Guidelines for Media Portrayals of Individuals Affected by Obesity

RUDD CENTER
FOR FOOD POLICY & OBESITY

OBESITY SOCIETY
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BACKGROUND

The media is an important and influential source of information about obesity. The way that obesity, weight-loss and weight maintenance are portrayed, described, and framed by the media profoundly shapes the public's understanding and attitudes toward these important health issues and the individuals affected by them.

The Rudd Center for Food Policy and Obesity, The Obesity Society (TOS) and the Obesity Action Coalition (OAC) believe that mainstream journalists have an obligation to be fair, balanced, and accurate in their reporting of obesity and persons whose lives are affected by this disease. Unfortunately, individuals affected by excess weight or obesity are often portrayed negatively and disparagingly in the media,[1-4] and reports about the causes and solutions to obesity are often framed in ways that reinforce stigma. These portrayals perpetuate damaging weight-based stereotypes and contribute to the pervasive bias and discrimination that individuals affected by this disease experience in everyday life.

Individuals affected by obesity or excess weight frequently confront stigma and discrimination in the workplace, educational institutions, health care facilities, and many other settings.[5] These stigmatizing experiences can impair emotional well-being, leading to depression, anxiety, low self-esteem, and even suicidal behaviors. Unfortunately, weight stigma can also lead to unhealthy behaviors and risk factors that exacerbate obesity.[5-6] Thus, weight stigma poses significant consequences for both emotional and physical health.

GUIDELINES

Purpose

The purpose of these guidelines is to ensure that all persons, regardless of their body weight, are represented equitably and accurately in journalistic reporting. We do not expect journalists to adhere to all suggestions provided in these guidelines. Rather, our aim is to assist journalists and reporters in their efforts to accurately cover obesity-related topics and to ensure that stigmatizing and pejorative portrayals of individuals affected by excess weight or obesity are avoided.

Application

These guidelines are broad and apply to a range of media, including, but not limited to, both print and broadcast journalism, entertainment television and film, Internet media, and advertising.

I: Respect Diversity and Avoid Stereotypes

1. Avoid portrayals of individuals affected by excess weight or obesity merely for the purpose of humor or ridicule.

2. Avoid weight-based stereotypes (e.g., such as individuals affected by obesity are "lazy" or "lacking in willpower").

3. Present individuals affected by excess weight or obesity in a diverse manner, including both women and men, of all ages, of different appearances and ethnic backgrounds, of different opinions and interests, and in a variety of roles. For an example of proper imagery, please visit **www.yaleruddcenter.org/press/media_gallery_intro.aspx**

4. Portray individuals affected by excess weight or obesity as persons who have professions, expertise, authority, and skills in a range of activities and settings.

5. Do not place an unnecessary or distorted emphasis on body weight. Descriptions of a person's body weight should not imply negative assumptions about his or her character, intelligence, abilities, or lifestyle habits.

II: Appropriate Language and Terminology

Consider carefully whether terminology and language used to describe body weight could be offensive to persons with obesity, and how this language will be interpreted by the intended audience.

Avoid using potentially pejorative adjectives or adverbs when describing people who are affected by excess weight or obesity, as well as language that implies moral judgments or character flaws of this population.

Incorporate People-First Language for Obesity, the policy of putting individuals before the disability or disease, when describing individuals affected by obesity. For example, rather than stating "there are many obese and overweight people…" use People-First language such as "there are many people affected by obesity." Labeling an individual by their disease dehumanizes the individual. The media does not say "cancerous people" when reporting on individuals with cancer; similarly, obesity must be given the same respect as other diseases. For more information on People-First Language for Obesity, please visit **www.obesityaction.org/weight-bias-and-stigma/people-first-language-for-obesity**.

Use appropriate descriptive terms for body weight. Examples include referring to obesity or body weight scientifically with Body Mass Index (BMI) descriptors, and using terms like "weight" or "excess weight" rather than "weight problem," "fat," "severely obese," or other similar descriptors. While using the words "fat" or "fatness" might be acceptable to individuals who identify with the Fat Acceptance movement, these terms can be offensive to others. Similarly, while clinical terms to describe various degrees of obesity are appropriate when used in the scientific community, these terms may be viewed as pejorative to other public audiences.[7-8]

When interviewing a person who is affected by excess weight or obesity, if their weight is relevant to the story, ask the individual what term(s) he/she prefers to be used when describing his/her body weight.

III: Balanced and Accurate Coverage of Obesity

Ensure that news stories, articles, and reports about obesity are grounded in scientific findings and evidence-based research. Identify the funding source of any science that is cited and be aware of potential conflicts of interest related to scientific research findings.[9]

Be familiar with the complex causes of obesity, including environmental, biological, genetic, economic, social and individual factors, as well as the current scientific evidence on the treatment of obesity and weight-loss.[10-11] The causes and solutions of obesity are complex, and this complexity requires seeking multiple perspectives and comprehensive reporting.

To present balanced coverage about the causes and solutions for obesity, consider different sides of the debate (e.g., societal versus personal responsibility). Productive debates can only occur when different positions are adequately and accurately presented. Very often, media coverage of obesity is biased with an over-emphasis on individual responsibility, ignoring important societal, economic, biological, and environmental contributors of obesity.[12-14]

IV: Appropriate Pictures and Images of Individuals Affected by Obesity

Images can often contribute to the depersonalization and stigmatization of individuals affected by excess weight or obesity. Photographs or video used for journalistic purposes should be chosen carefully to avoid stigma and pejorative portrayals of individuals affected by excess weight or obesity. Examples of pejorative pictures that should be avoided include the following:

i)   Photographs or video that place unnecessary emphasis on excess weight or that isolate an individual's body parts (e.g. abdomens or buttocks). This includes pictures of individuals affected by obesity from the neck down (or with face blocked) for anonymity.

ii) Images that depict individuals affected by obesity engaging in stereotypical behaviors (e.g., eating junk food, engaging in sedentary behavior). If these photographs are chosen, they should be accompanied by pictures portraying individuals affected by obesity in ways that challenge weight-based stereotypes (e.g., eating healthy foods, engaging in physical activity).

iii) Photographs or video that depict individuals affected by obesity in scantily clad clothing or looking disheveled in their appearance.

Instead, select appropriate photographs, videos, and images that portray individuals affected by obesity in the following manner:

i)   Engaging in diverse activities, roles, careers, and lifestyle behaviors.

ii) Portrayed in appropriate-fitting clothing and a well-kept appearance.

iii) Depicted in a neutral manner, free of additional characteristics that might otherwise perpetuate weight-based stereotypes.

When selecting an image, video, or photograph of an individual affected by obesity, consider the following questions:

1. Does the image imply or reinforce negative stereotypes?
2. Does the image portray an individual affected by obesity in a respectful manner? Is the individual's dignity maintained?
3. What are the alternatives? Can another photo or image convey the same message and eliminate possible bias?
4. What is the news value of the particular image?
5. Who might be offended, and why?
6. Is there any missing information from the photograph?
7. What are the possible consequences of publishing the image?

For examples of proper imagery, please visit **www.yaleruddcenter.org/press/media_gallery_intro.aspx.**

Conclusion

Weight bias penetrates every facet of life for individuals that are affected by obesity. The media plays an integral role in the perception of not only the disease of obesity, but also the individuals impacted by it. It is our hope that, as a media representative, you will adhere to these guidelines when reporting on the disease of obesity.

Guidelines for Communicating Obesity

I: Respect Diversity and Avoid Stereotypes

II: Use Appropriate Language and Terminology

III: Conduct Balanced and Accurate Coverage of Obesity

IV: Select Appropriate Pictures and Images of Individuals Affected by Obesity

Weight Bias Resources

- Rudd Center for Food Policy and Obesity – Free Image and B-roll Video Gallery for the Media
  http://www.yaleruddcenter.org/press/media_gallery_intro.aspx

- Obesity Action Coalition (OAC) – Weight Bias & Stigma
  www.obesityaction.org/weight-bias-and-stigma

- The Obesity Society
  www.obesity.org/resources-for/obesity-bias-and-stigmatization.htm

Supporting Organizations

Guidelines for Media Portrayals of Individuals Affected by Obesity are proudly supported by the following organizations:

Rudd Center for Food Policy and Obesity

The Obesity Society (TOS)

The Obesity Action Coalition (OAC)

Endnotes:

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Avoiding pejorative images about obesity in the media: Guidelines from the Weight Bias Task Force. The Obesity Society. Instructions to authors submitting manuscripts to the journal Obesity: **http://www.nature.com/oby/for_authors.html**

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