

Weight Stigma: The attitudes, behaviors and social systems that specifically marginalize, exclude, underserve, and oppress fat bodies. [It] refers both to individual bigoted beliefs as well as institutional policies designed to marginalize fat people.

- Aubrey Gordon

Weight stigma, also sometimes called Sizeism, is the system of beliefs in our society that places value and worth on weight, condemning higher weights as unhealthy/bad and idealizing thinness. It fosters discrimination and negative feelings towards those in larger bodies.

An article on weight stigma from the APA says: "Sizeism is one of the most deeply entrenched stigmas in today's society, partly because of sociocultural ideals tying thinness to core American values such as hard work and individualism. The implication is that people in larger bodies lack willpower and discipline." This stigma is horrible to experience and research has shown that it can cause harmful behaviors to affected individuals. The APA has conducted studies that show that individuals who experience weight stigma are more likely to engage in health deteriorating behaviors. Experiencing weight stigma increases the risk of disordered eating habits such as anorexia, bulimia, or binge eating disorder. People who experience weight stigma are also less likely to exercise in public because they feel uncomfortable, and they are more likely to avoid seeking medical care for health problems.

"For example, patients commonly report that physicians attribute all health problems to excess weight and make assumptions about patients' health behaviors, such as assuming that they overeat. Experiencing bias in health care settings can cause patients to trust their providers less, practice "doctor shopping," and delay or avoid seeking treatment for various health issues." (Abrams)

Our culture has an obsession with losing weight and being thin. In a survey by the Journal of the American Dietetic Association, the results showed that nearly $\frac{3}{4}$ of surveyed 10th grade girls said they'd tried to lose weight. Our entire society has so many systems centered around the idea that being thin equals beauty, health, and worth. Data collected by the Teen Health and Wellness Database shows a few examples: "[In] network television commercials, 1 out of every 3.8 showed some kind of message telling viewers what is attractive and what is not." The "attractive" ideal is almost always some sort of glamorously thin or muscular man or woman. Another study on the database says: "According to researchers Guillen and Barr, over a twenty-year-study of one teen magazine, 74 percent of the fitness and health articles told readers that the reason to

start exercising was “to be more attractive.” Another 51 percent stated “to lose weight or burn calories” was the reason for exercise. These are examples of the media constantly surrounding us with ideas that our bodies need to change and get smaller.

The media mainly ignores the actual facts about human bodies, such that we were stable and good at eating and being in homeostasis before calories were discovered, and obesity and concerns about being “too big” are relatively recent issues that have only risen to prominence in the last century. In the 1920’s being in a larger body was actually considered a sign of health and a prosperous family because it meant you had enough food and low-enough stress in your life to keep yourself nourished and happy. This ideology only changed when the Depression ended and goods became available to more people again. During the Great Depression in the 1920’s, abundant food was available to only the wealthy who could afford it. Being voluptuous and larger was a sign of high social status. When food became more accessible as the economy became stable again and agriculture grew, being nourished became more achievable to all. Needing to create a new hierarchical system, the wealthy and the media began to spread a new idea and image that now being small was the new cool because it showed you had the “willpower” and “discipline” to control your body and diet. Even though it was a completely made-up and disordered idea, somehow it’s really stuck to us.

On one hand we are finally becoming more aware of this implicit bias our culture carries, on the other our society is so entrenched with worrying about weight that most people’s life-styles are affected greatly by their feelings and actions about theirs. Having so much focus on weight has caused the disorders that go along with it like eating disorders and obesity.

In June 2013, the American Medical Association voted that obesity should now be considered a disease. This decision caused a lot of controversy because a lot is unclear when it comes to the actual effects of obesity and the definition of a disease.

The dictionary definition of a disease is “a harmful disorder of structure/function that has a known cause and a specific set of symptoms.” Physicians however, use lot’s of different variations of that, so the criteria to what a disease is is already unclear.

Obesity is defined in medical terms as “an excess accumulation of fat.” There are no other clinical signs/symptoms connected to obesity however (Karasu). The classification of obesity as a disease is problematic to me because obesity is decided based on the person's BMI. BMI is a ratio created in the 1970’s that compares height to weight. It is notoriously flawed, but it is still widely used because it is convenient and the data needed to measure a BMI is safe and easy to acquire. However, BMI measures bones and

muscles as well as fat, so a very muscular person with very little fat on them or a stockier short person could easily have “obese” BMIs. Remember, the definition of being obese is an excess of fat and the way that medical professionals decide obesity is BMI. It’s very sketchy.

Then there’s the fact that there's no consistent scientific correlation between being in a larger, higher fat percentage body and developing serious health complications.

“(A) complication of viewing obesity as a disease is that there are some obese people who never develop any medical problems and live long and healthy lives. (Karasu) Fatter people live radically different lives from each other. Yes, some of them develop conditions like heart disease, diabetes, cancer, sleep apnea...etc; but some also have zero health problems and live much healthier lives than some skinnier counterparts (“Calling Obesity A Disease). Thin people get cancer and have heart attacks too. Another study showed that repeated periods of weight loss and regain form a pattern known as weight cycling. This is often what happens as a result of dieting. [A study] indicates that popular literature has asserted that weight cycling may increase the risk of developing cardiovascular disease or type II diabetes to a greater extent than remaining weight stable at an obese Body Mass Index (“Consequences of Weight Cycling). The stress that weight-loss programs put on the body is unnatural. Living a healthy life-style by managing all factors of well-being but not controlling anything is a better solution. Defining obesity as a disease medicalizes it into something that it is not and so many signs show that that can be harmful.

An AMA council member who voted against the classification of obesity as a disease says: “We cannot say just because you are obese you will experience harm and morbidity from [being obese], and that is part of the definition of a disease. (Pittman)” Remember, going back to the definition of a disease, it’s a harmful disorder with a specific set of symptoms. People considered “obese” all have unique medical histories and degrees of health. The only thing they share is a BMI over a certain number. I wouldn’t call a BMI a symptom.

The AMA council members against the decision argued a really important idea that labeling obesity as a disease may put over reliance on medical treatments and pharmaceuticals. As a disease, obese people will be able to be prescribed medications to supposedly “cure” their disease. This could cause their health to decline as they rely on medication for their wellness instead of practicing a healthy lifestyle. Also, since obesity is measured by BMI which is a measurement of body size, calling obesity a disease puts more importance on body size as a determinant of health than actual healthy behaviors.

This is hugely problematic because as eating disorder consequences show, striving for thinness in the hopes of being healthier does not improve your health or quality of life. It comes with its own set of very serious consequences. (Karasu)

As Boston University's public radio station WBUR stated in an article soon after the obesity decision: "I think we need to take weight out of the health discussion altogether. Healthy habits are better determinants of health than body size. We need a system that leads to people actually liking their bodies, and therefore believing they are worthy of care. Any intervention that starts off with the idea that certain people's bodies are wrong is automatically a poor public health intervention."

Image 1

This is a picture I took in a hotel fitness room. Can you spot what I think illustrates an example of our society's disordered and harmful relationship with weight?



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