

## Ethical aspects of fat: can people be shamed into losing weight?

### *Jodie Rogers explores 'fat-shaming'*

Body mass index (BMI) is often used to categorise people by their weight. If your BMI is between 25.0 and 29.9, then you're classed as overweight. If it's 30 or more, then you're classed as obese.

Obesity is such a big problem now that the World Health Organization considers it to be a global epidemic. Obesity is associated with life-threatening conditions including many cancers, type 2 diabetes, heart disease and stroke. Overweight and obesity are estimated to cost the NHS £4.7 billion a year.

These costs are likely to increase – by 2030 it is predicted that 74 per cent of men and 64 per cent of women in the UK will be overweight, and a third of these classed as obese.

### **Fat-shaming**

In January 2013, an American philosopher, Daniel Callahan, [suggested that just like the campaigns and policies which shamed smokers for their actions](#) (for example, by forcing them outside to smoke), similar social pressures were needed to make overweight and obese people stop eating unhealthy foods. Callahan proposed that fat-shaming – singling out, discriminating against or making fun of overweight or obese people – should be used as an alternative to drugs and surgery to reduce obesity.

But would this work? And what are the wider implications of fat-shaming? Research has found that fat-shaming is dangerous as it may increase depression, suicidal thoughts and feelings of loneliness.

[One population survey](#) found that being fat-shamed does not encourage obese and overweight people to lose weight. [Another](#) found that being teased about your weight and shape in childhood can lead to eating disorders.

### **Debating the issue**

In response to fat-shaming, the fat acceptance movement has gained support. One group, [Health at Every Size](#), aims to ban fat-shaming and wants to help people be happy whatever size they are.

## **ABOUT THIS RESOURCE**

This resource first appeared in 'Fat' in December 2015. Published by the Wellcome Trust, a charity registered in England and Wales, no. 210183.

[bigpictureeducation.com](http://bigpictureeducation.com)

Activists argue that fat-shaming has created a society with an anti-fat bias, where the media often present overweight people as lazy and lacking self-control. Fat-shaming is even evident in government policies.

In July 2015, Prime Minister David Cameron announced that obese people who receive benefits would risk losing them unless they accept treatments that aim to reduce their weight.

Is public opposition to fat-shaming increasing? Perhaps. For example, in 2012, Disney's healthy-eating exhibit and website were closed down after just three weeks, after a poor public reception for their three overweight cartoon characters, Lead Bottom, Snacker and The Glutton.

More recently, over 70,000 people in the UK signed a petition to remove an advert created by the company Protein World. The advert posed the question "Are you beach body ready?" next to a picture of slim, toned woman, which campaigners thought implied that any other body shapes were inferior.

Not all people feel the same about fat-shaming. When the social bulletin board website Reddit decided to ban users from posting fat-shaming messages, it was met with a backlash from its members, who argued that a ban denied them their freedom of speech.

Look at the lists below. Can you think of two more reasons for and two more reasons against banning fat-shaming?

## Reasons for banning fat-shaming

- Banning fat-shaming would stop people suffering its negative effects, such as depression.
- Civilised societies should do all they can to prevent any type of discrimination.

## Reasons against banning fat-shaming

- Fat-shaming might lead some people to lose weight, which could improve their health.
- A ban may mean that people talk less about the health risks associated with obesity, which could have a long-term negative effect on people's health overall.

## ABOUT THIS RESOURCE

This resource first appeared in 'Fat' in December 2015. Published by the Wellcome Trust, a charity registered in England and Wales, no. 210183.

[bigpictureeducation.com](http://bigpictureeducation.com)

## REFERENCES

- [Huffington Post: Fat-shaming strategy pushed by Daniel Callaghan](#)
- [NHS Choices: Obesity](#)
- [Psychology Today: What's wrong with fat-shaming?](#)
- [Health at Every Size](#)
- [Guardian: Cameron calls on obese to accept help or risk losing benefits](#)

## QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- Can the possible physical health benefits of losing weight ever make up for the harmful emotional effects of fat-shaming?
- How can schools, the media and wider society promote a positive body image? Can you think of any campaigns that already do this?
- Is it ever right to limit someone's freedom of speech – for example, by banning them from fat-shaming?
- Should we ban any form of body-shaming – for example, discriminating against people who have a BMI below the 'healthy' lower limit ('thin-shaming')?

## FURTHER READING

- [Big Picture: Ethical aspects of fat - who's to blame if a child is overweight?](#)
- [Big Picture: Ethical aspects of fat - exploring the effects of selective breeding](#)

## ABOUT THIS RESOURCE

This resource first appeared in 'Fat' in December 2015. Published by the Wellcome Trust, a charity registered in England and Wales, no. 210183.

[bigpictureeducation.com](http://bigpictureeducation.com)