

WEIGHT STIGMA AND GENDER:



COMMON ISSUES AND DIFFERENCES

by Ted Kyle, RPh, MBA; and Rebecca Pearl, PhD

IS THE EXPERIENCE OF WEIGHT BIAS AND STIGMA DISTINCTLY DIFFERENT DEPENDING ON YOUR GENDER?

The short answer is both yes and no. Women tend to be the focus of much weight stigma research, in part because quite a few studies have suggested that it's a more common experience for women. Research has also suggested that women may be more likely than men to internalize negative societal messages about their weight.

But the truth is that people across the gender spectrum live with the harm of weight stigma. For that matter, research tells us that individuals who identify as transgender, non-binary or gender non-conforming are also vulnerable to weight-based victimization.

What Are Weight Bias and Stigma?

Let's start with a quick review of what we mean when we talk about weight bias and stigma. Weight bias is all about preconceived notions that people hold about others based solely on their body weight. Our culture promotes beauty standards that idealize a thin body. Thus, extensive research confirms that it is common for people to presume that individuals with higher body weights are less attractive, intelligent and capable. Such biases show up in media, employment, education, interpersonal relationships, and even in healthcare. Because weight bias crops up everywhere a person turns, it can affect persons living with obesity on a daily basis.

Weight bias – including negative attitudes, stereotypes and blame related to weight – leads to weight stigma. Stigma is the lesser status that a person feels in their daily lives because of their weight. When a person suffers unfair treatment or discrimination in healthcare, education or social interactions, it leaves them feeling stigmatized – dismissed or diminished solely because of their weight.

Compounding the harm of bias and stigma is something called internalized stigma. This happens quite naturally with repeated exposure to weight bias. A person starts to believe the lies and harsh judgments that our biased culture confronts them with daily. People begin to think less of themselves, have less confidence and even experience worse health because of weight bias and weight stigma.

How Common Is Weight Stigma for Men and Women?

As we said, weight stigma can be a more common experience for women than for men. For example, in a study (Dutton et al., 2003), White women were more than twice as likely as White men to experience weight discrimination. Black women were slightly less likely than white women to report the same experiences, but they were still much more likely than either Black or White men.

Likewise, some studies (Himmelstein et al., 2017) have reported more internalization of weight stigma in women than in men. In other words, women report more self-disparaging thoughts and feelings about themselves because of their weight than men do. About one in five adults (Puhl et al., 2017) in the general population may have internalized weight bias, but that rises to approximately half of people living with obesity.

Women and men experience weight stigma differently. Women steadily experience weight stigma more often as their weight goes up. The higher their weight relative to their height, the more stigma they experience. But for men, it's not so linear. They may also experience stigma at lower than average weights, as well as at the highest body weights. With mild overweight and obesity, the stigma for men might be less. Internalization of weight stigma in women is more strongly associated with eating disorders (Boswell et al., 2014) in women than men. There may be other ways in which experiences of weight stigma vary by gender, such as in the forms or sources of weight stigma (e.g., weight teasing from friends versus discrimination in the workplace), but more research is needed with gender-diverse samples to more fully understand these differences.

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Social and Cultural Factors

Social norms generally place greater emphasis on body image for women than men. As a result, men tend to be more satisfied with their bodies (Voges et al., 2019), considering themselves better-looking and less overweight on average, compared to women. Girls develop more self-consciousness about body weight at an earlier age than boys and thus may be affected by weight stigma at an earlier age. Media images more often portray a beauty ideal related to thinness for women than for men. For men, cultural norms relate more to size and strength that convey masculinity. This is likely why there's a higher weight threshold for men to be stigmatized, and also why men with an underweight status face weight bias as well.

A Problem Regardless of Gender

Though we could describe the differences between the experience of weight stigma between men, women, and other gender identities (Puhl et al., 2019) at length, the essential thing to remember is that it can be a problem regardless of a person's gender. It causes harm in many different settings. At times, our own implicit biases contribute to it without any ill intent or even awareness.

So it requires each of us to be more aware of these biases – both our own and the subtle and blatant expressions of it that are all around us, all of the time. It might be a cliché, but if we see something that feels like bias, we should say something. Otherwise, we contribute to a source of great harm to people who don't deserve it.

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Ted Kyle, RPh, MBA, founded his blog, ConscienHealth, in 2009. He is a pharmacist and healthcare innovation professional who works with health and obesity experts for sound policy and innovation to address obesity. Mr. Kyle serves on the Board of Directors for the Obesity Action Coalition (OAC), advises The Obesity Society (TOS) on advocacy issues and consults with organizations addressing the needs of people living with obesity. His widely-read daily commentary, published at ConscienHealth.org, reaches an audience of more than 10,000 thought leaders in health and obesity.

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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.



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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
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