Science Not Stigma: Reporting on Obesity to Inform and Help

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October 26, 2019
Two Types of Bias Gets in the Way

• Intellectual bias about obesity itself
• Weight bias directed at people with obesity
What Is Obesity?

- A heavier than average body?
- A high BMI?
- Per the World Health Organization: “Abnormal or excessive fat accumulation that presents a risk to health.”
- A highly stigmatized and misunderstood chronic disease
People Typically View Obesity as the Result of Poor Choices

70%

Environment • Choices • Genes
The Truth Is That

Obesity Is a Highly Heritable Chronic Disease

- Heredity plays a dominant role in obesity risk
- But environmental factors serve to activate it
- Then, people can choose what to do about it

Heritability 70%

Source: Musani, Erickson, and Allison, 2008, AJCN
Ever More Obesity from A Perfect Storm of Environmental Triggers

- Simplistic explanations are invariably wrong
- The more accurate view is a perfect storm of multiple factors

Rocket Science Is Complicated . . .
. . . But Obesity Is Far More Complex

Weight Bias Flows from Demeaning Stereotypes About People with Obesity

- Lazy
- Stupid
- Undisciplined
- Sloppy
- Awkward
- Losers
- Dishonest
- Won't follow directions
- Uniformly unhealthy
- Ignorant about nutrition
- Lives spent gorging on junk food

In the Kitchen, photograph © Obesity Action Coalition / OAC Image Gallery
Explicit Bias Is Down, But Implicit Bias Is Growing

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dimension</th>
<th>Explicit Bias Trend 2007-2016</th>
<th>Implicit Bias Trend 2001-2016</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sexuality</td>
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<td>Disability</td>
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<td>Flat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weight</td>
<td>Down</td>
<td>Up</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Charlesworth and Banaji, 2018, Patterns of Implicit and Explicit Attitudes, Long-Term Change and Stability From 2007 to 2016
Living with Bias & Stigma Makes People Sicker

Pathways from stress to obesity

Source: Tomiyama, 2019, Ann Rev Psych
Demeaning and False Reporting About Obesity

- Dehumanizing images
  - Stereotypes
  - Headless body parts
  - Reflecting implicit bias
- Myths
- Presumptions
- Weight loss miracles

Photograph by Tony Otter / Flickr
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Photograph by Steven Depolo / Flickr
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**Hold the fries:** 1 in 3 Americans is obese, study says

About one in three Americans, or more than 100 million people, are obese, according to a report released this week. The report from Trust for ...

3 weeks ago

**Jessica Simpson’s Weight Loss Secret:** Simply Do Everything Differently

What’s Jessica Simpson’s secret to weight loss without going to the gym? Going to the gym, apparently. The erstwhile singer-turned-fashion ...

5 days ago
Obesity Is a Diagnosis Not a Behavior or an Identity

Obese people outnumber smokers two to one

Category: Press release  3 July 2019  Cancer Research UK
Helpful and Informative Reporting About Obesity

- Humanizing imagery
- Objective and factual reporting
- Language free from implicit bias
Helpful and Informative Reporting About Obesity

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We're barely using the best tool we have to fight obesity

Americans keep dieting to lose weight, but bariatric surgery is the most effective treatment out there.

By Julia Belluz | @juliofotoro | julia.belluz@voxmedia.com | Updated May 16, 2019, 11:46am EDT

Fire Fighter, from the OAC Image Gallery, photograph © Obesity Action Coalition
Resources

- Obesity Action Coalition
- The Rudd Center at UCONN
- Obesity Canada
- EASO
- World Obesity Federation
- The Obesity Society
- ASMBS
- Obesity Medicine Association
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