

# Discrimination against fat people is so endemic, most of us don't even realise it's happening

May 9 2018, by Angela Meadows

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Credit: UConn Rudd Center for Food Policy & Obesity

When we think of prejudice and discrimination, most of us tend to think of overt attacks, harassment, or discriminatory behaviour. Blatant

examples of prejudice do still occur with depressing frequency, but for most members of stigmatised groups, it is not these experiences that shape their daily lives. Rather, belonging to a socially stigmatised group means travelling through a world that is rife with multiple small, sometimes subtle or apparently inconsequential reminders of your devalued status, known as [microaggressions](#).

As a weight stigma researcher, I focus on the experiences of fat people (many fat rights activists prefer the word "fat" and use it as a descriptive terms and not as an insult) but microaggressions define the lived experience of all groups devalued by society. Microaggressions can come from anywhere at any time. For a fat person, this might be:

- When they get on a bus and the person sitting next to an empty seat scowls at them or pointedly places their bag on the seat;
- People watching them while they're eating in a restaurant or checking out the contents of their trolley in the supermarket;
- A fat joke on TV or in a film; A slimmer friend asking if she "looks fat in this";
- Hearing a group of children making fun of them;
- Or even wondering whether they will be taken seriously when they go to the doctor with a sprained ankle, or just told to go away and lose some weight.

If you're not a member of a stigmatised group, you might think that most of these examples sound relatively minor and could be easily ignored. But while any individual incident may be minor, it is the [totality of stigma](#) that defines our existence.

## **The cost of hostile environments**

The pervasive hostile environment that marginalised people find themselves in serves as a source of constant physical and psychological

stress. The body's acute stress response involves the production of stress hormones and changes in cardiovascular, immune and neurological systems to deal with the threat.

This is an adaptive response in the short term – that is, it aids with survival. But [chronic exposure](#) to stress is associated with increased rates of diabetes, hypertension, heart disease and even some cancers. This is not limited to [fat people](#). These findings are consistent when looking at people belonging to racial minorities, LGBTQ individuals and many others.

Critically, the [harms associated with a hostile environment](#) occur even in the absence of [actual stigmatising incidents](#) – stigmatised individuals go through their daily life anticipating, fearing, expecting and preparing for these events. This consumes an enormous amount of mental and emotional energy and is itself a form of chronic stress. Hostile environments also contribute indirectly to long-term health and life outcomes via impacts on educational and economic achievement.

## Recognising stigma

Microaggressions against fat people are so pervasive and normalised in modern society that people, even fat people, may not recognise them as stigmatising at all. The [sometimes ambiguous nature](#) of microaggressions means that the target may be unsure of the intent or underlying meaning, wondering if that person was actually stigmatising them or not, making it difficult to respond. What is more, fat stigma is so entrenched that many [fat people are complicit](#) in their own stigmatisation, believing that they deserve it, or that the perpetrator was just stating a fact ("fat people are ugly and disgusting").

On the other hand, if they do challenge the stigma, at best, they may be told to ignore it; at worst, their experiences are invalidated. Victims of

microaggressions are told they are just imagining the slight, that they are [overly sensitive](#) or even [paranoid](#), or that they simply need to [develop a sense of humour](#). Fat people may even be told to lose weight if they don't like it. Most [people](#) would never tell a member of another stigmatised group that they should change themselves if they don't want to be discriminated against.

Most of us like to think of ourselves as unprejudiced. We would never [harrass](#) a fat person in the street, [beat them up](#), or give them [inferior service](#) in a shop.

But children as young as [three](#) exhibit anti-fat attitudes. They are not born with these beliefs – they are picking them up from the cues in their environment, for example from the attitudes and behaviours of [parents](#) and [caregivers](#), or from ubiquitous anti-fat messaging and stereotyping in [kids' cartoons](#). If we genuinely want to be part of a kind and decent society, if we want our children to grow up in that world, it is up to us not to let hostility go unchallenged. Oppression comes in many forms, and we all have a role to play in addressing it.

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