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The Ways that People Cope with Weight Stigma May Have Important Health Implications

A focus on positive coping strategies could help improve health for those stigmatized because of their weight

Hartford, Conn. – Considerable evidence has linked the experience of being teased or bullied because of weight to poor health.

Yet few studies have explored how individuals cope with being mistreated because of their weight, or the role that coping responses to weight stigma may play in health outcomes.

The findings of a new study by the Rudd Center for Food Policy and Obesity at the University of Connecticut show that coping responses to weight stigma help explain why experiencing weight stigma can affect negative or positive health outcomes.

Coping with weight stigma by engaging in healthy lifestyle behaviors (like exercise or eating healthy foods) was associated with better health, including greater self-esteem, better physical and psychological wellbeing, and less frequent depressive symptoms. Responding to weight stigma with negative emotions and maladaptive eating (such as starving, bingeing or purging) were linked with more depressive symptoms, lower self-esteem and worse physical and emotional health, according to the study.

“Overall, our results suggest that how people cope with weight stigma may be important when it comes to the negative health effects of being mistreated because of weight,” said Mary Himmelstein, UConn Rudd Center, and lead author of the study. “Our findings indicate that we need to find ways to help individuals experiencing weight stigma use coping strategies that have healthy benefits, rather than strategies that may worsen health.”

The study, published online today in *Health Psychology*, involved a national sample of 912 American adults who completed an online survey in 2015. Participants answered questions about demographic characteristics, whether they had experienced weight stigma and how they typically coped with these experiences, and health questions about current dieting behavior, depressive symptoms, physical and psychological wellbeing, and self-esteem.

All participants in the study reported experiencing some form of weight stigma. Weight-based teasing was the most common (88.9 percent) followed by unfair treatment (56.1

percent) and weight-based discrimination (43.1). The most common strategy for coping with these stigmatizing experiences was engaging in healthy lifestyle behaviors, followed by responding with negative emotions, and avoiding exercise.

“Obesity-related treatments, weight-management programs, and health professionals aiming to help individuals who report being stigmatized because of their weight need to focus on weight stigma,” Himmelstein said. “Offering support and focusing on positive coping strategies will be important to help improve their patients’ physical and emotional well-being.”

Study co-authors include Rebecca Puhl, Deputy Director for the UConn Rudd Center, and Diane Quinn, Professor in the Department of Psychological Sciences at the University of Connecticut.

About the UConn Rudd Center for Food Policy & Obesity

The Rudd Center for Food Policy & Obesity at the University of Connecticut is a distinguished multi-disciplinary policy research center dedicated to promoting solutions to childhood obesity, poor diet, and weight bias through research and policy. The Rudd Center is a leader in building broad-based consensus to change diet by conducting research and educating policy makers and the public. For more information, visit www.uconnruddcenter.org or follow us on Twitter at www.twitter.com/uconnruddcenter or on Facebook at www.facebook.com/uconnruddcenter.