Weight Stigma

According to the National Eating Disorders Association, weight stigma, also known as weight bias and weight-based discrimination, is defined as discrimination or stereotyping based on a person’s weight. Over the past decade, weight stigma has increased by 66%, making it nearly as prevalent as rates of race discrimination in the US.

Sources of Weight Stigma

- **Healthcare professionals**—69% of patients reported experiencing weight bias from their doctor, and 1/3 of nurses reported they would rather not care for individuals with a higher Body Mass Index (BMI).
- **Educational/school settings**—Surveys of teachers found they held negative stereotypes about and lower expectations of students with higher BMIs, and rates of bullying are 63% higher for these same students.
- **Workplace**—54% of people report experiencing stigma from co-workers. These same individuals are less likely to be hired, even when equally qualified and, when hired, earn less and receive fewer raises.
- **Parents, family members, and friends**—92% of children are bullied by their peers for their weight and family members’ comments often have lasting psychological impacts.

Impacts of Weight Stigma

- **Body image**. Weight stigma negatively impacts body image for people of all sizes, especially those on the high end of the BMI scale. Research shows that body image more strongly affects health compared to actual body size.
- **Eating behaviors**. An estimated 79% of weight-loss program participants reported coping with weight stigma by eating more food. Moreover, women with high internalized weight stigma were less likely to benefit from healthy eating behavior programs compared to women without internalized weight stigma, even if they were the same weight.
- **Childhood development**. Parents who are overly concerned with weight pass those stigmatizing attitudes and beliefs onto their children, who have been shown to model the same behaviors (e.g. body checking in the mirror, negative comments about body).
- **Mental health**. Weight stigma significantly increases an individual’s risk for developing depression, anxiety, low self-esteem, body dissatisfaction, suicidal thoughts and behaviors, and eating disorders.
- **Seeking medical care**. Individuals are less likely to seek medical care and preventative services and are more likely to delay or cancel appointments as a result of fear of weight stigma. This results in missed diagnoses and delayed treatment.
- **Disease risk**. Increased disease or mortality risk as a result of higher stress levels, increased inflammation, and poorer cardiometabolic outcomes.
- **General health behaviors**. Increased risk of engaging in risky behaviors such as smoking cigarettes, drinking and driving, using drugs, and participating in unsafe sex.

How to Combat Weight Stigma and Offer Support

- **Raise your own awareness**. Recognize weight stigma in the media, in research, at home with family and friends, and in the healthcare setting. Challenge your own internal weight biases.
- **Check your biases**. Avoid making assumptions about people based on their weight. If you work as a healthcare provider, consider your patients’ actual concerns rather than focusing solely on their weight.
- **Avoid offering unsolicited advice**. Though you may mean well, offering suggestions for ways to be healthy, eat, or lose weight can be harmful and in fact might result in resistance, putting up a wall, or engaging in the opposite behavior.
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- **Be mindful around children.** Negative comments from parents about their child’s weight have been linked to decreased body satisfaction later in life.\(^5\) Instead of telling your kids to lose weight, avoid discussing weight around them and instead model healthy behaviors.

- **Think twice about compliments.** Avoid commenting on an individual’s body, including weight loss, since it could reinforce weight stigma or disordered eating behaviors, may be from an illness or trauma, or could imply something was wrong with their appearance before. Consider compliments that take into account a person’s accomplishments, personality, and what you enjoy or appreciate about that person.

- **Offer words of encouragement.** Emphasize to your friend or loved one that the size of their body does not determine their health, but that the ways in which they nourish themselves physically and mentally is more important. Celebrate achievements which are not weight-loss oriented, like career milestones or personal achievements.

- **Consider body diversity.** Depending on your role within an organization, be mindful to have a diverse representation of people (e.g. race, age, ability, body size, etc.) when making decisions regarding images used on marketing materials, sizing of clothes as part of prize giveaways, furniture and room layout, guest speaker invitations, and more.

- **Say something.** Consider ways to address comments related to weight stigma or body shame, such as:
  - “I would rather not talk about other people’s bodies. Can we talk about something else instead?”
  - “It might not have been intended, but comments like that actually hurt people. Let’s try to lift others up instead.”

**Support for Individuals Facing Weight Stigma**

- **Speak to a counselor.** If weight stigma is affecting your mental health, you may benefit from meeting with a counselor or other mental health professional to talk about your experiences and work together on building a positive body image.

- **Practice self-compassion and body acceptance.** Speaking kindly to yourself has positive health outcomes. One study found that people who wrote compassionate letters to themselves once a day for a week saw significant reductions in their depression compared to those who did not. Self-compassionate individuals are also more likely to seek medical care, drink less alcohol, quit smoking, and exercise due to internal motivators rather than external factors.\(^6\)

- **Focus on what you appreciate about your body.** Make a mental note or write down the things that you are grateful for about your body, ways that you like being in your body, or the things that you like about yourself. Examples include:
  - My body allows me to participate in the hobbies and activities I enjoy.
  - I am grateful for my body’s ability to fight infection and keep me healthy.
  - I like how my body feels when I am dancing.

- **Be patient with yourself.** Improving your body image in a weight-stigmatizing society is difficult work which takes time. Know that some days you might not love your body, but that you are still making progress and that healing comes in waves.

**References**

1. Rudd Report: Weight Bias a Social Justice Issue
2. NEDA: Statistics & Research on Eating Disorders
4. The Health Impact of Weight Stigma
5. You Really, Really Should Never Comment on Your Child’s Weight