

# Weight fixation sends unhealthy messages

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Making assumptions of health based on a person's weight is faulty, and misinformation is putting people's physical and emotional well-being at risk, says College of Education researcher and lecturer in human development Dr Cat Pausé.

Dr Pausé challenged her students and colleagues to examine the “obesity myth”, which she says wrongly suggests that fat is unhealthy, that body size is a predictor of health and that there are permanent forms of weight-loss available.

“It is irresponsible to assume that all fat people are unhealthy, just as it is irresponsible to assume that all thin people are healthy,” Dr Pausé says.

She is project coordinator for the Adult Identity Development Project, which collected data on identity development, maintenance and revision in adult women and men for more than 20 years. Her focus is on weight identity, a small component of body image/identity.

Her research looked at United States women classified as morbidly obese. She says she this group because they are largely ignored or discarded by most studies. “Most research using individuals who are classified as morbidly obese is medical research, or has recruited participants through medical pathways.”

So far, she has found that New Zealand culture does not appear to be as weight-obsessed as the United States, yet she sees the same pressures being imposed. “In the United States, 90 per cent of women experience

some form of dissatisfaction with their body. We have a global culture telling women that their bodies are not acceptable.

“In Britain, authorities are even suggesting removing overweight children from their homes to avert what they consider to be child abuse – and their methods for measurement are based on outdated systems that do not reflect today’s life-style and standards.”

Dr Pausé says the system, known as the body mass index, is inappropriately used as a health measure by government agencies around the world and should be scrapped. She argues that most people who work in the field of fat studies, agree.

“It does not reflect the standards by which we live today – it was developed in 1850 and was developed as a normative measure of height and weight, not as an indicator of health.

“Using it perpetuates obesity myths, which damage our sense of weight identity inside a culture that is increasingly prejudiced toward fat people,” she says. “In fact we have an \$8 billion diet industry flourishing, when research shows that permanent weight loss of more than 8kg is impossible for 95 per cent of people.”

Dr Pausé says that there is research to show that weight identity does not necessarily shift even when the weight does. “Weight and health are not direct cause and effects,” she says, “Although younger dieting and yo-yo dieting does correlate with poor health, and 80 per cent of women in the United States have been on some form of diet to lose weight, by the time they are 18 years old.

“In many cultures, being a morbidly obese woman means living in a society that both oppresses your voice and exploits your image as a cautionary tale.”

Dr Pausé says there needs to be better understanding of issues surrounding weight and health, and that a culture shift must occur to encourage a healthier weight identity and physical health. “Imagine if a doctor prescribed a pill that only worked 5 per cent of the time for heart disease; it would be considered unethical, yet they still always say, 'eat less, exercise more, lose weight'.”

Provided by Massey University

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