What is Health at Every Size (HAES)?

HAES is a paradigm which focuses on promoting healthy behaviors without emphasizing weight loss. The HAES approach comes out of discussions among healthcare workers, consumers, and activists who reject both the use of weight, size, or BMI as proxies for health, and the myth that weight is a choice. The book *Health at Every Size* by Lindo Bacon, PhD explored decades of research to explain how weight-focused health goals have been seen to result in less-than-favorable health outcomes, while the HAES approach helps individuals to improve their self-esteem and overall health, regardless of their weight.¹

**HAES Principles**

- Accept and respect the diversity of all body shapes and sizes
- Recognize that health and well-being are multi-dimensional and that they include physical, social, spiritual, occupational, emotional, and intellectual aspects
- Promote all aspects of health and well-being for people of all sizes
- Promote eating in a manner which balances individual nutritional needs, hunger, satiety, appetite, and pleasure
- Promote individually appropriate, enjoyable, life-enhancing physical activity, rather than exercise that is focused on a goal of weight loss

**What Does the Research Show?**

**Body Image**

Research shows that body *image* has a much bigger impact on health than body *size*.

- Focusing on weight as an indicator of health leads to body dissatisfaction and in some cases eating disorders.²

**Mortality**

- In a review of over 350,000 research subjects, being overweight was found to be associated with a longer life when compared to being at a lower weight.
- After controlling for factors such as socioeconomic status, yet another review found a decreased risk for mortality in overweight and obese individuals.¹

**Weight Gain**

- Critics of HAES express concern that encouraging body acceptance will lead individuals to eat with abandon and disregard dietary considerations, resulting in weight gain. This has been disproven by the evidence. In fact, no randomized controlled trial on HAES has resulted in weight gain, and all studies that report on dietary quality or eating behavior indicate improvement or at least maintenance. Conversely, dieting is consistently associated with weight gain.¹
- Dieting by means of calorie restriction increases cortisol which contributes to weight gain.³
- Repeated attempts at weight loss and subsequent weight gain (weight cycling) has been shown to increase the risk of developing inflammation, high blood pressure, insulin resistance, and high cholesterol.⁴
Health Behaviors

HAES research shows that by learning to value their bodies as they are right now, even when this differs from a desired weight or shape, people strengthen their ability to take care of themselves, resulting in improvements in health behaviors.1

The HAES approach presents new ways to set health goals. According to research, those who have higher self-esteem and body confidence typically make healthier decisions day-to-day. HAES-based lifestyle changes have been shown time and time again to produce better mental, emotional, and physical results when compared to traditional weight-based lifestyle changes such as dieting.

Putting it into Practice: Approaching Health Through a HAES Lens

- Avoid comparing your body to others, including bodies presented in the media.
- Focus on moving your body in a way that you enjoy with the intent to feel better, not to lose weight.
- Provide your body with adequate fuel by eating foods which you like and which make you feel good.
- Practice challenging your current view of what a healthy body looks like. This could include following more diverse bodies on social media.

References