



# e-quilibrium

- *“electronic briefs on behavior and health”*

Volume 10, Number 10  
October 2014

## Weight Bias

Our perceptions and opinions of others are at times unfair and prejudicial, in spite of intentional efforts to minimize and/or eliminate such judgments. There is strong research evidence that biases can be implicit, that is, present without awareness of their existence. In many realms, there are laws against discrimination, the behavioral manifestation of prejudice or bias. Many factors contribute to the existence of biases, which include some of the basic features of human cognition.

Race, ethnicity, gender, and age are among the variables that have been given a great deal of attention with respect to bias. Weight bias, that is, negative attitudes toward persons with obesity, has been of increasing interest to investigators.

Weight bias is marked by beliefs that persons who are overweight are at fault for their body weight, and lack the willpower or discipline to lose weight. Weight bias affects behavior toward individuals with obesity, including hiring practices. The presence of weight bias has been found in numerous segments of society, including health professionals.

Many persons still believe that the stigma associated with overweight and obesity will motivate persons with weight problems to lose weight. However, research data have been very consistent in demonstrating just the opposite. Persons who experience weight bias or stigmatization are more likely to subsequently engage in behaviors associated with weight gain. These include stress eating, binge eating, and avoidance of

exercise. Studies have documented substantial weight gain among individuals experiencing the effects of weight bias.

Weight bias is also present among individuals who themselves are affected by overweight or obesity. This can contribute to a self-fulfilling prophecy. For example, weight gain can contribute to a belief that one has difficulty controlling impulses, which is apparent in subsequent behavior.

While no definitive way to eliminate weight bias has been discovered, awareness of the bias is a first step toward reducing discriminatory behavior. It is important to appreciate that many factors fuel the unprecedented rise in overweight and obesity rates, and that numerous features of our social and physical environments affect an array of health behaviors. Individuals who are able to maintain a healthy weight can typically identify areas where their own habits leave them less healthy than they could be, even if the effects aren't as obvious as body shape or size.

The social and psychological factors associated with the obesity epidemic are complex. Persons can endeavor to be nondiscriminatory, and thereby help to reduce the stigma experienced by those who struggle with weight management. This in turn can help minimize the negative emotions in these individuals that so strongly undermine weight control efforts.

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