

Smoking Is Glamorous

Category: Smoking

written by Pamela Adelstein | August 10, 2021

In the mid-1970s, as a preschooler, I used to stare at a poster in the waiting room of my pediatrician's office. This poster depicted a disorderly person, dark hair unshorn, snarling and puffing on a cigarette. The poster's caption: Smoking Is Very Glamorous.

As an earnest, curious child too young to understand irony, I scrutinized every inch of this poster, trying to understand what made this person glamorous. Once I inquired of my mother, "Why does it say smoking is very glamorous when the person on the poster does not look glamorous?" She explained the poster's meaning, but I remained unsettled. I felt sad for the poster's subject as I viewed the unhappiness in their eyes, their lack of grooming and their grimy state.

After leaving the pediatrician's waiting room my visit went downhill. First I was weighed in a place that felt public, all ears and eyes on me as my poundage was ceremoniously announced, then scribed into my chart. Next I was escorted into an exam room where the doctor poked and prodded me, asked a few questions about school, and proclaimed that I was "fat" and "needed to eat less and lose weight." Absent were words of encouragement, ideas for how to eat healthier, and opportunities for me to converse with the doctor. Deflated and humiliated, I was then led to a seat near the scale, where I was vaccinated via needle or drink. After appeasing me with a sticker or lollipop (oh, the irony), I escaped to the car and was driven home.

Needless to say, I despised going to the pediatrician. I felt solidarity with the person on the poster, who was said to be glamorous, but clearly was not. The shame attributed to the poster model mirrored what I experienced on the scale. Rather than learning how to be healthy, I learned that having weight, eating and taking up space were bad for a young growing girl.

Despite a lifetime of educating myself about body positivity, twisted cultural norms and the media industry, I still dread the moment I am weighed at my family doctor's office. In my work as a family physician, when patients confess their food "sins" and vow to weigh less next visit, I want to hug them and hold up a mirror so they can see what I see when I look at them: their gorgeous, glamorous humanity.

Pamela Adelstein

Newton Center, Massachusetts