

Sensitivity to weight bias: Treating obese patients

Health care providers face a complex challenge in helping their overweight and obese patients lose weight and adopt healthier lifestyle behaviors. Providers are faced with the challenge of deciphering the merits of existing weight loss strategies to recommend to their patients, even though many programs have limited success. In addition, there may be cases where providers cannot perform diagnostic tests with obese patients because existing procedures do not accommodate individuals with excess weight, or evaluation may be more difficult and less accurate when these tests are used. These are legitimate concerns that may increase frustration and anxiety about providing care for obese patients.

At the same time, obese patients are vulnerable to weight stigma in health care settings, and providers may unintentionally communicate subtle forms of bias which negatively impact patients' care and their future utilization of health care services. The problem of weight stigma is serious and pervasive, and providers need to be aware of this issue in their treatment practices with obese patients.

Weight bias is similar to other socio-cultural biases that can affect communication, interactions, and the quality of care provided to patients. Thus, recognizing that weight bias exists in a broader context of other social stigmas, and implementing strategies to reduce this form of bias, can help prevent multiple forms of bias that may be unintentionally communicated in health care settings.

Presented below are some strategies that providers can use to remain sensitive and supportive of their obese patients in light of their frustrations and challenges in providing quality care. Although the challenges of treating obesity may continue, these strategies are intended to help providers avoid stigma in their interactions with obese patients and to help encourage healthy behavior changes.

Strategies for providers to reduce bias

- Recognize the complex etiology of obesity and its multiple contributors, including genetics, biology, sociocultural influences, the environment, and individual behavior
- Recognize that many obese patients have tried to lose weight repeatedly
- Consider that patients may have had negative experiences with health professionals, and approach patients with sensitivity and empathy
- Explore all causes of presenting problems, in addition to body weight
- Emphasize the importance of behavior changes rather than just weight
- Acknowledge the difficulty of achieving sustainable and significant weight loss
- Recognize that small weight losses can result in meaningful health gains

These strategies emphasize the importance of appreciating the challenges of losing weight and maintaining weight loss, and reinforcing healthy behaviors of patients rather than just focusing on the number on the scale, so that patients can feel empowered to take charge of their health through lifestyle changes.

