

Joint Statement: Response to The Times article “Fat shaming is the only way to beat obesity crisis”

This joint statement is in response to The Times article “[Fat shaming is the only way to beat obesity crisis](#)” by Matthew Parris, 28th October 2022.

We were appalled to read the article published by The Times that encourages further stigma and discrimination towards people living with obesity. Stigma and discrimination towards people living with obesity is pervasive both in the [UK and across the world](#). People living with obesity experience stigma and discrimination across many settings of society including at [home, in schools and education settings, workplaces, and in healthcare](#). If stigma towards people living with obesity leads to a reduction in weight, which is the premise of Parris’s article, then this would have already occurred given the widespread nature of weight stigma and discrimination. By contrast, alongside the increasing prevalence of obesity has been a concomitant rise in weight stigma.

There is also substantial scientific evidence that experiences of weight stigma and discrimination have a negative impact on people living with obesity, and thus the stance that stigmatising people can lead to a reduction in weight is a misconception that is ill-aligned to scientific evidence. Research has shown that experiences of weight stigma and discrimination are associated with mental and physical health decrements including but not limited to [increased depression](#), [body image concerns](#), [reduced self-esteem](#) and [increased cardio-metabolic risk factors](#). Research has also reported that experiences of weight stigma are associated with increased risk of [self-harming and mortality](#). These detrimental experiences have a maladaptive impact with an increased risk of [disordered eating behaviour](#), [reduced physical activity](#) and [avoidance of healthcare environments](#).

Parris also compares obesity - a chronic, multifactorial, relapsing, progressive condition with [biological, genetic, psychological, environmental and societal causes](#) – with smoking or drink driving – which are both behaviours and are not comparable with obesity. This comparison and indeed, the assumption from this article that experiencing stigma can lead to change and is completely within an individual’s control, contradicts the wealth of empirical evidence. Not only is it contrary to the [evidence base](#), but research demonstrates that beliefs that obesity is within an individual’s control are associated with stigmatising attitudes towards people living with obesity.

Parris is incorrect in attributing the fall in smoking rates to stigma. Whilst attitudes towards smoking have changed within society, there have also been widespread changes to both UK law and policy including [restrictions on smoking](#) in public and workplaces, [increased taxation](#) and [advertising bans](#), which have arguably been the key factors in the reduction of smoking in the UK.

Finally, and of concern, is that Parris appears to openly encourage stigma towards people living with obesity, and in doing so, is inciting hatred and discrimination. The National Union of Journalists [codes of ethics](#) indicate that material should not lead to hatred or discrimination, yet this article openly calls for increased stigmatisation of an already marginalised group. Furthermore, the article also fails to meet several of the Clauses 1 (accuracy), 3 (harassment) and 12 (discrimination) of the [Editor’s Code of Practice](#) from the Independent Press Standards Organisation.

This article reflects the tone and content of media reporting on obesity. Indeed, there are continuous [newspaper and media coverage that stigmatises people living with obesity](#). This statement is not only to highlight the highly inaccurate and potentially dangerous impact that this article may have, but to add to the [continued calls](#) for media to end the stigmatising portrayal of people living with obesity, and to ensure that information is both accurate and respectful.

Authors

1. Dr Stuart W. Flint, School of Psychology, University of Leeds, Leeds, West Yorkshire LS2 9JU, United Kingdom
2. Dr Adrian Brown, UCL Centre for Obesity Research, University College London, London, Greater London, United Kingdom
3. Professor Rachel Batterham OBE, UCL Centre for Obesity Research, University College London, London, Greater London, United Kingdom

Organisations supporting this letter:

1. Association for the Study of Obesity
2. British Dietetics Association
3. Obesity Specialist Group of the British Dietetic Association
4. British Obesity and Metabolic Surgery Society
5. Obesity UK
6. Obesity Empowerment Network
7. All About Obesity
8. European Coalition for People Living with Obesity
9. European Association for the Study of Obesity
10. World Obesity Federation
11. Obesity Health Alliance