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BABY GOT BACK - 'FAT' ABUSE IS A WEIGHTY ISSUE FOR FULL-FIGURED WOMEN; COMMENTS TAKE A HEAVY TOLL

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"Men are telling women they need to lose weight. They're making it clear they're not attracted to their partners." - **Sarah Dreisbach**, health expert

WHEN Marie gained 70 pounds, the comments from her husband started. And with it, a giant helping of nitpicking and self-doubt. The 25-year-old founder of the personal blog mercurialscribe.com couldn't eat, drink or shop for clothing with her husband without feeling like, well, a big fat failure.

"I'd try on a dress and ask what he thought of it, and he'd start to say something . . . and then pause," says the struggling dieter, who asked that her last name not be used.

"Finally, he'd come out and say, 'When you were lighter, it would've looked excellent on you, but not right now.' And that hurt my feelings."

In a society that tends to associate pudginess with laziness, women's weight can be a heavy issue in romantic relationships. For many, battling the bulge doesn't mean just fighting food cravings - it entails dealing with the harsh criticism of a loved one.

"He would point out women who were in really good shape. It gets in your head when your boyfriend's picking out other women that he finds attractive," says Lisa, a 24-year-old who blogs about life as an overweight woman at afat-bridesmaid.blogspot.com. "This made me feel insecure. I was uncomfortable around him - and it was one of the reasons we broke up."

Sarah Maria Dreisbach, a body image expert who leads workshops, says this problem is widespread.

"I work with a lot of couples who face it every day," she says.

"Men are telling women they need to lose weight. They're making it clear they aren't attracted to their partners - and that's demeaning."

Dreisbach says that women - who are more likely to endure this type of abuse - become introverted and depressed.

Or worse, they snap.

Some suspect this might have been the case with Staten Island teacher Janet Redmond Mercereau, who is a prime suspect in the December slaying of her husband, 38-year-old Fire Marshal Douglas Mercereau. The murder is still under investigation, and Redmond Mercereau insists she didn't do it, according to her lawyer, Mario Gallucci. But she was, he said, "a true victim of mental spousal abuse." Because of a thyroid problem and medication to deal with it, she'd gained weight - and her husband derided her for it, Gallucci said.

Although murder is obviously at the extreme end of the spectrum, the issue of weight can be a trigger point for many people. And comments from a significant other can be like rubbing salt in an open wound.

"People can only take so much before they become seriously affected," says Dreisbach.

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Laura, a 24-year-old blogger, has long suffered ridicule by her boyfriend. It has taken a huge toll on her self-confidence.

"If I eat something like Tasti DLite, he discusses it like it's an issue, asking me to consider what I'm doing to my body," she says. "He gets mad at me when I get groceries because I sometimes bring home fatty snacks."

But that's not all. Whenever she's in public with her boyfriend, she worries about embarrassing him. "I gained 60 pounds back after dieting, and, when we were on the beach, I was obviously heavier. He was distant and openly unpleased about how fat I looked in my bathing suit."

Still, some believe the real sufferers in the relationship are the thin partners.

Just ask Chris, a 38-year-old who founded a Web site called myfatspouse.com, designed for men and women to have somewhere to complain about their fat spouses, anonymously.

"I wanted there to be a place where people could go and talk about dreading getting into bed with their 300-pound spouse without getting brutally attacked," he says. "These people have a legitimate concern and should be allowed to discuss it without being badgered for being insensitive."

While he admits that, "at first, new visitors write a three-page diatribe about how terrible it is to have sex with someone obese," Chris says that eventually, the support from fellow fat-spouse sufferers helps them deal with their anger. Connor, a 34-year-old who visits myfatspouse.com on a regular basis, says he learned to deal with his wife's obesity by reading forums.

"I wanted advice about how to bring this up and after reading other peoples' stories - the approaches they took that didn't work. You can learn from other people's mistakes."

But Dreisbach says that's no way to handle this issue.

"You have to sit down and say that you're concerned about their health and you're willing to work together," she says. "If you're the victim, you have to be clear about what's allowed to be said - because no one should be treated that way."

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GRAPHIC: -Janet Mercereau (right) stayed stoic during the funeral for her husband Douglas (inset.) Some suggested she snapped after enduring one too many of his fat jokes. [Paul Martinka] -Eddie Murphy plays a plump gal in "Norbit." -Overweight woman. [Pixland/Corbis] -Janet Mercereau (right) stayed stoic during the funeral for her husband Douglas (inset.) Some suggested she snapped after enduring one too many of his fat jokes. [Paul Martinka] -Eddie Murphy plays a plump gal in "Norbit."

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