

Enduring Impact of Stigma and Discrimination Faced by Obese Individuals in Society

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Description

Stigma related to obesity is commonly defined as prejudice or discriminatory behaviors directed at individuals due to their weight and high body fat percentage. This societal stigma can persist throughout an individual's life, as long as excess weight remains, starting from childhood and continuing into adulthood. Research has shown that individuals who are overweight or obese often face higher levels of shame compared to those with a normal weight.

Weight-based discrimination

Obese individuals often encounter fewer educational and career opportunities and tend to earn lower salaries than those of average weight. While public support for disability services, civil rights and anti-workplace discrimination laws has improved over the years, individuals who are overweight still experience discrimination, which can negatively affect both their physical and mental health. These challenges are compounded by the already significant health risks associated with obesity, which some researchers argue may be exacerbated by the social stigma tied to weight, rather than obesity itself. Anti-fat bias, also referred to as fat shaming or fat phobia, refers to negative assumptions made about individuals based on their body size. This bias is prevalent in many areas of society and fat activists often point to examples in the media and popular culture that reinforce these harmful stereotypes. Studies indicate that reports of weight-based discrimination increased between 1995 and 2006. Those who experience weight-related shame often report being judged more harshly than other marginalized groups, such as sexual minorities or people with mental health conditions.

Mental health impact

Anti-fat bias has been particularly evident among groups seeking to become physical education instructors. A 2007 study

comparing 344 psychology and physical education majors at a New Zealand university found that aspiring physical education teachers were more likely to exhibit implicit anti-fat attitudes than their psychology counterparts. Numerous studies have revealed that healthcare providers often harbor explicit or implicit biases against overweight individuals, leading to lower-quality care for these patients. Interestingly, healthcare professionals specializing in obesity treatment have been found to have a more supportive attitude toward obese individuals. The stress caused by obesity-related stigma may also result in negative health outcomes. For example, preschool-aged children in one study expressed a preference for average-sized children as friends over those who were overweight. Overweight individuals often face repercussions in various aspects of life, including legal and employment challenges later in life. A 2010 review of published studies found that interventions aimed at reducing bias and social stigma against obesity and overweight individuals are generally ineffective. To better understand weight-based attitudes, several theories have been proposed to explain these biases and the discrimination they foster. Christian discusses the justification of discrimination, noting that traditional North American values of self-reliance, independence and self-discipline may contribute to the negative attitudes toward overweight people. According to attribution theory, people's attitudes toward obesity are influenced by how much control they perceive an individual has over their weight. Numerous studies support this theory, suggesting that weight bias is often stronger when obesity is attributed to a lack of personal control, such as poor willpower. Additionally, seeing obesity as the result of an individual's lack of determination was linked to increased discrimination. However, there seems to be a reduction in bias when obesity is seen as stemming from factors outside the individual's control or when individuals are perceived to be actively trying to lose weight. Still, evidence also suggests that prejudice against obese individuals can be rooted in disdain, which persists even when people understand that obesity is not solely the result of an individual's actions.