

Female fat prejudice persists even after weight loss, study finds

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Overweight women may never escape the painful stigma of obesity – even after they have shed the pounds, new research suggests.

The study, by the University of Hawaii at Mānoa, The University of Manchester, and Monash University, examined whether anti-fat prejudice against women persisted even after they had lost significant [weight](#) and were now thin.

The researchers asked young men and women to read vignettes describing a woman who had either lost weight (70 pounds/32 kilograms) or had remained weight stable, and who was either currently obese or currently thin. Participants were then asked their opinions about this woman on a number of attributes, such as how attractive they found her, and their overall dislike for fat people.

The team found that participants in the study – published in the journal *Obesity* – expressed greater bias against obese people after reading about women who had lost weight than after reading about women who had remained weight stable, regardless of whether the weight-stable woman was thin or obese.

"We were surprised to find that currently thin women were viewed differently depending on their weight history," said Dr Janet Latner, study lead at the University of Hawaii at Mānoa, US. "Those who had been obese in the past were perceived as less attractive than those who had always been thin, despite having identical height and weight."

One of the more disturbing findings from the study, the researchers noted, was that negative attitudes towards obese people increase when participants are falsely told that body weight is easily controllable.

Co-author, Dr Kerry O'Brien, from the University of Manchester's School of Psychological Sciences and Monash University in Melbourne, Australia, said: "The message we often hear from society is that weight is highly controllable, but the best science in the obesity field at the moment suggests that one's physiology and genetics, as well as the food environment, are the really big players in one's weight status and weight-loss.

"Weight status actually appears rather uncontrollable, regardless of one's willpower, knowledge, and dedication. Yet many people who are perceived as 'fat' are struggling in vain to lose weight in order to escape this painful social [stigma](#). We need to rethink our approaches to, and views of, weight and obesity."

The findings, say the authors, demonstrate that residual obesity stigma persists against individuals who have ever been obese, even when they have lost substantial amounts of weight. Obesity stigma is so powerful and enduring that it appears to even outlast the obesity itself.

Dr Latner added: "Descriptions of weight loss, such as those often promoted on television, may significantly worsen obesity stigma. Believing that obese people can easily lose weight may make individuals blame and dislike [obese people](#) more.

"The findings demonstrate that residual obesity stigma persists against individuals who have ever been obese, even when they have lost substantial amounts of weight. Obesity stigma is so powerful and enduring that it may even outlast the obesity itself. Given the great number of people who may be negatively affected by this prejudice,

[obesity](#) discrimination clearly needs to be reduced on a societal level."

More information: Residual Obesity Stigma: An Experimental Investigation of Bias against Obese and Lean Targets Differing in Weight-Loss History, *Obesity* (2012).

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