

Speaking the Language of Obesity

Guidance for Obesity-Related Conversations, Research, Education, and Publications

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Executive Summary

The language used to discuss obesity directly influences healthcare experiences, treatment engagement, research quality, public understanding, and policy development. Stigmatizing or biased language contributes to weight stigma, discrimination, delayed care-seeking, and poorer health outcomes. Conversely, person-first, scientifically accurate, and respectful communication supports trust, improves patient engagement, and reinforces the recognition of obesity as a complex, chronic disease.

Key Recommendations

- Use person-first, non-stigmatizing language in all obesity-related communications.
- Recognize obesity as a complex, chronic, relapsing disease.
- Eliminate biased terminology that assigns blame or shame.
- Promote strengths-based and empowering communication.
- Incorporate bias-reduction education into healthcare and academic settings.
- Ensure media and public communications reflect evidence-based obesity science.

Background

Research consistently demonstrates that weight stigma and bias negatively affect physical health, mental health, healthcare utilization, and treatment outcomes. Language plays a critical role in shaping how obesity is understood and addressed. Respectful and person-centered communication improves trust, therapeutic relationships, and patient engagement while reinforcing obesity as a medical condition requiring comprehensive and individualized care.

Core Principles

- Obesity is a complex, chronic, relapsing disease influenced by biological, environmental, social, and behavioral factors.
- Respectful, inclusive, and person-centered communication improves healthcare experiences and outcomes.
- Weight stigma contributes to discrimination, delayed care-seeking, and poorer health outcomes.
- Person-first language supports dignity and trust.

Definitions

Weight Bias: Negative attitudes, beliefs, judgments, stereotypes, and discriminatory acts aimed at individuals simply because of their weight.

Person-First Language: Language that emphasizes the individual before their condition.

Medication Terminology Guidance

Pharmacologic therapies used to treat obesity should be referred to as “obesity medications.” The term “anti-obesity medications” is discouraged because it reinforces stigmatizing and adversarial framing inconsistent with recognizing obesity as a chronic disease.

Policy Statement: Reducing Bias, Stigma, and Discrimination

Weight bias remains a pervasive barrier to effective obesity care and treatment. Individuals with overweight or obesity frequently experience stigma and discrimination in healthcare, employment, education, and public settings. Every individual deserves equitable, evidence-based, and respectful treatment regardless of body size.

Negative Impacts of Weight Bias and Stigma



HEALTHCARE

- Delayed care
- Lower quality treatment
- Reduced trust in providers



MENTAL & PHYSICAL HEALTH

- Depression and anxiety
- Chronic stress
- Poorer health outcomes



SOCIETY & OPPORTUNITY

- Workplace discrimination
- Educational barriers
- Social exclusion

Policy Objectives

1. Champion consistent use of person-first, non-stigmatizing language across healthcare, research, policy, and media.
2. Advance implementation of bias-reduction education and accountability in clinical and academic settings.
3. Include stigma-sensitive outcomes in quality metrics.
4. Ensure equitable access to evidence-based obesity care.
5. Protect individuals from discrimination based on body size.
6. Promote respectful and accurate media representation of obesity.

Conclusion

The words used to discuss obesity shape public perception, healthcare experiences, policy decisions, and treatment outcomes. Adopting person-first, non-stigmatizing, and scientifically accurate language is essential to improving obesity care, reducing discrimination, and advancing health equity.

References

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4. The Obesity Society. *End Weight Stigma* Campaign. 2024.
5. Obesity Action Coalition. What We Fight For Weight Bias. <https://www.obesityaction.org/advocacy/what-we-fight-for/weight-bias>

About The Obesity Society

The Obesity Society (TOS) is the leading scientific organization dedicated to advancing the understanding, prevention, and treatment of obesity. Through research, education, and evidence-based advocacy, TOS promotes a comprehensive and science-driven approach to addressing obesity as a serious, chronic, and treatable disease. The Society's members include scientists, clinicians, policymakers, and other professionals working to improve health outcomes and reduce the global impact of obesity. **Learn more at www.obesity.org.**



The Obesity Society is proud to champion the global *End Weight Stigma* initiative and invites healthcare professionals, researchers, advocates, and the public to join the movement.

To learn more and to take the pledge, visit obesity.org/end-weight-stigma

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