



637 Emerson Place, Severna Park, MD 21145 / Toll-Free 855.855.BEDA (2332) / 410.741.3037 FAX

Weight Stigma in Fitness Professionals, Physical Therapists and Massage Therapists: Guidance for Individuals, Friends and Families

Working with fitness professionals, physical therapists, and massage therapists can add valuable dimension to the treatment of Binge Eating Disorder (BED). This work can aid in bringing a person back in touch with, and feeling comfortable in, their bodies to support their recovery.

On the other hand, attitudes and behaviors that suggest weight stigma on the part of the practitioner can interfere significantly with recovery. Hence, it is important to recognize weight stigma when it occurs and understand how to combat it.

Weight Stigma in the Fitness, Physical Therapy and Massage Therapy Fields

Weight stigma is defined as “bullying, teasing, negative body language, harsh comments, discrimination or prejudice based on a person’s body size or weight.” (BEDA, 2010). In body work sessions, weight stigma frequently comes into play when working with people of larger body sizes.

There remains a great deal of weight stigma among professionals who work in these fields; many times it comes as a result of lack of education, knowledge and awareness. Many in this field want to help, and more and more are stepping up to learn about working with a larger body. For now, recognize and trust your own feelings when it comes to weight stigma and discriminatory practices. Working with the “overweight,” plus-size, curvy, fluffy, large, full-figured, fat person is a specialty and not all health professionals are able to work in this field. If you find yourself working with a health professional who is discriminatory, you have the power within yourself to speak with



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this health professional and make your needs known or move on to another who may be less judgmental.

Code of Ethics

At this time, weight stigma is not part of the Code of Ethics for Fitness Professionals, Physical Therapists and Massage Therapists.^{1, 2, 3, 4} Each group supports the need to avoid discrimination but do not specifically identify weight. Weight stigma deserves to be recognized as a discriminatory practice.

Advocating Against Weight Stigma

The job of the health professional is patient care. You are seeking the help of a health professional because you have a health concern that you would like to address. You most likely are suffering or in pain and need the expertise of this individual.

The job of the health professional is to hear you – without any judgment – and provide the appropriate service necessary to help you move toward better health. This does not include a prescription for weight loss or fast results as most of this work takes time and consistency.

¹ Group Fitness Instructors:

http://www.apta.org/uploadedFiles/APTAorg/About_Us/Policies/Ethics/CodeofEthics.pdf

² Personal Trainers: <http://www.ideafit.com/fitness-library/idea-code-of-ethics-for-personal-trainers>

³ Physical Therapists:

http://www.apta.org/uploadedFiles/APTAorg/About_Us/Policies/Ethics/CodeofEthics.pdf

⁴ Massage Therapists: <http://www.amtamassage.org/About-AMTA/Core-Documents/Code-of-Ethics.html>



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Your job is to work with the health professional on a consistent basis in order to achieve optimum results. You are also doing your best to connect with your physical body in a way that is supportive, non-judgmental, free from bias, and in a way that is accessible and achievable for you, the client. Trust deeply that a small shift can have a huge impact. Do not be confused with a plethora of handouts, movement, or body work when first beginning. This can lead to a feeling of overwhelm and may even put you in a failure cycle if you feel you cannot complete, integrate or live up to all the expectations of the health professional.

Consider the following when seeking a size-friendly environment that welcomes people of all sizes. Gathering this information before your first visit can help you feel more confident that you have chosen the right facility for you.

- Call ahead to inquire whether entrances and exits of the facility or workspace allow for easy access.
- Ask the health professional for clothing suggestions but also feel safe knowing you can wear whatever makes you feel best on the first session. It's up to the health professional to meet you wherever you are at with your level of safety and comfort, not the other way around.
- Seek out health professionals who are also mindful of their clothing. The focus needs to be on you, not on the professional's body.
- Ask whether the furniture arrangement in the facility allows ample space to accommodate your body. Step stools are encouraged and highly recommended for larger bodies.
- Check for chairs without arms or solid wide benches that provide space and comfort.
- Check that chairs and benches are high enough for the pelvis to be slightly higher than the knees while in a seated position.
- Check the furniture for comfort, width, height and durability.
- Check for reading materials and resources that represent diverse images in the waiting area.



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- Look for art work that features people of varied ages, shapes and cultural backgrounds.
- Be mindful of mirror placement. The work you are doing with the health professional is meant to connect you peacefully and joyfully to your body. Mirrors can dramatically throw some people off center.
- If there is a staff, notice if it is a diverse group that includes all ages, shapes, sizes and ethnicities.
- Ask whether the practitioner incorporates Health at Every Size® basic principles into their work. <https://www.sizediversityandhealth.org/content.asp?id=152>
- Never discuss or compare your body with the health professional.
- Surround yourself with health professionals who are competent in working with larger bodies.
- Have open and honest communication with all health professionals. The relationship should be built on trust and integrity and you should never feel afraid to ask for what you need or discuss things that concern you. At the same time, it is also nice to share what is working for you.
- If it feels appropriate for you, ask health professionals to speak with others on your treatment team in order to provide the highest quality of professional treatment. It may enhance your overall experience, potentially making your treatment more effective and even simpler.



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