

Understanding Weight Stigma

An Informational Booklet
and Resource Guide



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01

Introduction



Purpose of this workbook

The purpose of this booklet is to educate and raise awareness about the harmful effects of weight stigma across various settings. Our target goals to fulfill this purpose include:

- **Increase Awareness**: help people understand the concept of weight stigma, including its explicit and implicit forms.
- **Highlight Impact**: show how weight stigma affects individuals psychologically, physically, socially, and behaviorally
- **Identify Contexts**: explore where weight stigma commonly appears, such as in healthcare, education, media, workplaces, and everyday life
- **Promote Empathy and Inclusivity**: encourage more inclusive attitudes and behaviors toward people of all body sizes
- **Support Behavior Change**: equip our audience with tools to recognize, respond to, and reduce weight bias in their environments

Why weight stigma is an important topic

Weight stigma is a pervasive mindset that has widespread, harmful effects, such as:

- **Impacting both mental and physical health**: Psychological effects include low self-esteem, depression, anxiety, and body dissatisfaction. ***Physical health can suffer*** due to avoidance of medical care out of fear of judgment or through byproducts of unhealthy behaviors, such as food restriction.
- **Undermining healthcare quality**: Patients in larger bodies often report being ***dismissed*** or ***misdiagnosed***. Weight stigma can lead to delayed diagnoses, reduced trust in providers, and poor health outcomes.
- **Reinforcing harmful stereotypes**: Weight stigma perpetuates the false belief that weight is solely a matter of personal responsibility or willpower. This belief ignores the ***complex interplay*** of genetics, environment, socioeconomic status, and mental health.
- **Hindering equity and inclusion**: Addressing weight stigma is essential for creating ***inclusive*** environments where all individuals feel respected and valued, regardless of body size.
- **Perpetuating hidden messaging**: Unlike many forms of discrimination, weight stigma is still socially acceptable in many contexts and is ***often overlooked***, making it harder to recognize and challenge.

Who this booklet is for

This booklet is for everyone, including students, teachers, parents, healthcare providers, and the general public. Everyone is surrounded by weight stigma and in need of tools to navigate it. In schools, students may face bullying or bias from their peers or educators; in the workplace, weight stigma can influence hiring decisions, promotions, and wages; and in the media, weight stigma reinforces narrow beauty standards and marginalizes diverse body types. We could all benefit from understanding weight stigma and the tools provided in this booklet to challenge this narrative.

02

What is Weight Stigma?



Weight Stigma Definition and Related Terms

Weight stigma refers to the social devaluation and discriminatory treatment of individuals based on their body size or weight. It involves negative attitudes, stereotypes, and assumptions, such as viewing people in larger bodies as lazy, lacking self-discipline, or unhealthy, regardless of their actual health or behavior.

Weight stigma is also commonly referred to as: weight bias, weight-based discrimination, sizeism, and anti-fat bias.

Implicit vs. Explicit Bias

Explicit weight stigma refers to overt and conscious negative attitudes, beliefs, or behaviors directed at individuals because of their body size. This type of stigma is deliberate and easily identifiable. For example, a hiring manager might openly state that they do not want to employ someone who is living in a larger body because they believe that person is lazy or lacks self-discipline. Another instance could be a teacher making derogatory comments about a student's body size in front of their peers. These examples reflect clear, intentional expressions of bias that reinforce harmful stereotypes.

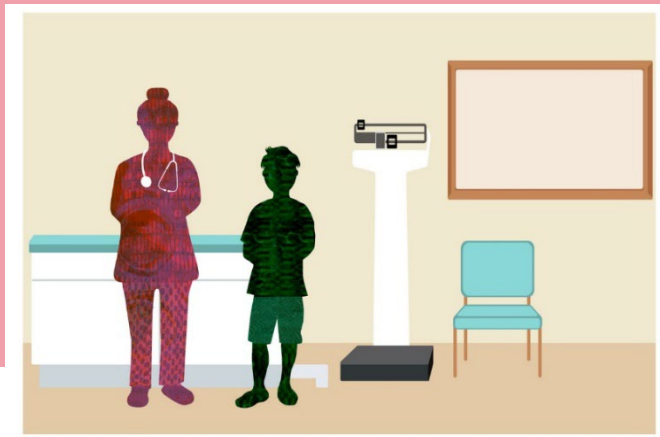
In contrast, implicit weight stigma involves unconscious biases or attitudes that people may not be aware they hold. These biases subtly influence behavior and decision-making, often without the individual's intent or recognition. For instance, a doctor might spend less time with an overweight patient or attribute all of their health issues solely to weight, even when unrelated symptoms are present. Similarly, a friend might assume that an individual living in a larger body is uninterested in physical activity and not invite them to join a fitness class. Unlike explicit stigma, implicit stigma is more insidious and can be difficult to detect or address because it operates beneath the surface of conscious thought.

While both forms of weight stigma are harmful, they differ in their visibility and intent. Explicit stigma is direct and identifiable, making it easier to confront and challenge. Implicit stigma, however, is often embedded in daily interactions and institutional practices, making it more difficult to recognize and address. Combating both forms requires raising awareness, reflecting on personal biases, and creating inclusive environments that value people of all body sizes. Understanding the distinction between explicit and implicit stigma is key to promoting equity and respect in healthcare, education, workplaces, and beyond.



03

Where does Weight Stigma Show Up?



Why Weight Stigma Matters

Weight stigma refers to discrimination or negative attitudes directed at individuals based on their body size. One of the most harmful aspects of weight stigma is internalization which is when individuals begin to absorb and believe these societal biases about their own bodies. Internalized weight stigma has been shown in research to contribute to a range of negative outcomes, including depression, anxiety, disordered eating, avoidance of healthcare, and reduced physical activity. Importantly, shame and stigma do not lead to healthier habits; in fact, they often drive the opposite. The environments we navigate daily (workplace, education, media, and home) all play a role in reinforcing or challenging these harmful narratives.

Healthcare

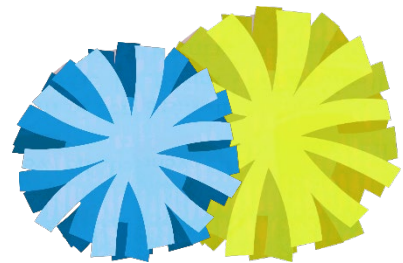
Weight stigma in healthcare often presents as biased attitudes or judgments towards those living in a larger body. Symptoms are often overlooked or automatically attributed to weight, which can lead to missed or delayed diagnoses. Patients may feel dismissed or judged, which can lead to avoidance of care, delayed diagnoses, and worsening health outcomes.

Weight stigma in healthcare is often reflected in the physical environment, such as furniture and medical equipment that do not accommodate all body sizes, artwork or décor that do not reflect all body types, gowns and cuffs that do not fit properly, and scales placed in non-private areas.

Workplace

Weight stigma in the workplace often presents as biased assumptions about the abilities, work ethic, or professionalism of individuals in larger bodies. Employees may be unfairly perceived as lazy, less competent, or lacking self-discipline, regardless of their actual performance. These judgments can lead to being paid less, overlooked for promotions, excluded from client-facing roles, or subject to inappropriate comments. Such experiences can create a hostile or isolating work environment, impacting an individual's confidence, job satisfaction, and mental well-being. Over time, weight-based bias in the workplace can contribute to stress, burnout, and reduced career advancement opportunities.

Weight stigma in the workplace can also be reflected in the physical environment- such as office chairs, breakroom seating, or uniforms that are not designed to accommodate all body sizes. Meeting spaces, common areas, and even restrooms may lack inclusive design, creating discomfort or exclusion for employees in larger bodies.



Education

Weight stigma in schools often presents as bullying, teasing, or exclusion of students living in larger bodies. This can occur from other students and sometimes even educators or coaches. Students may be singled out or overlooked for different roles. Communication between teachers and staff may contain messages about dieting, weight, food, or body size. These can lead to students feeling ashamed, judged, and dismissed- resulting in these students choosing to withdraw and avoid school-based activities.

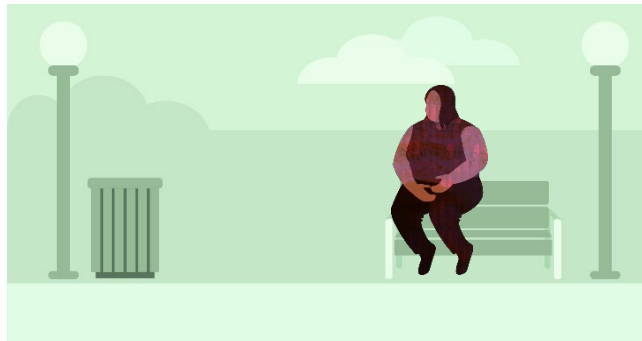
Weight stigma in schools can also be reflected in the physical environment- such as desks, chairs, and cafeteria tables that are not accommodating to all body sizes, ill-fitting uniforms, and displays or artwork that do not demonstrate a variety of different bodies.

Media

Weight stigma in the media is often reinforced through the consistent portrayal of thin (or overly fit) bodies as the ideal and larger bodies as undesirable, comedic, or unhealthy. Television, film, advertising, and social media frequently marginalize or misrepresent people in larger bodies, casting them in stereotypical roles or excluding them altogether. This lack of representation and/or misrepresentation can shape public attitudes and influence how individuals view themselves and others. Over time, exposure to these messages can lead individuals to internalize weight bias, struggle with self-worth, and adopt harmful behaviors in an attempt to conform to unrealistic standards.

Everyday Life

Weight stigma in everyday life, often manifests as critical comments, unsolicited advice, or jokes about body size from family members or close peers. Individuals in larger bodies may feel scrutinized during meals, pressured to diet, or shamed for their appearance or habits. This constant judgment can damage self-esteem, strain relationships, and contribute to disordered eating or body image distress. Over time, these experiences may lead individuals to withdraw socially, engage in unhealthy coping strategies, or internalize negative beliefs about their worth and health.



Especially within the home, weight stigma can also be reflected in the physical environment. This may include furniture that is not designed to comfortably support all body sizes, limited or inaccessible clothing options stored in shared spaces, or bathroom scales placed in highly visible areas that emphasize weight as a constant concern. Home decor, fitness equipment, or media that idealize thinness, without representation of diverse body types, can send implicit messages about which bodies are valued. These environmental cues, though often unintentional, can create a sense of exclusion or discomfort for individuals in larger bodies, even within their own homes.

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Examples of Weight Stigma

Examples of Weight Stigma in Clinical Settings

As described above (See [What Is Weight Stigma?](#)), weight stigma refers to the discrimination or stereotyping that occurs based on how others perceive a person's body size or weight. It can be subtle (implicit) or overt (explicit), but is often ubiquitous in everyday life, appearing in a multitude of areas, from healthcare and education to media and overheard everyday conversations.

This bias is often rooted in harmful assumptions and cultural norms that hold an idealized beauty standard and equate thinness with health and worth. Understanding where and how weight stigma appears is the first step towards dismantling it.

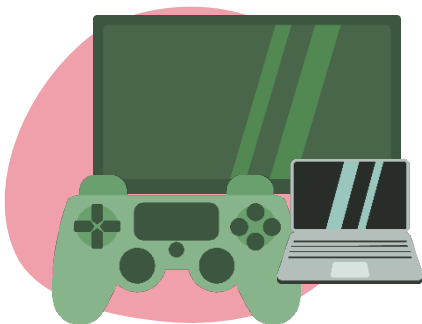
Below are some examples to help you identify biases in the future:

Jokes & Comments

- “You’d be so pretty if you lost weight.”
- “Are you going to eat all that?”
- Fatphobic memes or viral videos that mock larger bodies

Assumptions

- Assumptions that people in larger bodies are lazy or unhealthy
- Unsolicited health or exercise advice
- Beliefs that larger people are less disciplined or motivated

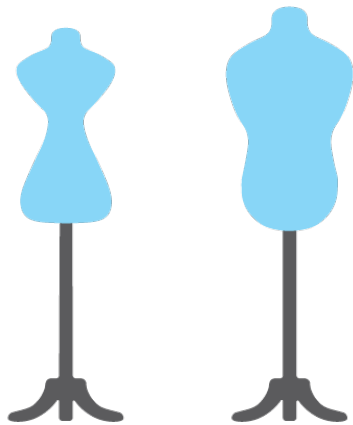


AI, Avatar Bias, & Social Media

- Avatars used in video games, social media, and online video content default to thin bodies
- AI filters and phone image processing automatically slim faces and bodies

Medical Bias

- Dismissing symptoms without proper review or examination
- Attributing all medical events solely to weight
- Delayed diagnoses



Fashion Industry

- Limited clothing in the store or generally available
- Plus-size section hidden, poorly stocked, or not made with large body shapes in mind (simply larger versions of the item with no adjustments for shape, not as tailored, etc.)
- Small dressing rooms and store layouts can be challenging for those with larger bodies to navigate

Fitness Industry

- Lack of inclusive equipment or clothing
- Unsolicited comments and shaming/bullying in spaces



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Effects of Weight Stigma

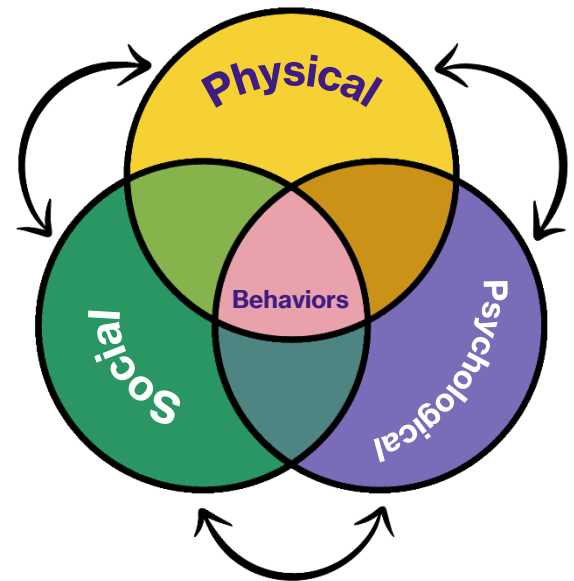
Psychological Impacts

Low Self-Esteem & Body Image Issues

- Internalized weight bias: many individuals begin to believe negative stereotypes about their own weight
- Distorted body image: people may develop overly negative views of their bodies
- Examples may include: negative self-talk or shame

Depression & Anxiety

- Weight stigma is strongly associated with higher rates of depression, increased anxiety symptoms, and social withdrawal due to fear of judgment
- These effects can occur regardless of actual body size
- Examples may include: persistent sadness, panic attacks, or suicidality (ideation and attempts)



Physical Impacts

Avoidance of medical care

- Fear of judgment from doctors can cause individuals to delay or avoid medical care, which can lead to worsening health and missed diagnoses
- Examples can include: skipping checkups and not addressing symptoms

Chronic stress

- The constant stress from stigma can elevate cortisol levels, which are linked to mood dysregulation, cognitive impairment, or increased/decreased appetite
- Examples include: issues with sleep, irritability, fatigue, and challenges with memory, decision-making, and concentration

Social Impacts

- **Isolation**

- Weight stigma can lead to avoidance of social situations, rejection or bullying (especially in youth and workplace settings), and loneliness, which compounds psychological distress.
- Examples may include: withdrawing from friends or events or lack of desire to interact with others

- **Bullying**

- Weight stigma bullying isn't "just teasing" - it's a form of discrimination with lasting mental health consequences.
- Examples may include: verbal insults, physical aggression, social exclusion, cyberbullying, and institutional bullying

- **Discrimination**

- Weight stigma discrimination refers to unfair or unequal treatment of individuals based on their body weight.
- Examples may include: being denied opportunities, unequal services, lower wages, hiring biases, educational biases, and harsher healthcare experiences

Behavioral Impacts

- **Disordered Eating:** stigma can trigger or worsen unhealthy eating behaviors such as restrictive eating, emotional eating, or avoidance of eating in public.

- Examples may include: binge eating, food restriction, or guilt around eating

- **Reduced Motivation for Physical Activity**

- Fear of being judged in fitness or public settings can reduce motivation to exercise.
- Stigmatized individuals often avoid gyms, parks or group activities.
- Examples may include: avoidance of situations that involve exercise, fear of gyms or workout studios, and general inactivity

06

Myths and Facts About Weight and Health

Myths and Facts About Weight and Health

Weight stigma, rooted in widespread myths and misconceptions, can have profound and lasting effects on individuals' physical and mental health. These misconceptions often lead to negative assumptions about people based on their size. Far from encouraging healthier behaviors, such myths can increase stress, erode self-esteem, and contribute to mental health struggles. To better understand the full scope of these impacts, it is important to examine the myths themselves and the damage they perpetuate.

Here are a few salient examples:

Myth 1: Higher weight automatically means poor health

Reality: The myth that thinness automatically equals health and fatness equals poor health is a harmful oversimplification. In reality, health exists across a wide range of body sizes, and factors like genetics, lifestyle, stress, access to healthcare, and social determinants play a much greater role than weight alone. You can't judge health by appearance alone. Many people in larger bodies are metabolically healthy, active, and free of chronic disease, just as some thin individuals may struggle with serious health conditions. Equating health with appearance not only reinforces weight stigma but also distracts from more meaningful indicators of well-being, such as blood pressure, cholesterol levels, mental health, and physical fitness.

Myth 2: People can control their weight *entirely* through willpower

Reality: The belief that people can control their weight solely through willpower and behavior is a myth that overlooks the powerful influence of genetics, environment, and biology. While personal choices around food and activity do matter, they are only part of a much larger picture. Genetics can determine how a person's body stores fat, regulates appetite, and burns energy. Environmental factors – such as access to nutritious food, safe spaces to exercise, and socioeconomic status – also shape health behaviors and outcomes. On top of that, biological systems like metabolism and hormonal regulation vary widely from person to person. We can do all the “right” behaviors and still not live in a smaller body – we may be metabolically healthier if we exercise, but may not lose much weight. Framing weight as simply a matter of willpower not only ignores these complexities but also contributes to stigma and shame, rather than fostering understanding and support.

Myth 3: Shaming people helps them lose weight

Reality: The myth that shaming people will motivate them to lose weight is not only false but also deeply harmful. Research shows that weight stigma and body shaming actually lead to worse health outcomes, both physically and mentally. People who experience weight-based discrimination are more likely to engage in disordered eating, avoid medical care, experience higher levels of stress, and suffer from depression and anxiety. Ironically, shame can even contribute to weight gain by triggering stress-related hormonal changes and emotional eating. Instead of promoting health, shaming reinforces a cycle of harm and discourages people from taking care of themselves. Compassion, respect, and evidence-based support are far more effective tools for fostering lasting well-being.

Take-home

The myths surrounding weight stigma are not only misleading but also deeply damaging to individuals and society as a whole. These false beliefs perpetuate harmful stereotypes, promote discrimination, and hinder efforts to foster a more inclusive and compassionate world. By challenging these myths and fostering a deeper understanding of the complexities of weight, health, and identity, we can begin to dismantle the stigma. A more informed and nuanced perspective is essential for creating environments where individuals are supported in their health journeys, free from the constraints of harmful assumptions based on size.

07

Preventing and Addressing Weight Stigma

Creating a Culture of Respect: Why Language and Action Matter

Promoting inclusion starts with the words we choose and the attitudes we uphold. When we speak about body size, health, and appearance, our language can either reinforce harmful stereotypes or help build a more respectful, compassionate world. This section offers practical tips for using inclusive language, challenging stigma, and supporting environments where everyone – regardless of body size – feels valued and respected.

Use inclusive language

When we talk about inclusive language, it's important to recognize that people who are most judgmental of others' bodies often speak to themselves in similarly harsh, stigmatizing ways. This internal dialogue, rooted in shame, can reflect their own struggles with self-worth, and it often fuels outward bias. Additionally, individuals who are genetically predisposed to maintain a socially accepted body size with little effort may not fully grasp the complexity of others' experiences. Because they haven't faced the same challenges, they may unknowingly adopt societal narratives that equate thinness with discipline or health – without realizing these are oversimplified and harmful assumptions.

Tip: Say “people in diverse bodies” instead of “overweight individuals.”

Words matter. Instead of labeling someone by their body size, use respectful and **person-first language** like “a person in a larger body” or “a person living with obesity.” This helps shift the focus from judgment to understanding and respect.

Challenge jokes or comments that reinforce stigma

Weight-based jokes or offhand comments can be harmful – even if they seem harmless. Speak up when you hear stigmatizing remarks and explain why they're hurtful. This helps create a more respectful and inclusive environment.

Tip: If someone says, “She should lose weight if she wants to be healthy,” you might respond, “Health isn't just about size – there are many factors involved.”

Educate yourself and others

Learn about the science behind weight, health, and stigma. Share what you learn with friends, family, and coworkers. Understanding that weight is influenced by **genetics**, **environment**, and **social factors** helps reduce blame and bias.

Tip: Explore resources from organizations like the National Association to Advance Fat Acceptance ([NAAFA](#)) or the Health at Every Size ([HAES](#)) movement.



Encourage body diversity and self-acceptance

Representation matters. Celebrate all body types and promote the idea that beauty and health come in many forms.

Avoid idealizing thinness or promoting unrealistic body standards in media, education, and social settings.

Tip: Support brands and media that feature people of all shapes, sizes, and abilities.

Support anti-discrimination policies in schools, workplaces, and healthcare

Weight discrimination can affect employment, healthcare, and education. Advocate for policies that protect people from weight-based bias and ensure equal treatment regardless of body size.

Tip: Encourage local leaders to include weight as a protected category in anti-discrimination laws.

Push for environments that accommodate and respect people of all sizes. This includes seating, uniforms, medical equipment, and wellness programs that don't shame or exclude.

Tip: Ask your workplace to offer wellness programs that focus on mental health, movement, and nutrition – not just weight loss.

“ Statistics show people in larger bodies are consistently hired less often and paid less than lighter-weight people. When interviewing, be mindful of potential weight stigma you may have and hire the best candidate for the job, regardless of their size. ”

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Supporting Others and Body Respect

Ways we can support others and promote body respect

Be an ally: Being an ally means doing what you can to stand up to weight stigma. It also means supporting people of all sizes with empathy and compassion.

- Speak up! Say something when you hear weight or body- based jokes or harmful stereotypes.
- Educate yourself about how weight stigma affects both mental and physical health
- Look inward- addressing any stereotypes you may have

“ Research shows people are less likely to revisit spaces that felt cramped or too small. When designing, be sure to create space for people of all sizes. ”

Listen without judgment: When someone shares their experiences about their body or weight, how you respond matters!

- Listen with full attention. Be fully present, expressing empathy and compassion.
- Avoid jumping in with advice or suggestions
- Don't make assumptions about their health, habits, or goals

Help others access respectful care: Weight stigma can create barriers to quality healthcare. You can help by:

- Encouraging loved ones to seek care that prioritizes whole health and body function
- Support others in finding providers that are inclusive and respectful
- Offer to go with them to the health appointment for additional support

Promote body neutrality or body positivity: You don't have to like every aspect of how your body looks, but in order to be healthy and functional, treating our bodies with respect and taking care of them, is essential.

- We need to acknowledge that bodies come in all shapes, sizes, and abilities
- Body functionality is a focus on what your body can do, not how it looks.
- Promote body respect by:
 - Speak kindly about your own and others' bodies.
 - Unfollow social media accounts that make you feel “less than.”
 - Celebrate diversity in the multidimensionality of appearance, not just smaller sizes.

“ Research shows that clothing that is tight-fitting increases people's anxiety and dissatisfaction. When choosing uniforms, consider a vest or apron that goes over personal clothing so people of all sizes can work comfortably. ”

09

Continuing Education and Resources

Continuing Education and Resources

Books

- Fat Talk: Parenting in the Age of Diet Culture by Virginia Sole-Smith
- Intuitive Eating: A Revolutionary Diet Approach by Evelyn Tribole & Elyse Resch
- Decolonizing Wellness: A QTBIPOC-Centered Guide to Escape the Diet Trap, Heal Your Self-Image, and Achieve Body Liberation by Dalia Kinsey
- What We Don't Talk About When We Talk About Fat by Aubrey Gordon
- Your Body is Not an Apology by Sonya Renee Taylor
- You Have the Right to Remain Fat by Virgie Tovar
- Fearing the Black Body: The Racial Origins of Fat Phobia by Sabrina Strings

Podcasts

- What is Weight Stigma? With Dr. Rebecca Puhl
- The Language of Weight Stigma (with Ragen Chastain)
- Rebel Eaters Club Podcast hosted by Virgie Tovar
- Fierce Fatty Podcast hosted by Vinny Welsby (they/them)
- Maintenance Phase hosted by Aubrey Gordon and Michael Hobbes

Documentaries

- Embodied
- Your Fat Friend

Organizations

- UConn Rudd Center for Food Policy and Health
- Association for Size Diversity and Health
- National Association to Advance Fat Acceptance
- Obesity Medicine Association
- The Obesity Society
- Obesity Action Coalition

Support groups and online communities

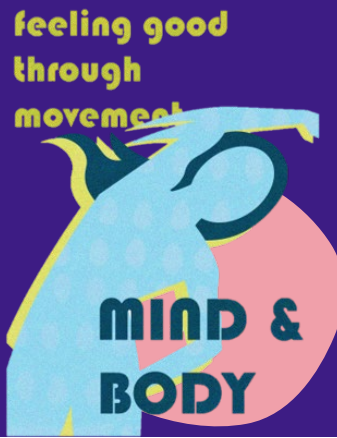
- Fat Fridays Virtual Social Club
- ASDAH Events
- I Weigh Community
- Weight and Healthcare Newsletter by Ragen Chastain

For educators and healthcare professionals

- Healthcare professionals:
 - Massachusetts Medical Society – Weight Bias Resources
- Educators:
 - Weight Bias and Stigma in Schools (PDF)

11

Final Thoughts



This booklet provides a comprehensive, evidence-based foundation to recognize, understand, and actively challenge weight stigma in all aspects of life. Some of the key takeaways from this booklet include:

- **Awareness**: Weight stigma is often overlooked and even accepted. This booklet aims to educate and increase awareness about weight stigma and the harm it can cause. By highlighting the impact of weight stigma and how/where it occurs, we can take the first step towards change.
- **Understanding**: This booklet provides a well-rounded understanding of the concept of weight stigma. Weight stigma is discrimination based on weight or body size and can be explicit (overt and intentional) or implicit (unconscious and subtle).
- **Environment**: By identifying where weight stigma appears, we can be more mindful of where to be on the lookout for stigmatizing behaviors. These locations and associated behaviors include:
 - **Healthcare**: judgment, shame, misdiagnoses, and avoidance
 - **Workplace**: bias in hiring, pay, and roles
 - **Education**: bullying, teacher bias, and non-inclusive environments
 - **Media**: reinforcement of thin ideals and misrepresentation of people in larger bodies
 - **Every day**: comments from friends and family, exclusion based on furniture, and underrepresentation
- **Effects** – We identify some of the harmful effects of weight stigma to draw attention to the impact and harm it can cause.
 - Weight stigma negatively affects:
 - **Psychological health**: low self-esteem, depression, anxiety, internalized bias,
 - **Physical health**: care avoidance, chronic stress, worsened health outcomes,
 - **Social health**: isolation, bullying, discrimination, and
 - **Behaviors**: disordered eating, reduction in motivation to exercise, and overall social withdrawal.

Encouragement to continue learning and advocating

- Continue learning from others and having open conversations about weight stigma. The more we talk about it, the less stigmatizing it will become. When we educate ourselves with the appropriate resources, we all do better.
- Challenging weight stigma is not easy, but it's incredibly important. Every time we speak up, we shift culture towards more inclusivity. We don't have to be experts to make a difference. Even small acts of questioning harmful jokes or using inclusive language have real impact.
- Remember, change starts with awareness, but it grows through action. By doing this work, we promote environments where everyone – regardless of size – can thrive.

Call to action: What can you do today to reduce weight stigma?

The best ways to prevent and address weight stigma include:

- Using inclusive, person-first language
- Speaking out when you see weight stigma occurring
- Educating yourself and others on factors influencing weight
- Promoting body diversity and representation
- Advocating for inclusive policies
- Pushing for environments that accommodate all body sizes



Finally, we can continue to support one another by speaking up, listening without judgment and challenging assumptions. By shifting focus from body weight and size to celebrating all our bodies can do, we promote body neutrality and positivity across the size spectrum.



Thank You

At Greaux Healthy, we are committed to fostering a culture of respect, inclusion, and evidence-based understanding around health and well-being. This booklet is designed to support our shared mission of promoting health equity and reducing weight stigma in our communities.

We encourage you to use this resource as a guide to better understand how weight stigma affects individuals across all ages and backgrounds. Whether you're a healthcare provider, educator, parent, or community member, your role in creating inclusive environments matters.

If you have questions or would like to learn more about our outreach efforts, please connect with the Greaux Healthy team. Together, we can build a healthier, more compassionate Louisiana – where everybody is valued.

Thank you for being part of this important work!

– The Greaux Healthy Team at Pennington Biomedical Research Center

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