



# Weight Stigma

**Weight stigma** refers to the discrimination towards people based on weight and size and results from weight bias.

**Weight bias** refers to the negative attitudes towards those who do not match the body weight and shape currently deemed adequate or desirable in society.

## Where does weight stigma come from?

Weight stigma is widespread. It can be evident in schools, workplaces, mass media and even health care settings. People in larger bodies have often been stereotyped and portrayed as unattractive, unappealing and objects of ridicule in the media. Sensationalist news articles and documentaries about the “obesity epidemic” use scaring tactics to promote the ‘thin ideal’ and continue this false assumption that people in larger bodies are lazy or lacking in willpower. These harmful stereotypes only reinforce pre-existing weight bias and trick people into thinking that their bodies are less desirable or worthy if they don’t look a specific way. Environments can also contribute to weight stigma. For example, having no seats in cinemas or airlines that can accommodate people in larger bodies effectively excludes them from participating. These negative weight related attitudes complicate narratives around health and results in mistreatment and weight-based discrimination.

## What does weight stigma look like?

Weight stigma can exist externally or internally.

Examples of external weight stigma:

- Doctors commenting on your weight or telling you to lose weight despite seeing them for a totally unrelated issue
- Being bullied or shamed by classmates or co-workers for your size
- Being denied jobs or promotions based on your size
- Not being able to find clothes in your size at clothing stores or clothing brands are only using similar sized models to promote a certain body shape
- Not being able to fit in restaurant booths or other public spaces
- When larger bodies are dehumanised in the media (e.g. photos with only body parts visible or photos taken at unflattering angles)
- When size is used as an insult or a negative descriptor

Weight stigma can be subtle too. Comments about weight, even ones meant as compliments like “wow, you’ve lost weight!”, from family or friends are a form of weight stigma. Weight-biased language equates a person’s worth to their weight and completely ignores why and how the person lost the weight which could have involved engaging in unhealthy or dangerous behaviours.

With weight stigma so engrained in our diet-obsessed society, many of us have internalised this weight bias from an early age. It is this internalised weight bias that makes us apply these negative stereotypes about weight to ourselves and consequently blame and shame ourselves for our weight. For example, using



negative self-talk such as “I’m so bad and lazy for not exercising” instead of recognising that when you’re feeling too tired to exercise, it is not ‘laziness’ but your body’s way of telling you it actually *needs* self-care and rest.

### **What are the harms of weight stigma?**

Weight stigma is more harmful than actually carrying more weight than what is considered “normal” or “healthy”. Weight stigma can have a lifelong impact on physical and mental health. The detrimental effects of weight stigma on health and wellbeing affects people of **ALL** sizes. Trying to achieve the ‘ideal body’ presented in the media often comes at the expense of time, money, and health. People may feel pressured to go on restrictive diets and exercise regimes to lose and/or maintain weight.

Weight loss attempts have been shown to be ineffective long term and often lead to people being trapped in cycles of weight loss and regain. Weight cycling is strongly associated with poor health outcomes such as increased risk of hypertension, cancer, and death. Weight bias also increases the likelihood of developing body image issues, unhealthy relationships with food and exercise, reduced self-esteem and eating disorders.

For people recovering from eating disorders, weight stigma makes changes in body size/shape seem scarier when in fact it is a necessary part of recovery.

Weight bias also denies people the equal opportunity for healthcare. Healthcare providers who hold weight bias are more likely to dismiss health concerns by blaming them on weight, lack of self-control or laziness and recommend weight loss. This weight focused attitude completely ignores the extensive scientific research showing that there are in fact many determinants of health besides weight so recommending weight loss as a ‘solution’ to poor health is unfair. Body size has nothing to do with lack of self-control or laziness and trying to convince people otherwise is just plain *wrong*.

### **What can we do to combat weight stigma?**

Weight stigma has been engrained in our culture for far too long.

You are not responsible for the weight bias that many people might have. However, you *can* be responsible for making changes to raise awareness and end weight stigma by:

1. Recognising and challenging your own conscious or unconscious weight bias when it creeps into your conversations, thoughts, and interactions.  
Asking yourself:
  - Why is one body size, which is so difficult to attain, considered the ideal?
  - Do I make judgements and assumptions about people in larger bodies?
  - Do I treat people differently based on their body size?
  - If so, why? Where did these ideas come from?
2. Changing your language by *not* using weight and body size to define people (people are SO much more than a number on a scale/dress size!)
3. Talking about weight stigma with family and friends.



4. Calling out weight stigma when you see it (e.g., when people in larger bodies are portrayed negatively on tv shows or a clothing brand does not use diverse models)
5. Educating yourself on the issue by:
  - Participating in Weight Stigma Awareness Week run by the National Eating Disorder Association (NEDA)
  - Supporting weight inclusive movements such as the Health at Every Size (HAES) movement
  - Following body positive social media accounts



## References

- Bacon, L., Aphramor, L. Weight Science: Evaluating the Evidence for a Paradigm Shift. (2011).
- Tylka, Tracy & Annunziato, Rachel & Burgard, Deb & Danielsdottir, Sigrun & Shuman, Ellen & Davis, Chad & Calogero, Rachel. The Weight-Inclusive versus Weight-Normative Approach to Health: Evaluating the Evidence for Prioritizing Well-Being over Weight Loss. Journal of obesity. (2014).
- <https://centerfordiscovery.com/blog/weight-stigma-awareness-week-why-it-matters/>

## Further Readings

- [Poodle Science](#) on YouTube (a short animated educational clip created by ASDAH)
- [Association for Size Diversity and Health](#)
- [HAES Australia](#)
- Books:
  - Fearing the Black Body by Sabrina Strings
  - Health at Every Size by Lindo Bacon