

## ‘Fat Shaming’ Just Makes Older Adults Get Fatter

July 30, 2013 by Candy Sagon



Well, we could have told them this: Humiliating older adults about their [weight problem](#) doesn't make them slim down.

A [new study](#) finds, in fact, that it may do just the opposite. People who felt belittled because of their weight were 2 1/2 to 3 times more likely to either gain weight or remain obese, according to the study published last week in the journal PLOS One.

“Weight discrimination, in addition to being hurtful and demeaning, has real consequences for the individual’s physical health,” study author Angelina Sutin, a psychologist at the Florida State University’s College of Medicine, told [NBC News](#).

The researchers looked at data from a national health and retirement study of 6,157 men and women, average age 66. The participants had their Body Mass Index (a ratio of height to weight that indicates amount of body fat) measured in 2006 and again in 2010. They were also asked whether they had experienced different types of discrimination, including weight.

Adults who were overweight in 2006 and felt discriminated against because of it, were 2 1/2 times more likely to gain more weight and be obese when they were re-measured in 2010. Those who were obese and reported discrimination in 2006 were three times more likely to remain obese at the follow-up four years later, researchers found.

This goes against the recent thinking that we need to goad people into losing weight to help counter the country’s obesity epidemic. [Nearly 70 percent](#) of American adults are either overweight or obese, which raises the risk for heart disease, diabetes, high blood pressure, stroke and other problems.

Bioethicist Daniel Callahan of The Hastings Center, [in a recent editorial](#), called for “an edgier strategy” that would stigmatize obesity, similar to techniques used in the anti-smoking campaign. He proposed using social pressure to push overweight people to lose weight.

But shaming or guiltting people into losing weight — such as the 2011 Georgia public health campaign that chided chubby children, or the University of New Mexico professor who [recently tweeted](#) that obese PhD applicants shouldn’t bother applying — seems to drive them to gain even more weight, the study shows.

It’s too soon to know whether the American Medical Association’s decision last month to call [obesity a “disease,”](#) will be a better strategy, but some health experts think it may be more successful than simply scolding people.

As Arthur Caplan, the head of medical ethics at New York University’s Langone Medical Center, told NBC News, “It would be nice if guilt was the magic bullet to weight control. It isn’t.”

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