

Melissa:

Tasha, I'm so excited to have you on the show today, and I'm so excited about the work that you're doing in the world.

Natasha:

Thank you so much. I'm so excited to be here, too.

Melissa:

So for people who maybe haven't heard about your work and maybe even like the anti-diet movement, could you maybe say a little bit about the work that you're doing in the world, currently?

Natasha:

Okay. Well, to best answer your question, I'll have to start from scratch and tell you my story. I was born in South Africa. I moved to Canada when I was about eight years old. And just from being raised there, I learned a totally different standard of beauty than what is here in Canada.

Growing up here and just seeing all the media messages and being around people, talking about beauty, I realized more and more every day that I was really far away from that standard. Basically, my life became all about trying to get to that standard of beauty. It was just completely unattainable, but I just always tried anyways. I've always been a bigger girl. So it's just not something that was for me, because even if I was active and eating well, my weight just never really budged.

In high school, towards the end, I really had a thing for someone, and this guy told me that if I could just lose 50 pounds, then I would be attractive. I already had body image issues, but then that comment was kind of a major motivation for me to go harder and try more so that I could be beautiful.

For the next three months, I basically over exercised, starved myself, but I thought that I was being healthy about it because I was reading all these articles online from all these nutritionists that sounded like they knew what they were talking about, which they did not. And so, I ended up losing the 50 pounds. I felt so amazing in my body. Surprise, he still didn't like me, but by that time I was just so deep into like diet culture.

I ended up wanting to get into nutrition so that I could learn more about weight loss and kind of share with everyone because people wanted to know how I lost the weight. But with time, I regained the weight and more, and during this process I was actually in nutrition. So, it was really traumatic to be gaining so much weight while studying nutrition, and people would look at me funny and all kinds of ways. It actually made me feel really depressed. I ended up hitting rock bottom.

So I saw a dietician, and I just let her know, "Hey, I need to lose this weight that I've gained. Can you help me do that?" She had a completely different approach from what I was expecting. She's the one who introduced me to a totally different way of looking at life. That's how I learned about intuitive eating, health at every size, and my life just changed completely.

I really wanted to share that with everyone. So that's how I came about with my Instagram, The Thick Nutritionist, and I started sharing those messages with other people, mostly women, and just repeatedly reminding everyone that we don't need to fall into the diet culture traps, that beauty is individual. It's not just one image that we all need to reach. So, I guess I really just love, love, love spreading the messages of you deserve to eat, you're worthy in your own size, don't compare yourself to anyone.

Melissa:

That's just so good and so counter cultural, too, which is awesome.

If it's okay, could I go back and just hear a little bit more ... One of the questions I really love to talk to people, or just have named, are just some of the lies about beauty that you've experienced in your own life. I mean, because you mentioned when you first moved to Canada and were noticing some messaging around beauty. What were lies then? What are lies now? Anything that comes to mind?

Natasha:

Oh, well I feel like one big lie is that beauty is pain, and it's something that we should all strive for. I don't think that makes sense. I really hate the fact that that message is put on women all the time about how you need to be skinny, you need to wear makeup, have nice clothes, nice jewelry, only certain hairstyles are beautiful. It's been all about looks this whole time, but it's not just about looks.

I think just growing up and realizing that there's no perfect skin color, your face doesn't have to be perfectly symmetrical, or a perfect lip structure. None of those things really matter. For the longest time, I was so uncomfortable with even the size of my forehead or the fact that I don't have clear skin because those were all messages of what beautiful is, and I just was the opposite. So, I think since I was a child, those are all kinds of lies that have followed me until now.

Melissa:

Yeah. Thank you for naming that. I just think sometimes those lies are so innate in our culture and we just are fed them so often, like subconsciously through advertising and media, that it can be powerful to even just name them. There are many.

Natasha:

It's crazy.

Melissa:

Yeah. I hadn't thought about size of your forehead. Have I felt self-conscious about that? Probably so at some point, but I didn't even think about that. Yeah. Yeah. There are so many rules we're supposed to abide by or somehow fit into.

So another question I love to ask people, we talked a little bit about lies, but then as you've grown and transformed and adapted, as you've noticed how unhelpful diet culture and beauty standards can be, how do you currently define beauty?

Natasha:

Well, in terms of the physical part, I really don't think that there's a standard definition. I have realized that beauty is truly in the eyes of the beholder.

Just growing up and being in different cultures, in my own culture, people would think that I'm gorgeous, but then if I translate it to being here, it might not be the same thing. So, I realized that there is no global standard. I realized also that true beauty is being happy, confident, loving, all of those good things that are intrinsic. It's about being nonjudgmental, being open to new ideas.

I think that we should really broaden the concept of what beauty is all about.

Melissa:

Yeah, no, totally. So, for you, where do you find yourself seeing beauty in the world around you?

Natasha:

Well, I feel like a big one is just outside in nature. There have been so many little moments where maybe I'm looking at the sky or at some falls or mountains, just appreciating basically all the amazing things that God has put in the world. That has been a really big thing.

I also see beauty when I see small acts of kindness, especially if it's from strangers. I think that's really awesome. I see beauty in hanging with my friends, spending time with my family and other loved ones. I think a really big one is just to be myself and realizing that I'm pretty like me, not like her, but it's still beautiful.

Melissa:

Yeah. Yeah. Thank you for that.

Something that kind of caught my eye, too, when I was looking over your website and some of your materials, which I would highly recommend your account to anyone who's listening, too. It's The Thick Nutritionist on Instagram. Just so inspiring, I feel. But I'm wondering if you could maybe talk a little bit about if someone is new to diet culture, could you maybe say a little bit around how you would define that, since that might be a newer term to some listeners?

Natasha:

Okay. Diet culture is, I would say, the result of the diet industry taking regular things that we can be insecure about, blowing them up, and then making us feel like we need to change them. Then the diet industry offers us those solutions, through solutions like weight loss, diets, just any way of changing the way you currently are.

So then basically diet culture traps you. Then you spend the next few years, or even the rest of your life, buying into all of the different ways of fixing yourself and just trying to be happy.

Because the diet culture and diet industry really makes you feel like if you were just someone else, you would be happy, and they can help you be someone else.

It's really sad because a lot of it is really coming from a marketing space, not actually a health and wellness space that everyone thinks. A lot of us think that when we are following those diets, we're getting more healthy. But in reality, it's not healthy to be skipping out on entire food groups, or under eating. Those things are not healthy. Also, we don't have to be over-exercising and hating the way we look and the way we feel, just to be beautiful.

Melissa:

Yeah. Thanks for saying that piece, too, that part about enjoyable movement. I noticed that you are a Zumba instructor, is that correct?

Natasha:

Yes, I am.

Melissa:

So could you maybe say a little bit more about that? Because again, I think sometimes some of these messages around movement and exercise in our culture, it just seems so like, I don't know, like the Nike term of "just do it," like let's just keep pushing ourselves, kind of how that cultural view of movement maybe is similar or different to this idea of moving our bodies for enjoyment.

Natasha:

Well, diet culture really makes it seem that exercise is not for fun. It's for completely changing your body, and you have to push yourself, rain or shine. Whether you like the exercise or not, you have to do it. There are all these rigid plans that people feel like they need to follow, to get to certain results. I've had so many conversations where people ask me, "Why do you go to the gym if you have no goal? Are you just seriously going to have fun?"

I think it's ridiculous that that's even really a problem to some people, that I would like to go just to have fun. I'm not looking for scale victories. There are so many non-scale victories that you can get from working out. I've realized also that when you find movement that is enjoyable, things that you actually love doing, you end up pushing yourself more, you end up being consistent, but it's because you like it. You love it. You're not just doing it for the calories. In the long term, it's a lot healthier to exercise because you want to and do things you want to, rather than be in a bad space physically and mentally because you're trying to change yourself.

Melissa:

Totally. I'm just thinking about the ways that probably our thought life is different then, as we're moving our bodies, when we have a goal of a certain number, versus actually paying attention to our body and being in the present moment, enjoying what we're doing.

Natasha:

Exactly. It's a huge difference.

Melissa:

The other piece that I know you highlight a lot is around body acceptance. Could you maybe say a little bit about that, again for people who might be new to that term or what that might look like?

Natasha:

Okay. Well, body acceptance is interesting because a lot of times people think it's body positivity, and that seems like an unattainable goal for a lot of people, to just love their body and be obsessed with it all day, every day. It's not always realistic. Body acceptance is just trying to really accept where you currently are right now.

Even if you don't love your body, you take the time to appreciate all the things that it does for you. That's one exercise that I really liked doing when I feel awful about something. So, if I feel bad about my legs or my thighs, then I'll ask myself, "Okay, what do they do for me?" Then I appreciate that they help me walk, they help me run, all those things, and that it's actually a privilege to be able-bodied. So, body acceptance is just more about respecting your body and accepting it the way it is, whether or not you like it.

Melissa:

Thank you for explaining that, too. Yeah, because I think it can be confusing sometimes because there's body positivity, body acceptance, there's all sorts of different terms, too. I think, like you said, that body acceptance and the gratitude for body functioning and also just the miracles that our body are. This is going to sound maybe crazy or out there, but I remember hearing even about the eyeball and how insane the structure of the eyeball is.

Natasha:

I believe it.

Melissa:

Everything about us. Yeah. I mean, when we start to learn about our brain structure, and truly every part of our body is so miraculous. It's just I think it can be interesting when that can be our lens, versus how we do we're don't match a standard. Yeah, there's so many unhelpful parts about that. So, thank you for sharing about that, as well.

Another question that I love to know about is, have you had any experiences that have transformed your ideas around beauty?

Natasha:

Yes. I've had so many. One thing that really transformed my views way back was when I heard about this experiment back in 2014, where this journalist got a picture of herself, just a raw unedited picture, and then she sent it out to 25 photo-shop experts around the world and basically said, "Beautify me." If you look at the images, all the 25 images are insanely different, and it really showed how differently everyone sees beauty. Having all those people say, "Oh no, this is actually what's beautiful," was just so interesting to see.

Another big thing is, when I first learned about intuitive eating and HAES (Health At Every

Size), I ended up surrounding myself in a community of likeminded people. I unfollowed all the accounts on social media that made me feel bad about myself, all the Instagram models and the fitspo people, unfollowed. Just from seeing regular people doing regular things and just going through the process of accepting their bodies, too, made the biggest difference to me. Because I realized that, you know, we don't have to strive for that one look of beauty. It's okay to be beautiful in your own unique way.

Melissa:

Yeah, totally. That makes so much sense. I'm so sorry if I keep asking you to define things. I think sometimes these ideas are so ... I mean, it totally depends who you're talking to, regarding how familiar they are with these terms. So, you had said intuitive eating, and I don't know if you have a way of explaining that, if you wouldn't mind maybe saying a couple things about what intuitive eating is, if someone is new to that term.

Natasha:

Okay, sure. I'll try to give a brief summary. Intuitive eating is basically rejecting everything that diet culture has ever told us. One of the biggest things about intuitive eating is honoring your hunger and fullness.

Diet culture's way of eating is following external cues. So, they tell you what to eat, when to eat, and how much you should eat. As we grow up and we follow all these rules, we kind of lose touch with our own senses.

We stop trusting our bodies because they're seen as an enemy, and we think that we're going to totally lose control if we eat how we want to eat.

With intuitive eating, you're rejecting all of those external cues, and you're really trying to look inward. It's not a simple process or easy work, but it does get easier with time. With intuitive eating, you go out of your way to try and follow your hunger and fullness cues. If you're eating a meal, you can pause throughout the meal and just ask yourself how you're feeling. Also, just eating and putting a snack in you, if you're starting to feel hungry, rather than waiting and starving to meet a mealtime that you were told to eat.

You stop thinking that foods are good and bad. You just see them neutrally, and you honor your cravings. If you're really craving something, you're not scared to have it. Unlike with diet culture, where things are horrible for you and they're bad and you can't eat them and you feel guilty for eating them, intuitive eating kind of takes out all of that shame and that guilt. Basically, you're just trusting your body and accepting that sometimes you're going to eat less, sometimes you're going to eat more, and everything is okay.

Melissa:

It just sounds like there's so much more freedom and it takes the shame out of your relationship with food.

Natasha:

There should be no guilt or shame when you're eating.

Melissa:

Thank you so much for explaining that. I appreciate it. As you're thinking about this topic of beauty and/or beauty standards, is there anything else, as you were thinking about our conversation today, that came to mind or that you wanted to mention?

Natasha:

Yeah, for sure. I think I'll just share my biggest lesson, and that is basically not to follow diet culture at all. Just really try to find beauty in yourself and your own self-worth, because if you stay trapped in that cycle, you end up missing out on so many amazing things that life has to offer. For example, going to the beach, being in pictures with your friends, or just doing all kinds of activities, going to events, those are all things that we're so self-conscious about because of the way we look, but we really don't need to be. We should be able to enjoy all of the different things life has to offer without thinking about our looks, because beauty is just so relative.

We really don't need to fall into this idea that beauty is one certain way of looking.

Melissa:

Yeah, that is awesome. Would you say that diet culture has caused you to miss out on some of those experiences, then, and to live and be in the present in those moments?

Natasha:

Yes, for sure. One thing that I always feel bad about is that there's a few years of my life that I just have no pictures of. I know that I did different things, but I just have no pictures because I felt so self-conscious. When I look back, I really wish I had pictures from those moments because my weight really doesn't matter. It's just crazy also because at that time, even though I weighed less, I felt horrible about myself, but then I gained weight and then wished I had that body. So, everything is always changing.

Melissa:

It's like you couldn't win.

Natasha:

No, there's no winning.

Melissa:

Yes, yes. Earlier you had mentioned that ... I think you said like God's creation is where you see beauty. Am I remembering right?

Natasha:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Melissa:

I'm wondering if faith or spirituality is a resource for you and if so, how that plays into your relationship or your view of beauty, even in the world or in yourself.

Natasha:

Yeah. I think just by being spiritual and having that faith, I realized that since I am God's creation, since I am and since we all are, we're all in his image. So, it's almost rude to say that we're ugly because we're all made by him. So just really thinking about that made me realize that there was no point in judging myself, and that if people are trying to make us feel bad, it's just not anything we need to give energy to.

Melissa:

Thank you for sharing that. That's really helpful.

Natasha:

Yeah.

Melissa:

So as we look towards wrapping up, is there anything that you, in terms of places, if people are interested and want to find you online, places that they can find more about you and maybe some additional information about your work?

Natasha:

Okay. Well, the best place to find me is on Instagram, on my page The Thick Nutritionist, as I mentioned before. Also, I have an online store where I just sell merchandise that supports the anti-diet message, and that is thethicknutritionist.com. As for my work, I'm really interested in speaking right now. So, if anyone wants me to be a guest on their podcast or anything like that, feel free to reach out to me.

Melissa:

Awesome. Cool. This has been so helpful, and I so appreciate the work that you're doing and everything that you shared today. Thank you so much for your time and for talking with me today.

Natasha:

Thank you so much for having me. I really appreciate it.