



CHALLENGING ANTI-FAT BIAS ON TELEVISION: ACTION STEPS FOR CONTENT CREATORS

THE ISSUE

Sizeism¹ is an equity issue. Fat² people in the United States often face stigma and discrimination in many realms, including employment and healthcare. For example, fat people earn about 3-6% less than thin people for the same job,³ receive lower starting salaries,⁴ and are perceived as having less leadership potential.⁵ As of early 2024, discrimination based on body size is legal in almost every state.⁶

Anti-fat bias, or sizeism, can be especially salient in healthcare settings. In one study, 53% of fat adults reported receiving inappropriate comments from doctors about their weight, and doctors were rated as the second most common source of interpersonal weight stigma.⁷ Experiences of sizeism in healthcare settings have been linked with avoidance of care, mistrust of doctors, and a reduction in the quality of care received.⁸

RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1. Challenge individualistic narratives and myths about fatness.** Body size and weight are influenced by a myriad of micro and macro level factors, beyond just diet and

¹ Sizeism refers to prejudice or discrimination based on body size or weight.

² Fat refers to people living in larger bodies. The term is preferred by those who argue that terms like “overweight” or “obese” are both othering and stigmatizing.

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<https://uconnruddcenter-org.media.uconn.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/2909/2020/07/Weight-Bias-in-the-Workplace.pdf>

⁴Schulte P. A., Wagner G. R., Ostry A., Blanciforti L. A., Cutlip R. G., Krajnak K. M., et al. (2007). Work, obesity, and occupational safety and health. *Am. J. Public Health* 97 428–436. 10.2105/AJPH.2006.086900

⁵ Flint S. W., Snook J. (2014). Obesity and Discrimination: the Next ‘Big Issue’? *Int. J. Discrimin. Law* 14 183–193. 10.1177/1358229114534550

⁶ <https://www.vox.com/ad/23298808/why-is-weight-discrimination-still-legal>

⁷ Puhl R, Brownell K. Confronting and coping with weight stigma: an investigation of overweight and obese adults. *Obesity (Silver Spring)*. 2006;14(10):1802-1815.

⁸ Phelan SM, Burgess DJ, Yeazel MW, Hellerstedt WL, Griffin JM, van Ryn M. Impact of weight bias and stigma on quality of care and outcomes for patients with obesity. *Obes Rev*. 2015 Apr;16(4):319-26. doi: 10.1111/obr.12266. Epub 2015 Mar 5. PMID: 25752756; PMCID: PMC4381543.

exercise. Regardless of intention, individualistic narratives can stigmatize and imply blame, leading to poorer health outcomes.⁹

2. **Instead, include storylines that address genetic and systemic factors in weight** such as socioeconomic status, environmental and structural racism, urban design, food deserts, and safe neighborhoods.
3. **Diversify depictions of fat characters, and highlight intersectionality.** Fat characters should reflect the diversity of the world we live in, as well as the ways in which body size intersects with gender, race, and class to create unique experiences.
4. **In medical or fitness settings, do not use body size or BMI as an indicator of a person's overall health.** In 2023, The American Medical Association adopted a new policy encouraging doctors not to rely solely on BMI when assessing health.¹⁰ Thus, fat bodies should not be used to imply poor health or disease. In fitness settings, focus on “non-scale victories” like strength, stamina, and improvements in mood.
5. **Don't equate body size with one moral character.** You can do this by avoiding moralizing language around food (“good” vs “bad”; “cheat meals”), avoiding depictions that elicit disgust, and normalizing *not* making comments about other's bodies— whether thin or fat.
6. **Humanize depictions of fat people by avoiding tropes and stereotypes or using them for comedic relief.** Like members of other marginalized or stigmatized communities, fat people should be depicted with nuance, depth, and as full humans capable of joy, love, and success.
7. **When in doubt, lean on resources like Hollywood, Health & Society (HH&S).** HH&S, a program of the USC Norman Lear Center, has been providing the entertainment industry with accurate and up-to-date information through **free resources** like tip sheets, access to subject matter experts, panels, and consultations. For more information, visit <https://hollywoodhealthandsociety.org/>

⁹ Westbury S, Oyebode O, van Rens T, Barber TM. Obesity Stigma: Causes, Consequences, and Potential Solutions. *Curr Obes Rep.* 2023 Mar;12(1):10-23. doi: 10.1007/s13679-023-00495-3. Epub 2023 Feb 14. PMID: 36781624; PMCID: PMC9985585.

¹⁰ <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/06/15/well/live/bmi-health-weight-ama.html>