

A MESSAGE FOR JOURNALISTS/ WRITERS/PEOPLE IN THE MEDIA: COVERING WEIGHT CONCERNS

A growing number of scientists, health professionals, civil rights advocates, educators, and other concerned people are challenging conventional ideas about weight. We argue that many currently accepted ideas are unsupported by scientific evidence and have resulted in significant damage to people of all body sizes.

Assumptions that support the current weight paradigm are so strongly part of our cultural landscape that they are not even recognized, with the result that fairness and accuracy in reporting get compromised. For example, did you know that the “obesity epidemic”—if there ever was one—is long over: child, teen and adult obesity rates leveled off years ago? That dozens of studies indicate that weight doesn’t adversely affect longevity for the vast majority of people—and less than a handful of studies suggest otherwise? And when factors such as activity, nutrition, dieting and weight cycling history, and socioeconomic status are considered, the relationship between weight and disease disappears or is greatly lessened? Studies also show that biologic safeguards prevent most people from maintaining weight loss, despite vigilant dieting and exercise.

Despite ample evidence published in top scientific journals, these contentions are rarely given credence or fair exposure in the media. If we are to truly provide accurate information and improve the health of the American people, it is time to challenge status quo belief systems about weight and health.

To be fair-minded, consider the following points when reporting stories on weight:

- Recognize that just because something is conventionally accepted doesn’t mean it’s true. Journalists have an obligation

Excerpt from *Health at Every Size: The Surprising Truth*

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to remain open-minded and give air time to perspectives that aren't typically heard.

- Listen to and report on what fat people have to say—and keep an open mind. Don't make assumptions about their health practices and don't limit your story to “experts” describing the experiences of fat people. “Nothing about us without us” is a rallying call of many stigmatized groups.
- Stage fair fights. If you interview a health expert talking about the dangers of obesity, pair her or him with a health expert who can dispute the conventional view of weight and health. Paring a conventional obesity “expert” with a fat person talking about their experience is an unfair setup.
- Show images of fat people being physically active, eating nutritious foods, and participating in their lives, rather than the usual photos that reinforce the stereotypes. Depict fat people as complete human beings. The typical stock photo of the “headless fatty” is dehumanizing. It sends a message that this body is so shameful that it doesn't deserve a face.
- Language has meaning. Think about terms like “obesity,” “overweight” and “fat” and what they convey. Discover why a growing number of health professionals don't use the terms “overweight” or “obesity.”
- When you report on weight loss, be sure to consider long-term evidence. Many techniques deliver short-term, but those results can be deceptive when the long term is considered.
- Cover stories about people doing work to help people of all sizes improve their health without a focus on weight or weight loss.
- Remember that the proliferation of stories about the evils of fat and other misinformation can contribute to an increase in unhealthy weight loss behaviors, painful food and weight preoccupation, damaging cycles of weight loss and regain,

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poor body image, life-threatening eating disorders, stress, stigmatization, and discrimination. Don't be part of the problem.

The media hold considerable power. Use yours respectfully.

To learn more about these issues, check out *Health at Every Size: The Surprising Truth About Your Weight* (www.HAESbook.com) or contact Dr. Linda Bacon at linda@lindabacon.org. Other helpful resources include The Association for Size Diversity and Health (www.sizediversityandhealth.org) and the National Association to Advance Fat Acceptance (www.NAAFA.org).

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