

Is body neutrality our way out of unattainable beauty standards?

FABIHA AFIFA

When I had my first pimple in fourth grade, I was devastated. I would check rush to the mirror every 15 minutes, hoping the pimple would be gone and go to bed with a pea-sized dollop of toothpaste on the zit every night. (Please don't do this to your skin.) Over time, my attitude towards my skin changed. Initially for the worse, and then for the better.

At first, I was sucked into the movement of radical body positivity that told me everything about me was absolutely divine and it would be a pathetic waste of my life if I did not have a crush on me. However, I found it stressful to fall in love with myself. I would be in my head constantly, reminding myself to see some abstract beauty in all my human imperfections.

I do not recall how I grew out of it but I did. I no longer feel the need to cringe at myself, nor do I force myself to be my own muse. I only make sure I'm eating well, getting enough sleep, not stressing too much and drinking enough water. Not so that my pimples vanish, but more so I know my lifestyle is healthy.

Recently, I have learnt that my new-found acceptance of my appearance as it is, without any forced appreciation, has a name— body neutrality. The term was originally coined by body image coach Anna Poirier in 2015 to help her clients have healthier, more practical relationships with food and exercise.

Poirier's belief was that the concept of body positivity can be too big of a jump for some people. Not everyone can transform their frustration with their cellulite or rosacea into seamless confidence and self-love overnight or even over years, regardless of how natural or common they are.

Simply accepting the body for what it is and being grateful for all its functions, on the other hand, are attitudes people can adapt to more easily. They also help people become healthier more holistically— physically, mentally and emotionally. After all, one will be more mindful of their health when they work out for strength or health instead of their goal to achieve the perfect summer body.

Similarly, thanking the body for all the wonders it does for us every day will make one appreciate their bodies more and make them feel more comfortable in it.

Beauty can still be on one's list of desirable traits for themselves and in no way does body neutrality deny that. All it simply asks is to not prioritise beauty over everything and to move towards self-love at a more realistic, organic pace instead of shoving forced affirmations down one's throat day and night.

If one happens to see beauty in all their flaws, great. But if one does not, they can aim to see the beauty in the functionality of their body before moving on to its appearance. After all, like most things in life, it is what is on the inside that counts the most.



DESIGN: SYEDA AFRIN TARANNUM

You should be worried about surveillance capitalism

AYAAN SHAMS SIDDIQUEE

Earlier this week, a friend of mine was bragging about his optimised Facebook feed. He claimed he gamed the system by watching videos of burgers and fries on YouTube, which led to him getting all sorts of promotions and discounts of fast food joints on his feed.

What my friend unsuspectingly took as personal gain, is actually hard proof that he, along with billions of active social media users, are victims of surveillance capitalism.

In essence, surveillance capitalism is a process that relies on the constant gathering of online data by tech companies. The data that is generated is the byproduct of our everyday web browsing, app usage, and digital consumption — the videos we watch, the memes we react to, and the news that we consume. This allows companies to make personalised predictions about who we are, the things we want, and the things we're likely to do.

However, this isn't all, since gathering and selling information is only the tip of the iceberg. Through subliminal cues and triggers, tech companies have learnt to "modify our behaviour in the direction of their preferred commercial outcomes". This subliminal coercion and herding is why my friend sees ads for fast food joints.

So why should this be a cause of concern when the convenience this provides for us seems to outweigh the cons at an



DESIGN: KAZI AKIB BIN ASAD

initial glance? The reasons are manifold.

Firstly, the business model of surveillance capitalism wholly undermines personal privacy. Google, Facebook, Amazon, and other tech companies claim human experience and data as raw material to feed into their systems and gain profit from.

While these companies claim to take a user's consent before collecting their data, the truth is far from it. More often than not, there isn't really much of a choice involved with giving platforms access to your personal data.

Secondly, in the process of modifying

our behaviour, our free will is impeded to a large extent. The future that we project ourselves into is no longer a meaningful result of the present, but rather a programmed outcome of hindering our critical thinking and moral judgement.

It is also important to note that even though surveillance capitalists know everything about us, we know little to nothing about their incursions. The extent of knowledge they have on our behaviour and preferences extend far beyond the scope of the information we consented to give them.

However, truth be told, there isn't a single, universally applicable solution that can ensure our privacy on the internet. So, the next time you find sneakers on your feed after a trip to the sports shop, do take it with a grain of salt.

References

1. The Guardian (October 04, 2019). Shoshana Zuboff: 'Surveillance capitalism is an assault on human autonomy'
2. The Daily Star (September 09, 2019). Surveillance capitalism and the right to privacy
3. The Harvard Gazette (March 04, 2019). High tech is watching you
4. Rappler (August 31, 2030). What you need to know about surveillance capitalism

Remind Ayaan that he should be studying for his SSC examination at ayaan.shams@gmail.com

Back to the wall

How I live with back pain

MAISHA SYEDA

My constant state of pain comes from an injury I had some six-odd years ago when I slipped and fell – from the steps of my yoga class – and landed square on my bottom. The shock that my spine suffered at that moment resulted in two slipped discs: one cervical and one lumbar.

The consequence was a complete 180-degree turn-around of my lifestyle choices, my moods, how I interact in relationships, the way I henceforth sat, stood, slept, when or what I ate... basically my entire life.

And even though my case was somewhat unusual, young people these days, from teenagers to adolescents, all seem to be suffering from severe back issues for far less – like habits and lifestyle choices. It wasn't only because of the heavy bags we carried to school for years and years, but that seems to be one of the earliest contributing factors.

Tanvir Rahman, whose back pain isn't as recurrent, says the pain mostly appears when stuck for two hours in the backseat of a car with two other people on his way home from work.

"I've had a long day already and it's a long way back home, with very little room to move inside the car; it is cramped and uncomfortable," Tanvir says. "And then my pain hits."

Doctors suggest that age, stress, development of various degenerative diseases of the spine (like osteoporosis, fibromyalgia, and arthritis, among others) that occur over time are some of the leading medical causes of back pain. These can occur due to age, natural and/or genetic causes, among others. Lifestyle choices, like lack of exercise, gaining excess weight, and smoking can also lead to various back problems.

However, for Mir Zunayed Hossain, a customer sales representative, there is no "identifiable" reason why his pain may act up.

"It's usually when I have a particularly stressful or busy day at work," says Zunayed, adding that he usually goes on carrying on with work when it's still tolerable. "I may take a day off if the pain is too severe, but mostly I can't because it doesn't seem like that big a deal," he asserts. "Who doesn't have back problems these days?"

Practicing physiotherapist at United Hospital, Dr. Md. Tanvir Alam, notes, "I have found throughout my career that the cause of back pain among young people mostly is postural alignment."

He reasons, "These days we spend most of the time with gadgets like mobile phones, computers, laptops, gaming consoles, etc. Moreover, we do not engage in exercises or outdoor sports anymore due to the lack of time in our hands."

"It is because of physical inactivity that our musculoskeletal structure is becoming vulnerable day by day," Dr. Alam explains.

And that is the irony: our bodies – the structure of our spines – are devolving to one similar to the Hominids', or cave people, because of technological advancement. Growing up, we fell into these unhealthy habits because it was demanded of us from our tech-savvy, easy, social practices resulting in a sedentary lifestyle. We keep working at our desks, hunched over, because most of our jobs are desk jobs and there aren't too many options for physical exercise.

Lifestyle-induced backpain is now such a systemic problem that even if wanted to change it, we wouldn't know where to begin or how to keep up.

But while back pain seems merely like an occasional inconvenience to some, others suffer far more and severely. Studies have found that even sitting down for too long

or gaining a little bit of weight can cause disc herniations.

Senior analyst Fairooz Rahman, who has to sit working long hours at desk, complains of chronic pain impacting her moods and relationships. She said her back usually acts up when she's had a lot to do in the office.

"Which is almost always," she mentions. "That means I haven't had the time to take a break or even leave my desk, and the lack of movement or stretching causes a sharp, ceaseless pain that shoots up and down my spine". When asked if and how it affects them in their personal lives, she said it makes them irritable and short tempered.

"Suddenly, even the smallest thing triggers me, and I end up picking a fight with my husband and become passive-aggressive with my in-laws," Fairooz tell me.

"There's nothing I can do though. I have a desk job,

on a chair with good lower back support.

"Good posture can reduce the stress on back muscles," he added.

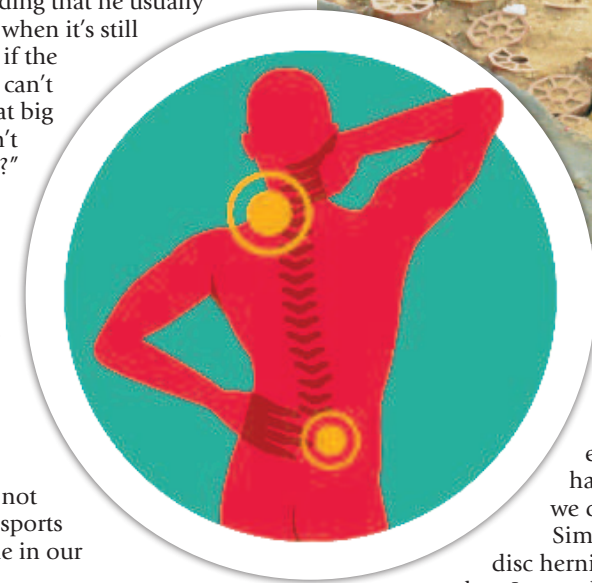
With all due respect, and at the risk of contradicting myself, is maintaining this ongoing list of challenging (read: unrealistic for us non-super humans) "tasks" always attainable?

Our "bad" posture is the consequence of our lifestyles. Such lifestyles of ours, in turn, is the consequence of the system, the social practices, the norms, and the lack of attainable options on the contrary. Because we can't make a lifestyle out of being an active Olympic runner in this country. And doctors and medical treatment are expensive – and not sustainable.

Abir Haque, 24, a private university student who also works as a copywriter, demands there be massage facilities



PHOTO: KK NAYAN



it requires me to stay seated at my desk for hours at a stretch. Most people in this country have desk jobs, so it makes sense that almost everyone in our generation will have back problems. It's not like we can just quit," she adds.

Similar to her, the pain from my disc herniation became prominent

when I started teaching at a school, at least two years after I suffered the injury, surprisingly. The doctor I went to at the time mentioned that the "minor" injury was aggravated due to sitting for long hours and constantly working with my right hand unsupported (I had to check countless copies every day).

However, he couldn't do much because I hadn't completely become bedridden from the pain yet.

But the pain, for me, was still unbearable, and I looked to go to a physiotherapist on my own.

When I first started going to a physio, my doctor mentioned a good practice was to sit on a chair with a hand-rest to support the elbows. Sitting straight in a chair with a back support is also a good idea, and even better, if we can manage to work with a standing desk.

Public health professional Dr. Tareq Salahuddin suggests maintaining a healthy weight as excess weight strains the muscles. He also advised to "avoid movements that strain [the] back" by not slouching, or sitting

ties at every workplace. It makes sense to me, what sane working individual hasn't asked for that at some point in their working life? My colleagues and I wish for one every other day. But that is wishful thinking, obviously.

Even though a number of workplaces house gyms these days, the people do not have enough time to go to that gym. I mean, no one is really stopping us from spending an hour doing stretches and light exercises, but it has somewhat become ingrained in our understanding that our times are better spent finishing the work at hand.

Besides, are there workstations that have the option of standing desks? I've never seen or heard of those here. And most of the time, we work on chairs that are poorly designed, with no ergonomic support, which are already present in the office.

It would take years to change the work culture, the system, these norms and accordingly, our lifestyles. Our backpains are not getting better – permanently, at least – any time soon.

What are we supposed to do then, stop texting, attending to our emails and quit our jobs? As one of my colleagues aptly puts it, "Our backs are suffering from the weight of our responsibilities."

Maisha Syeda is a writer, painter, and a graduate of English Literature and Writing. She is the sub editor of Daily Star Books.