Weighing In: How Can We Identify and Reduce Weight Stigma?

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Weighing in: How can we Identify and Reduce Weight Stigma?

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PSYCHOLOGY
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Fact or Fiction?

- **Obesity can be simplified to calories in, calories out**
  - **Fiction.** There are multiple and complex genetic, biological, epigenetic, social, environmental and behavioral factors that contribute to obesity.

- **The prevalence of weight discrimination has decreased since the 1990s.**
  - **Fiction.** Perceived weight discrimination has increased 66% from the 1990s to the 2000s. (Eisenberg et al., 2019)

- **Weight bias is always obvious and direct.**
  - **Fiction.** Weight bias is not always obvious, but it can be seen all around us; from waiting room chairs and the sensationalizing of a pop star’s weight loss, to explicit, derogatory comments made toward people in larger bodies.
Fact or Fiction?

- **Weight bias and discrimination can begin as early as preschool**
  - **Fact.** There is some evidence that even preschoolers demonstrate negative attitudes and beliefs about individuals in larger bodies (e.g., Spiel et al., *Body Image*, 2012)

- **Weight stigma and discrimination can lead to weight gain.**
  - **Fact.** Weight criticism, stigma, teasing, and discrimination can lead to more stress and shame, decreased activity, and weight gain.

- **Healthcare providers, especially those specializing in obesity-related concerns, tend to have the lowest levels of weight bias.**
  - **Fiction.** Many healthcare providers, including physicians, nurses and even clinicians specializing in obesity-related concerns, exhibit high levels of weight bias. (Tomiyama et al., *BMC Medicine*, 2018)
Weight Bias, Stigma, Discrimination

- **Weight Bias**: Negative attitudes, beliefs, prejudice, judgments about others due to their weight.

- **Internalized Weight Bias**: When someone believes and applies these attitudes and beliefs to themselves.

- **Weight Stigma**: Stereotypes and misconceptions about obesity and people in larger bodies.

- **Weight Discrimination**: When these personal biases or misconceptions lead to unfair or inequitable treatment, verbal or emotional harmful treatment, teasing or bullying, physical barriers, and problems with access to care.
Forms of Weight Bias:

**Implicit Weight Bias**

- Underlying attitudes and beliefs that impact the interactions with or treatment of individuals in larger bodies
- The individual with these beliefs may not be aware of or deny having these beliefs when asked

**Explicit Weight Bias**

- Identifiable attitudes and beliefs that impact the interactions with or treatment of individuals in larger bodies
- The individual can vocalize these beliefs
What contributes to weight bias?

- **Inaccurate causal attributions of obesity**
  - Personal control? vs. low access to affordable / healthy foods, sleep deprivation, medications, marketing, discrimination, metabolic and endocrine factors, learned behaviors

- **Societal messages** individuals in larger bodies are “at fault”, thin ideal -> reinforcing stereotypes

- **Environmental factors** and access to resources and care

- **Individual beliefs and behaviors**

- **Media**
Gym Advertisements

1. "This is no shape for a girl"
2. "Make muscles not excuses"
3. "Enroll in one of our classes now and enjoy 40% off on our available gym gear.
4. "No excuses just results"
Food Advertising

Guilt free goodness.

Skinny Pop

Skinny Whip Toffee & Chocolate Snack Bar
Day-to-Day
How common is weight bias?

- Weight discrimination rated as the 4th most prevalent form of discrimination

- 54% of adults with obesity experience weight prejudice from coworkers

- 69% of adults with obesity report experiencing weight prejudice from healthcare workers

- School-aged children affected by obesity are 63% more likely to be bullied than their non-obese peers

- 72% of media images stigmatize individuals affected by obesity

Nutter et al., 2018; Puhl et al., 2008 WHO, 2017
Why does it matter?

- Impact of weight bias internalization
- Psychological Impact
  - Lower self-esteem, shame, higher depression and anxiety
- Social Impact
- Impact on Eating and Physical Activity
- Physical Health Impact
  - Less access to quality health care, Reduced use of health care, elevated physiological markers of stress, increased risk for continued weight gain
- Educational and Economic Impact
What can you do?

- **Ask yourself some questions** (adapted from Puhl & Suh, Weight Bias in Clinical Care):
  - What are my views about the causes of obesity? How does this affect my attitudes toward and treatment of individuals in larger bodies?
  - Do I or have I believed these common stereotypes about obesity?
  - Do I make assumptions about an individual’s character, capabilities, or qualities based only on their body size or weight?

- **Be mindful of how you talk about weight in your social circles**
  - “Fat talk”, social media

- **Language matters**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Instead of this</th>
<th>Try this</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fat*</td>
<td>Larger body</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chubby</td>
<td>Higher Weight</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weight problem</td>
<td>BMI (if in proper context)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Morbidly obese</td>
<td>People with obesity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Or not at all!</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
What can you do?

- Learn more about the multiple, complex causes of obesity
- Consider the **multiple barriers to weight management** for those who do choose to lose weight
- Facilitate discussions of weight stigma in your classrooms and when training student professionals
  - Provide assigned readings, videos, exercises
- Consider **modifications to the environment** over which you have control
- **Challenge people** who express negative opinions about people with excess weight.
- **Implement protections** against weight stigma and weight-based bullying
- Make efforts to address **food insecurity, access to food, and problems with the built environment**
- **Further action here**: https://www.obesityaction.org/action-center/access-issues/
Questions?

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References / Resources

- The Implicit Association Test (IAT), Weight: https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/takeatest.html

- UConn Rudd Center for Food Policy and Obesity
  - https://uconnruddcenter.org/research/weight-bias-stigma/


- Videos:
  - https://uconnruddcenter.org/research-archive/
  - https://www.weightoftheworld.com/library/

- For the more comprehensive list of references and resources, please see the library's LibGuide at:
  - https://library.lasalle.edu/c.php?g=1117148&p=8283178