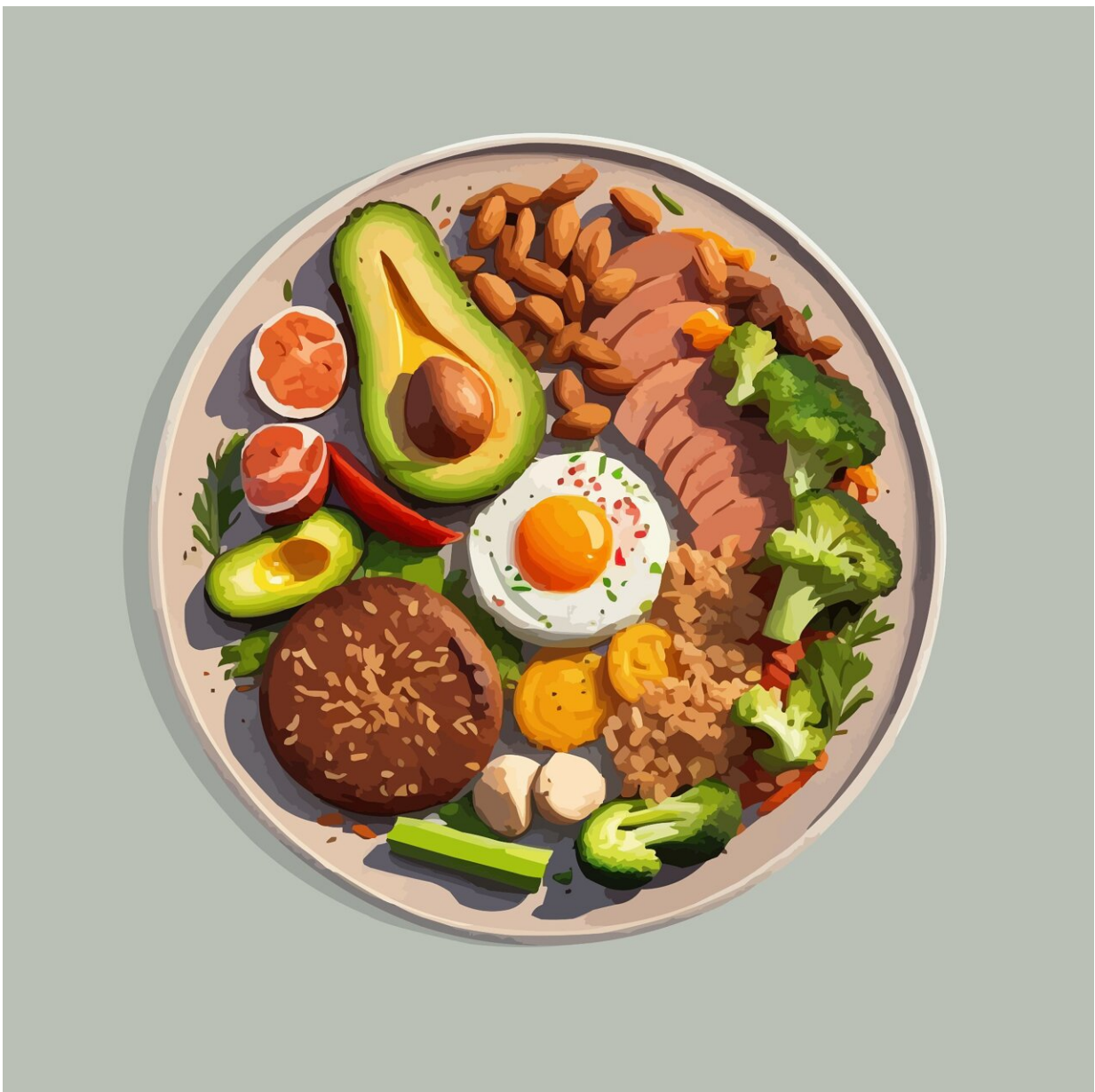


Why weight stigma is more than just being mean to overweight people

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Credit: Pixabay/CC0 Public Domain

People may think weight stigma only manifests as rude comments, is harmless or can even do some good.

At worst, it means overt discrimination, for example, if somebody isn't hired for a job because of their weight. But the reality is that weight stigma is often insidious, and pervasively entrenched into our society and environment. [Based on data from nearly a thousand people, we show](#) that weight stigma doesn't have to be malicious or targeted directly at a person to cause harm.

Fat microaggressions

Recurrent and commonplace discriminatory acts that demean members of stigmatized groups are called microaggressions. The impacts of microaggressions have been described as "[death by a thousand cuts](#)," referring to how seemingly minor incidents, when repeated cumulatively, contribute to real harm.

With combined input from reports of lived experiences, expert testimony and large studies with diverse samples, we identified four main types of fat microaggressions.

Direct microaggressions are the ones that most people might think of: rude remarks, being laughed at or publicly shamed on [social media](#), being excluded from activities with friends or family, or having people make assumptions about them, for example, that they couldn't possibly be in a loving relationship with a conventionally attractive partner.

The built environment can also be a source of direct microaggressions, such as at sporting events, theaters or restaurants where the seats are not wide or sturdy enough.

Indirect microaggressions are slights not targeted directly at an individual, but whose effects are still felt. Think fat jokes, unintelligent, gross, and/or unattractive fat characters on TV and in movies (like "Fat Monica" from "Friends" or Gwyneth Paltrow's character in "Shallow Hal"), and thin friends complaining they "feel fat" in front of a larger person and commenting on how much they hate their bodies.

Our data confirm that indirect microaggressions are the type most experienced by fat people—they invade every aspect of daily life and remind fat people that they are not viewed as OK.

Clothing exclusion

One type of direct microaggression that emerged as its own category in our analysis was clothing exclusion. Stores typically have far fewer options in larger sizes, or they are less stylish, yet cost more. It is also common to see clothing in stores with claims that "one size fits all," that really don't.

Limited choices for larger bodies send a message that they are not deserving or worthy of clothing to which others have access. But fat people still must turn up to work, social events, weddings, with sometimes the only purchasing criteria being, "does it fit?"

Easily overlooked by those who have endless options, selecting clothing is an everyday decision that can impact how fat people express themselves, how comfortable they feel in their bodies, as well as how the world sees them.

[Fat activists have also long recognized](#) that clothing exclusion acts as a proxy for other societal forms of erasure, in that the more standard options fail you, the more you are likely facing other forms of everyday oppressions.

Benevolent weightism

The other specific type of direct microaggression that was prominent in the lived experience of fat people is something we call "benevolent weightism." These are the often (although not always) well-meaning suggestions of diets and other weight-loss strategies that friends, family, co-workers and even total strangers feel obliged to share with fat people.

You would be hard-pressed to find a fat person who has not [tried multiple weight-loss methods](#), only to end up unsuccessful and feeling worse about themselves than ever.

[Science tells us](#) this is not about willpower. Indeed, the most likely outcome of weight-loss attempts is [weight regain](#), and [usually, weight rebound](#) above your initial starting point. Studies that show otherwise are often [methodologically flawed](#) and frequently misleading in their headline messaging. It is perhaps, then, no coincidence that [rises in obesity rates have paralleled attempts to make our populations thinner](#) with the promotion of weight as an indicator of health.

Why fat microaggressions matter

Across [four studies](#), we established the prominence of fat microaggressions in the lives of fat people and linked experiencing fat microaggressions to poorer mental health, such as greater stress, anxiety and depression, and worse self-esteem. Fat microaggressions were even associated with discrimination-related trauma symptoms, including

feeling on edge or constantly on guard, fearing embarrassment or feeling isolated from others.

Experiencing fat microaggressions was also connected to avoidant coping strategies, such as not attending social events, avoiding eating in front of others or going to the gym, and fear of seeking advancement in education and employment. This avoidance can lead to the accumulation of worse life outcomes and additional negative health effects.

Importantly, these findings were consistent for all the different types of microaggressions, including simply observing [weight stigma](#) directed at others and those meant to be helpful.

How you can help

Microaggressions often seem trivial. But every single microaggression, however well meaning, is a small violation of feeling safe in the world and cumulatively creates a hostile environment, putting targets under constant stress and vigilance, anticipating future microaggressions.

Greater awareness and recognition of fat microaggressions is an important first step to confronting them. Understanding their harm may lead us to think twice before engaging in fat talk, sharing fat jokes and memes, or providing unsolicited diet advice. If you really are concerned about health, do not tell fat people they need fixing; these microaggressions make people's health worse, not better.

Beyond this, speak up when you see these occurrences, and advocate for greater seating accessibility and better clothing options for people in larger bodies. Vote with your wallet when companies engage in fat shaming or exclusion. Challenging anti-fat attitudes when they manifest in these other ways is key to a more inclusive and less harmful world.

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