

The stigma of obesity

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Study participant Bri King with daughter Ruby.

Obesity stigma exists within many workplaces and cultural settings, often having a negative impact on individuals' health, social behaviours and outcomes.

A new study, led by Monash University and published in the Social Science & Medicine journal looks at how [obese individuals](#) respond to different types of obesity stigma encountered in their daily lives.

Lead researcher, Dr. Samantha Thomas said the perception of thinness as a health and social ideal is everywhere around us, putting pressure on the health and social wellbeing of obese adults.

“Not only are obese individuals depicted as lazy, gluttonous, unmotivated, and unhealthy but scientific research constantly reinforces a link between obesity and a range of medical, economic and social costs for members of the community,” said Dr. Thomas.

“The physical visibility of the fat body also means that this negative public gaze is inescapable for those who are classified as obese.”

The study focused on three types of weight-based stigma including Direct (e.g. being abused when using public transport), Environment (e.g. not being able to fit into seats on planes), and Indirect (e.g. people staring at the contents of their supermarket trolley).

The participants responded by describing the different types of obesity stigma they faced, how they responded to this stigma, and the impact of stigma on their physical and mental health.

The research found that participants described that more subtle forms of stigma had the most impact on their wellbeing. However, participants rarely challenged stigma, and felt that they deserved the stigma they received.

The study showed that obese adults also avoided situations where they perceived they would be stigmatised and constantly thought about how they could find a solution to their obesity. Importantly, this meant that many avoided participating in activities that would improve their physical and mental health.

“Obese adults face many different types of stigma which impact in different ways on health and social opportunities. These stigmas can also lead to emotional distress, social isolation, and withdrawal from daily activities.

“While anti-stigma initiatives developed for other health conditions may be a useful guide in obesity, it is likely that initiatives in this setting will need to be more complex. This is in part because weight bias is everywhere and is inherent in the contemporary ‘war on obesity,’” said Dr. Thomas.

The study, How do obese individuals perceive and respond to the different types of [obesity stigma](#) that they encounter in their daily lives? was published in the [Social Science & Medicine](#) journal.

Provided by Monash University

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