

Rebecca Puhl

Weight bias is a legitimate form of bias. It has significant consequences for health; it's a pervasive problem that needs to be addressed in our society; and fundamentally, everyone deserves to be treated with respect and dignity regardless of their body weight or body size.

LuAnn Heinen

That's doctor Rebecca Puhl, professor in the Department of Human Development and Family Sciences at the University of Connecticut and Deputy Director for the Rudd Center for Food Policy and Obesity. She's conducted research on weight bias for 15 years, studies on weight-based bullying and youth, weight bias in health care in the media, interventions to reduce weight bias, and the impact of weight stigma on emotional and physical health. Rebecca has a PhD in clinical psychology from Yale University.

I'm LuAnn Heinen and this is the Business Group on Health podcast, conversations with experts on the most important health and well-being issues facing employers today. My guest is Rebecca Puhl. We're going to talk about what's been called the last socially acceptable form of discrimination in our society.

Rebecca, I'm delighted to have you here on the podcast today. Welcome.

Rebecca Puhl

Thanks so much for having me.

LuAnn Heinen

Let's start with how you came to this work on obesity and stigma.

Rebecca Puhl

When I was a graduate student, which was now about 20 years ago, my plan at that point was to do research on eating disorders. I didn't really know very much about the topic of weight stigma at all, but I was offered an opportunity to do some research in this area and that completely changed the direction of my work. Also, as part of my clinical training at that time, I was treating people who were really struggling with weight and eating disorders. Both of those research and clinical experiences really opened my eyes to a problem that was, I think, really prevalent but not receiving much attention. I just wanted to do more research to really try to help understand this issue and address this problem. That's really what I've been doing ever since.

LuAnn Heinen

We've learned so much through your work and that of others, for example, that weight bias has far ranging effects. Let's start with what can happen in the doctor's office. How does weight bias show up in health care delivery?

Rebecca Puhl

Within the health care setting, weight stigma really occurs in different ways. Unfortunately, the negative weight biases that we have in our broader society are sometimes also shared and expressed by health care professionals themselves. What we know from research is that health providers do hold and express negative weight biases about their patients and this has been shown in primary care providers and endocrinologists and cardiologists and nurses and medical trainees, so really across a wide variety of medical disciplines. It often includes views that patients who have obesity are lazy or lacking motivation or non-compliant with treatment. I do want to note here that there are many health care providers that don't harbor these attitudes, but the fact that some do is concerning. What we see in research is that weight bias from health care professionals can really impair quality of health care for patients. It can interfere with patient provider communication. For example, we know that when it comes to patients with obesity, some providers spend less time in appointments with them or they provide less education about health or they view them to be less adherent to medications or they expressed less desire to help

them compared to providing care to thinner patients. That's concerning. From the patients perspective, we see that patients often report that they have felt stigmatized by doctors because of their weight and they report feeling judged about their weight or that their weight is blamed for whatever presenting problem they go to for the doctor, even when those problems are unrelated to their weight. So really weight bias can affect patient care in different ways, ranging from how providers communicate to different types of treatment.

LuAnn Heinen

Does this mean that obesity itself is potentially undertreated as a condition?

Rebecca Puhl

That's possible. I think trying to track some of that in the context of stigma can become very challenging because a lot of that doesn't get documented or reported in a way that would help us identify stigma as an underlying reason for that.

LuAnn Heinen

Are there outcomes like lower screening rights, delayed diagnosis, or others that can be linked to bias at either the individual practitioner or the system level?

Rebecca Puhl

There's a couple of ways to think about this. One is that in the context of health care, patients may feel reluctant to talk about their weight or their health with the doctor because they've had stigmatized experiences. In some cases weight stigma may lead some patients to switch doctors or to avoid future medical appointments altogether. It can have a negative effect that way. Now, in terms of your question about screening, it's certainly very possible that weight stigma affects things like delayed diagnosis or screening rates, but again, those are really challenging issues to monitor and study, because for example, if a doctor fails to diagnose a patient maybe in a timely manner because of a problem that they have that was attributed to their weight rather than something else, that's not necessarily going to get recorded in a chart or a medical record. If a doctor tells a patient you can't have a certain procedure until you lose weight, that might not be recorded either. It's very challenging to study this and there's been very little research documenting this. We just really don't have an accurate picture of how common these kinds of outcomes are.

LuAnn Heinen

Do you think the scientific community's recent pledge to end weight stigma will have an impact and what might you expect to see?

Rebecca Puhl

Well, I certainly hope so. To provide this little bit of context on this. In 2020 there was a joint international consensus statement that included over 100 medical and scientific organizations around the world who really pledged their support to try to eliminate weight stigma. I think this is really the first time that scientists and medical organizations are kind of collectively speaking with one voice to really try to condemn weight stigma and recommend strategies to address this problem. Some of these recommendations include developing strategies to make sure that health care providers are educated about weight stigma and using stigma-free practice skills in their health care delivery. I do feel optimistic that this is a pledge that is taking an important step to push for change. At the same time, it's going to require significant efforts and a lot of groups to mobilize to take action because we need to implement education and training. That's going to be critical to these efforts. That needs to really happen at all levels of medical training with students, through residency, and practicing health care professionals.

LuAnn Heinen

Is there a way for us as individuals to assess our own bias when it comes to weight?

Rebecca Puhl

Yes, I think that's a really important thing to talk about. Becoming aware of our own biases is very important. Negative messages about weight and stereotypes about weight have become really automatic in our society. It's very easy to have negative biases and not really be aware of them. It can come out in subtle ways in our language and behavior, but we really become aware by assessing our own bias. One way is to become aware of your own implicit bias, which is the kind of bias that we might not realize we have on a conscious level, like the kinds of automatic assumptions we make about people because of characteristics. There's a tool that can be helpful to use here called the Implicit Association Test (IAT) and it's a free online assessment that is offered as part of this larger initiative called Project Implicit. It's conducted by researchers at Harvard. You can actually access it by going to <https://implicit.harvard.edu> to get more information. That's a great tool to become aware of your own implicit biases.

LuAnn Heinen

Does it address biases other than weight bias, such as race or others?

Rebecca Puhl

It does. It addresses multiple different types of biases - race, gender, ethnicity, and even things like religion and political orientation. There are lots of different types of biases that you can learn about. Beyond the IAT, we can also become more aware of our own weight bias by just asking ourselves questions like how do I feel about people with larger bodies, also thinking about like why do we have these assumptions and starting to challenge those beliefs and stereotypes. So looking for evidence of people that you know or people in your community or in our broader society who really challenge those stereotypes. Then it's helpful to think about how our own biases come out in our behavior and in our communication, even if it's unintentional. There are a lot of steps there, but I think it's really about asking yourselves questions about the assumptions that you make about people because of their body size or body weight.

LuAnn Heinen

Let's explore the finding that people with obesity actually internalize stigma and then do worse achieving their weight management goals. Why is this the case?

Rebecca Puhl

Internalizing stigma happens when people are aware of the negative stereotypes about them because of their weight and then they agree with those stereotypes or they apply them to themselves, kind of blaming themselves for their weight or the stigma that they experience. A lot of people who experience weight stigma, internalize it. In some ways that's not so surprising, because negative societal attitudes about weight are so common in our society and we don't really have very many messages that challenge it. When societal weight stigma isn't challenged, it becomes easier to internalize it. I think that's important because it's not just the stigmatizing situation itself that can be harmful, but how we interpret this experience. Do you attribute a stigmatizing encounter to unfair prejudice from somebody else or do you internalize it and blame yourself? This is a really important issue for us to look at because we know that when you internalize weight stigma, it can have a negative impact on health, sometimes even more than the actual experience of stigma. For example, when people internalize bias, we see that they have worse emotional and mental health like depression or anxiety. We see that they have more disordered eating behaviors like binge eating and poor physical health. I think it's important to really think about not just the impact of the experience of stigma, but then what people who are stigmatized do with that information and how that affects their behaviors and their health.

LuAnn Heinen

So is the body positivity movement something of an intentional counter to that internalization of stigma?

Rebecca Puhl

It's certainly a movement that can help challenge existing societal stigma and help people really recognize the unfairness of mistreatment because of weight rather than turning that mistreatment inwards. I do think that it's an important voice that has been really gaining traction in the past several years, in particular, to really combat some of the negativity that we see, especially on social media.

LuAnn Heinen

Yes, exactly. Your work has demonstrated that shame doesn't work and isn't helpful in motivating behavior. Based on a pretty strong body of research, this seems to hold true in the doctor's office and in the home. What about the workplace?

Rebecca Puhl

Yes, shame is problematic no matter what setting it occurs in and the workplace is no exception. In the workplace people can be stigmatized for their weight in different ways and sometimes that occurs in the form of stigma from coworkers like stereotypes or teasing or making jokes of people because of their weight or being in a work environment that places a lot of emphasis on physical appearance of employees. But other times it can be almost more overt, like inequitable hiring practices or denying people promotions because of their weight or even job termination. All of these have harmful consequences, just as weight stigma does in other settings as well. We know that it really does not motivate health behavior change at all.

LuAnn Heinen

Going back to the home, I'd like to ask you about parenting children with unhealthy weight. We know it is truly worrisome and often guilt provoking for parents and painful for kids to be at above average weight. What are some of the risks and pitfalls of our well-meaning efforts to help our kids?

Rebecca Puhl

Yes, this is a really important issue. We know from research that even when parents have the best intentions, sometimes their conversations about weight with kids can really be damaging to their child's emotional well-being or self-esteem or you know even their unhealthy eating patterns, especially if kids feel shame or embarrassed or blamed because of this. It's tricky. Parental frustration about their child's weight or maybe their lack of weight loss can sometimes translate into parental criticism and negative comments towards the child. We know that a lot of parents engage in what we call 'weight talk' with their kid, which essentially means talking about weight and it can take different forms, sometimes it might mean making comments about their child's weight or encouraging them to diet in order to lose weight. It can also include the kinds of comments that parents might make about their own weight or other people in front of their child. What we know is that weight conversations do have important implications for well-being. Typically, the more that parents talk about weight, the more likely their child is to have negative outcomes, like poor body image or unhealthy eating or depression. Instead of talking about weight with a child, it's really better to focus conversations and actions on healthy behaviors that the child can engage in, that the family can engage in, like eating fruits and vegetables or avoiding sugary beverages or engaging in physical activity. If parents do talk about weight, I think it's really important to be a role model of acceptance of different body sizes and to really avoid criticism or judgment of one's child or oneself or anybody else because of their body size.

LuAnn Heinen

That's super helpful. Let's turn now to how during the pandemic we might be able to address some of these issues more constructively. Two things we know. One is that higher body mass index along with

other chronic conditions like diabetes, increases the risk for more serious illness with COVID-19. It also appears that higher body weight may worsen the immune response to a forthcoming vaccine. At the same time, there's a lot of action on social media around quarantine 15 and people who are commiserating about being cooped up and not being able to go to the gym and so on. How do we come out of this with something that's helpful and constructive?

Rebecca Puhl

This is certainly very timely. Given that there seem to be links between obesity and complications of COVID, we need to be very careful to avoid stigma in this context to ensure that it really doesn't create further challenges. For example, if a person with obesity needs access to critical care because of COVID, we need to make sure that they are provided with not only safe but respectful health care. And given that we know that people with obesity might avoid or delay accessing health care because of weight stigma or that health care providers may have weight biases, this tells us that this could interfere with the care that people receive during the pandemic. We really need to be mindful of these issues. We need to ensure that clinical care settings are accessible and respectful to people regardless of their body size. To your point about social media, yes, we need to think carefully about how we are communicating about weight, weight gain, weight loss during this time period. A lot of people are struggling with eating right now. We know that stress can really have a negative impact on our eating behaviors and for a lot of people turning to food in times of stress is very common. We also need to remember that stigma is a form of stress. Both of these stressors may be compounded during the pandemic. We want to really try to focus on healthy routines for sure, but think carefully about the language and communication we use about weight and weight loss and eating right now.

LuAnn Heinen

It's so important. Can you share some headline findings on a few topics that might have real implications for practitioners? Let's start with the language we use.

Rebecca Puhl

Body weight is a very emotionally charged topic for a lot of people and so how we talk about it is very important. People have different preferences and reactions to the language that we use to talk about body weight. In the medical field medicalized terms like overweight and obesity is really the language that's most commonly used. There is currently kind of a movement in the medical field to use what's called 'people first language' in the context of obesity, which really just means referring to a person who has obesity rather than referring to someone as an obese person. That approach really focuses on identifying the person first, rather than identifying a person by his or her condition or body weight. There's also some people who really don't like the word obesity or who feel more comfortable with words like higher body weight or larger body. We've done a number of studies with my research team examining the different kinds of preferences for language that people have. What we find pretty consistently is that people prefer neutral language when we talk about weight, especially in the context of how health care professionals talk to patients. When I say neutral, I mean using words like weight or high body weight or BMI. We're kind of at a place right now where we don't currently have a universally accepted phrase or term that everyone is comfortable with, so I think it's very important to respect that diversity of preferences that really exist out there. What we recommend to health care professionals is just to default to neutral terminology, but then to ask patients what words, what language do they feel most comfortable using when having conversations about their body weight. There really are diverse opinions about this. Some language is perceived to be stigmatizing and shaming, and because there is so much diversity in preferences, we really need to approach communication with sensitivity.

LuAnn Heinen

Similarly, images can be very powerful in their impact. With every communication virtually on the internet we're using images. What can you say about what we put forth there?

Rebecca Puhl

Sometimes I think regardless of what words we say, the pictures that we see can communicate an even stronger message. When it comes to body weight and obesity, we often see messages and images that communicate obesity as an issue of personal fault or blame or a problem that's caused by individual behaviors. That really does happen in pictures as well. We've done a number of studies to really look at the kinds of visual images that accompany things like news reports about obesity and what impact seen those images has on public attitudes. Essentially what we find is that about three quarters of images of whether it's kids or adults with obesity, they tend to be stigmatizing. When people see those stigmatizing images, it really worsens their weight bias. They're more likely to view people with obesity as being lazy. They're more likely to dislike people with obesity. In contrast, when people in our studies see non-stigmatizing images that really portray people in respectful ways, this really improves public attitudes. It reduces weight bias. People in our studies tell us that they would much prefer to see these kinds of respectful images rather than ones that are stigmatizing. Since so many images in the media typically reinforce negative stereotypes, we kind of respond to this by creating a large image gallery of respectful images of youth and adults with higher weight and we've really turned it into a free resource for the media to use as well as for educators and health care professionals to use. We've had some really good success with this. We've seen our images appear in national news outlets, in educational presentations, and so for anyone who's interested that gallery is available on our website at <http://uconnruddcenter.org/media-gallery>.

LuAnn Heinen

It is a terrific gallery. I'd also question or ask you whether it makes sense then even when you're not communicating about healthy weight and healthy lifestyles, but you're communicating, generally, enrollment in the health plan or anything else, it sounds like you're recommending the use of respectful images of people at all body weights.

Rebecca Puhl

Absolutely. I think sometimes we even need to ask ourselves when we're selecting images like that, are these images that need to be showing people at all or can they be showing other images that are related to health behaviors. But fundamentally, absolutely, the bottom line is that we want respectful images of people regardless of body size.

LuAnn Heinen

Out of curiosity, is there evidence that bullying is worse now than it was four years ago?

Rebecca Puhl

I haven't seen research specifically tracking that overtime, although I understand the reason for asking the question. When we have an environment or a society where bullying tactics are prevalent and go unchallenged or are ignored, that really sets a tone of acceptability that certainly could have long-term implications. I think that those kinds of studies need to be done going forward to see what kind of impact there has been.

LuAnn Heinen

Is weight bullying something that parents should worry about when they have kids who are above average body weight?

Rebecca Puhl

We know that having a high body weight is one of the most prevalent reasons that children and adolescents are teased and bullied. It is an important conversation for parents to be having with their child to find out if they are experiencing negative treatment in the school setting. It's also an opportunity for parents to really be building self-esteem in their child regardless of what their body size is and to help their child understand that their value and their worth really has nothing to do with their

physical appearance and it has so much more to do with their character and their contributions to society. There are important opportunities for conversations. I do think that it's also important to mention that sometimes parents can be the sources of weight-based teasing towards their own children. That's a fairly prevalent problem as well. Again, that kind of speaks to what we were talking about earlier about the need for parents to really think carefully about how they communicate about weight and how their comments about their child's weight might be interpreted or how they may come across.

LuAnn Heinen

Let's talk a little bit about incentives. Incentives have been used widely in the past for encouraging people to maintain a healthy lifestyle, participate in programs, manage biometric measures, and so on. What's your thought about that?

Rebecca Puhl

Employers do sometimes provide incentives for employees to meet certain weight goals or a certain BMI range. I'd say instead of making these incentives about weight, employers can really include all of their employees regardless of body size by placing incentives on healthy lifestyle behaviors instead. That's a more inclusive approach that doesn't stigmatize or single out people because of their weight. It's also an approach that reiterates the message that everybody of all body sizes should be engaging in healthy lifestyle behaviors like nutritious eating and physical activity. Those aren't messages that should only be focused on or targeting people who have higher weight.

LuAnn Heinen

Rebecca, thank you so much for your time today. It's been a great conversation. Before we wrap, I'd love to ask you one last thing which is, is there anything we should have talked about and didn't or a critical point you'd like to make that you wish everyone knew or understood about weight bias?

Rebecca Puhl

We've certainly covered a lot of ground today. I think that one message that's helpful to think about with weight stigma is that this is both a social injustice and a public health issue and we need to address it on both of those levels. Weight bias is a legitimate form of bias. It has significant consequences for health; it's a pervasive problem that needs to be addressed in our society; and fundamentally, everyone deserves to be treated with respect and dignity regardless of their body weight or body size.

LuAnn Heinen

That's beautifully stated. Thank you for that.

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This is LuAnn Heinen. Thanks for listening.