Shame Campaigns
- Do they work?

by Rebecca Puhl, PhD
You have likely seen television commercials, billboards, or magazine ads sponsored by different health organizations promoting obesity prevention messages. These campaigns often focus on the importance of reducing portion sizes and soda intake, eating more fruits and vegetables, and increasing physical activity. As an example, First Lady Michelle Obama’s Let’s Move! Campaign has been widely publicized and broadly embraced across the United States, which aims to encourage healthy eating and activity behaviors in children.

Shock-Tactics

While most of these campaigns are initiated from positive intentions to improve public health, some anti-obesity campaigns have instead been criticized for shaming and stigmatizing individuals affected by obesity. As an example, in 2011, the Children’s Health Care of Atlanta Campaign to address childhood obesity in Georgia publicized billboards and commercials portraying youth with excess weight with “warning” captions such as “Stocky, Chubby, and Chunky are Still Fat” and “Fat Kids Become Fat Adults.” Despite being the target of public criticism for promoting shame and stigma toward families affected by obesity, these kinds of shock tactics are often defended by campaign organizers as being necessary to increase public attention to the issue, and from misperceptions that shame and stigma may actually provide an incentive for people to lose weight.

Gathering Public Opinion

As a researcher who has studied weight stigma for more than a decade, I was concerned that these types of campaigns would do more harm than good. We know from considerable research evidence that experiencing weight stigma can worsen psychological and physical health, impair weight-loss efforts, and potentially lead to increased weight gain. In addition, given that so many people with excess weight already suffer from stigma and prejudice, and are frequently made to feel ashamed of their bodies, the potential harm that could come from public health campaigns using shaming tactics is a legitimate concern. I was also surprised to learn just how little research was being done by health organizations to test their messages and approaches before they launched their obesity-related campaigns. In an effort to address this, my research team at the Rudd Center conducted two nationwide studies to see what Americans really think of different anti-obesity campaigns.
Specifically, our aim was to examine public perceptions of obesity-related health campaigns that were recently publicized throughout the U.S. In our studies, we presented people with a series of obesity-related campaigns to look at (including those that had stigmatizing content and those that were more neutral), and we asked them to evaluate each campaign on a number of different characteristics. For example, we asked participants to what extent each campaign instilled feelings of motivation to improve their health, whether they felt able and confident to make health behavior changes that were promoted by the campaign, whether they felt the campaign reinforced negative stereotypes about persons affected by obesity, and whether they felt the campaign content (both pictures and words) was appropriate.

Our findings revealed some important insights:

- First, obesity-related campaigns that were rated to be stigmatizing were no more likely to instill motivation for improving lifestyle behaviors than campaigns rated as more neutral.
- In addition, stigmatizing campaigns were also rated as inducing less self-confidence to engage in health behaviors promoted by campaigns, and viewed to have less appropriate visual content compared to neutral campaigns.

These findings also remained consistent across different segments of the public (regardless of a person’s own body weight). Importantly, these findings challenge the idea that stigma is an acceptable or necessary approach to take in efforts to address obesity. It also indicates that shaming and stigmatizing approaches are less effective than non-stigmatizing campaigns to encourage health behaviors.

"Campaigns that were rated to be most motivating for improving health behaviors were those that did not even mention the word "obesity," and in most cases made no mention of body weight at all."
When we looked more closely at the types of obesity-related campaigns that the public favored and felt motivated to improve their health behaviors, we came across another important finding: campaigns that were rated to be most motivating for improving health behaviors were those that did not even mention the word “obesity,” and in most cases made no mention of body weight at all. These were campaigns that instead focused on promoting specific health behaviors, such as eating more fruits and vegetables, or replacing sugar sweetened beverages with water; behaviors that all Americans can engage in to improve their health, regardless of their body size.

What Does this All Mean?

What these findings tell us, is that weight stigma undermines the ability to effectively communicate with Americans about obesity and health. People feel much more motivated and empowered to make healthy lifestyle changes when campaign messages are supportive and encourage specific health behaviors. In contrast, when campaigns communicate shame or stigma, people feel less motivated and have lower intentions to change their health behavior. Our research findings also suggest that campaigns don’t need to focus on obesity in order to promote healthy eating and exercise behaviors. This kind of approach could go a long way in helping to reduce weight stigmatization. Removing the emphasis on obesity, and instead focusing on healthy behaviors that everyone can engage in regardless of their body weight, can help reduce blame and shame directed at persons affected by obesity and support all individuals in their efforts to be healthy.

We know from considerable research evidence that experiencing weight stigma can worsen psychological and physical health, impair weight-loss efforts, and potentially lead to increased weight gain.”
What NOT to do:

**Pejorative Language**
Suggest that person’s body weight implies negative assumptions about their character, intelligence, abilities, or health.

**Denigrating Images**
Communicate weight-based stereotypes

**Blame the Individual**
Suggest that person’s body weight implies negative assumptions about their character, intelligence, abilities, or health.

**Use fat jokes/humor**

Conclusion

Clearly, there is much work that needs to be done to ensure that media campaigns are truly empowering and supporting people as they take steps to improve their health behaviors, rather than alienating persons affected by obesity and instilling shame and stigma. This also holds true for the way that we talk about weight-related health without any stigma or shame, and with plenty of support and empowerment.

About the Author:
Rebecca Puhl, PhD, is the Deputy Director at the Rudd Center for Food Policy & Obesity at Yale University. For more information about Dr. Puhl’s work, please visit www.yaleruddcenter.org.

References:

What TO do:

Respectful portrayals of persons with obesity
Focus on health behaviors

Suggest specific actions
Persons affected by obesity
Use sensitive language

Challenge stereotypes
Question whether “obesity” or body weight need to be mentioned at all

Order your FREE copy of Understanding Your Weight-loss Options Brochure at ObesityAction.org
Membership Application

OAC Membership Categories
(select one)
- Individual Membership: $20/year
- Institutional Membership: $500/year
- Chairman’s Council Membership: $1,000+/year

OAC Membership Add-ons
(optional, but only accessible by OAC members)

Add-on 1: Educational Resources
To order bulk copies of OAC resources, members can purchase educational packages. If you'd like to order resources, select one of the below packages.
- Standard Package
  10-50 pieces/quarter $50/year
- Deluxe Package
  51-100 pieces/quarter $100/year
- Premium Package
  101-250 pieces/quarter $150/year

Add-on 2: Make a General Donation
Make a tax-deductible donation to the OAC when joining as a member. Your donation helps the OAC’s educational and advocacy efforts.
- $5
- $10
- $25
- $50
- $100
- Other ______

Membership/Add-on Totals:
Membership Category: $_____
Add-on 1 (if applicable): +$_____
Add-on 2 (if applicable): +$_____
TOTAL MEMBERSHIP PAYMENT: $_____

Contact Information
Name: ____________________________
Address: __________________________
City: ______________ State: _____ Zip: _____________
Phone: ______________ Email: ______________

Payment Information
- Check (payable to the OAC) for $______.
- Credit card for my TOTAL membership fee of $______.
  - Discover®
  - Visa®
  - MasterCard®
  - Amex®
Credit Card Number: ________________
Expiration Date: __________ Billing Zip Code: ___________

Building a Coalition of those Affected
The OAC is the ONLY non-profit organization whose sole focus is helping those affected by obesity. The OAC is a great place to turn if you are looking for a way to get involved and give back to the cause of obesity.

There are a variety of ways that you can make a difference, but the first-step is to become an OAC Member. The great thing about OAC membership is that you can be as involved as you would like. Simply being a member contributes to the cause of obesity.

Why YOU Should Become an OAC Member
Quite simply, because the voice of those affected needs to be built! The OAC not only provides valuable public education on obesity, but we also conduct a variety of advocacy efforts. With advocacy, our voice must be strong. And, membership is what gives the OAC its strong voice.

Benefits to Individual Membership
- Official welcome letter and membership card
- Annual subscription to the OAC’s publication, Your Weight Matters Magazine
- Subscriptions to the OAC Members Make a Difference and Obesity Action Alert monthly e-newsletters
- “Bias Buster” Alerts, alerting specifically to issues of weight bias
- Immediate Advocacy Alerts on urgent advocacy issues and access to the OAC’s expert advocacy team
- Ability to lend your voice to the cause

Membership Benefits

RETURN TO:
Mail: OAC
4511 North Himes Ave., Ste. 250
Tampa, FL 33614
Fax: (813) 873-7838