



PARENTS

HAVING A PRODUCTIVE CONVERSATION: WEIGHT BIAS - DISPELLING MYTHS



UConn
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FOR FOOD POLICY & OBESITY

Weight bias is one of the last socially acceptable prejudices in our society, which often makes it a difficult subject to discuss. People who believe negative stereotypes about individuals with high body weight often don't realize that they are prejudiced against people with high body weight. Some people even believe that stigmatizing someone for their weight might motivate them to lose weight, and this can make having a conversation about weight bias difficult and frustrating. So how do you have a productive conversation about weight bias?

Many of the negative stereotypes about people with high body weight stem from myths surrounding body weight and weight loss. The first step to discussing weight bias in a way that is fruitful is knowing how to successfully identify and dispel these myths.

Common weight bias myths and how to respond to them:

MYTH: “Fat jokes are funny (and harmless)”

RESPONSE: A fat joke is no different from a racist joke. Even making a comment “in good fun” condones weight bias and perpetuates negative stereotypes which can lead to negative social, psychological, economic, and physical health outcomes for people who are at the receiving end of these jokes.

MYTH: “If people have obesity, it is because they are lazy and make bad decisions about food and exercise”

RESPONSE: Body weight is influenced by a variety of factors, such as genetics, environment, economy, marketing, and the government. For example, the availability and prices of healthy food compared to less healthy options plays a big role in what people eat.

MYTH: “Having a high body weight is always unhealthy”

RESPONSE: Weight is not an automatic indicator of health. Individuals with high body weight can be in good health, and have healthy nutritional and behavioral habits. Conversely, normal weight individuals can have heart disease and type 2 diabetes, and engage in unhealthy behaviors.

MYTH: “Stigma towards people with obesity will motivate them to lose weight”

RESPONSE: While studies have shown that weight stigma makes people feel worse about themselves and their bodies, this does not appear to motivate weight loss. In fact, research has found that stigmatizing people may actually cause them to engage in unhealthy coping behaviors (such as binge eating and avoiding exercise).

MYTH: “People with obesity could lose weight if they tried.”

RESPONSE: Human genetics make it easy to gain weight, but much harder to lose weight. Most individuals who lose weight regain the weight within 1-5 years, making significant weight-loss maintenance very unlikely. This means that many people with high body weight may not achieve long-term weight loss, despite their best efforts and participation in weight loss programs.

MYTH: “Parents are to blame if their children develop obesity.”

RESPONSE: We all come in different shapes and sizes, and someone's body weight is influenced by a lot of factors – like genetics, human biology, and our environment. Although parents can do things to help improve their child's health, there are some things that are out of their control. Children usually eat 1 to 2 of their meals at school. Marketing targets young children with exciting messages about unhealthy food, candies, sodas, and toys that come with fast food meals.