born.

She never told me not to run there alone.

On a crisp, cool fall morning two months after my arrival in Paris, I put on my workout clothes, laced up my shoes, and headed to the Bois de Boulogne. As I finished my run, a man grabbed me, shoved me down into nearby bushes, and sat on top of me. Underbrush dug into my skin. I twisted my legs and torso, trying to escape, and called for help. He slapped me across the face, hard. My glasses fell off. He put a filthy hand over my mouth. I gasped for air, the weight of him a boulder on my chest. And then he sexually assaulted me.

Part of me wanted nothing more than to get on the next plane home and let my parents take care of me. Instead, determined to fulfill my commitment to the family I worked for, and unwilling to admit defeat by leaving, I stayed and kept running.

And running.

And running.

I didn't need a scale to tell me that the combination of daily runs, now with a can of mace in hand, and the smaller portion sizes in France were driving my weight down; my loose-fitting clothes gave it away. Although I occasionally sacrificed a few Francs and weighed myself on public scales because the family's scale was tucked away in the couple's bathroom—not a space I frequented. At first, I used paper and pencil to convert

the kilograms to pounds and recorded it on the slip of paper the scale spit out at me. Later, I could approximate the conversion in my head. The number kept creeping down, month by month.

Bathroom scales first became available in 1913, propelled by the improved precision of an essential component, spring mechanisms. In a 1925 advertisement, the Health-O-Meter Automatic Bathroom Scale was touted as “the greatest aid in reducing and in keeping slim.” According to the ad, simply knowing your weight was “an easy, simple, scientific method for reducing your weight to the desirable condition where you are normal, healthy, vigorous, and physically lovely.” Even though most Americans didn’t have flush toilets, sales of scales were steady.

When I moved back to the US from Paris, I got a job, rented an apartment, and bought a scale. I kept running—six miles a day, seven days a week—and hardly ate. I weighed myself daily and watched with satisfaction as the number continued to plummet. It was tangible evidence of my ability to control *something*. Proof that I had “gotten over” the assault. I was fine. Strong. Healthy.

Except I wasn’t any of those things.

Within two years, I was in treatment for anorexia nervosa. I stood backwards on a scale every week because my caregivers in the outpatient program wouldn’t let me see the number. I felt like a child being punished for misbehaving. Some weeks I wanted to throw a tantrum and scream, “Just tell me!” But the determination to recover outweighed my desire to know the number.

Through therapy, I learned how to recognize destructive thought patterns and loosen my grip on perfectionism. I began the (never-ending) process of dialing down the voices that loved shouting “facts” about scales and weight and turning up the volume on a more compassionate inner voice.

I came to understand that I wasn’t to blame for the assault. I gave myself permission to eat more—to enjoy food again—and exercise less.

None of it was easy; none of it happened overnight.

Slowly, the fullness of my body returned, inching up from my lowest point—ninety pounds on my five-foot, six-inch frame. Crawling out of the cave I'd entered, I reminded myself over and over it was okay that I needed a new pair of jeans. Again. It was okay to have a belly, butt, and breasts. It was okay to inhabit my body. To be a body.

Today, smart scales connect with our phones or fitness trackers via Wi-Fi or Bluetooth to track weight, BMI, total body fat, water percentage, bone and muscle mass, metabolic rate, and more. Some provide a 3D virtual model of your body's progress over time. There are even scales that talk (a helpful feature for the visually impaired). With the meteoric rise in the use of AI, talking scales of the future may offer real-time encouragement or tailored feedback, telling us what to eat, how much water to drink, or how and when to exercise.

Although these scales calculate much more than weight, they still don't measure what matters most: kindness, compassion, and empathy. Integrity, trust, and respect. A willingness to show up for others. To listen. To love.

Stepping on the scale is no longer the daily ritual it was years ago, before I realized I was anorexic. Before therapy and recovery. But curiosity about my weight—a need to know the number—still gnaws. The eating disordered voice that still exists in my head, years after recovery, grows louder than the self-compassionate one. And I am human, after all, swimming in a society where images of svelte and sculpted bodies portray perfection.

I slip back into measuring my self-worth with the scale when things are hard; when I feel lonely, lost, or untethered. When life seems overwhelmingly chaotic. During those times, I look down at the number and experience a twisted moment of victory when it is one or two pounds less than the last time.

I know my self-worth is not dependent on what my physical body looks like, other people's opinions, or my achievements. But knowing it and truly believing it are two different things. It's easy to revert to comparison, self-judgment, and perfectionism. To forget I have nothing to prove to myself or others.

When the divided self reappears, I have to stop and remind myself it's not real. The number doesn't matter. The scale is a false god. It doesn't reveal anything important about me. Despite hundreds of years of effort and invention, the scale still doesn't measure my worth.

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