Seeking solutions for the impact of obesity stigma

February 26 2015, by Erika Jerme

Arizona State University President's Professor Alexandra Brewis Slade (standing) is a leading researcher of fat stigma and its effects on personal well-being. She recently convened a workshop to explore this overlooked field and to devise ways of moving it forward.

Arizona State University medical anthropologist and President's Professor Alexandra Brewis Slade says that even as more and more Americans find themselves carrying extra weight, the stigma attached to being overweight has grown.

As one of the world's leading researchers of obesity stigma and co-director of Mayo Clinic-ASU Obesity Solutions, she hopes to change the

lack of awareness of the impacts of obesity stigma and fat shaming on people who are overweight and obese.

Recently, she convened a small group of scholars with similar interests for a one-day workshop to discuss ways to move the field of obesity stigma research forward.

Seeking solutions

ASU scholars included cultural anthropologist Amber Wutich; medical anthropologist Jonathan Maupin; Obesity Solutions postdoctoral researcher Sarah Trainer; and Obesity Solutions associate director Deb Williams.

Invited guests came from academic institutions across the nation.

The group spent a packed day together on Feb. 13, presenting on their past, present and planned future research, and exploring collaborative opportunities. Because the role of stigma in obesity has received such little attention from researchers, the group decided to create a panel on fat stigma at a national conference in 2016 as a strategic first step toward making the issue more widely understood.

"The problem of weight-related stigma is everywhere, including the ASU campus," said Brewis Slade, director of the School of Human Evolution and Social Change and the Center for Global Health. "It is gratifying to see that scholars from around the country are beginning to pay attention to what is a widespread and often legal and socially acceptable form of discrimination, and one that undermines the health and well-being of so many."

She points out that overweight people are commonly subjected to hurtful messaging and behavior in everyday life, which takes a toll on emotional

well-being. They may encounter the stares of strangers; well-meaning but ultimately damaging remarks from others, such as unsolicited dieting tips or fitness advice; or outright insults. In addition, the media is full of negative representations of heavier people.

Leaving the stigma behind

Unfortunately, fat shaming has long been held up as a way to get people to lose weight. The thinking goes that if people feel embarrassed enough about their weight, they will change their eating and activity patterns to lose weight. Yet the evidence shows that fat shaming leads to just the opposite.

"A major theme from the workshop is how this stigma actually leads to weight gain or additional barriers to successful weight loss," Brewis Slade explains.

People who feel stigmatized because of their weight tend to avoid exercising in public, and may fall back on patterns of comfort eating or extreme caloric restriction (often leading to later cravings and binges) when they feel bad about themselves. Moreover, many people who have felt judged by a health care provider avoid going to the doctor later, reducing their access to professional weight loss guidance.

Obesity stigma leads to other serious impacts, too. Researchers find that, in addition to having lower self-esteem and confidence, people who are obese are less likely to be hired or promoted than their lighter-weight peers, while earning lower wages and having fewer training opportunities at work. They also tend to be treated more poorly by health care professionals, teachers and peers.

Despite the mounting evidence of the negative impact of obesity stigma, its study remains a relatively small field within the social sciences. As

the 'obesity epidemic' draws more and more attention from health professionals, the public and the media, Brewis Slade and her colleagues are concerned that issues of stigma and shame tend to be drowned out amidst concern for the more obvious health effects of obesity.

Provided by Arizona State University