

The clear message on promoting body positivity

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Public health campaigns that challenge weight stigma and promote body positivity can boost the health and well-being for people of all body sizes, according to a University of Queensland study.

UQ School of Psychology Ph.D. scholar Joanne Rathbone has led a project which examined how different public health messages affect people's behaviors.

"Public health messages often encourage weight-loss and focus on the risks that [excess weight](#) might pose to health, which can be stigmatizing," Ms Rathbone said.

"We looked at how alternative ways of framing public health messages affected people, and compared these outcomes with those from typical weight-loss messages.

"The alternative messages we tested either did not mention weight, explicitly targeted people of all body sizes without focusing on weight-loss, or challenged weight stigma and encouraged body positivity and size acceptance.

"We examined how these different public health messages affected people's perceptions of weight stigma, their motivation to engage in healthy behaviors like eating fruits and vegetables and exercising, and unhealthy behaviors that are associated with disordered eating like skipping meals or purging.

"We also asked people about their body satisfaction and self-esteem after viewing these messages."

Ms Rathbone said the alternative messages did not affect everyone equally.

"They affected health behaviors and well-being differently depending on the actual or perceived weight of the audience," she said.

"Removing mention of weight from the message only had a [positive impact](#) for people with a lower weight.

"Messages that targeted people of all body sizes without focusing on weight-loss increased higher-weight people's motivation to engage in healthy behaviors.

"For lower-weight people, these messages made them feel less satisfied with their bodies.

"Messages that challenged weight stigma and encouraged body positivity and size acceptance had a predominantly positive effect on psychological well-being for people of all body sizes.

"However these messages also reduced motivation for healthy behaviors that are often associated with weight-loss, and reduced [body](#) satisfaction for [lower-weight](#) people."

Ms Rathbone said [public health campaigns](#) needed to move away from focusing on weight-loss and should avoid using weight-stigmatizing content.

"Past research has indicated time and time again that public health messages that focus on weight-loss and use weight-stigmatizing content are unlikely to be effective at encouraging healthy behaviors," she said.

"In fact, the evidence suggests that these messages can actually be harmful to people's health and well-being.

"There are alternative non-stigmatizing ways in which we can frame public [health](#) messages but there is no one-size-fits-all approach.

"Careful consideration needs to be given to the weight-related framing of [public health messages](#), based on the goals that these messages are trying to achieve and the [target audience](#)."

The study is published in *Journal of Health Psychology*, and was co-authored by Professor Jolanda Jetten and Dr. Tegan Cruwys.

More information: Joanne A Rathbone et al. Non-stigmatising alternatives to anti-obesity public health messages: Consequences for health behaviour and well-being, *Journal of Health Psychology* (2021). [DOI: 10.1177/1359105321999705](#)

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