

Body Image, Obesity, and the “Health at Every Size” Movement

The unattainable standard of beauty and body image (the thin ideal) presented in the media is more noticeable than ever at a time when more and more people are being described as overweight or obese. In fact, approximately one third of the US population is overweight, and another third of the population are obese, according to current health standards (Body Mass Index or BMI). Individuals who are overweight or obese are more likely to experience body dissatisfaction and are at a higher risk of developing symptoms of depression. Weight-related stigma has been identified as a significant factor affecting the well-being of those who are overweight and obese, with biases and even discriminatory treatment occurring across various social settings.

Negative body image, health concerns, or stigma may encourage a person to engage in weight loss efforts ranging from diet and exercise, to more extreme interventions such as bariatric surgery. Although weight loss is associated with improvements in body image for some people, it is extremely difficult to maintain weight loss, especially when it is the result of a highly restrictive or extreme diet and/or exercise program. Unfortunately, negative body image may return as the result of gaining weight back, resulting in a vicious cycle of weight loss vs. gain, and self-acceptance vs. self-loathing.

The Health at Every Size (HAES) approach comes out of a movement toward acceptance of all body shapes, sizes, and weights, with an emphasis on the facts that (1) there are a wide range of reasons a person may be overweight or obese, and (2) not all overweight or obese individuals are “unhealthy,” and not all normal weight or thin individuals are “healthy.” This movement emphasizes and rises against the discrimination and stigma present in society toward overweight or obese people.

The principles of this movement are summarized here:

(1) Weight inclusivity and acceptance, **(2)** Health enhancement through equal access and personal practices that improve overall well-being, **(3)** Acknowledgement of weight stigma, and weight bias, **(4)** Promotion of flexible, individualized, intuitive eating without focusing on weight control, and **(5)** Support and promotion of enjoyable physical activity that is accessible by people of all sizes, abilities, and interests.

Changing one’s focus from weight loss, to acceptance of one’s body and engaging in behaviors that promote overall health and well-being may have a positive effect on body image. Taking this approach may also make it less likely that an individual determines their self-worth or esteem based on a number on the scale. For more information on the HAES approach, visit the Association for Size Diversity and Health website.

