



GLOBAL WELLNESS  
INSTITUTE™  
EMPOWERING WELLNESS WORLDWIDE

## **Awareness Action Kit - WEIGHT BIAS AND STIGMA -**

Global Perspectives on Inclusive Well-Being:  
The Role of Health and Wellness Coaching in  
Fostering Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and  
Belonging

Empowering Individuals, Leaders, Service  
Providers, and Advocates of DEIB Through the  
Lens of Health and Wellness Coaching

- 2024 -



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Welcome!

We are thrilled to introduce you to our **Awareness Action Kit**, designed to kickstart your journey into understanding the invaluable intersection of Health and Wellness with Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Belonging.

This kit offers you a practical, actionable, and easily digestible resource to delve into the profound impact that Health and Wellness can have in fostering a culture of Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, And Belonging.

Directly excerpted from our comprehensive 130-page whitepaper, "Global Perspectives on Inclusive Well-Being: The Role of Health and Wellness Coaching in Fostering Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Belonging," these resources are a simple gateway to a deeper understanding.

We invite you to download the complete whitepaper along with its accompanying PowerPoint presentation and 11-page infographic, available [HERE](#).

Within the whitepaper, you'll explore 10 distinct areas of diversity, each accompanied by its own Awareness Action Kit:

- 1. Race and Ethnicity**
- 2. Age and Generations**
- 3. Gender**
- 4. Sexual Orientation**
- 5. Religion and Spirituality**
- 6. Disability**
- 7. Socioeconomic Status and Social Determinants of Health**
- 8. Health Status**
- 9. Neurodiversity**
- 10. Weight Bias and Stigma**

Each kit provides insights into the definition of the specific type of diversity, why it's crucial, how Health and Wellness Coaching can play a pivotal role in supporting it, and real-life "Voices from the field" to enrich your understanding.

Additionally, each Awareness Action Kit comes complete with a "**Questions for Discussion Guide**" to prompt thoughtful reflection and dialogue, as well as essential "**Contact Information**" to reach out for further support or inquiries. There is an **(11<sup>th</sup>)** separate **Glossary of Terms Awareness Action Kit** to enhance your comprehension across all areas covered.

Happy discovering - we're excited you've joined us!  
The Global Wellness Institute Wellness Coaching Initiative Team.

# XIX. Weight Bias and Stigma



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## XV. Weight Bias and Stigma

- **What it is**

Weight bias is defined as negative attitudes towards, and beliefs about, others because of their weight. These negative attitudes are manifested by stereotypes and/or prejudice toward people in larger (or occasionally smaller) bodies. Internalized weight bias is defined as holding negative beliefs about oneself due to weight or size. Weight bias can lead to weight stigma, which is the social sign or label affixed to an individual who is the victim of prejudice. Weight stigma involves actions against people that can cause exclusion and marginalization, and lead to inequities (WHO, 2017).

Even the terms “underweight, overweight, and obese/obesity” can be stigmatizing. They imply that there is one weight to be and everything else is under or over. Further, these terms medicalize and pathologize body size based on BMI which has been shown to be a flawed measure (Mauldin et al., 2022).

- **Why it matters**

According to the World Obesity Federation, nearly half of the world is “obese or overweight” (World Obesity Federation, 2023). Current healthcare is weight-centric, equating weight and health. This approach to healthcare has negative consequences on patient and client well-being (Mauldin et al., 2022).

Weight stigma can result in discrimination and social exclusion, limiting opportunities in various areas of life. It can affect educational attainment, employment prospects, and interpersonal relationships. Individuals who face weight stigma may encounter bias in hiring decisions, workplace mistreatment, and bullying. This discrimination perpetuates inequality and hinders social and economic participation.

Weight stigma intersects with other forms of discrimination and oppression, such as sexism, racism, ableism, and classism. It is essential to recognize and address the intersectional nature of weight stigma to promote social justice and equality. Individuals who belong to marginalized groups may face compounded stigma and discrimination based on their weight and other intersecting identities. From a public health perspective, focusing on weight as a measure of health can perpetuate harmful stereotypes and neglect other factors influencing well-being, such as social determinants, genetics, and lifestyle behaviors. Hence, addressing weight stigma impacts healthcare as a whole.

Weight stigma can have detrimental effects on physical and mental health. It contributes to increased stress, anxiety, depression, and disordered eating behaviors. Weight stigma by healthcare providers is frequent and even more harmful, as it can also lead to avoidance of healthcare services; weight loss advice is not a replacement appropriate diagnostic testing and treatment. Further, weight stigma perpetuates a cycle where individuals may engage in unhealthy behaviors, such as crash diets or excessive exercise, which can further harm their health and well-being.

Weight stigma can negatively impact body image and self-esteem. Constant exposure to negative stereotypes and societal messages about body weight can lead to body dissatisfaction and a distorted perception of one's own body. This can have long-lasting effects on self-worth, confidence, and overall mental well-being.

Though there is a lack of multinational studies, meta-analyses found that approximately 19% of people with obesity and 39% with severe obesity experienced stigma (Sikorski et al., 2015). This stigma has been experienced by educators, employers, health professionals, the media and even friends and family (Cameron, 2016; Brochu et al., 2014; Kirk et al., 2014; Puhl et al., 2007; Rudolph et al., 2009). Data from the Rudd Center for Food Policy and Obesity indicate that: school-aged children with obesity experience a 63% higher chance of being bullied; 54% of adults with obesity report being stigmatized by co-workers, and 69% of adults with obesity report experiencing stigmatization from health care professionals (Ha, 2020).

While significant attention is given to the issue of weight stigma directed towards individuals who are overweight or obese, it is important to recognize that societal attitudes toward body weight can affect individuals at various points along the weight spectrum.

Some people with significant overweight and obesity choose to undergo bariatric surgery. Many view this as a “magical solution,” poorly informed about the unique challenges awaiting them after the procedure, including:

- Life-long commitment to adhere to behavioral changes,
- Diet restrictions requiring a significant attitude change toward food and eating habits,
- Weight gain caused by non-adherence to diet guidelines, depression, or substance abuse,
- Postoperative depression increased by an idealization of life after surgery, temporary changes in self-esteem and personality, social reactions and demands to the weight loss, difficulty coping with negative life events that were attributed to obesity and post-surgical complications,

- An existing complex emotional relationship with food that is still used as a coping mechanism for emotions, anxiety, and stress,
- Coping with excess skin (even though this can be fixed with plastic surgery this can negatively affect self-confidence),
- Postoperative Depression.

In Canada, there is since 2020 a clear strategy in place, as per the Canadian Clinical Guide for Clinical Practice, that “shifts the focus of obesity management toward improving patient-centered health outcomes, rather than weight loss alone”. They further state that “Obesity care should be based on evidence-based principles of chronic disease management, must validate patients’ lived experiences, move beyond simplistic approaches of “eat less, move more,” and address the root drivers of obesity”.

Underweight people might also face judgments, comments, or assumptions about their appearance, health, and lifestyle. This kind of stigma can also contribute to feelings of self-consciousness, isolation, and a negative body image for those who are underweight.

- **How Health and Wellness Coaching can support this diversity**

Health, Wellness and Medical Coaches are trained to help increase resilience and emotional agility as well as help client cope with emotional triggers and shift into resourceful and pro-active states.

At the root of Health and Wellness Coaching is the creation of a safe and non-judgmental space for clients. By challenging weight bias and promoting body acceptance, Health and Wellness Coaches can help foster a more inclusive and equitable society that values and supports people of all body sizes. Within this safe space, Health and Wellness Coaches can help shift the focus from resistance or victimization to health promotion, body acceptance, and compassion, while supporting individuals in achieving well-being.

Health coaches use an individualized approach that respects the unique needs and goals of each client. Recognizing that health is multifaceted and influenced by various factors beyond weight, coaches can support clients in setting realistic and sustainable health goals that align with their values and preferences. Health and Wellness Coaches are trained to avoid using stigmatizing terms and to focus on health behaviors rather than weight as a measure of success, emphasizing overall well-being and self-care.

Coaches must be mindful of the impact their words can have on an individual's mental and emotional well-being. Employing inclusive and sensitive language allows coaches to acknowledge the diverse experiences and challenges related to health and body size without perpetuating stereotypes or judgment. By cultivating an environment free from weight-related biases, coaches can create a safe space for clients to explore their health goals, promoting a person-centered and positive approach to well-being that goes beyond external appearances. In the glossary, we have included links to specific, weight-centric and weight-inclusive terminology.

Health coaches can empower clients to become advocates for their health and well-being by supporting them in developing self-compassion, self-esteem, body acceptance, and resilience to combat weight stigma. This may involve helping clients challenge societal beauty standards, develop positive coping strategies, and find supportive communities.

Finally, many Health Coaches are specifically trained to work with clients in this area and are all trained to recognize the boundaries of their scope of practice and to refer clients to appropriate professionals, such as registered dietitians, therapists, and medical professionals to ensure clients receive comprehensive and specialized care when needed. By adopting a weight-inclusive approach and actively addressing weight stigma, health coaches can create a supportive environment that promotes integral well-being and helps clients develop a positive relationship with their bodies and health.

- **Voices from the Field**

Provided By Dr Michelle May, CSP, Founder of Am I Hungry?® Mindful Eating Program.

*"A weight-neutral approach to eating has been transformational for me. When I started the Am I Hungry? program, I was exhausted from the endless cycles of dieting I'd engaged in my entire life and desperate for change. With Michelle's help and the support of weight-neutral coaching sessions, I quickly saw how I had been using food as a coping mechanism for years. I learned new skills that have completely transformed my relationship with food. I have found true joy in eating without restriction and am no longer bound by the fear and self-recrimination of continually gaining and losing weight. Perhaps for the first time, I am truly and fully enjoying my life and am in a place of true acceptance of the person I am, body and all." — Wendy*

*"My coach helped me understand that the dominant paradigm of thinness = health is not only unsupported by scientific evidence but is also hugely*

*damaging to physical and emotional well-being. She challenged me to resist such easy explanations and instead adopt a weight-neutral approach based in mindfulness and curiosity. This shift has proven transformational. I no longer see food as the enemy. I no longer judge my worth by my size. I no longer value movement for the calories it burns and instead see it as a source of pleasure and health. And I no longer postpone joy for some distant time in the future when I will be "deserving" of it." — Kate*

*"My weight as a measure of my "progress" has always been a source of shame and judgment. Positive feelings when I lost weight were always replaced by shame when I inevitably gained it back. Each new diet failure brought more shame and judgment. A weight neutral approach eliminated the shame and feeling of judgment, allowing me to focus on how I felt and my relationship with food." — Jim*



## Contact Information

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### Want to contribute?

Health and Wellness Coaching Connection Blog Space.

It is our mission to empower individuals and businesses around the world to confidently partner with wellness coaches, optimizing health and well-being and clarifying wellness coach specialties and global guidelines through education and community resources. The GWI WCI Blog is one of these resources intended to advance the global Health & Wellness Coaching Community by providing accessible, evidence-based articles related to the field of Health & Wellness Coaching. Blogs will be posted on our area of the [GWI website](#) and cross-posted on LinkedIn.

Learn more here :

[Wellness Coaching Connection Contributor Guidelines](#)  
[Blog-Newsletter Submission Form](#)

Please email us ([gwiwci2023@gmail.com](mailto:gwiwci2023@gmail.com)) if anything is unclear or if you have questions. We look forward to receiving your submissions!

## Questions for Discussion Guide

Complementing our research, this Questions for Discussion Guide serves as an organized tool to facilitate ongoing discussion and contemplation on the pivotal role of Health and Wellness Coaching within the realms of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion. Intended for educators, students, and readers, this guide provides a structured framework for further exploration, encouraging thoughtful analysis and collaborative dialogue to advance inclusive practices in the field.

- What does a diverse, equitable, and inclusive workplace/ world/ community where everyone belongs look like/feel like?
- What are the gaps in your organization around this type of diversity?
- How might you champion greater inclusion in your day to day?
- How can you champion more inclusion and awareness around this diversity?
- What might be a personal obstacle to embracing this type of diversity?
- What unconscious bias might you have in this type of diversity?
  - How might you explore your unconscious bias?
- What is the greatest challenge for you concerning this type of diversity and why?
- Who might support you to better understand this type of diversity?
- In what context might you find this type of diversity most relevant (i.e. Workplace? Schools? Community?)
- Where (country, location, venue) might this type of diversity NOT be a challenge and why?
- What has been your personal experience with this type of diversity - from the outside or inside?