



PORTIONS HAVE GROWN  
SO ONE WHOLE WHOLE WHOLE CAN LEAD  
TO HAPPY HEALTHY PEOPLE  
CUT YOUR PORTIONS. CUT YOUR SIZE.  
It could be for your health. Eating Right.

Save the Whales  
LOSE THE BLUBBER

Not Ready to  
Meet Your  
Maker?  
DON'T DRINK SO MUCH  
ALCOHOL. BECAUSE IT MIGHT  
AFFECT YOUR HEALTH.

OOOOO

Your Abs  
on Chees  
Your Thig  
on Chees

ARE YOU POURING ON THE POUNDS

# Shame Campaigns

## - Do they work?

by Rebecca Puhl, PhD



**As part of national and state efforts to address obesity, many mass media campaigns have emerged throughout the country encouraging Americans to improve their diet and exercise more.**

**Y**ou have likely seen television commercials, billboards, or magazine ads sponsored by different health organizations promoting obesity prevention messages. These campaigns often focus on the importance of reducing portion sizes and soda intake, eating more fruits and vegetables, and increasing physical activity. As an example, First Lady Michelle Obama's *Let's Move! Campaign* has been widely publicized and broadly embraced across the United States, which aims to encourage healthy eating and activity behaviors in children.

### Shock-Tactics

While most of these campaigns are initiated from positive intentions to improve public health, some anti-obesity campaigns have instead been criticized for shaming and stigmatizing individuals affected by obesity. As an example, in 2011, the Children's Health Care of Atlanta Campaign to address childhood obesity in Georgia publicized billboards and commercials portraying youth with excess weight with "warning" captions such as "Stocky, Chubby, and Chunky are Still Fat" and "Fat Kids Become Fat Adults." Despite being the target of public criticism for promoting shame and stigma toward families affected by obesity, these kinds of shock tactics are often defended by campaign organizers

as being necessary to increase public attention to the issue, and from misperceptions that shame and stigma may actually provide an incentive for people to lose weight.

### Gathering Public Opinion

As a researcher who has studied weight stigma for more than a decade, I was concerned that these types of campaigns would do more harm than good. We know from considerable research evidence that experiencing weight stigma can worsen psychological and physical health, impair weight-loss efforts, and potentially lead to increased weight gain. In addition, given that so many people with excess weight already suffer from stigma and prejudice, and are frequently made to feel ashamed of their bodies, the potential harm that could come from public health campaigns using shaming tactics is a legitimate concern. I was also surprised to learn just how little research was being done by health organizations to test their messages and approaches before they launched their obesity-related campaigns. In an effort to address this, my research team at the Rudd Center conducted two nationwide studies to see what Americans really think of different anti-obesity campaigns.



Specifically, our aim was to examine public perceptions of obesity-related health campaigns that were recently publicized throughout the U.S. In our studies, we presented people with a series of obesity-related campaigns to look at (including those that had stigmatizing content and those that were more neutral), and we asked them to evaluate each campaign on a number of different characteristics. For example, we asked participants to what extent each campaign instilled feelings of motivation to improve their health, whether they felt able and confident to make health

“ Campaigns that were rated to be most motivating for improving health behaviors were those that did not even mention the word “obesity,” and in most cases made no mention of body weight at all. ”

behavior changes that were promoted by the campaign, whether they felt the campaign reinforced negative stereotypes about persons affected by obesity, and whether they felt the campaign content (both pictures and words) was appropriate.

Our findings revealed some important insights:

- First, obesity-related campaigns that were rated to be stigmatizing were no more likely to instill motivation for improving lifestyle behaviors than campaigns rated as more neutral.
- In addition, stigmatizing campaigns were also rated as inducing less self-confidence to engage in health behaviors promoted by campaigns, and viewed to have less appropriate visual content compared to neutral campaigns.

These findings also remained consistent across different segments of the public (regardless of a person’s own body weight). Importantly, these findings challenge the idea that stigma is an acceptable or necessary approach to take in efforts to address obesity. It also indicates that shaming and stigmatizing approaches are less effective than non-stigmatizing campaigns to encourage health behaviors.



When we looked more closely at the types of obesity-related campaigns that the public favored and felt motivated to improve their health behaviors, we came across another important finding: campaigns that were rated to be most motivating for improving health behaviors were those that did not even mention the word “obesity,” and in most cases made no mention of body weight at all. These were campaigns that instead focused on promoting specific health behaviors, such as eating more fruits and vegetables, or replacing sugar sweetened beverages with water; behaviors that all Americans can engage in to improve their health, regardless of their body size.

### What Does this All Mean?

What these findings tell us, is that weight stigma undermines the ability to effectively communicate with Americans about obesity and health. People feel much

more motivated and empowered to make healthy lifestyle changes when campaign messages are supportive and encourage specific health behaviors. In contrast, when campaigns communicate shame or stigma, people feel less motivated and have lower intentions to change their health

“ “ We know from considerable research evidence that experiencing weight stigma can worsen psychological and physical health, impair weight-loss efforts, and potentially lead to increased weight gain.” ”

behavior. Our research findings also suggest that campaigns don’t need to focus on obesity in order to promote healthy eating and exercise behaviors. This kind of approach could go a long way in helping to reduce weight stigmatization. Removing the emphasis on obesity, and instead focusing on healthy behaviors that everyone can engage in regardless of their body weight, can help reduce blame and shame directed at persons affected by obesity and support all individuals in their efforts to be healthy.



## Conclusion

Clearly, there is much work that needs to be done to ensure that media campaigns are truly empowering and supporting people as they take steps to improve their health behaviors, rather than alienating persons affected by obesity and instilling shame and stigma. This also holds true for the way that we talk about

obesity in other settings, such as in schools with children, and with healthcare providers and their patients.

As a starting point, our research highlights strategies that can lead to a more careful and thoughtful consideration of

approaches and messages that are used to communicate about weight-related health. Summarized below on this page and the next are the “Do’s” and “Don’ts” that can serve as general guidelines for obesity-related campaigns, but these also apply to the way that we talk about weight and health as health providers, educators, and even as parents. We all need to promote a positive and productive dialogue about weight-related health without any stigma or shame, and with plenty of support and empowerment.

### About the Author:

Rebecca Puhl, PhD, is the Deputy Director at the Rudd Center for Food Policy & Obesity at Yale University. For more information about Dr. Puhl’s work, please visit [www.yaleruddcenter.org](http://www.yaleruddcenter.org).

### References:

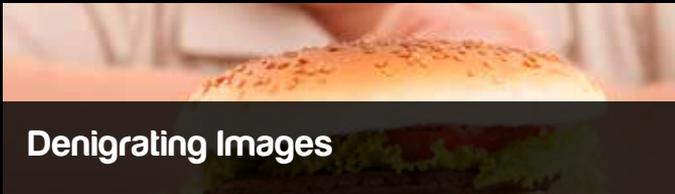
Puhl, R.M., Peterson, J.L., Luedicke, J. (2013). Public reactions to obesity-related public health campaigns: A randomized trial. *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*. 45, 36-48.

Puhl, R.M., Peterson, J.L., Luedicke, J. (2012). Fighting obesity or obese persons? Public reactions to obesity-related health messages. *International Journal of Obesity*. doi:10.1038/ijo.2012.156

Article Photos: © istockphoto.com/iconogenic  
© istockphoto.com/hayesphotography  
© istockphoto.com/fatihhoca  
© Rudd Center for Food Policy & Obesity at Yale University

Below are examples of Do’s and Don’ts

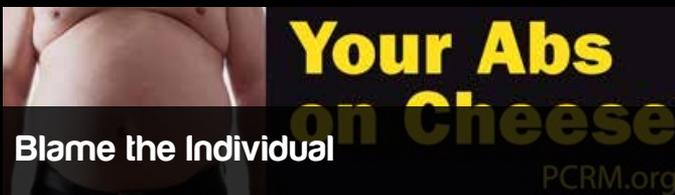
# What NOT to do:



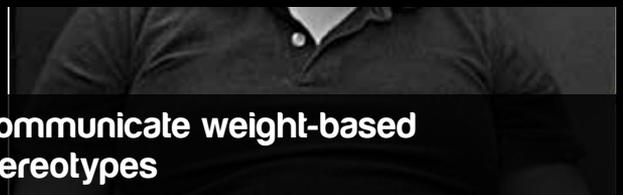
Denigrating Images



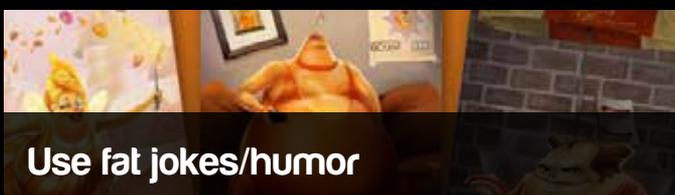
Pejorative Language



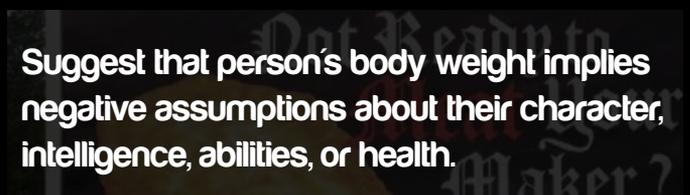
Blame the Individual



Communicate weight-based stereotypes



Use fat jokes/humor



Suggest that person’s body weight implies negative assumptions about their character, intelligence, abilities, or health.

# What TO do:



**Respectful portrayals of persons with obesity**



**Focus on health behaviors**



**Suggest specific actions**



**Use sensitive language**



**Challenge stereotypes**



**Question whether “obesity” or body weight need to be mentioned at all**

UNDERSTANDING  
**YOUR  
WEIGHT-LOSS  
OPTIONS**



An educational resource provided by

**OAC**  
Obesity Action Coalition

Order your  
**FREE** copy of  
*Understanding Your  
Weight-loss Options*  
Brochure at  
**ObesityAction.org**





# ABOUT THE OBESITY ACTION COALITION (OAC)

The Obesity Action Coalition (OAC) is a National non-profit organization dedicated to giving a voice to individuals affected by obesity and helping them along their journey toward better health. Our core focuses are to elevate the conversation of weight and its impact on health, improve access to obesity care, provide science-based education on obesity and its treatments, and fight to eliminate weight bias and discrimination.



VIBRANT COMMUNITY



NATIONAL AWARENESS CAMPAIGNS



ANNUAL CONVENTION



ADVOCACY



PUBLIC EDUCATION

## LEARN, CONNECT, ENGAGE

The OAC knows that the journey with weight can be challenging but we also know that great things happen when we learn, connect and engage. That is why the OAC Community exists. Our Community is designed to provide quality education, ongoing support programs, an opportunity to connect, and a place to take action on important issues.

**Through the OAC Community, you can get access to:**

- Weight & Health Education • Community Blogs
  - Community Discussion Forum
  - Ongoing Support • Meaningful Connections
- AND MUCH MORE**



**JOIN TODAY: GO TO [OBESITYACTION.ORG/JOIN](http://OBESITYACTION.ORG/JOIN)**

[info@obesityaction.org](mailto:info@obesityaction.org)

(800) 717-3117 | (813) 872-7835 | Fax: (813) 873-7838



@ObesityActionCoalition

@ObesityAction