WEIGHT BIAS AND STIGMATIZATION – IS IT A MATTER OF PUBLIC HEALTH?

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Background: People living with obesity frequently experience weight bias, stigma and discrimination, from childhood through all their lives. Wight bias are negative weight-related attitudes, beliefs, assumptions and judgments in society, that are held about people with obesity. Weight stigma is characterized by prejudiced, stereotyped, and discriminatory views and actions towards people with obesity, often fuelled by inaccurate ideas about the causes of obesity.

Weight bias, stigma and discrimination usually lead to several physical, psychological and psychosocial consequences. Some of the consequences of weigh bias and stigmatization include increased chronic stress, cortisol levels, oxidative stress, and increased risk for obesity, diabetes, avoidance of healthcare, greater cardiovascular risks, psychological distress, anxiety, body image disturbance and depression. Weight bias can also have social and economic consequences, such as fewer opportunities for education and employment for people living with obesity.

A fundamental driver of weight bias is a lack of public understanding of the complex and multifactorial nature of obesity. Public health strategies that focus on obesity as an issue of unhealthy eating and physical inactivity, and ignore biological, genetic, environmental and social contributors of obesity, can contribute to the lack of public understanding of the disease and can lead to people experiencing weight bias and stigma. Public health campaigns that promote negative attitudes and stereotypes toward people with obesity, are not only ineffective in motivating behaviour change but also end up labelling and stigmatizing individuals further.

Conclusions: In order to reduce weight bias and stigmatization, public health professionals should be aware of and concerned about weight stigma and its consequences, while all health workers need to be educated and trained in reducing weight stigmatization and discrimination. Instead of using stigmatizing language and images, public health policy makers should develop people-centred policies that move beyond personal responsibility, recognize the complexity of obesity and promote health, dignity and respect, regardless of body weight or shape.

Keywords: weight bias, weight stigmatization, obesity, public health