

...type of thinking would be useful is an approaching showdown in Congress: Fiscal cliff, the sequel.

On Sept. 30, the government's spending authority will expire without a continuing resolution from Congress, and by mid-October, the federal debt ceiling — an incredible \$16.7 trillion — will be exceeded. Without raising the debt limit, the government, unable to borrow more money, will not be able to pay all of its bills. You and I will notice, but more importantly, the world will notice. As with the showdown in the summer of 2011, and the original fiscal cliff, this dilemma is likely to be met with a lizard brain response from a Congress locked in a deep partisan divide.

For others, the term conservative envisions a "Hummer driving, meat eating, gun-toting, small-government promoting, tax decreasing, hard-drinking, Bible thumping, black and white thinking, fist pounding, shoe stomping, morally dogmatic blowhard."

These stereotypes, courtesy of author Michael Shermer, are a function of the lizard brain. Opposing worldviews trigger the same part of the brain that lights up with the approach of a tiger. How is anybody supposed to think straight?

Not very easily, it turns out. Nobel Laureate researcher Daniel Kahneman reports on nearly boundless trials to understand the interaction between two modes of

says the slow thinking "System 2"? It answers: "Deficits are only erased in a growing economy."

The Aug. 23 issue of *The Economist* led with the story "A rickety rebound, The global economy is gaining momentum. But only in America is the acceleration likely to last." It seems that the initial austerity path followed by the rest of the developed world got other economies off to a poor start following the global financial crisis. The piece concludes with, "Which leaves the United States as the likely engine of global growth." In this view, America got it right with its financial rescue and stimulus despite massive deficit spending.

Meanwhile, partisan views of the fiscal cliff are a little bit like two different owners walking a dog. The right would like to put the dog on a choker chain and yank it up tight. The left would slacken the leash. But if any of the nonpartisan information above has any merit, government spending needs to be on a leash, but one that is carefully and conscientiously managed to avoid choking off recovery. Getting to this point demands more than a lizard brain, but if my hunch is correct, a thoughtful, rational approach to deficit cutting isn't going to happen.

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Avoid 'old talk' around impressionable young women

A few weeks ago a friend called me to share what she deemed to be very disturbing news. "Today is a terrible day," she moaned. "I found my first gray hair!"

"Guess it's time to find a good hair colorist!" I replied without thinking.

Recently I was reminded of our exchange as my YWCA York colleague and I chatted about our agency's upcoming Girls on the Run season — our biggest yet. Throughout the fall, our staff and volunteers will work with hundreds of pre-teen girls to encourage self-confidence, positive body image and an appreciation of health and fitness.

And yet here I was commiserating over a gray hair.

New research led by psychology professor Carolyn Black Becker of Trinity University labels my conversation with my friend "old talk." Old talk is distinct from yet connected to the more widely-acknowledged "fat talk," a phrase used to describe denigrating conversation related to one's body weight. Think comments like "Do I look fat in this?" and "I hate my thunder thighs!" Old talk, on the other hand, highlights our cultural obsession with both thinness and youth, leaving women fretting over wrinkles and gray hairs in addition to their weight.

The study, which was published earlier this year in the *Journal of Eating Disorders*, surveyed more than 900 women between the ages of 18 and 87. Participants reported on a variety of measures, including age, weight, body satisfaction, engagement in fat talk and old talk, and eating disorder behavior. The researchers found that, while younger women tend to bash their bodies through fat talk, older women engage in similar negativity through old talk. Of all women surveyed, a whopping 81 percent reported fat talking at least



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occasionally, and two-thirds reported old talking.

Additionally, Becker's research found that women who engage in frequent fat talk and old talk also reported greater struggles with low self-confidence and negative body-image. Such body dissatisfaction — be it due to weight, age, or both — is associated with a variety of physical and emotional health problems, including low self-esteem, depression and eating disorders. Research compiled in the YWCA's 2008 report "Beauty At Any Cost" highlighted that in the U.S., nearly 10 million women suffer from an eating disorder such as anorexia or bulimia.

As YWCA York gears up for our next Girls on the Run season, I can't help but wonder how many of the girls we will serve — girls who are already faced with a cultural standard of beauty glorifying the size zero — have overheard their adult role models grumbling about a new wrinkle or some sagging skin. How many of them have even heard their YWCA mentors using such language?

"We certainly hear anecdotally from young women that they are influenced by the things they hear adult women saying," noted Becker.

Why are we so dedicated to ending fat talk among girls and yet engage in old talk ourselves? The problem, according to Becker, is that old talk has become so norma-

tive — so commonplace — that most of us don't even realize we're doing it. Sarah Blake, LCSW, who has worked in the treatment of eating disorders for over 15 years, agrees. "It's quite amazing just how prevalent old talk is, and nobody bats an eyelash," she commented.

Nobody, that is, except the girls who overhear and internalize the contradictory messages we're sending them.

If we want to instill self-acceptance in the young women we serve — if we truly want to show them that all sizes and ages are beautiful — then we need to start with our own thoughts and speech. Becker points out that "we pay lip service to the idea that all bodies are accepted, but every time we engage in old talk or fat talk we are personally expressing confirmation of the thin-young ideal."

That needs to change. But how do you stop doing something that's so deeply embedded in our minds and in our culture? Here are three ways to start.

1. Become mindful of your body-bashing thoughts.

It's pretty hard to squash negative thoughts when you're not even aware you're thinking them. According to Blake, mindfulness is about "paying attention to what is going on within your head" to increase that awareness. "We have so many thoughts within a single minute," she explains, "and most of them we don't pay conscious attention to. But they're still there." When you start paying attention, you'll soon begin to recognize when a self-disparaging thought — "I'm way too old to wear a bathing suit!" — pops into your mind.

2. Keep your lips sealed.

Once you're aware of your negative body-image thoughts, you then have the power to choose what you do with them: share them with

others or keep them to yourself. The next time your brain says, "My neck looks so old!" or "Look at all my ugly sun spots!" make a conscious decision not to express those sentiments to anyone else. "It's about not engaging in (old talk) yourself," says Becker. "A lot of people will say to me they can't turn it off in their heads, so you start by turning it off behaviorally, by not saying it out loud."

3. Speak candidly with others — including young women — about negative body-talk of all kinds.

The YWCA's "Beauty At Any Cost" report highlighted that more than 80 percent of women are dissatisfied with their appearance. To combat these widespread feelings of inadequacy, we need to speak openly with our friends, family members, and — perhaps most importantly — the young women we serve in our programs about the negative effects of fat talk and old talk.

If your sister starts complaining about her big butt, explain to her why you're choosing not to join in. When a girl in your program asks about Botox, emphasize that there is nothing inherently wrong with having wrinkles. Creating a positive dialogue about body image will help everyone start using more self-affirming language.

Recently the mother of a Girls on the Run participant wrote YWCA York a letter commending our program. Of the young women we served, she wrote, "No matter how they looked on the outside, (after the season) they possessed a stronger sense of self-determination on the inside."

Let us all work to instill that kind of confidence, both in the girls we serve and in ourselves.

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