

Shame on you: tough-love approach to obesity may backfire

May 3 2011, By Bob Beale

(Medical Xpress) -- Tough love may not be the way to motivate overweight and obese people to change their habits for the better, a new study suggests.

Indeed, trying to shame such people into healthier eating and doing more [physical activity](#) can sometimes have the opposite effect, according to new findings by a UNSW researcher published in the journal [Obesity](#).

The study gives fresh insight into a negative cycle of thinking and attitudes behind weight problems, revealing that weight [stigma](#) can have a negative influence on overweight people's motivation to exercise, says Dr Lenny Vartanian, a lecturer in the UNSW School of Psychology who studies the psychology of body image and weight bias and discrimination.

“Research tells us that shaming overweight and obese people into changing their diet and exercise behaviour does not work — it actually backfires, causing them to be less likely to diet and exercise,” says Dr Vartanian.

Dr Vartanian surveyed 111 adult men and women who responded to advertisements for a study on the “life experience of overweight individuals”. They were assessed with a variety of standard psychological questionnaires.

Almost half reported experiencing some form of weight stigma at least

once a week. The more stigma they experienced, the more they thought negatively about themselves and the less motivated they were to exercise.

"In this study, it emerged that overweight and obese people regularly experience discrimination because of their weight. These stigma experiences make them less likely to tackle their problem through healthy eating and exercise, especially for people who themselves adopt a thin-is-good-fat-is-bad attitude," says Dr Vartanian.

"As well as the health problems they are more likely to encounter, overweight and [obese people](#) also suffer a great deal of prejudice, discrimination and poor treatment from others.

"There's growing evidence that this negative treatment from others not only has negative effects on their feelings about themselves but on their behaviour as well, which can ultimately worsen the impact on their physical health. Overweight children who are teased, for example, are reluctant to take part in physical activity at school. It looks increasingly like that is true for adults as well."

Provided by University of New South Wales

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