Addressing Weight Bias: A Call to Action

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What is weight bias?

Weight bias refers to the negative attitudes, beliefs, assumptions and judgements towards individuals based on their weight, shape, appearance, or Body Mass Index (BMI). Weight bias is a result of our conscious and unconscious thoughts, feelings and attitudes about bodies and leads to unfair and unjust treatment, health care policies, and guidelines.

Weight bias can affect anyone across the weight spectrum; however, when targeted at larger bodies it leads to prejudice, stigma and discrimination. Weight bias exists in interpersonal interactions, media, healthcare, education and workplace settings.

What are the effects of weight bias?

Weight bias can lead to having a negative relationship with our bodies, food, physical activity, and self-care. Individuals affected by weight bias, stigma, and discrimination are more likely to:

Physical	Mental/Emotional
• avoid physical activity • have unhealthy eating practices • delay seeking or avoid healthcare • have increased blood pressure, pain, substance use, stress	• have increased stress, depression, anxiety, psychiatric diagnosis, suicidal thoughts • have poor body image and low self-esteem
Social	**Economic**
• fear travel and feel uneasy in crowds • suffer from bullying and harassment • experience poor quality relationships and social isolation	• have decreased academic and work performance • have lower socio-economic status • face discrimination in education and workplace settings

Why is weight bias a concern?

Weight bias contributes to discrimination, oppression, and social injustice. These decrease overall well-being and quality of life, increase disparities in access to healthcare, and increase health inequities.

Body weight is often seen as an easily modifiable behaviour that an individual can control by 'eating less and moving more'. Weight is not a behaviour, and is influenced by many complex factors such as genetics, environment, and social and economic situations. Current public health messages, health policies, and clinical practice guidelines often:

• Reinforce cultural preoccupations with weight
• Perpetuate the concept of individual responsibility for health and weight control
• Result in shaming and blaming

Everyone has a responsibility to advocate for and act to reduce health inequities for all people, including those experiencing weight bias. Weight bias is a systemic problem requiring action to change deeply entrenched attitudes, beliefs and practices.

What can we do to reduce weight bias?

- Consider that health and well being goes beyond the physical aspects and includes mental, emotional, social, and environmental dimensions.
- Recognize the drivers of overall health beyond individual control.
- Accept and respect the diversity of body shapes and sizes.
- Change the way we talk about health behaviours to ensure our messages don't reinforce negative stereotypes.
- Stop using weight as a rationale for health behaviour and policy change.
- Promote health and well-being for all people.
- Ensure positive media representation of all ethnicities, body sizes and socio-economic groups.

Try this! Review your website and resources to see if the images used include only individuals in smaller bodies. If so, replace with non-stigmatizing images of diverse bodies to counter negative stereotypes and promote health for all.

How can we reframe our messages?

DO talk about:

- Eating food that makes you feel good and that you enjoy
- Finding activities you enjoy for mental and physical well-being
- Positive qualities about ourselves and others that don't relate to size, shape or appearance
- Being mindful of eating habits such as listening to our hunger and fullness cues
- Food literacy, physical literacy and media literacy
- Social determinants of health and reducing health inequities
- The importance of positive, supportive relationships in achieving health

DON'T talk about:

- Using food or activity to control weight or prevent obesity
- Obesity being a 'public health crisis'
- 'Good' or 'bad' foods, or foods we 'should' or 'shouldn't' eat. Labelling foods as healthy or unhealthy can lead to moralizing and internalizing.
- Needing to achieve a specific weight or BMI to achieve health

Weight bias creates health inequities. Everybody is entitled to respect, representation, inclusion, and compassionate services, free from discrimination. To support physical, mental and social well-being, we need to address weight bias.

Health and Wellbeing Philosophy and Approach to Weight (Position Statement). 2018. Ontario Dietitians in Public Health (ODPH).