



Plus-size? More like my size -Ashley Graham

You are bold, you are brilliant, and you are beautiful. There is no other woman like you. You are capable. Back fat, I see you popping over my bra today, but that's alright. I'm going to choose to love you. And thick thighs, you are just so sexy, you can't stop rubbing each other. (Laughter) That's alright. I'm going to keep you.

And cellulite, I have not forgotten about you. I'm going to choose to love you even though you want to take over my whole bottom half, but you're a part of me. I love you. It's true, honestly. I felt free once I realized I was never going to fit the narrow mold that society wanted me to fit in. I was never going to be perfect enough for an industry that defines perfection from the outside in. And that's OK. Rolls, curves, cellulite, all of it. I love every part of me.

My name is Ashley Graham, and I'm a model and body activist. Over the last 15 years, I've come to the conclusion that there is no one perfect body. Because I, like you, possess a wonderfully unique and diverse physique. Now, the fashion industry may persist to label me as "plus size", but I like to think of it as 'my size'. In fact, did you know that the plus size fashion industry actually starts at a US size 8? And it goes up to a US size 16.

So basically what I'm saying is that the majority of this room right now is considered plus size. How does it make you feel to be labeled? I really feel like we need to start looking beyond the plus size model paradigms to what it actually means to be a model in 2015. My journey begins in Lincoln, Nebraska. I was 12 years old and scouted in a mall. At 13, I signed with a major modeling agency and was traveling the world.

I was shooting big campaigns, and before I even graduated high school, I had been to multiple different countries. At 17, I graduated and moved to New York, and while most kids are going through their self-discovery stage in college, my self discovery stage was in the midst of catwalks, catalogs, and casting calls. I was working as a full time plus size model. Back in Nebraska, I was known as the "Fat Model".

The girl who is pretty for a big girl. I always hated answering that question: "What do you do for a living?" I would see that person's eyebrow raise as I would reply: "I'm a model!" I'd have to quickly qualify with: "Well, I'm a plus size model." In fact, here is my very first editorial for YM Magazine. And, you are reading it correctly, "cantaloupes-large breasts". I was helping women across America at the age of 15 dress their big boobs. But you know what the first thing that someone in middle school pointed out to me besides-- well, besides the obvious? Was that fold above my knee. That fat fold above my knee.

As a young model, my confidence was tugged at and pulled in all different directions. I struggled to achieve true confidence. I would go home and look in front of the mirror and only hate what I saw. And to fill the void on the inside, I began to cave to all the vices being thrown my way. Between the parties, the men, the alcohol, I was looking for self love, for affirmation from somebody, when in reality, I didn't love who I was, and I couldn't seem to get a handle on regulating my own weight. I began to face my insecurities head on.

And instead, I was filling my life with temporary fixes. I, like so many young women, have struggled to love who I am. And Dove's global report on attitudes towards beauty actually did a survey with thousands of women in ten different countries. And you know what the most striking result was? That only 2% of women find themselves beautiful. 2%! We need to work together to redefine the global vision of beauty. And it starts with becoming your own role model.

As a curvy woman it was the assumption that I should look up to Marilyn Monroe or Jennifer Lopez mainly because they were two of the most notable curvy women in the public eye that were being praised for their curves. But these weren't my role models. In reality, the woman I looked up to the most was my mother. She told me I was beautiful, and she never devalued herself. So why would I? She told me and taught me that true beauty comes from within and that validation and self worth must also come from within. In my lowest moments of insecurity this is when I realized that I had to reclaim my body and its image as my own.

Plus-size fashion is an 18-billion-dollar industry. And now IMG, the world's number one modeling agency, has signed me and other models that are not defined by their size. My body, like my confidence, has been picked apart, manipulated, and controlled by others who didn't necessarily understand it. I had to learn to reclaim my body as my own. And in reclaiming my body as my own, I understood as a woman that I had a greater purpose.

I had a greater purpose to redefine beauty. The feminine beauty. Curvy models are becoming more and more vocal about the isolating nature of the term plus size. We are calling ourselves what we want to be called: women with shapes that are our own. I believe beauty is beyond size. With so much emphasis on the body and external, it's no wonder that we all suffer so much internally. But you know, people in the fashion industry actually told me that I would never be in magazines let alone the covers of them. Well, I guess we've proven them wrong. Five covers in a little over a year. And I was one of the very first curvy models to be featured in Sports Illustrated Swimsuit Edition. (Applause)

Thank you. Never let anybody tell you that you can't. I have achieved, and I'm still achieving what was seemingly impossible. My goal is to give a voice to young women. To give a voice to young women who struggle to find someone they can look up to. For girls who struggle to look inside the mirror and say, I love you. For women who feel uncomfortable expressing their confidence they've locked away inside themselves. For women who have relinquished their rights to someone else. It is critical that both men and women create a body positive environment. Uplift the important women in your lives.

Create a safe space for them to express their body and their beauty for who they are not because of who they're not. Be you. Be real. Be authentic. Be your favorite kind of woman. Don't let anybody else take that job. And remember this is the generation of body diversity. The current is changing. I now invite all of you to #TEDxBV15 with your own self-affirming words. There may not be a full-length mirror in front of each of you today, but I want to challenge you to think about what you would want to say to yourself in the mirror with your own self-affirming words. Thank you. (Applause)