

Health at Every Size in Public Health Messaging

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First Do No Harm

Interventions intended to increase public health should, at the very least, not decrease public health.

Public Health
Messaging about
“obesity” has become
based in shame,
stigma, and fear



Headless Fatties





Unintended Consequences

- ▶ Increased disease risk through increased stress (Muennig)
- ▶ Lower personal health care engagement (Puhl)
- ▶ Triggering eating disorders (Pinhas)

Smoking vs. Obesity

- ▶ Behavior vs Body Size
- ▶ Escaping Oppression
- ▶ Changing a Behavior vs Changing Body Size
- ▶ Downside Risk

What Messaging Works

- ▶ Shame Free
- ▶ Future Oriented
- ▶ Positive Behavior Based

Fighting obesity or obese persons? Public perceptions of obesity-related health messages

R Puhl, JL Peterson and J Luedicke

- ▶ Data collected online in 2011
- ▶ Nationally representative sample of 1014 adults
- ▶ Viewed random selection of 10 (from a total of 30) messages from major obesity public health campaigns from the United States, the United Kingdom and Australia,
- ▶ Rated each campaign message according to positive and negative descriptors, including whether it was stigmatizing or motivating.
- ▶ Participants also reported their familiarity with each message and their intentions to comply with the message content.

Participants responded most favorably to messages involving themes of increased fruit and vegetable consumption, and general messages involving multiple health behaviors.

-Puhl et. al

Messages that have been publicly criticized for their stigmatizing content received the most negative ratings and the lowest intentions to comply with message content.

-Puhl et. al

Messages that were perceived to be most positive and motivating made no mention of the word 'obesity' at all, and instead focused on making healthy behavioral changes without reference to body weight.

-Puhl et. al.

We can have a complete discussion of public health without pathologizing body size

And
We
Should

Benefits of Positive Messaging

- ▶ Avoids double disservice
- ▶ Avoids reinforcement of public shame and stigma
- ▶ Creates a belief in the fat body as deserving of care
- ▶ Establishes positive relationship between people of size and healthcare providers

Practical Steps

- ▶ Separate weight and health (ie: No “Healthy Weight”, Healthy Habits instead of Weight Loss)
- ▶ Be aware of shaming/blaming language (“tip the scales”, pathologizing body size etc.)
- ▶ Demand rigorous evidence basis for all healthcare recommendations – do not fall prey to “everybody knows”

If you suggest weight loss:

Does it meet ethical standards:

- ▶ Proof of possibility
 - Evidence based medicine
- ▶ Proof of efficacy
 - Body Size interventions for Health problems
 - The chemo effect
- ▶ Disclaimer
 - Informed Consent

Proactive Steps

- ▶ Healthcare Interventions for Health Issues
- ▶ Don't try to solve social stigma with weight loss
- ▶ Provide blame-free, future oriented messages

Proactive Steps

- ▶ Fiercely anti-shame public health messaging
- ▶ Create movement options that are physically and psychologically safe
- ▶ Make public health messages about providing healthy options to the public, not making fat bodies the public's business

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