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# Nicola Coughlan is right: 'body positivity' traps us in the same old conversations

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6–7 minutes

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Nicola Coughlan is sick of the subject of “body positivity”, and thank God, because so am I. “The thing I say sometimes that pisses people off is I have no interest in body positivity,” she said in a recent interview. Like Coughlan and no doubt many, many other women, I’m sick of talking about it, thinking about it, reading about it, all of it (I do recognise a certain irony in my writing about it, but hear me out). In [the same interview](#), Coughlan recounted an encounter with a fan: “I remember this really drunk girl once talking to me in a bathroom being like, ‘I loved [Bridgerton] because of your body’ and started talking about my body, and I was like, ‘I want to die. I hate this so much.’”

She continued: “It’s really hard when you work on something for months and months of your life, you don’t see your family, you really dedicate yourself and then it comes down to what you look like – it’s so fucking boring.”

Coughlan – a brilliant actor – has been particularly unfortunate, in that her body is the talking point that will not leave her alone. Even

at times when, as she pointed out, she is a size 10, she is still talked about as “plus-sized”. In some ways, it reminds me of [Kate Winslet](#) in the early days of her fame. The tone of the conversation is different; Winslet was subjected to the merciless misogyny and [body fascism of 1990s media](#), while Coughlan is held up as a “body-positive role model” as part of a pushback against it. Yet both actors have faced a similar battle: wanting to make good work that they care about in their chosen art form, and finding that all anyone seems to want to talk about is their supposedly “atypical” bodies.

Coughlan and I are of the same generation, and so both came of age during the period when Winslet was being viciously body-shamed. It was not a good time to become a young woman, and some of us have fared better than others in coming to terms with that era and the impact on our self-esteem of ruthless, internalised self-scrutiny.

That’s why the body-positivity movement most recently popularised during fourth-wave feminism was greeted with open arms. After years of shaming and fatphobia, here was a movement that celebrated women’s bodies in all their diverse beauty. I found it inspiring, but over time I began to realise that it never really succeeded in silencing that almost constant, self-hating background hum that came from years of being socialised into only seeing your own flaws.

To me, body positivity felt like something other women seemed to be excelling at – like it was yet another standard to meet. Loudly loving my body didn’t feel like a realistic goal to strive towards. Maybe on some level I knew that the pressure to love my body was in itself a directive to think too much about it, when true

liberation looked like not having to think about my body at all. Maybe it was less about loving it, and simply about learning to live with it peacefully.



📷 Nicola Coughlan in the April edition of *Elle UK*. Photograph: *Elle UK*/ Georgia Devey Smith/PA

Surely, true liberation was directing your energy elsewhere, towards making art, doing politics, loving people and the planet? One of the most heartbreaking things about the toxic overemphasis on women's bodies is how it chips away at everything else that makes life meaningful. Coughlan's frustration is my frustration, too: all that time and energy, when all of us could be doing something so much more worthwhile.

That seems to be the case whichever way the pendulum is swinging, from body negativity to body positivity, and back again. At the moment, body positivity is on the wane, plus-sized models are losing work, and we seem to be returning to a 1990s worshipping of ultra-thinness, made all the more prevalent due to the rise of [weight-loss injections](#). Presumably after that we will

have another backlash. I just don't think I have it in me to engage. As Coughlan says, it's fucking boring. Whether we're talking about body negativity or body positivity, we're still talking about the body at the expense of all else. What we should be striving for is body neutrality. Body acceptance. That is where the real freedom lies.

We all get there, or start moving towards it, in different ways.

Perhaps it's giving birth, becoming seriously unwell, or seeing your body achieve a feat of endurance. I'd characterise it as a sort of detached respect and appreciation for what your body can do, as the vehicle that moves you through the world.

When I was writing [my novel](#) *Female, Nude*, in which my characters wrestle with these questions, I attended a lot of life drawing classes for research. As an exercise in learning body neutrality, there is nothing better. If I had a young daughter, that's what I would recommend. At first, you might look at the life model and notice the sorts of "flaws" that can be disappeared online at the touch of a button – the fat of her upper arm when it's pressed against her side; the back folds from the slight turn of a torso; cellulite. Then something happens: the body dissolves into a series of lines and curves. The act of observing becomes detached, and the human body becomes a fact, nothing more. Instead of constant, tedious discussion about the female body, truly, properly and uncritically *looking* at it feels, to me, like a move towards equilibrium and hopefully, freedom. It's a process, but Coughlan's refreshing attitude reminds me to keep trying.

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