

Weight discrimination has major impact on quality of life

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Man on scales. Credit: David Reber

Weight discrimination is linked to significantly lower quality of life, and accounts for approximately 40% of the negative psychological effects associated with obesity, finds new UCL research funded by Cancer Research UK.

The study, which analysed data from 5,056 UK adults, found that those who felt discriminated against on the basis of their weight had a 70% increase in symptoms of depression, a 14% drop in quality of [life](#) and 12% lower life satisfaction relative to those who did not perceive weight discrimination.

To assess weight discrimination, participants were asked whether they experienced day-to-day discrimination that they attributed to their weight. Examples of discrimination include being treated disrespectfully, receiving poor service in shops, and being harassed. Psychological wellbeing was assessed with standard measures of quality of life, life satisfaction and symptoms of depression.

The data come from the English Longitudinal Study of Ageing (ELSA), a study of adults aged 50 or older. The researchers analysed the results to check whether the known association between obesity and poorer psychological wellbeing could in any part be explained by weight-related discrimination. They found that when perceived weight discrimination was accounted for, differences in wellbeing between obese and non-obese individuals were reduced substantially, suggesting that discrimination may be an important cause of low wellbeing for obese people.

"In the United Kingdom, the Equality Act 2010 legally protects individuals from discrimination on the basis of age, sex, race, disability, religion or beliefs, sexual orientation, marital status, pregnancy, or gender reassignment; making it clear that discriminatory behaviour of this nature is not to be accepted," says lead author Dr Sarah Jackson

(UCL Epidemiology & Public Health). "However, our results indicate that discriminatory experiences contribute to poorer psychological wellbeing in individuals with obesity, but there are currently no laws prohibiting weight discrimination. This might send the message to people that weight discrimination is socially acceptable."

Senior author Professor Jane Wardle, director of the Cancer Research UK Health Behaviour Centre at UCL, says: "Combined with our previous work showing that weight discrimination does not encourage weight loss, we can see that [weight discrimination](#) is part of the obesity problem and not the solution. Weight bias has been documented not only among the general public but also among health professionals; and many obese patients report being treated disrespectfully by doctors because of their weight. Everyone, including doctors, should stop blaming and shaming people for their weight, and offer support, and where appropriate, treatment."

More information: [dx.doi.org/10.1002/oby.21052](https://doi.org/10.1002/oby.21052)

Provided by University College London

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