



# What Is Weight Bias? A Look at How Fat Stigma Affects Society

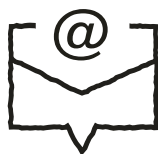


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Published on April 28, 2022

## Key takeaways:

- Weight bias is a negative assumption that someone makes about another person because of their weight.
- Weight bias occurs across school, work, and healthcare settings. It affects physical, emotional, social, and financial success.
- Society assumes that weight stigma motivates individuals to lose weight. Instead, it increases both obesity rates and weight discrimination.



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Bodies come in all shapes, weights, and sizes. There is no “normal” way that a person should look or feel. Yet we’ve all seen weight bias in action.

Maybe a character on TV makes a “fat joke,” and the laugh track kicks in. Or a salesperson assumes a customer with a larger body size isn’t interested in the beauty products their shop sells.

Weight discrimination — also referred to as weight bias — persists throughout American society. So let’s explore where weight bias comes from, the impacts it has, and how we can stop it.

## What is weight bias?

Weight bias is any negative belief or judgment made about a person because of their weight.

Weight bias can affect people at any size. But it [most often negatively impacts](#) the [nearly 75% of Americans](#) who have larger bodies and are identified as overweight or obese.

We say *have* because our weight does not define us. It has nothing to do with our intelligence, ambition, likeability, or beauty. But weight biases assume that it does. It considers people who have heavier weights as lesser than their peers. Shaming, teasing, and exclusion can happen as a result.

## Why does weight bias exist?

American society values individuality, productivity, and ambition. People should act in our own best interests. According to these values, we’re in control of our choices and get what we deserve.

In general, society prizes thinness as a reflection of self-discipline, ambition, and success.

In general, society prizes thinness as a reflection of self-discipline, ambition, and success. Those with larger bodies, then, are believed to lack ambition, self-esteem, or self-control.

Of course, this is untrue. Weight does not determine positive or negative personality traits. And [various health and environmental factors](#) contribute to how much a person weighs.

Factors can include:

- Genetics and family history
- Access to affordable, healthy foods
- Age-related weight gain
- [Medication side effects](#)
- Health conditions, like [edema](#) or [polycystic ovary syndrome \(PCOS\)](#)
- The accessibility of parks and safe spaces to exercise
- Chronic stress

Still, these beliefs about heavier weight are so persistent that [92% of Americans](#) report at least one negative belief about fatness. We may not recognize this bias within ourselves. But as a society, we don't condemn or punish those practicing weight bias. This makes it seem like an [acceptable form of prejudice](#).

## What's the difference between weight bias and weight stigma?

When one person makes a judgment about another person because of their weight, that's weight bias.

Weight stigma is the social shame that we attach to people with larger bodies. It promotes the idea that shame motivates people to lose weight. In truth, fat shaming can [increase body weight](#) and other health issues like depression, anxiety, and eating disorders.

## Common examples of weight bias

Weight should have nothing to do with how we treat people in school, work, or healthcare settings. Still, weight bias persists almost everywhere. Common [examples of weight bias](#) include:

- Teasing with derogatory comments or "fat jokes"

teasing with derogatory comments or fat jokes

- Designing chairs or doorways that are only comfortable for people with a lower weight
- Excluding someone with a larger body when selecting teams or employees
- Telling someone they would be more attractive if they “just lost a little weight”

These get more specific as we look at various areas of our society.

## Examples of weight bias in education

Research shows that [girls as young as 6 years old](#) struggle with body image issues. This might be because of weight stigmatization in school settings:

- [A teacher may assume](#) that a student with a larger body is unmotivated and overemotional. They may consider that student less likely to succeed and so spend less time teaching them.
- Students may [tease peers with larger bodies](#) for being “fat” or lazy. They may also leave them out of team sports or clubs.
- A child struggling with body image issues may avoid school, especially on days devoted to exercise. In fact, students with heavier weights average more missed [school days](#) than their peers.
- Feeling ashamed, students with larger bodies may [engage in negative self-talk](#). Or they’ll avoid talking about their bodies altogether. They may turn to [binge eating](#) as a coping mechanism. This then compounds weight gain and feelings of shame.

## Examples of weight bias in the workforce

Employees with larger bodies [report discrimination](#) way more than colleagues with lesser weights. It’s not hard to see why:

- Employers often assess employees through weight-based stereotypes. They review employees with higher weights as less conscientious, agreeable, stable, or extraverted.
- Employers are [less likely to hire](#) or promote people with higher weights. And they’re more likely to fire them when no other factors are at play.
- Because of this, fewer people with larger bodies get [managerial and technical jobs](#). And

they [earn up to 6% less](#) than comparable colleagues with lesser weights.

## Examples of weight bias in healthcare

Weight stigma assumes that having a heavier weight is an avoidable health risk. So even healthcare providers can develop [unconscious bias](#) about weight:

- [More than 50% of primary care providers](#) judge people with heavier weights as noncompliant with treatment recommendations.
- Providers grossly underestimate how motivated people with larger bodies are to improve their health. These providers spend less time in discussion with such people and offer fewer preventive health screenings or interventions. This means providers may miss diagnosing illness at a crucial moment.
- Providers may even suggest that people “lose a little weight” before they pursue other options to diagnose or treat an unrelated medical condition.

As a result, people with larger bodies often feel that their providers don’t care about helping them. They may then [delay or cancel further medical appointments](#). This puts people with heavier weights at even higher risk of avoidable conditions.

## Examples of weight bias in media

[Almost 75% of the U.S. population](#) is considered overweight or obese. But [fewer than 25% of characters](#) on screen have a larger body size.

- Those characters (and actors) who do make it on screen are often shown as lazy, selfish, and not interested in romance. And they eat more often than characters with lesser weight.
- The same is true in [children’s entertainment](#). Characters with larger bodies get teased and binge eat far more often than characters with smaller bodies. Seeing this, girls as young as 3 years old can [perceive thinness as ideal](#).
- On the news, [more than 70% of images](#) link having a larger body size to negative, stigmatizing beliefs. Images used in news stories about larger bodies usually show only a person’s body from the torso down — rarely their face. If you *can* see their face, they are most likely eating.

## The mental impact of weight bias

Weight bias can impact people's mental well-being in a number of ways. This includes internalized weight bias and even developing eating disorders.

Internalized weight bias happens when we believe that negative stereotypes about weight apply to us. If we don't get the job, the romance, or the happy ending? It's because we haven't achieved that thin ideal.

These beliefs can then can be [associated with mental health issues](#), including:

- [Higher levels of depression and lower self-esteem](#)
- A strong desire to be thin, wanting to lose weight, and fear of weight gain
- Body image avoidance, where we avoid our reflection or social situations out of shame
- [Having fat phobia](#) — a literal fear of being fat
- Developing an eating disorder like [binge eating disorder](#), [bulimia](#), [anorexia](#), or [“atypical” anorexia](#)

## What to do if you experience weight bias

There is currently no federal law protecting people from weight-based discrimination. But there are still ways to speak out and inspire change:

1. **Remember you're not alone.** Two-thirds of Americans have a bigger body size. And fat shaming is one of the most common forms of bullying at school. Programs through organizations like the [Association for Size Diversity and Health](#) and the [National Association to Advance Fat Acceptance](#) are great places to find community with others who have similar experiences with weight bias.
2. **Speak up.** If you feel safe, educate those around you about weight bias. Let them know when their actions are unfair and hurtful. Every time you speak up, you're one step closer to what you deserve.
3. **Speak out.** Your school or workplace should have anti-bullying or anti-harassment policies in place. If not, alert someone in management or human resources. Point out where you see problems and how they should improve.
4. **Fight for your health.** Your provider's job is to help diagnose, treat, and manage illness. If they aren't doing that because of weight bias, file a report with an office manager or

social worker. This sends a message that you're invested in your health, and it may help other people too.

## The bottom line

Weight bias assumes that people with heavier weights have undesirable character traits. But science (and common sense) tell us this is untrue. Still, weight bias is common in many areas of everyday life, including school, work, and healthcare settings. And weight bias can have a detrimental effect on the health and well-being of those with larger bodies. The more we call out acts of weight bias, the less socially acceptable it will be.

## References

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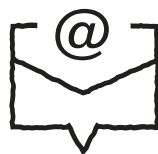
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