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

Fitness professionals, physical therapists and massage therapists know body work can help a person maximize their health. But what they often don't realize is the impact of their personal beliefs and attitudes on their clients' health.

Do you have preconceived notions about a person because of their weight? All of us do – it's the result of a cultural climate of weight stigma. It's important to recognize internalized weight stigma because it can lead to poorer care on the part of the health professional. It can also exacerbate negative beliefs and attitudes your clients may have about themselves, which already put them at greater risk for poor physical, psychological and emotional health. Many clients with Binge Eating Disorder (BED) cite experiences of weight stigma as being central to their development of the disorder.

What is Weight Stigma?

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.

Multiple studies have shown that across disciplines, healthcare providers think of larger-bodied clients as non-compliant, lazy, awkward, weak-willed, dishonest, lacking in self-control, sloppy, unsuccessful, and unintelligent.¹ This means that healthcare providers fail to be at their clinical best when providing care for their clients.

Weight Stigma in Fitness, Physical Therapy, and Massage Therapy

Weight stigma is rampant in the fitness, physical therapy, and massage therapy fields. To change this picture, professionals working in these fields need to recognize and acknowledge internalized weight stigma and discriminatory practices.

¹ Ferrante et al., 2009; Campbell et al., 2000; Fogelman et al., 2002; Foster, 2003; Hebl & Xu, 2001; Price et al., 1987; Puhl & Heuer, 2009; Huizinga et al., 2010



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Be honest with yourself and with your clients. If you find that working with the “overweight,” plus-size, curvy, fluffy, large, full figured, fat person is something you aren’t able to do without stigmatizing them or provoking yourself, refer them to someone who will give them the courtesy and service they deserve. Working with this population is a specialty and not all health professionals are able to work in this field.

The Ethics of Weight Stigma

At this time, weight stigma is not part of the Code of Ethics for Fitness Professionals, Physical Therapists and Massage Therapists.^{2,3,4,5} Each group supports the need to avoid discrimination but do not specifically identify weight. Weight stigma deserves to be recognized as a discriminatory practice.

Combating Weight Stigma in Your Work

Regardless of your clients’ body sizes, your job is to help them connect with their physical body in a way that is supportive, non-judgmental, free from bias, accessible and achievable for the client. Trust deeply that a small shift can have a huge impact.

Avoid judging the level of a person’s physical health based on their body size. As you would with any client, conduct a thorough assessment that gives you the information you need to provide effective care. It’s up to you to meet the client wherever he or she is with their level of safety and comfort, not the other way around.

When beginning to work with people of larger body sizes, keep in mind their experience of weight stigma. It often shows its face through disdain accompanied by a plethora of false promises. Repeating that experience does not help them and can cause them to never return to you.

² **Group Fitness Instructors:** http://www.apta.org/uploadedFiles/APTAorg/About_Us/Policies/Ethics/CodeofEthics.pdf

³ **Personal Trainers:** <http://www.idealife.com/fitness-library/idea-code-of-ethics-for-personal-trainers>

⁴ **Physical Therapists:** http://www.apta.org/uploadedFiles/APTAorg/About_Us/Policies/Ethics/CodeofEthics.pdf

⁵ **Massage Therapists:** <http://www.amtamassage.org/About-AMTA/Core-Documents/Code-of-Ethics.html>



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The following ideas can help you provide a size-friendly environment that welcomes people of all sizes and gives you the opportunity to do effective work.

- Review the entrances and exits of your facility or workspace for easy access. Will they accommodate people of all sizes?
- The furniture arrangement in your facility should allow ample space to accommodate the larger body.
- Have chairs without arms or solid wide benches to provide space and comfort.
- Chairs and benches should be high enough for the pelvis to be slightly higher than the knees while in a seated position.
- Step stools to support getting on and off tables and equipment are highly recommended for larger bodies.
- All furniture should be tested for comfort, width, height and durability.
- Be familiar with weight limits on all equipment including treadmills, elliptical machines, and therapy tables to avoid embarrassment.
- In your waiting area, provide reading materials and resources that represent diverse images.
- Strive for art work that features people of varied ages, shapes and cultural backgrounds.
- Be aware of mirror placement. A larger-bodied client may become dissociated or further disconnected with her body when standing before a mirror.
- If you have staff, consider hiring a diverse group that includes all ages, shapes, sizes and ethnicities.
- Consider working within the Health at Every Size® basic principles that foster health regardless of body size. <https://www.sizediversityandhealth.org/content.asp?id=152>
- Never discuss or compare your body with your client.
- Be mindful of your clothing. Keep the focus on the client and not on your body.



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- Stay within your scope of practice.
- Surround yourself with health professionals who are competent in working with larger bodies.
- Familiarize yourself with BED. <http://bedaonline.com/understanding-bed/what-is-binge-eating-disorder/>
- Be willing to step outside the box and find ways to work with your client through honest dialogue.
- Ask your client for permission to speak with other health professionals he or she may be working with in order to provide the highest quality of professional treatment.

Written by Rochelle Rice,

Rochelle Rice, MA is the President of In Fitness & In Health in New York City. She is a nationally recognized speaker, author and educator for the plus-size population and the author of Real Fitness for Real Women. Rochelle earned her Master's Degree at NYU specializing in her Plus-Size Exercise Program. She is an advance Somatic Experience Practitioner and a graduate of the CHRIS[®] Technique and has been working passionately with the plus population since 1995. For more information, visit www.RochelleRice.com.

Edited by: Marsha Hudnall, MS, RD, CD
Produced by: Lizabeth Wesely-Casella