Stamping out weight stigma

What we can all do to put an end to weight stigma



Images: World Obesity Federation Stigma-Free Image Bank

This presentation has been developed by Food Active
Published Winter 2021 | Updated Winter 2026

www.foodactive.org.uk

HEG Health Equalities Group

FOOD ACT!VE

What's on the menu...

- Understand weight stigma and who is most affected
- Discuss the impact of weight stigma using the evidence base
- Consider weight stigma within the context of promoting healthy weight
- Explore what we can all do to help
- Signposting information and support

What is weight stigma?

"Weight stigma refers to the discriminatory acts and ideologies targeted towards individuals because of their weight and size."

World Obesity Federation

What does it look like?

How obesity is harming the planet: Overweight people generate an extra 700 MILLION tons of carbon dioxide a year, US study claims



2/23/2023 • By Lisa Marshall

FOOD ACT!VE

What does it look like?





Health Equalities Group

Who is affected?

- Predominantly people living with overweight or obesity.
- Women are more likely to experience weight stigma, compared to men.
- Children report weight stigma in educational settings from teachers and peers.
- Patients report experiencing weight stigma in health and social care settings.
- Employees report experiencing weight stigma in workplace settings.
- People report experiencing weight stigma in the media, through negative portrayal or being stereotyped.

What is the impact?

- **Psychological outcomes** can include depression, anxiety, low self-esteem, poor body image, self-harm and suicide.
- **Behavioural outcomes** can include unhealthy weight control practises, binge eating, and avoidance of physical activity and health screening.
- **Social outcomes** can include social rejection by peers, poor quality of interpersonal relationships, potential negative impact on academic outcomes, the denial of jobs and promotions, the reduction of earning potential, biased attitudes from health care professionals, and stereotypes in the media

What does the evidence say?

- The UK's All-party Parliamentary Group for Obesity reported that 88% of people living with obesity had experienced weight stigmatisation [1]
- Almost half of UK adults living with obesity have felt judged because of their weight in clothes shops and health care settings [2]
- More than 80% of UK adults believe people with obesity are viewed negatively because of their weight [3]
- 62% Britons think people are likely to discriminate against someone who is overweight. This is higher than other forms of discrimination, including ethnic background (60%), sexual orientation (56%) or gender (40%) [3].

1. All Party Parliamentary Group on Obesity (2018). The Current Landscape of Obesity. [online] Available at: http://allcatsrgrey.org.uk/wp/wpfb-file/appgonobesity-report2018-pdf/
2. British Liver Trust (2018) Weight most common form of discrimination [online] Available at: https://britishlivertrust.org.uk/weight-uks-most-common-discrimination/
3. World Obesity Federation (2018). World Obesity Day 2018: Media Report. [online] Available at: https://www.worldobesity.org/resources/resource-library/world-obesity-day-2018-media-report

Doesn’t ‘fat-shaming’ work?

Fitness instructor claims obese people SHOULD be fat-shamed because it encourages them to 'keep their mouths shut and lose weight'

- Actor Christopher Biggins clashed with fitness instructor Danielle Levy on GMB
- Danni argued people should be fat-shamed to encourage them to lose weight
- Said: 'The more we fat shame, the more people would keep their mouths shut'
- Viewers took to Twitter over segment, with one calling her argument 'disgusting'
- One argued it was 'bullying', saying: 'Fat-shaming needs to go on the "ist" list'



Fat shaming is only way to beat obesity crisis

Deaths from smoking fell dramatically after it was stigmatised but disapproval of the overweight is still thought cruel

FOOD ACT!VE

Weight stigma and reducing obesity

- Obesity is not simply caused by what an individual chooses to eat. It is a much more complex condition that is influenced by a wide range of factors beyond our control – our genetics, where we live, access to healthy food and more.
- It is unjust to blame an individual wholly for their weight, when the issue is much more complex than this.
- Weight stigma can lead to counterproductive outcomes for obesity and trigger the obesogenic process.
- Addressing weight stigma is therefore essential to meet obesity reduction and prevention targets.

HEG Health Equalities Group

What can we do?

1. Avoid stereotypes
2. Use appropriate language and terminology
3. Create balanced and accurate conversations around the complexities of obesity
4. Use appropriate images of individuals with obesity

What can we do?



Whilst stigmatisation and discrimination based on characteristics such as sex, ethnicity and mental health has become less acceptable in the UK, weight stigma and associated discrimination does not tend to be viewed in the same light and continues to be reported and experienced, primarily by people who live with overweight or obesity.

Weight stigma, bias and discrimination can be found across different forms of communications in a wide range of contexts, including the media, healthcare systems and across social circles. This can have a profound and harmful impact on people across the weight spectrum, but in particular those people living with overweight and obesity. If you would like more information on weight stigma, please click here to read our evidence briefing.

We realise that on the majority of occasions, communications and resources are not developed with the intention of stigmatising individuals with excess weight, and many individuals are unclear on what constitutes weight stigma and discrimination. However, there are some simple steps that we can all take to stamp out weight stigma in our own settings and set a standard on how to communicate issues concerning obesity appropriately. This checklist has been designed to give the writer, trainer or health and social care professional the confidence and tools to examine whether the content of an article, training package, blog, policy paper or report is free from stigmatising language, stereotypes and images.

Notes for use: Please use this checklist to proof any documents before publishing. In addition, it would be considered good practice (time permitting) to consult with the target audience (people living with overweight or obesity) when preparing a training package or policy paper – to name just two examples.

This checklist has been developed by Food Active and informed by resources produced by Obesity UK[1] and World Obesity Federation[2].

Spot and stop the stigma

Instead, use person-centred language and avoid language that attributes blame and responsibility to those living with obesity. Also check to source of the evidence to ensure this is what the paper concluded.

This news headline is stigmatising as it attributes blame to people with obesity

How obesity is harming the planet: Overweight people generate an extra 700 MILLION tons of carbon dioxide a year, US study claims

Alternative: *'A new study suggests 700 million tonnes of carbon dioxide could be saved through supporting those living with obesity to lose weight.'*

Spot and stop the stigma

If an individual with obesity was reading this article, consider how this might make them feel. The use of 'deadly' may cause distress or worry.



Alternative: '*Further evidence published to highlight links between obesity and mortality.*'

Spot and stop the stigma



This image is not suitable because:

✗ Includes stereotypes of people living with obesity with less healthy food and drink



Image by UConn Rudd Center for Food Policy & Obesity

Spot and stop the stigma



This image is not suitable because:

✗ Features isolated body parts

✗ Creates an unnecessary emphasis on excess weight

✗ Removes the person's identity



Image by UConn Rudd Center for Food Policy & Obesity

FOOD ACT!VE

Take home messages

- Obesity is a complex condition that can be shaped by the environment, access to healthy food, and wider social factors.
- Weight stigma can worsen health outcomes, discourage physical activity, and act as a barrier to accessing care.
- We all have a role in reducing weight stigma – by avoiding stereotypes, using respectful language and imagery, and promoting balanced, evidence-based conversations about obesity.



HEG Health Equalities Group

Why Weight To Talk training

"Why weight to talk?" is a training programme that equips frontline practitioners with the confidence and skills to deliver compassionate, brief advice on healthier weight. It reframes obesity as a complex condition shaped by structural and social inequalities, highlights the roles of trauma, stress and adversity in weight gain, and addresses how weight stigma undermines motivation and engagement.

The training introduces practical, evidence-based communication techniques, embeds safeguarding considerations, and provides clear, locally mapped referral pathways so practitioners know exactly where to signpost; an approach shown to markedly increase the likelihood of initiating supportive conversations with children, young people and families.

For further information, please contact: **info@heg.org.uk**

FOOD ACT!VE

Healthcare Practitioner Weight Stigma training

Health Equalities Group is now offering a new, evidence-based training course which educates healthcare practitioners about the negative consequences associated with weight stigma and how this is particularly relevant for healthcare settings. The training is delivered face to face over a two-hour session and is made up of four key learning modules covering:

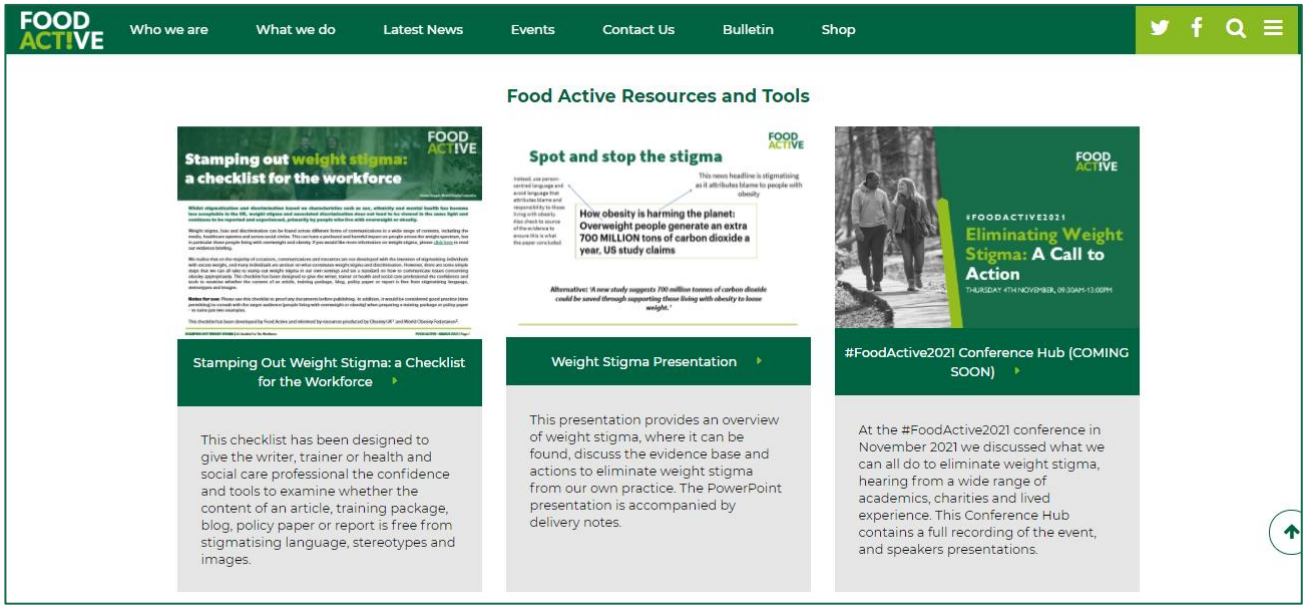
- Incidence of weight stigma in wider society
- Consequences of weight stigma for patients in healthcare settings
- The complex causes of weight gain, wider determinants of health & health inequalities
- How to avoid stigmatising behaviours & language, plus considerations on medical equipment and layout of waiting and consultation rooms for people of higher weight
- How to structure empathetic conversations about weight & referral to local support

For further information, please contact: **matthew.philpott@heg.org.uk**

HEG Health Equalities Group

Useful information

Check out Food Active's **Weight Stigma Resource Hub**, which includes a range of useful information and resources to use – including the checklist.



FOOD ACT!VE

Other useful sites/organisations

OAC

ALL ABOUT OBESITY

WORLD OBESITY

Obesity UK

EASO

EASO ECPO

UCONN RUDD CENTER FOR FOOD POLICY & OBESITY

KING'S College LONDON

obesity canada

HEG Health Equalities Group