

Bariatric support groups: A valuable setting to address weight bias

For patients undergoing obesity surgery, support groups play an important role in aiding recovery, providing a setting where patients can share their experiences, and encouraging discussion about coping with the challenges associated with dramatic lifestyle changes and weight loss. Support groups can also be a useful setting to address issues of weight bias, an experience that is common for many obese patients. Facilitating discussions about bias can help patients learn to cope with these negative experiences, and can alert medical staff to areas of health care delivery that need to be improved. Provided below are some suggestions of how to address weight bias in a support group setting:

- Encourage patients to voice their views and opinions about the care they received before, during, and after their surgery. Elicit feedback about both positive and negative experiences of patients. When patients recount experiences of weight bias, encourage patients to describe their feelings about the event, and elicit ideas from patients about preferred communication strategies from providers and suggestions for strategies to prevent future bias.
- Discuss patients' perceptions of weight bias and discrimination before and after their surgery. Have their perceptions changed? If yes, how?
- Because weight bias can occur at home, at work, in health care facilities, and even in public, it is important to be aware that patients may be confronting negative attitudes in multiple settings.
- Encourage patients to discuss how they have coped with experiences of weight bias. Facilitate group discussions about what types of coping strategies have been helpful and unhelpful to patients. Discuss the pros and cons of various strategies, and help patients identify adaptive coping techniques (e.g., seeking social support) rather than strategies that maintain emotional distress (e.g., social withdrawal).
- Obese individuals can be vulnerable to internalizing weight-based stereotypes, and blaming themselves for negative stigma. This can make patients vulnerable to negative outcomes like lower self-esteem and unhealthy eating behaviors like binge-eating. Initiate discussions about weight-based messages that are communicated by the mass media and reinforced by our societal ideals of thinness, and how these forces have created negative stereotypes about overweight individuals. Help patients avoid self-blame by encouraging them to challenge common weight based stereotypes. Look for examples of individuals in the media, or in patients' own lives, who counter these stereotypes.