

Post-Print

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You win some, you lose more

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Ratings consistently show Australians love reality television. In 2013 our favourite thing on TV was to watch one another singing, dancing, cooking and renovating. Every year producers dish up more contrived scenarios, bitter conflicts, shameful embarrassments and heart-warming triumphs under familiar reality brands. We are entertained; they make money.

Not surprising, then, that a new season of *The Biggest Loser* starts this weekend. More surprising is that recent years have seen the show's ratings fall. It's hard to know why: perhaps we're just bored. Perhaps we're more interested in watching someone sauté a quail in butter. Or maybe - and I'm being optimistic here - we're starting to listen to our intuition that this show is a bit wrong. That it is exploitative, even by reality TV standards. That it is ethically questionable.

In the past 50 years, we have built a society in which it's easier to be fat than thin

I am not the first to criticise *The Biggest Loser*: Google can introduce you to my fellow travellers. Personal trainers, dieticians, weight-loss doctors, contestants and former employees of the show have critiqued its methods, its motives and its outcomes. And their criticisms suggest deep ethical problems.

The simplest is this: the show is likely to harm contestants and unlikely to benefit them. They are rewarded not for improving their health, but for decreasing their weight. Before weigh-ins they reportedly starve themselves, go without fluids and take long saunas to temporarily shed kilos. They are sometimes trained to the point of physical breakdown ("Who can take the pain?"). Medical emergencies are just more drama for the storyline. Most contestants regain their weight after the show because they lost it too quickly, and because the show's environment is so unlike normal life changes can't be sustained.

The show likes to imply it benefits its audience by inspiring them to lose weight. But this is also improbable. Yes, contestants' stories can be inspiring. But they are harnessed to unrealistic weight loss expectations that, if anything, will undermine people's real-life efforts. Maybe we all understand that reality television has nothing to do with reality. But frankly, if *The Biggest Loser* was going to inspire Australia thin it should have worked by now.

And this leads to the biggest problem, for individual contestants and for us collectively. *The Biggest Loser* tells us, episode after episode, that heavy people are entirely responsible for their own weight and until they fix it they don't deserve our respect. Like a lot of reality TV, it is built on antagonism, individualism and ritual humiliation. Trainers scream abuse, contestants strip down for weigh-ins (reinforcing the freak-show vibe), and everyone but *The Biggest Loser* is, well, a loser.

Yes, our weight is partly a product of our own actions, but it exists in a context: a market and a society. And in the past 50 years, we have built a society in which it's easier to be fat than thin.

Season Nine promos hint *The Biggest Loser* might be learning their lesson. For the first time, the team are "changing the shape of one of Australia's most obese towns", Ararat in Victoria. This provides hyperbole but it might also be a glimmer of recognition that we are all in this together.

Could *The Biggest Loser* be listening to its critics and taking their responsibilities more seriously? For the show to become morally defensible, it needs to set reasonable goals, encourage small and sustainable lifestyle changes, show concern for contestants' health, coach respectfully, and stop the big-body shaming. It would, in fact, need to be an entirely different show. Let's wait and see.