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Weight Stigma in Nutrition Counseling Settings: Guidance for Individuals, Friends and Families

Working with a qualified nutrition professional such as a registered dietitian (RD) can be one of your greatest assets to recovery from Binge Eating Disorder (BED) as well as making positive behavior changes for improved health. However, there is a risk that weight stigma may get in the way of effective nutrition counseling. The purpose of this article is to provide you and your loved ones with information that will empower you to:

- Understand the role of the dietitian in your treatment
- Identify red flags for weight stigma in the nutrition counseling setting
- Provide you with resources to advocate for a non-stigmatizing nutrition counseling experience

The Role of a Qualified Nutrition Professional

A qualified nutrition professional is trained to translate nutritional science into manageable information you can use to live healthier. **For someone struggling with an eating disorder, the most important function of a nutrition counselor is to help the client separate food behaviors from psychological and emotional problems.** This requires that the nutrition counselor engage in additional training in psychology and behavior change counseling and work as a member of a multi-disciplinary treatment team. **It also requires that the nutrition counselor is able to focus on behavior rather than weight as an indicator of progress.** Unfortunately, nutrition counselors are not immune to the [negative biases our culture makes about weight](#).¹

¹ <http://news.yale.edu/2009/03/02/even-dietitians-may-have-negative-attitudes-toward-obese>



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Red Flags in Nutrition Counseling

Making assumptions about a person based on their weight is associated [with worse health outcomes](#)². **Utilizing a health-focused, rather than weight-focused, approach facilitates a non-stigmatizing environment that research suggests improves health outcomes without causing harm.**

Below are a few red flags to watch out for when working with a nutrition counselor, particularly if you are in recovery from an eating disorder:

- Assuming that weight loss means health improvement
- Trying to simultaneously pursue eating disorder recovery and weight loss
- Using weight as the only or most important marker of progress

A weight-focused approach is not only ineffective but also harmful when it comes to treating eating disorders. Focusing on weight masks the underlying issues that perpetuate unhealthy coping mechanisms and may trigger cycles of restriction, bingeing, and purging

Resources for Advocacy

If you are considering or currently working with a nutrition professional, please consider talking to them about approaches that are non-stigmatizing and associated with improved health outcomes – Health At Every Size (HAES), mindful eating and intuitive eating.

The HAES model places an emphasis on health behavior rather than making assumptions about weight. Below are links to resources to learn more about the [HAES approach](#) and [the research](#) associated with the HAES approach.^{3, 4} Mindful eating and intuitive eating are terms used to describe internally regulated eating based on the body's cues for hunger, fullness, and satiety while learning to self-

² http://www.yaleruddcenter.org/resources/bias_toolkit/index.html

³ <http://www.lindabacon.org/resources/>

⁴ <http://www.nutritionj.com/content/10/1/9>



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regulate emotion without using food. See [The Center for Mindful Eating](#)⁵ and the [Intuitive Eating Resources page](#)⁶ for information and research that supports the effectiveness of internally-regulated eating in improving health without causing harm.

Written by Marci E. Anderson, MS, CEDRD, CPT

Marci E. Anderson is a registered dietitian in Cambridge, MA. She owns a group nutrition practice and specializes in treating eating disorders. She is passionate about helping others find a peaceful relationship with food and their bodies. You can find her online at <http://www.marcird.com/>, on Twitter at [@MarciRD](#), and Facebook at [Marci RD](#).

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

⁵ <http://www.nutritionj.com/content/10/1/9>

⁶ [Intuitive Eating Resources page](#)