

## Study shows 'being fat in today's world' invites social discrimination

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Obese people feel "a culture of blame" against them, which they say has been made worse by media reports about the health risks of obesity, a new study from Australia found. The results will be presented Tuesday, June 17, at The Endocrine Society's 90th Annual Meeting in San Francisco.

Researchers at Monash University in Melbourne conducted one-hour personal interviews with 76 obese individuals (62 females, 14 males), ranging in age from 16 to 72 years. The aim of the study was to better address issues of concern to obese people, in an attempt to improve interventions for the increasing epidemic of obesity, said the lead author, Paul Komesaroff, MD, PhD, director of the university's Centre for Ethics in Medicine and Society.

The authors found that the messages from media and health care professionals to engage in healthy behaviors, such as physical activity and eating healthier, may actually be doing more harm than good, Komesaroff said.

"Obese people frequently feel overwhelmed and disheartened by the publicity about their condition," he said. "They often feel disrespected and not understood by medical practitioners. Our participants express the view very forcefully that they feel victimized by current social attitudes about obesity. To be told that, in addition to the problems that they recognize only too well, they are now regarded as 'sick' is unlikely to assist them to find a solution."

Study participants said they find it difficult to act on the health messages about obesity, he said. Most participants reported that they had tried weight loss remedies that their physician recommended and were generally dissatisfied with the help doctors provide.

Health care providers' efforts to convince overweight patients to lose weight are largely unsuccessful, Komesaroff believes, possibly because they do not understand the key issues that obese people face.

"The experience of being obese is often painful," he said. "Many obese people have major social and psychological issues that doctors and public health policies [often] do not address."

Nearly 50 percent of the participants (37 of 76) described poor mental and emotional health, including depression, related to their overweight, study data showed. Nearly all (72 of 76) said they experienced humiliation and discrimination regarding their weight, either in childhood or as adults. Twenty participants—more than 25 percent—regularly tried to lose weight quickly by going without eating anything for periods—essentially "starving" themselves.

"Our preliminary results indicate that health care providers should do a more thorough assessment of the needs of individual obese patients based on a sympathetic and nonjudgmental appreciation of their problems," Komesaroff said. "Responses may include the setting of reasonable targets with respect to disease risk factors and a closer attention to social and psychological issues."

For practices and policies on the prevention and treatment of obesity to be effective, he believes it will be necessary to include obese people in the development process.

Source: The Endocrine Society

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