What is healthism and why are we against it?

Healthism, simply put, is a harmful overemphasis on keeping healthy. It is a way of thinking that sees health, the *appearance* of health, and healthy-seeming activities as morally superior. Health is believed to equal success in life, and ill-health is seen as a shameful sign of failure. Healthism pervades our society, and leads to discrimination and exclusion against people who are, or seem to be, unhealthy. Healthism hits women, girls, and gender-expansive people especially hard, as we face toxic cultural demands to conform to gender norms.

People with healthist attitudes often engage in victim blaming, trying to find a "reason" why someone is sick, disabled, or has a chronic illness. For example, it's easy for someone who is healthy to believe that their good health is due to their own virtuous actions: eating fruits and vegetables, exercising often, and otherwise "taking care of themselves." Conversely, a person who is ill is often subject to judgments about their diet and exercise habits, their mental and psychological states, their weight, and numerous life choices. We deeply support health and well being, but not as a moral imperative, and not at the cost of every other aspect of our lives.

Healthism often puts the responsibility for health on an individual. Healthism does not acknowledge the social determinants of health, and how factors such as the environment, access to food, the healthcare system, or poverty drive health status. These social determinants are caused by social inequalities which disadvantage people based on race, immigration status, age, sexual and gender minority status, education, and social class. In a vicious cycle, social determinants of health both reinforce and exacerbate these same inequalities. Healthism encourages us to either overlook or purposely ignore these critical societal issues.

Healthism has many faces. It can be targeted toward our weight, eating habits, and exercise, as thinness is assumed to equal good health and fatness is assumed to equal bad health. Further, this good or bad health is believed to reflect good or bad character. Those who are slimmer are seen as better, more stable and desirable *people*, while larger-bodied people are stereotyped as lazy, greedy, slovenly, and compulsive. People with large bodies are subject to stigma and discrimination in many aspects of our lives, from family members and partners, neighbors and strangers, as well as workplace and health care discrimination. See "How do we address fat politics?"

The fitness-wellness-diet social media sphere has well-documented negative effects on girls', women's, and gender-expansive people's mental health. For instance, we see "fitspirational" (fit + inspirational) posts that promote vigorous exercise or food restrictions in the hope that our bodies can become smaller and tighter. These posts do not address one's actual health. In fact, they may actually make people less healthy. Some studies have found that "fitspirational" posts lead to increased negative moods and body dissatisfaction, resulting in a decline in one's mental well-being.

While often applied to food and exercise, healthism also emerges in drug and alcohol use. Healthism would have us blame the user for their addictions, rather than addressing how poverty, trauma, social stigma, the lack of access to treatment and rehab, and other environmental factors contribute to drug and alcohol use.

Healthism is also tied to overmedicalization. As we cast greater areas of life in terms of health and illness, we can end up depriving ourselves of deeper well being. What is lost when we see our bodies, exercise, eating, meditation, fresh air, "down time," and play—all pleasures in their own right—simply as measures of our potential health or non-health? Ironically, by objectifying and "rationalizing" our health and our lives, we disconnect from our bodies and our wholeness. By objectifying and blaming others for their health, we uphold hierarchies of "good" and "bad" bodies, and devalue people who are suffering physically, mentally and socially.

We oppose healthism in all its forms. We promote valuing every bodymind.