

# Weight Bias: A Call to Action

## What is weight bias?

Weight bias refers to the negative attitudes, beliefs, assumptions and judgments towards individuals based on their weight, shape, appearance, or Body Mass Index (BMI). It results from our conscious and unconscious thoughts and perceptions about the human body and leads to injustice in health care treatments, policies, and guidelines.

Weight bias can target anyone; however, when it's aimed at people with larger bodies, it leads to prejudice, stigma and discrimination. It can be seen in social interactions, the media, health care, education and the workplace.

## What are the effects of weight bias?

Weight bias can lead to a person to have a negative relationship with their body, food and physical activity, and to neglect self-care. Weight bias, discrimination, and stigma have many effects on their victims.

<b>Physical</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• avoid physical activity</li><li>• have poor eating habits</li><li>• delay too long or avoid seeking health care</li><li>• have high blood pressure, pain, stress, and alcohol and drug use problems</li></ul>	<b>Mental/Emotional</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• have increased stress, depression, anxiety, mental illness and suicidal thoughts</li><li>• have poor body image and low self-esteem</li></ul>
<b>Social</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• fear travel and feel uneasy in crowds</li><li>• suffer from bullying and harassment</li><li>• experience poor quality relationships and social isolation</li></ul>	<b>Economic</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• have decreased academic and work performance</li><li>• have lower socio-economic status</li><li>• face discrimination in education and professional settings</li></ul>

## Why is weight bias a concern?

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

Weight is often seen as the result of a behaviour that can be easily modified by eating less and moving more. However, weight is not a behaviour, and is influenced by many complex factors such as genetics, lifestyle, and socio-economic status. What's more, public health messages, health policies, and clinical guidelines often have detrimental effects:

- They increase cultural preoccupations with weight;
- They perpetuate the concept of individual responsibility for weight control and maintaining good health;
- They result in shaming and blaming.

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

## How can we fight against weight bias?

- Understand that health and well-being go beyond the physical, they include the mental, emotional, social, and environmental dimensions, and depend on lifestyle.
- Recognize that no one has full control over their own health.
- Accept and respect the diversity of body shapes and sizes.
- Change the way we talk about health behaviours so that our messages don't reinforce negative stereotypes.
- Stop using weight as the rationale for changes in lifestyle and health policies.
- Promote health and well-being for all people.
- Ensure that everyone is positively represented in the media, regardless of ethnicity, body size or socio-economic status.

**Tip!** Review your website and other resources to see if the images used include only individuals with smaller bodies. If so, replace them with non-stigmatizing images of diverse bodies to break negative stereotypes and eliminate discrimination.

## How can we reframe our messages?

### **DO talk about:**

- Foods that make you feel good and that you enjoy
- Activities you enjoy and that are good for your mental and physical health and well-being
- Positive qualities about ourselves and others that don't relate to size, shape or appearance
- Good eating habits, such as listening to hunger and fullness cues
- The importance of educating ourselves about nutrition, physical health and the media
- Social determinants of health and reducing health inequities
- The importance of healthy, supportive relationships in achieving health

### **DON'T talk about:**

- Weight being controlled or obesity prevented solely through diet and physical activity
- Obesity being a 'public health crisis'
- 'Good' or 'bad' foods, or foods we 'should' or 'shouldn't' eat (labelling foods in this way can be moralizing and contribute to reinforcing stereotypes)
- Needing to achieve a specific weight or BMI to be healthy

Weight bias creates health inequities. Everybody has the right to respect, fair representation, and services free from discrimination. For the physical, mental and social well-being of everyone, we must combat weight bias.

