

# Language Matters: Treating body image in eating disorder patients

Claire St John, MPH RDN CEDS-S  
Center for Change, July 13, 2023

1

## What We'll Cover

---

- What eating disorders are we talking about?
- How does nutritional restoration impact body image?
- How does language impact recovery?
- Cultural considerations impacting body image recovery

2

## Acknowledgments and Disclaimers

----

- About me
- About the language I'll use
- About the mistakes I might make



3

## What is Body Image?

----

Body image is a subjective experience of the body. It is a complex construct that involves perception, feelings and thoughts about the body, as well as one's behaviors in reaction to those perceptions, thoughts and feelings (like avoiding social situations to avoid feeling seen or exposed). Body image may be neutral, negative, positive or a shifting mixture of any of these on any given day, time or situation.

4

## Language impacts body image recovery for all eating disorder diagnoses

----

- Anorexia nervosa
- Atypical anorexia nervosa
- Binge eating disorder
- Bulimia nervosa
- ARFID and OSFED

5

## What is Nutritional Restoration?

----



- All eating disorders cause nutritional disruption
- Body size can obscure need for restoration
- Patient fears/concerns can impede restoration
- Weight restoration can be necessary for those in larger bodies

6

## Role of Body Image in Eating Disorders

- Body image as initial trigger
- Projection of distress/trauma on the body
- The intractability of body image
- The cultural demands and expectations of our bodies



7

## Body image challenges in nutritional restoration

- Fear of weight gain and internalized fatphobia
- Feeling of weight gain from fullness or constipation
- Gastroparesis
- Eating when not hungry
- Eating foods considered “bad” or “fattening”

8

## Health at Every Size and Fatphobia

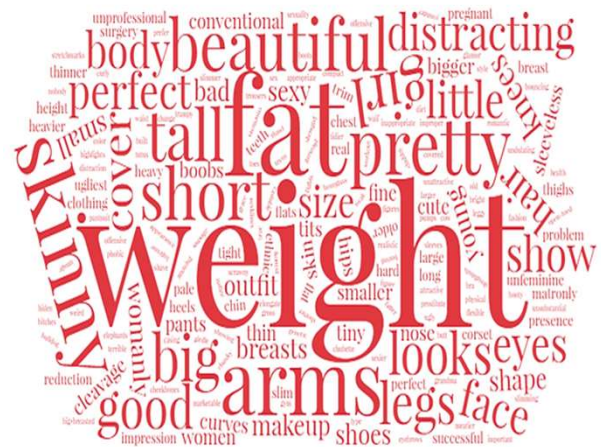


- Health at Every Size and supporting studies
- Language used in studies reinforcing fatphobia
- The obesity paradox

9

## Language and Communication

- The power of words in treatment
- The lasting impact of our words as professionals
- The impact of words on adolescents in treatment



10

## Words and Phrases to Consider

----

- Underweight, normal weight, overweight, obese
- Body positivity, body neutrality, body liberation
- Oh, I assume you had binge eating disorder or bulimia
- Don't worry, we don't want you to gain weight
- It's okay if you eat less than your peer
- You don't have to have the cheese
- Our goal is to get you to a normal weight
- Our intention is not to push you into the overweight range
- You don't have to eat it all
- We're not going to let you get fat

11

## How to Avoid Stigmatizing Language

Assessing Our Own Fatphobia

- Do we fully accept HAES or do we have concerns?
- What are our automatic thoughts about fat people?
- Are we able to talk about treatment potentially causing weight gain and what that means?

----

12

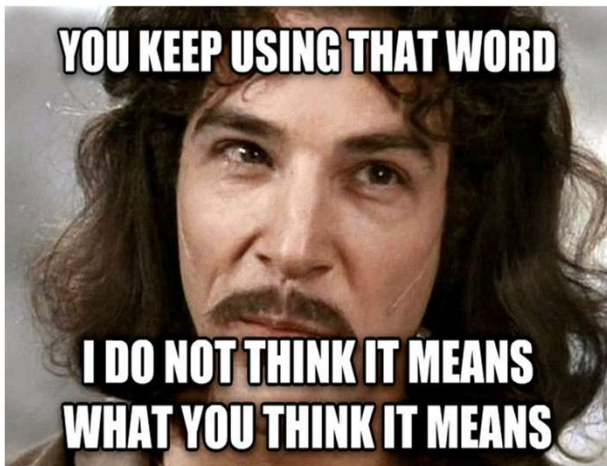
## Promoting Positive Body Image with Language

- Use patient-preferred words and language
- Always question outsized emphasis on body image
- Comment on affect, impermanent items (hair, clothing, nails) instead of body
- Remove gendered language
- Emphasize qualities, interests, plans, dreams, over idealized body image



13

## Client language: Unpacking “Feeling Fat”



- Reinforce that there’s nothing wrong with being fat
- Is it fullness?
- Is it clothing?
- Is it a negative emotion you can’t articulate?

14

## Psychoeducation on Body Image and Nutrition

----

- Addressing fatphobia is for all cohorts, all milieus
- Eating to satisfaction or fullness is for all bodies
- Every body requires nutrition, regardless of how much movement its engaged in
- Weight does not equal value

15

## Body image considerations for trauma

----



- Trauma-informed treatment considerations
  - Awareness that a particular body may have offered protection
  - Focus on body autonomy
  - Understanding of the role food or eating may have played in trauma

16



## Body image considerations for trans, nonbinary, gender dysphoric patients

---

- Body positivity, body acceptance aren't helpful
- Understanding body composition changes, hormone effects
- Supporting the health of the body



17

## Making Body Image a Priority in Eating Disorder Treatment

---

- Continued learning and exploration for confidence in body image treatment
- Receiving feedback from patients/clients
- Body autonomy
- Understanding of the shifting and impermanent nature of body image

18

**Thank you!**  
Thoughts or questions?

19

## References

— — —

April-Sanders AK, Rodriguez CJ. Metabolically Healthy Obesity Redefined. *JAMA Netw Open*. 2021;4(5):e218860. doi:10.1001/jamanetworkopen.2021.8860

Blackburn GL. Medicalizing Obesity: Individual, Economic, and Medical Consequences. *Virtual Mentor*. 2011;13(12):890-895. doi: 10.1001/virtualmentor.2011.13.12.pfor1-1112.

Campos P, Saguy A, Ernsberger P, Oliver E, Gaesser G. The epidemiology of overweight and obesity: public health crisis or moral panic? *Int J Epidemiol*. 2006 Feb;35(1):55-60. doi: 10.1093/ije/dyi254. Epub 2005 Dec 8. PMID: 16339599.

Dolezal L. Shame anxiety, stigma and clinical encounters. *J Eval Clin Pract*. 2022 Oct;28(5):854-860. doi: 10.1111/jep.13744. Epub 2022 Jul 28. PMID: 35903848; PMCID: PMC7613638.

Himmelstein, Puhl, R. M., & Quinn, D. M. (2017). Intersectionality: An Understudied Framework for Addressing Weight Stigma. *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*, 53(4), 421–431. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.amepre.2017.04.003>

Institute of Medicine (US) Committee on Women's Health Research. *Women's Health Research: Progress, Pitfalls, and Promise*. Washington (DC): National Academies Press (US); 2010. 1, Introduction.

Komaroff M. For Researchers on Obesity: Historical Review of Extra Body Weight Definitions. *J Obes*. 2016;2016:2460285. doi: 10.1155/2016/2460285. Epub 2016 May 30. PMID: 27313875; PMCID: PMC4904092.

Mulheim, Lauren. *Recovering Big*. Published April 20, 2023. <https://www.eatingdisordertherapy.com/recovering-big/#more-4677>

20