

PRESS RELEASE

INTERNATIONAL SCIENTISTS AND CLINICIANS, TOGETHER WITH PATIENT ORGANIZATION, AGREE - WE MUST MAKE A COLLECTIVE EFFORT TO STOP WEIGHT STIGMA.

Over 60% of children and youth with obesity experience weight-based bullying by their peers at school. More than half (60%) of adults with obesity seeking health care experience stigmatization by health care providers. More than 80% of images and videos in the media portray people with larger bodies in a stigmatizing manner.

Having a weak character, being lazy, stupid and unmotivated are a few of the deeply ingrained misconceptions and stereotypes about people with obesity that exist in our society today. The problem is that these misconceptions can lead to stigmatization or the unfair treatment of people living with obesity. When misconceptions become accepted as common knowledge in society or when images, movies and TV-shows that portray people living with a larger body in a negative light go uncontested, it can deepen the unfair treatment that individuals with obesity experience in their daily lives. We must challenge these misconceptions and stereotypes to prevent weight stigma.

Misconceptions and stereotypes about obesity and people living with this disease are compounded by the lack of understanding about obesity and stigma among health care professionals. Often, health care professionals make unjust assumptions about people with obesity and their health behaviours (e.g. assume that people with obesity eat unhealthy and do not exercise enough). This can influence the patient-provider relationship (e.g. lack of trust) and impact health care services and patient outcomes. Experiencing stigmatization by health care professionals can lead to patients with obesity avoiding interactions with health care professionals which can delay diagnosis and treatments of diseases and conditions. Experiencing weight stigma can also lead to internalization of misconceptions and stereotypes about obesity, increased feelings of shame and guilt and may even lead to poor psychological health outcomes such as eating disorders, depression, and even suicidal thoughts and acts.

Misconceptions about body size and social desirability are learned early. Children as young as 4-5 years of age are well aware that dieting is a way to achieve an ideal body size. Feeling bad about one's body size and shape can lead to unhealthy dieting and exercise patterns, which can increase obesity risk.

Instead we should be talking about health from a holistic perspective that is grounded in science and not in the unhealthy body size ideals. People come in different shapes and sizes and we must differentiate between body size ideals and obesity. Promoting body positivity among children and youth while also nurturing health and well-being of individuals who have the disease of obesity should be a priority among educators, health care professionals and policy makers.

Once we educate ourselves, educators, health care professionals, the media, and policy makers about the difference between body size and obesity the disease, we will be able to talk about obesity in a non-stigmatizing way. When we teach children that all bodies are different, and that body size diversity is the norm, we can begin to move beyond body size ideas and focus on health and well-being. It's time to stop normalizing weight stigma and start taking action. We know that increased knowledge about obesity can reduce weight bias. To end weight stigma we must stop making assumptions about somebody's health or lifestyle based on their body size.

Because no matter what your body size is, you should always be treated with dignity and respect!

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info@hobs.se

www.hobs.se

070-754 87 26