Image use and obesity: recommendations

Have you ever thought about how the images that are used to depict overweight and obesity may be perceived? Many images commonly used, for instance in the media, reinforce many of the stereotype about obesity, and suggest that people with obesity are lazy, greedy or lack will power.

Currently, there are several different ways in which obesity is commonly depicted which can reinforce negative stereotypes about obesity and contribute to weight stigma. This includes:

- ❖ Overemphasising specific behaviours, such as sedentary activity or excessively consuming junk food
- ❖ Depersonalising obesity by showing isolated body parts, particularly abdomens
- ❖ Depicting people with obesity in a negative context, for instance being excluded from a group or wearing ill-fitting clothing.

This type of imagery risks simplifying obesity and its causes, fails to capture the wider drivers and determinants of obesity, and creates a negative image of people living with obesity. This in turn can reinforce misconceptions about obesity and contribute to weight stigma.

Table 1: Negative and positive attributes for portraying obesity[1]

NEGATIVE ATTRIBUTES

- People consuming unhealthy foods and beverages
- Selling, shopping or serving unhealthy food
- Headless body
- Isolated body part(s)
- Sad or negative facial expression
- Engaging in sedentary behavior (e.g. lying down, watching TV)
- Wearing ill-fitting clothes
- Person excluded from group
- Walking down the street (Headless)
- Being featured in a personal interest story (Negative)

POSITIVE ATTRIBUTES

- Consuming healthy foods and beverages
- Selling, shopping or serving healthy food
- Exercising
- Being an advocate or expert
- Being a patient
- Being a professional (e.g. teacher, health worker, business person)
- Smiling or positive facial expression
- Dressed in appropriately fitting clothes
- Obesogenic foods and beverages
- Obesogenic streets or traffic
- Obesogenic advertising
- Walking down the street (Active)
- Being featured in a personal interest story (Positive)
- Being the feature of a weight loss story

The most common negative images consist of showing isolated body parts, most frequently an abdomen alone. Some other negative portrayals include people with obesity engaging in sedentary behaviours such as sitting down, watching TV or eating junk/unhealthy food. The use of such images can reinforce stereotypes about personal responsibility and blame. They also tend to present people with obesity as miserable, distressed or sad.

More positive examples of images used to talk about obesity include the presentation of unhealthy foods without a consumer to help highlight the role of the obesogenic environment that contributes greatly to the rising numbers of obesity and takes away the focus from individual accountability. Other positive examples include showing people with obesity smiling, looking confident in well fitted clothing and who aren't engaging in stereotypical behaviours as the ones described above.

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[1] WOD 2018 report

Using images of food[2]

X **Individuals consuming unhealthy food -** Images that show people consuming unhealthy food or beverages reinforce stigmatising perceptions that people with obesity are greedy and regularly make unhealthy food choices. This ignores the broader health and environmental factors that contribute to obesity.

√ **Healthy food -** Images and videos showing heathier foods convey messages of wellbeing and optimism, directed at creating healthy food environments as opposed to the ultra-processed foods that contribute to obesogenic environments. This image helps portray more system-wide changes to help reduce rates of obesity, rather than personal ones to stigmatise individuals.

X **Unhealthy food environment -** Too many images focus on an individual's body parts rather than the broader obesogenic environment. Images that focus on junk food help remove the focus away from personal circumstances by highlighting the significant role of societal influences and conditions that have helped shape modern-day obesity.

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[2] All images taken either from the image bank or SCOPE modules

Using images of activity

X **Individual engaging in sedentary behaviour** This image – which is typical example of a number of images used by media around the world – shows a teenager on a couch consuming unhealthy food and drinks. It leads to assume that people with obesity are lazy, greedy and unhealthy, which is a key element of weight stigma.

√ **Exercise and active lifestyles -** This image show someone engaging in sport and physical exercise. It takes the focus away from negative assumptions about laziness and food – which fuel obesity stigma – and instead convey the proactive efforts of people trying to lose weight.

√ **Daily life activities -** This image shows someone in their daily environment. Showing example of casual daily activities takes the focus away from negative assumptions of the types of activities people living with obesity might engage in.

Using images of people with obesity

X Isolated body parts - Images of isolated abdomens are often used in the media. By cutting off the face and the rest of the body, the image reduces the individual to their abdomen and weight. This keeps the viewer focus on the individual by equating them to the sum of their weight and overlooks the broader factors that lead to obesity around the world.

X Person excluded from a group - Images showing people with obesity being excluded is an all-too-regular occurrence in any image or video about obesity. These examples are particularly negative, steering us towards derogatory assumptions and attitudes about the worthiness of people with obesity.

X Negative facial expression - Images showing people with obesity as downbeat can reinforce negative perceptions that a person with obesity tends to be unhappy or dejected. Such stereotypes ignore the more positive aspects of people's lives and efforts to lose weight.

√ **Clinical elements of obesity -** Obesity is a health condition. It's a fundamental part of living with obesity. That's why media stories that feature healthcare settings or medical images are positive, reminder the reader that people living with obesity are patients. This moves mindsets away from stigmatising assumptions about laziness or greed and instead emphasises the role of medicine and the healthcare sector in support weight loss.

√ **Positive expression -** Images of people with obesity that show more than just an isolated abdomen provide a more accurate and honest reflection of living with obesity. These images demonstrate the broader element of living with obesity, beyond negative misconceptions about sedentary lifestyles or eating.

Recommendations

As part of efforts to reduce weight stigma, it is important that we all consider the images we attach to obesity. This includes avoiding the use pictures which focus on specific body parts with the head removed and instead use pictures with the whole body. Images that show people with obesity engaging in regular day-to-day activities are also encouraged, rather than those illustrating sedentary behaviour or excessive eating. People with obesity should be depicted in a non-stigmatising manner, devoid of stereotypical and discriminatory components that contribute to weight-based stigma.

When using pictures to accompany any of your work on obesity, consider the following:

- ✓ Use positive images which accurately support individual's stories without exacerbating misconceptions about people with obesity
- ✓ Pictures of people with obesity should include their whole body rather than specific body parts with the head removed
- ✓ Images that perpetuate stereotypes, such as people with obesity, being sedentary, looking sad or isolated from other people, should be avoided
- ✓ Call out the use of negative images, particularly in the media

Visit www.worldobesity.org/resources/image-bank for a selection of free to download images available for use.

Contributing to *Healthy Voices*

Contributions to Healthy Voices are welcome, particularly in the form of blogs and vlogs. When sending in submissions please consider the language and images you have used and ensure that they adhere to the above recommendations.

Please contact healthyvoices@worldobesity.org with any questions or content you would like to be considered for submission.

We all have a responsibility to consider the images we use to represent obesity in order to help reduce weight stigma.