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# Changing Obesity Narratives

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# Obesity Research

- Obesity is a chronic condition, similar to diabetes or high blood pressure, which is characterized by abnormal or excessive fat accumulation that impairs health.
- Obesity should be diagnosed by a qualified health professional using clinical tests and measures beyond BMI.
- BMI is not an indicator of health.
- Obesity management is about improving health and wellbeing, and not simply reducing numbers on the scale.
- Healthy behaviours are important regardless of weight.
- Weight is not a behaviour.
- **Weight stigma increased morbidity and mortality.**

# WEIGHT BIAS AND DISCRIMINATION IS RAMPANT IN OUR SCHOOLS, WORKPLACES, HEALTH SYSTEMS AND MEDIA.



Elementary school kids with obesity face a 63% higher chance of being bullied



54% of adults with obesity report being stigmatized by coworkers



64% of adults with obesity report experiencing weight bias from a healthcare professional



72% of images and 77% of videos stigmatized persons with obesity according to recent media studies

- Public health messages that oversimplify obesity as a lifestyle/ behavioural risk factor can contribute to weight bias attitudes and obesity stigma.
- Using stigma to encourage behaviour change is not an evidence-based strategy.



Media framing of obesity places more emphasis on individual responsibility and may contribute to a culture of weight bias and stigma

Atanasova D, Koteyko N. Obesity frames and counter-frames in British and German online newspapers. *Health (London)*. 2016.

## Want to prevent obesity? Head for the hills, say scientists

Research in Spain has found that people who live at high altitudes are 13 per cent less likely to become overweight or obese

Charlie Cooper | @charliecooper8 | Thursday 7 May 2015 | 



Health

### Inactivity 'kills more than obesity'

By James Gallagher  
Health editor, BBC News website

🕒 15 January 2015 | Health | 📄 864



A lack of exercise could be killing twice as many people as obesity in Europe, a 12-year study of more than 300,000 people suggests.

- Widespread narrative that obesity is caused by unhealthy eating and lack of exercise leads to social judgments about individuals with obesity
- Not evidence-based narrative
- Moralizing weight silences and shames individuals living with obesity

## Obesity's global costs hit \$2 trillion a year, report suggests

Nearly half the world's adults will be overweight or obese by 2030 should present trends continue

The Associated Press Posted: Nov 20, 2014 9:37 AM ET | Last Updated: Nov 20, 2014 10:43 PM ET



Obesity global cost hits \$2 trillion: report 2:25

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### Obesity bigger cost for Britain than war and terror

Britain spending £47bn a year dealing with the healthcare and social costs of an increasingly overweight population, study finds



Britain is spending a fraction on preventing obesity compared with the cost of addressing the consequences, a study has found. Photograph: Alamy

Obesity is a greater burden on the UK's economy than armed violence, war and terrorism, costing the country nearly £47bn a year, a report has found.

- Obesity is a burden to society versus people with obesity are a burden to society
- War on obesity versus war on people with obesity

# Portrayal of Persons with Obesity

- 72% of persons with overweight and obesity portrayed negatively
  - Heads cut out of photos
  - Persons showed from the side or the rear
  - Persons portrayed with only their abdomens or lower bodies
  - Persons portrayed partially clothed (e.g. bare stomachs showing)

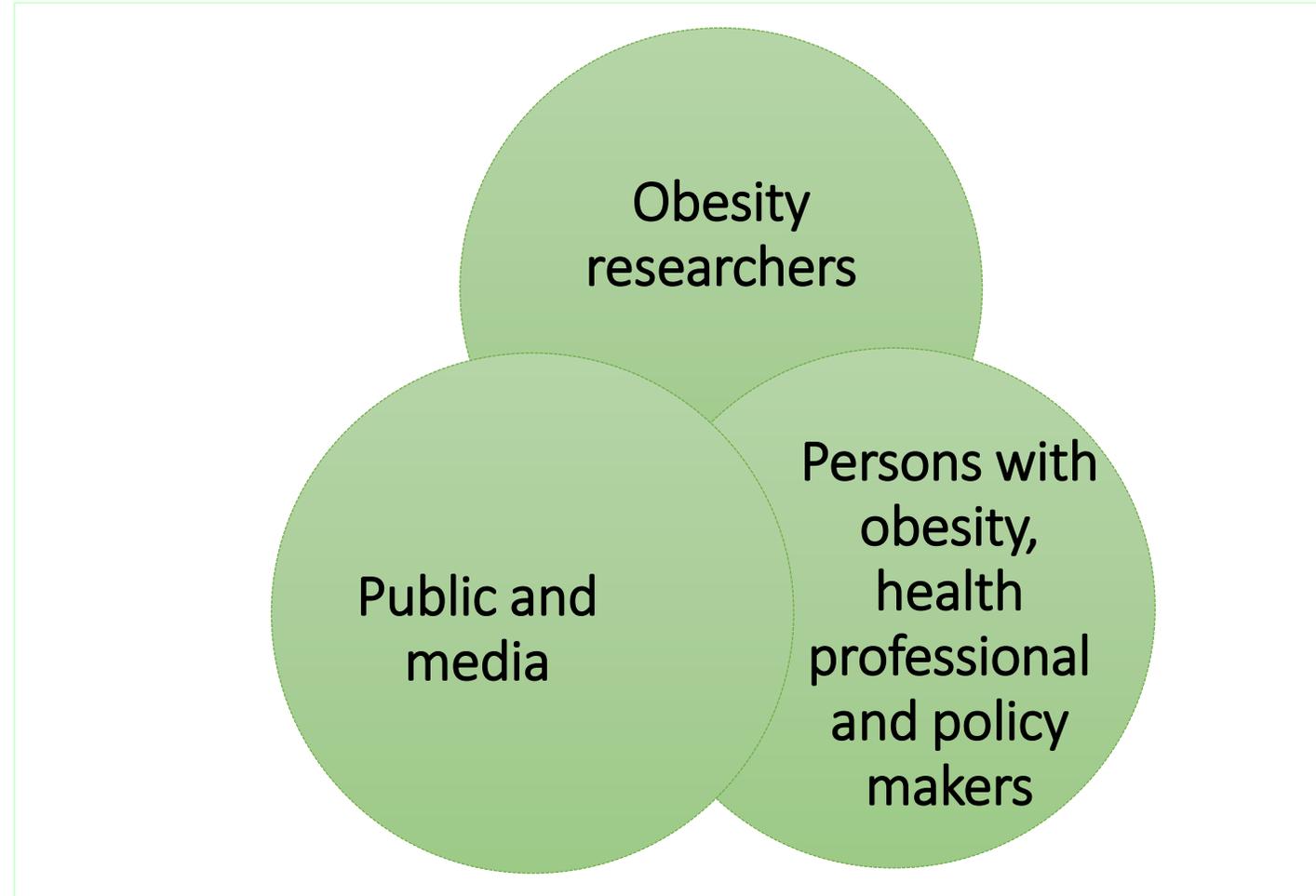
*Journal of Health Communication*, 16:976–987, 2011

- Exposure to negative visual portrayals of persons with obesity contributes to weight bias attitudes

*Health Psychology*: 2014, Vol. 33, No. 2, 197–200

# What can we do to change the obesity narrative in public health and the media?





# Changing the Obesity Narrative

Examine core **beliefs, values, assumptions, practices, relationships, language and images** that contribute to weight bias and stigma



We must change our narrative that obesity is a lifestyle/behaviour choice

Weight is not a behaviour. Rather it is influenced by behaviours and many other factors that can be beyond an individual's control.

# Changing Our Narrative

- Consider the complexity of **obesity as a chronic disease** and peoples' lived **experiences**
- Work with **obesity experts and persons living with obesity** to contextualize media stories
- **Narratives from people with obesity** can be powerful, but there can be a personal cost for those that speak up



# Changing the Portrayal of Obesity

- Promote **body size diversity** in media stories
- Draw from online image banks available at:
  - <http://www.obesitynetwork.ca/image-bank-child-youth>
  - <http://www.uconnruddcenter.org/video-library>
  - <http://www.imagebank.worldobesity.org/>
- Adopt **people-first language** in stories about obesity



[www.obesitynetwork.ca/images-bank](http://www.obesitynetwork.ca/images-bank)



- Avoid photographs that place unnecessary emphasis on excess weight or that isolate an individual's body parts
- Avoid pictures that show individuals from the neck down (or with face blocked) for anonymity
- Avoid images with unnecessary exposure of skin
- Avoid photographs that perpetuate a stereotype



# THANK YOU

[www.obesitynetwork.ca](http://www.obesitynetwork.ca)

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