

Pervasive Weight Discrimination a Serious Health Risk

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(PhysOrg.com) -- Weight discrimination poses serious risks to the psychological and physical health of obese individuals and should be considered a social justice issue as well as a public health priority, according to a paper from the Rudd Center for Food Policy and Obesity at Yale University. The paper appears in the June issue of the American Journal of Public Health.

Authors Rebecca M. Puhl, Ph.D. and Chelsea A. Heuer, M.P.H. argue that despite decades of studies documenting weight stigma and discrimination toward obese people, these attitudes remain pervasive and their public health implications are still largely ignored. The authors write that “because weight stigma remains a socially acceptable form of bias, negative attitudes and stereotypes toward obese persons have been

frequently reported by employers, coworkers, teachers, physicians, nurses, medical students, dietitians, psychologists, peers, friends, family members, and even among children as young as 3 years.”

Puhl and Heuer challenge the notion that weight stereotypes and stigmatization motivate individuals to adopt healthier behaviors, citing evidence that they do just the opposite - increasing the risk of unhealthy eating behavior and the avoidance of physical activity.

“Overweight and obese people are commonly viewed as lazy, lacking in discipline and noncompliant with programs and treatment for weight loss,” said Puhl, director of research and weight stigma initiatives at the Rudd Center. “These stereotypes are rarely challenged in American society despite recognition of the complex causes of obesity, and often lead to prejudice that impairs quality of life for [obese children](#) and adults.”

In the paper, the authors also cite the HIV/AIDS epidemic as an example of the historical role stigma and discrimination have played in the suffering of groups vulnerable to disease. They say that these factors were identified early on as major barriers to addressing the epidemic, and note that they were overcome through major public health campaigns.

But despite five decades of scientific research documenting the consequences of weight stigma, the authors say there has been no comparable breakthrough. No federal legislation exists to protect [obese individuals](#) from weight-based discrimination, and creating such legislation would improve their health, argue Puhl and Heuer. Further, they warn of the consequences if such discrimination is not addressed. "To effectively address the obesity epidemic and improve public health, it is essential to eliminate weight discrimination and pervasive blame toward obese individuals. Weight stigma must be included as a priority

in the national discourse of obesity," Puhl said.

Provided by Yale University

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