

# How everyday language casually stigmatises obesity – and what to do about it

September 14 2017, by Tara Coltman-Patel

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Obesity is a highly stigmatised condition. Those with obesity are frequently [subject to prejudice and ridicule](#) at home, school, work and even from health care professionals. Every day, they face social

rejection and are deemed [lazy, unattractive, unmotivated and unhappy](#). Alarmingly, many obese individuals feel unable to challenge such stigma, so they [passively accept and sometimes believe it](#).

We live in a world where we are constantly reminded that [obesity](#) is a "crisis", an "epidemic", that it is crippling the economy, and that it is a burden on society. These ideologies are disseminated throughout the news media, social media, by politicians and by [health care professionals](#) – and they are the birthplace of weight stigma.

Weight stigma can manifest itself in several different ways. It can be overt, such as verbal and physical abuse, but it can also be indirect and subtle. My research focuses on the subtle and subconscious [language](#) choices that do not appear stigmatising on the surface and my results are drawn from a data set of 16,500 British newspaper articles about obesity.

## The 'epidemic'

["Obesity epidemic"](#) was one of the most frequently used phrases in the newspaper articles. And it is not just limited to the press – it's a phrase that is used widely in a range of contexts, often in everyday speech by everyday people.

The word "epidemic" is used as a metaphor to highlight the rising prevalence of obesity. But the [definition of "epidemic"](#) is the wide spreading occurrence of an infectious disease.

I would argue that this generates a level of fear and anguish towards obesity, perhaps suggesting that you should avoid [obese people](#). It also obscures the fact that obesity is incredibly complex. Becoming complacent with such language choices has led to divisive and negative attitudes towards those with obesity.

The "[obesity epidemic](#)" is only one of the many negative language examples I have found. Even more subtle, subconscious and potentially stigmatising is the coupling of the words "are" and "obese" in statements such as "One in eight people ARE obese"; "Children who ARE obese", and "How can you tell if you ARE obese."

## The "are" problem

The word "obese" occurs 24,011 times in my data. On 28% of these occasions, it is preceded by the verb "are". So what's the problem, you might be wondering?

Well, it can be argued that obesity is a [medical condition](#). Three years ago, the American Medical Association [adopted this position](#) and the [NHS recognises](#) that obesity can be more complex than just a result of overeating and a lack of exercise.

So if obesity is a medical condition, it is not something that you "are", it is something you "have". It is rare that people are defined by a medical condition they have. You will never hear the phrases, "you are lupus", or "you are meningitis".

But there are important exceptions. Tellingly, the medical conditions that are used alongside the verb "are" are those that are also unfairly stigmatised.

- You ARE HIV positive.
- You ARE dyslexic.
- You ARE a leper.
- You ARE obese.

Defining people as obese causes severe conflation and it insinuates that that is all they are. It becomes easy to issue blame, it implies that all

negative weight related ideologies apply to them, and it creates a very narrow and inaccurate identity for those that have obesity.

These examples were extracted from newspaper articles, but they are language choices that are subconsciously made by the majority of people, not just journalists. It is astonishing that phrases we use without the intention to stigmatise have the power to change the way an entire concept is represented and viewed.

I would argue that the language we use when discussing this issue needs to be evaluated and more calculated so that we can use powerful platforms such as [news media](#), that reaches out to a large audience, to educate as opposed to discriminate. The language we use represents the way we think, and the language we read, hear and digest shapes the way we think.

It is a powerful tool and highlighting examples of our complacency with it could be the first step in the right direction towards changing the way we treat this issue and reducing the weight stigmas which are currently so widespread in society.

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