

UNPACKING FATPHOBIA, WEIGHT DISCRIMINATION, AND THEIR DEADLY REPERCUSSIONS



The Center for Health Communication works to create [toolkits and briefings](#) that help content creators spread evidence-based health information on social media. The information provided is meant to be educational and is not a substitute for medical advice.

This toolkit provides creators with evidence-based strategies for changing the conversation around fatphobia and weight discrimination

REFRAMING THE CONVERSATION

Weight is a complicated, emotionally-charged subject that can be challenging to talk about. Many of us are exhausted from messaging that hyper-focuses on thinness as the ultimate standard of health. Sadly, activists that push-back on this messaging are often met with hate from people that believe that fighting weight discrimination and increasing acceptance for larger bodies harms health by encouraging people to gain weight. To make these conversations more empowering and evidence-based, work to infuse these perspectives:

1 WEIGHT DISCRIMINATION IS MORE THAN BULLYING. IT'S A SYSTEMIC, STRUCTURAL, AND DEADLY PROBLEM THAT AFFECTS EVERYONE

Weight discrimination (a.k.a. fatphobia or weight stigma) is the unjust experience of being treated unfairly because of one's body size and/or how much a person weighs. Teasing or bullying someone for their weight is just one aspect of weight discrimination, which also includes [receiving worse healthcare](#), being [less likely to be hired for jobs](#), and being subjected to [harmful media stereotypes](#). These experiences harm people's [physical and mental health](#) and raise their [risk for early death](#). While weight discrimination is worse for people with larger bodies, [it can be experienced at any body size](#), and pervasive weight stigma is tied to [increased eating disorders for people of all body sizes](#).

When you talk about weight discrimination, make sure to emphasize that this is a major societal problem that is perpetuated by systemic failures, and can't solely be understood in terms of mean comments made by a few individuals.

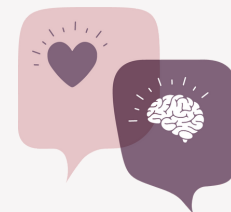
2 WEIGHT DISCRIMINATION IS HARMFUL AND DOES NOT HELP PEOPLE BECOME HEALTHIER

Experiencing weight discrimination harms people's [physical and mental health](#), reduces their engagement in healthy activities, like [exercising](#), and ironically increases the likelihood that they will [gain weight](#).

Make sure that the people around you understand that being treated poorly because of your weight doesn't have any health benefits and instead worsens people's health and wellbeing.



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3

RESEARCH HAS LINKED WEIGHT AND HEALTH, BUT THAT RESEARCH HAS ALSO CRITICALLY IGNORED THE DISCRIMINATION THAT PEOPLE WITH LARGER BODIES FACE

[Thousands of studies](#) have established links between higher body weight and worse physical and mental health. However, few of those studies have accounted for the fact that discrimination contributes to those relationships by [increasing stress](#) and [decreasing the quality of healthcare](#) people receive. New research investigating this question has estimated that [more than a quarter of the relationship](#) between higher body weight and health is caused by discrimination.

Acknowledge that there are relationships between weight and health, but that we need more research to understand the full picture.

4

HEALTH IS MULTI-FACETED, AND GOES WAY BEYOND A NUMBER ON THE SCALE

There is no one universal definition of health. Each person will have their own definition of what ‘healthy’ looks like, and it is worth asking yourself what it means to you. One vision of health is a state that allows people to live as long as possible, doing the activities that they love. If we are using that definition, it is impossible to tell how ‘healthy’ someone is just from looking at them. People of diverse body sizes can be living their vision of health, which may or may not include attempts to lose weight. Despite this, people with larger bodies are [stereotyped](#) as inherently lazy people who lack the discipline and willpower to take their health seriously. Being stereotyped this way often leads to [internalized shame that results in health consequences](#) that get that person further away from their vision of health.

Remind people that [healthy bodies come in all shapes and sizes](#), and that you shouldn’t make assumptions about a person based on their weight.

A note on language – Lots of different words are used to describe weight, and different words feel respectful to different people. For example, [size acceptance organizations](#) have advocated for people to use terms like “people with larger bodies” or simply calling people “fat” (not obese). Organizations focused on medical aspects of higher weight will often refer to “people with obesity” or “people with overweight” as an attempt to [differentiate obesity as a disease](#), rather than an adjective for describing people. The most neutral phrases to use are terms like “weight”, “higher weight”, and “lower weight.” To promote supportive and respectful communication, remind your communities to ask people what terminology they prefer and use their preferred language in conversations.

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TAKE ACTION

1

ADVOCATE TO MAKE WEIGHT DISCRIMINATION ILLEGAL

In [every state except Michigan](#), it is legal to discriminate against people based on their weight. Passing laws that outlaw weight discrimination is an important step for providing people with a pathway for justice, raising awareness about the harms of weight discrimination, and ultimately [reducing how often it happens](#). To advocate for these laws:

Direct people to urge their legislators to oppose weight discrimination through [the Campaign for Size Freedom petition](#).

Urge people to get involved with organizations that are already advocating for these laws, like the [National Association to Advance Fat Acceptance](#) or the [Obesity Action Coalition](#).

2

NOTICE THE SIGNS OF WEIGHT DISCRIMINATION IN THE MEDIA AND WHEN APPROPRIATE, CALL YOUR COMMUNITY IN

People with larger bodies are consistently stigmatized in the news, in entertainment, and on social media. To make matters worse, media bias against people with larger bodies has [worsened over time](#). Harmful tropes to watch out for (and counter):

- **The shamed & blamed:** People with larger bodies lack willpower and are shaped the way they are because of gluttonous behavior and no desire to better themselves.
- **Before-body & after-body:** Images or content that show people before and after weight loss and imply or state openly that their true inner self has been ‘revealed’ through the process of weight loss.
- **The deviant:** People with larger bodies are out-of-control, loud, unconventional rule breakers, and don’t care who they offend.
- **The disgraced citizen:** People with larger bodies are individually failing to stop national trends of rising body weight, contributing to a public health crisis.
- **The victim:** People with larger bodies have some form of underlying trauma that contributes to them avoiding behaviors like exercise and eating ‘right.’
- **The unworthy partner:** People with larger bodies are less desirable as a romantic partner, and if they are in a partnership, they must be offering something exceptional and/or there is something ‘wrong’ with the partner with the smaller body.
- **The body as a spectacle:** Displaying people with larger bodies as a ‘spectacle’ to look at, in a ‘freak show’ type way, to demonstrate how their body is inferior and deserving of poor treatment.
- **The body in redemption:** People with larger bodies transforming how ‘worthy’ they are of happiness, health, and respect through weight-loss journeys.

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- **The bad mother and failed child:** Mothers with larger bodies are poor role-models for their children, and their bodies are unsuited for pregnancy and need to be intervened upon. And if the mother has a smaller body and her child has a larger body, it is because of a parenting failure.

These tropes frequently intersect with racist and misogynistic stereotypes. For example, members of the Black community are often portrayed as eating ‘bad’ foods and in need of expert advice (often from white experts) on how to change the way they eat.

3

SIT WITH AND DISCUSS UNCOMFORTABLE TOPICS WITH YOUR COMMUNITY

Weight discrimination is harmful, and we have a collective stake in ending it. While legislation and education are a great start, fully eradicating weight discrimination will require imaginative solutions that start with our ability to reckon with uncomfortable realities. Sit with these topics and discuss them with your communities if you are comfortable:



HOW THE BODY IS BOTH POLITICIZED AND THE SOURCE OF OUR INDIVIDUAL HEALTH

The way our bodies look affects the way we are treated and the resources we can access. Because of this, people may choose to lose weight to avoid stigma and discrimination. However, they may also be doing so to achieve their own vision of health. People may also lose weight unintentionally, or because of underlying health conditions. Seeing others lose weight may bring up feelings of betrayal in people who see weight loss as a [decision to abandon a political fight](#). Those feelings of betrayal may bring up confusion and anger for others, who may find it hateful to hold someone back from achieving their own vision of health. **Encourage your community to non-judgmentally reflect on the complexity of how our weight and health are politicized and the need to respect people of all body sizes, regardless of whether they choose to lose weight.**



HOW PROFIT MOTIVES CONTINUE TO DRIVE HOW WE THINK ABOUT WEIGHT AND DISCRIMINATION

Weight-loss is a [\\$90 billion dollar industry](#) that benefits from people’s insecurities about their weight. On the flip side, companies (like [General Mills](#)) profit off of movements working to fight weight discrimination by running ads that imply that eating their products pushes back on “food shaming.” **Encourage your community to recognize the harm created by companies and campaigns that continue to profit off weight-related insecurities.**

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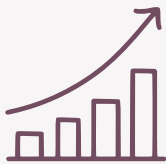
STATS TO KNOW



[34 million people](#) in the US experienced weight discrimination in 2019



[\\$206 billion](#) is lost to weight discrimination each year in the US to health system and productivity costs.



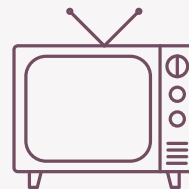
[60% increased risk](#) of early death for people who experience weight discrimination



[2.5x risk](#) for mood and anxiety disorders for people who experience weight discrimination



Nearly [75 million people](#) in the US are misclassified as healthy or unhealthy when relying on weight (i.e. BMI) alone.



[2x increase](#) of people with larger bodies being portrayed in children's film as less active, making fewer friends, or being treated negatively since the 1990s.



Nearly [60% of tweets](#) with the word 'fat' in them are negative



[18 out of the top 25 teen TV shows](#) displayed characters being teased for their weight



[9 in 10 adults](#) in the US support school policies that ban weight-based bullying



[6 in 10 adults](#) in the US support legislation that outlaws weight discrimination

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CONTENT RESOURCES

Here's a short selection of resources that you can use to create content about weight discrimination:

- [My Fat Friend](#) – Documentary following activist, author, and content creator, Aubrey Gordon's life as she advocates against weight discrimination.
- [Fattitude \(documentary 2017\)](#) – Documentary on the harms of weight discrimination and the fat acceptance movement.
- Free banks of non-stigmatizing images of people with larger bodies from the [European Association for the Study of Obesity](#), the [UConn Rudd Center for Food Policy and Health](#), the [Obesity Action Coalition](#), and [Obesity Canada](#)
- [Brochures and toolkits](#) from the National Association to Advance Fat Acceptance for talking about guidelines for healthcare providers, HR training, and more
- [Maintenance Phase](#) – Podcast by Michael Hobbes and Aubrey Gordon debunking harmful wellness and weight loss trends.
- [Stop Weight Bias Campaign](#) – Website with many helpful resources, including [fact sheets](#), and [stories](#) from people who have experience weight bias.

DEEPER DIVES

For a deeper dive on weight discrimination and its repercussions, check out these resources:

- [The Media Empathy Report: Spotlight on Weight Stigma](#) – Report summarizing the state of weight stigma in the media, including film, television, news, and social media.
- [Weight Stigma and Media: Assessing the Impact](#) – Survey results from a large study exploring how people with larger bodies see themselves portrayed in the media.
- [The Real Cost of Beauty Ideals](#) – Report on the social and economic costs of weight discrimination, body dissatisfaction, and additional forms of appearance-based discrimination.