

Calling someone fat names can make them eat more, researchers say

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Discriminating against someone for being fat isn't real helpful. That's something scientists have already documented for issues like depression. But a new study says it also seems to make people gain weight.

"Rather than motivating individuals to lose weight, weight discrimination increases risk for obesity," the researchers wrote in an article released Wednesday in the journal PLOS One.

It seems logical that calling someone names — or worse — for being fat would discourage them from taking part in gym class or other physical activities, and that happens, the researchers said. They said such discrimination seems also to lead to "coping behaviors including problematic eating."

The researchers from the Florida State University College of Medicine looked at 6,157 people from the nationally representative Health and Retirement Study in 2006 and 2010 to see what happened both to people who already were obese and to others who said they faced discrimination for their weight.

Participants who experienced weight discrimination were about 2.5 times more likely to be obese by the follow-up survey and participants who were obese in 2006 were three times more likely to still be so in 2010, the researchers wrote.

They said that other forms of discrimination — gender or racial, for instance — were unrelated to risk of obesity over the four years.

The participants were classified as obese or not obese at the start of the study, based on a dividing line of a body mass index of 30. Of the 4,193 who were not obese in 2006, 357 became so by the follow-up. Discrimination was measured by the participants' ratings of everyday experiences and attributing them to personal characteristics such as weight, gender, age or disability.

"There is robust evidence that internalizing weight-based stereotypes, teasing and stigmatizing experiences are associated with more frequent binge eating," the researchers wrote. There also may be physiological mechanisms at work, as the body reacts to the stress of discrimination, they said.

Creative approaches are needed to combat obesity, they wrote.