

Guidelines for the Portrayal of Obese Persons in the Media

Background

The media is an important and influential source of information about obesity. The way that obesity and weight loss is portrayed, described, and framed by the media profoundly shapes the public's understanding and attitudes toward these important health issues.

The Rudd Center for Food Policy and Obesity at Yale University and The Obesity Society (TOS) believe that mainstream journalists have an obligation to be fair, balanced, and accurate in their reporting of obesity and persons whose lives are affected by obesity. Unfortunately, overweight and obese persons are often portrayed negatively and disparagingly in the media, and reports about the causes and solutions to obesity are often framed in ways that reinforce stigma. These portrayals perpetuate damaging weight-based stereotypes and contribute to the pervasive bias and discrimination that overweight and obese persons experience in everyday life.

Overweight and obese persons frequently confront stigma and discrimination in the workplace, educational institutions, health care facilities, and many other settings.¹⁻² These stigmatizing experiences can impair emotional well-being, leading to depression, anxiety, low self-esteem, and even suicidal behaviors. Unfortunately, weight stigma can also lead to unhealthy behaviors that exacerbate obesity, as those who are stigmatized about their weight may cope with these experiences by engaging in unhealthy eating patterns and avoiding physical activity.²⁻³ Thus, weight stigma poses significant consequences for both emotional and physical health.

Purpose

The purpose of these guidelines is to ensure that all persons, regardless of their body weight, are represented equitably and accurately in journalistic reporting. We are not the media police and do not expect journalists to adhere to all suggestions that we provide in these guidelines. Rather, our aim is to assist journalists and reporters in their efforts to accurately cover obesity-related topics and to ensure that stigmatizing and pejorative portrayals of overweight and obese persons are avoided.

Application

These guidelines are broad and apply to a range of media, including, but not limited to, both print and broadcast journalism, entertainment television and film, internet media, and advertising.

Guidelines

I: Respect Diversity and Avoid Stereotypes

1. Avoid portrayals of overweight and obese persons merely for the purpose of humor or ridicule.
2. Avoid weight-based stereotypes (e.g., such as obese persons are “lazy” or “lacking in willpower”).
3. Present overweight and obese persons in a diverse manner, including both women and men, of all ages, of different appearances and ethnic backgrounds, of different opinions and interests, and in a variety of roles.
4. Portray overweight and obese individuals as persons who have professions, expertise, authority, and skills in a range of activities and settings.

5. Do not place an unnecessary or distorted emphasis on body weight. Descriptions of a person's body weight should not imply negative assumptions about his or her character, intelligence, abilities, or lifestyle habits.

II: Appropriate Language and Terminology

Consider carefully whether terminology and language used to describe body weight could be offensive to persons with obesity, and how this language will be interpreted by the intended audience.

Avoid using potentially pejorative adjectives or adverbs when describing people who are overweight or obese, as well as language which implies moral judgments or character flaws of this population.

Use appropriate descriptive terms for body weight. Examples include referring to obesity or body weight scientifically with Body Mass Index (BMI) descriptors, and using terms like “weight” or “excess weight” rather than “weight problem”, “fat”, “morbidly obese”, or other similar descriptors. While using the words “fat” or “fatness” might be acceptable to individuals who identify with the Fat Acceptance movement, these terms can be offensive to others. Similarly, while clinical terms to describe various degrees of obesity are appropriate when used in the scientific community, these terms may be viewed as pejorative to other public audiences.⁴

When interviewing a person who is overweight or obese, *if their weight is relevant to the story*, ask the individual what term(s) he/she prefers to be used when describing his/her body weight.

III: Balanced and Accurate Coverage of Obesity

Ensure that news stories, articles, and reports about obesity are grounded in scientific findings and evidence-based research. Identify the funding source of any science that is cited and be aware of potential conflicts of interest related to scientific research findings.⁵

Be familiar with the complex causes of obesity, including environmental, biological, genetic, economic, social and individual factors, as well as the current scientific evidence on the treatment of obesity and weight loss.⁶⁻⁷ The causes and solutions of obesity are complex, and this complexity requires seeking multiple perspectives and comprehensive reporting.

To present balanced coverage about the causes and solutions for obesity, consider different sides of the debate (e.g., societal versus personal responsibility). Productive debates can only occur when different positions are adequately and accurately presented. Very often, media coverage of obesity is biased with an over-emphasis on individual responsibility, ignoring important societal, economic, biological, and environmental contributors of obesity.^{2,8}

IV: Appropriate Pictures and Images of Obese Persons

Pictures can often contribute to the depersonalization and stigmatization of overweight and obese persons. Photographs used for journalistic purposes should be chosen carefully to avoid stigma and pejorative portrayals of obese people. Examples of pejorative pictures that ***should be avoided*** include the following:

- i) Photographs that place unnecessary emphasis on excess weight or that isolate obese persons' body parts (e.g. abdomens or buttocks). This includes pictures of obese individuals from the neck down (or with face blocked) for anonymity.
- ii) Pictures that depict obese persons engaging in stereotypical behaviors (e.g., eating junkfood, engaging in sedentary behavior). If these photographs are chosen, they should be accompanied by pictures portraying obese persons in ways that challenge weight-based stereotypes (e.g., eating healthy foods, engaging in physical activity).
- iii) Photographs that depict obese persons in scantily clad clothing or looking disheveled in their appearance.

Instead, select appropriate photographs, videos, and images that portray obese persons in the following manner:

- i) Engaging in diverse activities, roles, careers, and lifestyle behaviors
- ii) Portrayed in appropriate-fitting clothing and a well-kept appearance
- iii) Depicted in a neutral manner, free of additional characteristics that might otherwise perpetuate weight-based stereotypes.

When selecting an image, video, or photograph of an obese person, consider the following questions:

1. Does the image imply or reinforce negative stereotypes?
2. Does the image portray an obese person in a respectful manner? Is the individual's dignity maintained?
3. What are the alternatives? Can another photo or image convey the same message and eliminate possible bias?
4. What is the news value of the particular image?
5. Who might be offended, and why?
6. Is there any missing information from the photograph?
7. What are the possible consequences of publishing the image?

Endnotes:

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- ⁵Vartanian LR, Schwartz MB, Brownell, KD. Effects of soft drink consumption on nutrition and health: A systematic review and meta-analysis. *American Journal of Public Health* 2007; 97: 667-675.
- ⁶Wadden TA, Brownell KD, Foster GD. Obesity: Responding to the global epidemic. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology* 2002; 70:510-25.
- ⁷Franz MJ, VanWormer JJ, Crain AL, Boucher JL, Histon T, Caplan W, et al. Weight-loss outcomes: A systematic review and meta-analysis of weight-loss clinical trials with a minimum 1-year follow-up. *Journal of the American Dietetic Association* 2007;107:1755-67.
- ⁸Kim S-H, Willis LA. Talking about obesity: news framing of who is responsible for causing and fixing the problem. *Journal of Health Communication*. 2007;12:359-76.

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http://www.nature.com/oby/for_authors.html

Additional Scientific Peer-reviewed Articles on Weight Bias and Media Coverage of Obesity:

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**For more information about weight bias,
please visit The Rudd Center for Food Policy & Obesity at Yale University, at
www.yaleruddcenter.org**