Study finds stigma regarding weight loss may be overblown

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This is an image of a weight scale. Credit: CDC/Debora Cartagena

A qualitative study from North Carolina State University finds that most people who have lost a lot of weight don't perceive themselves as being "judged" because they used to be overweight or obese - which contradicts earlier research that people were still stigmatized even after reaching a healthy weight.

Previous research found that people judge thin individuals more harshly if they know that those individuals used to be overweight - for example, judging them to be less attractive or lazier.

"I wanted to know whether people who have lost weight did experience this sort of 'residual stigma,' and how they navigated that issue," says Lynsey Romo, an assistant professor of communication at NC State and author of a paper describing the work. "Specifically, I looked at how and what these people chose to share about their weight loss."

For this study, Romo conducted in-depth interviews with 17 men and 13 women. All of the study participants self-identified as having a normal weight, but had previously been overweight or obese. The average weight loss for study participants was 76.4 pounds.

"I found that an overwhelming number of participants had not perceived any residual stigma related to their weight loss; most felt the response to their weight loss was very positive," Romo says.

"Most study participants were extremely open about their weight loss, for different reasons," Romo says. "Some wanted to try to inspire others who were trying to lose weight, some disclosed their experience in order to build relationships by sharing personal information, and others felt that talking about their weight loss publicly made them feel more accountable and helped them keep the weight off."

However, a few study participants were reluctant to talk about their weight loss.

One reason for this was because they didn't want to be seen as boastful or "holier than thou." And for a small minority of participants, there was a fear of residual stigma: that they would be viewed negatively if others found out they had been overweight.

"Based on this work, the residual stigma discussed in earlier research may be overstated," Romo says. "Or, at least, most people who have lost weight don't perceive a biased response in their day-to-day interactions.

"Everyone needs to make his or her own decisions, but this research suggests that most people should feel comfortable talking about their weight loss experiences."

The paper, "How Formerly Overweight and Obese Individuals Negotiate Disclosure of Their Weight Loss," is published in the journal *Health Communication*.

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