Understanding Weight Bias & Stigma

An educational resource provided by the Obesity Action Coalition



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Obesity Action Coalition

Obesity is a complex, chronic disease influenced by many factors, including biology, genetics, environment, health conditions, medications and social circumstances. It is not simply a matter of willpower or personal choice.

Yet people living with obesity are often blamed, judged or treated differently because of their weight. This can happen in health care, schools, workplaces, relationships, media and everyday life.

Weight bias includes negative attitudes, beliefs, stereotypes or assumptions about a person because of their weight.

Weight stigma is the shame, social exclusion or feeling of being less valued that people experience because of their weight. It can show up through hurtful language, stereotypes or treatment that makes someone feel unwelcome.

Weight discrimination occurs when someone is denied opportunities or treated unfairly because of their weight.

These experiences can affect a person's emotional and physical health, relationships, education, employment and willingness to seek health care. Weight bias can be obvious, but it can also appear in subtle ways, including language, jokes, images, assumptions and environments that do not accommodate people of all body sizes.



Everyone deserves to be treated with dignity, respect and compassion. By learning to recognize weight bias and understanding its impact, each of us can help create more respectful and inclusive communities.

This resource explains weight bias and stigma, where they occur, how they affect people and what individuals, allies, health care professionals and organizations can do to help stop them.

Why Misunderstanding Obesity Fuels Weight Bias

Weight bias is often rooted in the false belief that body weight is entirely within a person's control. This belief can lead people to assume that someone living with obesity lacks willpower, motivation or self-discipline.

In reality, obesity is a complex, chronic disease. Many interconnected factors can influence weight, including biology, genetics, hormones, medications, health conditions, sleep, stress, environment, access to care and social conditions.

When obesity is viewed as a personal choice or failure, people are more likely to be blamed instead of supported. Increasing understanding of the complexity of obesity can help challenge harmful assumptions, but education alone is not enough. We must also examine the policies, practices and social norms that allow weight bias and discrimination to continue.

Weight Bias in the Workplace

Weight bias can affect people throughout the employment process, from applying for a job to advancing in a career. A person may be judged according to stereotypes about their appearance, competence, professionalism or work ethic rather than their qualifications and performance.

Weight bias in the workplace may affect:

- Hiring and interview decisions
- Pay and benefits
- Promotions and professional opportunities
- Workplace culture and relationships
- Uniforms, seating and other accommodations
- Performance evaluations
- Disciplinary actions or termination

Research continues to show that weight-based discrimination can contribute to unequal employment opportunities and pay. Employers can help prevent it by evaluating people according to their skills and performance, reviewing workplace policies and providing an environment that respects and accommodates people of all body sizes.

Recognizing Weight Bias at Work

Weight bias can be direct, such as making insulting comments about someone's body or refusing to hire a qualified applicant because of their size. It can also appear in less obvious ways, including assumptions about a person's health, abilities, professionalism or work habits.

Examples may include:

- Commenting on an employee's weight, body or food choices
- Assuming someone cannot perform a job because of their size
- Using travel or other workplace policies that do not account for employees' needs related to body size
- Applying appearance standards differently based on body size
- Excluding employees from public-facing or leadership roles
- Offering fewer opportunities for advancement
- Providing uniforms, seating or workspaces that do not accommodate a range of body sizes
- Pressuring employees to participate in weight-focused workplace wellness programs
- Using body weight as a measure of health, performance or personal responsibility





Creating a More Respectful Workplace

Employers can help prevent weight bias by:

- Evaluating applicants and employees according to their qualifications, performance and ability to complete essential job responsibilities
- Providing uniforms, seating, equipment and workspaces that safely and comfortably accommodate employees of all body sizes
- Reviewing travel and other workplace policies to ensure employees can access needed accommodations, including appropriate seating and transportation arrangements
- Making wellness programs voluntary, private and focused on overall health rather than weight or appearance
- Training managers and staff to recognize and respond to weight-based comments, stereotypes and discrimination
- Establishing a clear process for reporting concerns without fear of retaliation

Know Your Rights

Legal protections related to weight discrimination vary by location. Some states and communities specifically prohibit discrimination based on weight, height or body size. Other situations may be covered by disability or other civil rights protections. The U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission notes that height and weight requirements should be related to the actual responsibilities of the job.

If you believe you have experienced weight discrimination, document what happened and consider contacting your human resources department, union representative, local civil rights agency or a qualified legal professional.

Weight Bias in Education

Weight bias can affect students of all ages. It may come from peers, educators, coaches, school staff or institutional policies and practices. It can happen in classrooms, cafeterias, health and physical education programs, athletics, extracurricular activities and online.

Students may experience weight-based teasing, bullying, social exclusion or assumptions about their abilities, health, eating habits or level of physical activity. Research continues to show an association between higher body weight and an increased risk of bullying among children and adolescents.

Weight bias at school may include:

- Teasing, jokes or unwanted comments about someone's body, weight, clothing or food choices
- Excluding a student from social activities, sports or group projects
- Making assumptions about a student's health, behavior, motivation or abilities
- Treating students differently during physical education or health-related activities
- Using classroom materials or lessons that blame people for their weight
- Failing to provide desks, uniforms, equipment or other spaces that accommodate students of different body sizes
- Sharing hurtful comments, photos or videos through texts, group chats, games or social media

These experiences can affect a student's emotional well-being, sense of belonging, relationships and participation at school. Research has also found an association between weight stigma and mental health concerns among children and adolescents.

What Schools Can Do

Schools have a responsibility to create environments where every student is treated with dignity and respect. Educators and school leaders can:

- Include weight-based bullying in anti-bullying and harassment policies
- Respond consistently to weight-based teasing, whether it happens in person or online
- Avoid classroom activities that publicly weigh students or focus on appearance
- Use lessons that explain the complexity of obesity without blame or shame
- Review books, images and health materials for stigmatizing language or stereotypes
- Provide seating, uniforms and equipment that accommodate students of all body sizes
- Train educators, coaches, counselors and school health professionals to recognize weight bias
- Encourage students to speak up, include others and seek help from a trusted adult

Students should not be expected to handle bullying alone. Families and school staff can work together to document concerns, provide support and create a plan that helps the student feel safe and included.



OAC's Anti-Bullying Toolkit offers additional resources for children, teens, families and schools.

Weight Bias in Health Care

Everyone deserves respectful, compassionate and appropriate health care. However, people living with obesity may encounter weight bias from health care professionals, staff, policies or environments that do not accommodate people of all body sizes.

Weight bias in health care may include:

- Assuming that every health concern is caused by weight
- Failing to fully evaluate symptoms or consider other possible causes
- Making assumptions about a person's eating habits, physical activity, motivation or ability to follow a care plan
- Offering unsolicited advice about weight loss
- Using judgmental, dismissive or disrespectful language
- Discussing weight without asking permission
- Weighing someone when it is not medically necessary
- Failing to provide privacy during weighing or examinations
- Not having gowns, seating, examination tables, blood pressure cuffs or other equipment in appropriate sizes

Weight bias can damage trust and make people feel blamed, dismissed or unwelcome. Some people may delay or avoid appointments because they fear being judged or mistreated. A 2021 study involving nearly 14,000 adults across six countries found that weight stigma and internalized weight bias were associated with health care avoidance, fewer routine checkups, feeling less heard and respected and lower perceived quality of care.

What Respectful Care Looks Like

Health care professionals and organizations can help create a more supportive experience by:

- Listening to the person's concerns without making assumptions
- Addressing the reason for the visit before discussing weight
- Asking permission before beginning a conversation about weight
- Explaining why a weight measurement is needed and offering privacy
- Respecting a person's decision not to be weighed when a measurement is not medically necessary
- Using people-first, nonjudgmental language
- Focusing on the person's overall health, goals and quality of life
- Providing evidence-based information about the full range of obesity treatment options
- Recognizing that obesity is a complex, chronic disease, not a personal failure
- Ensuring that facilities and equipment safely accommodate people of all body sizes
- Providing ongoing education about weight bias for everyone who interacts with people seeking care

Addressing weight bias requires more than individual awareness. Health care organizations should review their policies, physical spaces, equipment, educational materials and complaint procedures to ensure that every person receives respectful and equitable care.



Weight bias is not harmless. Being judged, excluded or treated unfairly because of weight can affect a person's emotional well-being, physical health, relationships, education, employment and access to care.

These experiences may happen once or continue over time. Repeated exposure can create chronic stress and may lead people to expect mistreatment in new situations. Some people may also begin to believe the negative messages they hear about weight. This is known as internalized weight bias.

Emotional and Mental Health

Weight bias and stigma may contribute to:

- Shame or self-blame
- Anxiety or depression
- Lower self-esteem
- Negative body image
- Social isolation
- Feeling less safe or confident in public spaces

Research has found associations between weight stigma and mental health concerns among both adults and young people.



Health and Health Care

Experiences of weight stigma may affect health-related behaviors and a person's willingness to seek care. Possible effects include:

- Delaying or avoiding medical appointments
- Feeling less comfortable discussing health concerns
- Lower trust in health care professionals
- Avoiding physical activity because of embarrassment or fear of judgment
- Disordered eating or other harmful attempts to change weight
- Increased stress and reduced quality of life

In a large six-country study, people reporting greater internalized weight bias also reported more health care avoidance, fewer routine checkups and lower-quality health care experiences.

Relationships, School and Work

Weight bias can also lead to bullying, social exclusion, strained relationships and unequal opportunities. At school or work, fear of judgment may affect participation, belonging and willingness to pursue new opportunities.

The effects of weight bias are not a personal weakness or failure. The responsibility for preventing stigma belongs to all of us, including families, schools, workplaces, health care organizations, media and policymakers. By challenging stereotypes and changing harmful practices, we can create communities where people of all body sizes are treated with dignity and respect.

What Can We Do to Stop Weight Bias?

Ending weight bias requires action from individuals, families, health care professionals, schools, employers, media and policymakers. Education is important, but lasting change also requires policies, environments and practices that protect people from unfair treatment.

Examine Our Own Bias

Everyone can hold conscious or unconscious beliefs about weight. We can begin by questioning assumptions about a person's health, behavior, abilities or character based on body size.

Before making a comment or decision, consider:

- Am I making an assumption based on someone's appearance?
- Would I respond differently if this person were in a smaller body?
- Could my words or actions cause shame or exclusion?
- Am I treating this person with dignity and respect?
- Use Respectful Language and Images

Words and images shape how people understand obesity. Use people-first language, such as "person living with obesity," and avoid labels, jokes or descriptions that define someone by their weight.

Choose images that show people of different body sizes participating fully in everyday life. Avoid headless body images, close-ups of body parts or photos that reinforce stereotypes. OAC offers a free bias-free image gallery to help organizations portray people living with obesity with dignity.

Visit **StopWeightBias.com/image-gallery** or scan the QR code to explore the gallery.

If it feels safe, challenge weight-based comments, jokes or unfair treatment. A response can be as simple as:

- "That comment is not appropriate."
- "We should not make assumptions about someone based on their body."
- "Obesity is a complex, chronic disease, not a personal failure."
- "Let's focus on the person's qualifications, needs or concerns."

People who experience bias should not be expected to confront it or educate others. Allies can help by speaking up, listening and supporting the person affected.

Change Policies and Environments

Organizations should review the systems that allow weight bias to continue. This may include:

- Adding weight and body size to nondiscrimination and anti-harassment policies
- Providing furniture, equipment and spaces that accommodate people of all body sizes
- Training staff to recognize and respond to weight bias
- Reviewing educational and promotional materials for stigmatizing language or imagery
- Establishing clear and accessible complaint procedures
- Evaluating people according to their needs, qualifications and performance rather than assumptions about weight
- Including people with lived experience when developing programs and policies
- Turn Awareness Into Action

Recognizing weight bias is only the beginning. The OAC Action Center makes it easy to use your voice and help create meaningful change.

Through the Action Center, you can:

- Contact elected officials about issues affecting people living with obesity
- Support stronger protections against weight discrimination
- Respond to advocacy alerts
- Learn about legislation in your state
- Share your experiences and help decision-makers understand why action matters
- Join OAC advocates working to improve access to care and stop weight bias

You do not need advocacy experience to make a difference. OAC provides the information and tools you need to speak up, take action and help build a future where everyone is treated with dignity and respect.

Visit the OAC Action Center at **ObesityAction.org/Action-Center**.

Find Support and Connection

You do not have to face weight bias alone. The OAC Community is a welcoming place to find trusted education, meaningful connections, ongoing support and opportunities to make your voice heard.

Connect with people who understand, learn from shared experiences and become part of a community committed to treating everyone with dignity and respect.

Join the OAC Community at **ObesityAction.org/Join**.

Notes:

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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

OAC Community

JOIN TODAY: GO TO
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