Part II. Experimenting with Opinions about Obese Men

Repeat the phases and steps in part I, this time focusing on the image of an obese man.

Self-Awareness Activity 15.2   What Do You Know about Obese Americans?

Purpose: To see what you know about the issues covered in this chapter

Instructions: Determine whether you think the following statements are basically true or false—and why. The answers will emerge in this chapter, and the summary at the end of the chapter focuses on these issues. Repeat this exercise after you finish reading the chapter.

1. People become obese only because they overeat.
2. Anyone with sufficient willpower can lose excess weight.
3. People become excessively overweight because of personality problems.
4. Obese people have jolly personalities.
5. Obese employees are likely to cost employers more in health care and sick leave than employees who diet to keep their weight low.
6. Being overweight has no significant effect on career success.
7. Activists prefer to use the ADA as legal protection from obese discrimination.
8. Obese persons are protected by law from workplace discrimination.
9. Extremely overweight people generally make poor workers.

Myths and Realities

Most of the myths and stereotypes about obese persons are either false or distorted, partial truths. In fact, most stem from people's discomfort with obesity based on their fear of becoming obese themselves. It's true that becoming overweight is usually a matter of eating too much of the wrong foods and not getting enough exercise—and overweight has become a major U.S. health problem in recent years. However, for persons who are obese—beyond mere overweight—the situation is usually more complex than the simple energy-in, energy-out ratio. Those who become obese early in life usually have genetic, hormonal, metabolic, or similar problems. In fact half the children who are obese after age 6 remain that way their entire lives, as do 75% of those who are obese as teenagers, according to the New England Journal of Medicine.

Regardless of the reasons why certain employees are overweight or obese, they all have the right to privacy, respect, fair treatment, and reasonable accommodation on the job. As their co-worker or manager, your job is not to "cure" their weight problem.

Your job is to give them the support they need in order to perform their tasks effectively and contribute to the organization. This means you must get to know what it's like to be an obese person. The first step is to understand the myths and stereotypes they deal with every day. To bridge the divisive walls these myths hold in place, you must know what they are, know other realities that balance or refute them, and move beyond myths to a more realistic view of obese persons. The goal here is to appreciate each person's unique value and to strengthen unity as one cohesive team, organization, and culture.

Myth #1. People become obese when they overeat and don't exercise

For most people, the cause of overweight and obesity is eating too much for the energy expended, resulting in retaining fat. However, this is the most basic and simplistic way of viewing the issue. In fact, people who become obese typically consume no more calories

per day than other people, according to 19 out of 20 studies on this topic. To get down to normal weight range and stay there, an obese person must eat excruciatingly less than a normal-weight person, probably for life. In addition, greatly overweight people have a complex physical situation. Large size probably *causes* the inactivity of greatly over-weight persons, and not the other way around. In 1993 a National Institutes of Health panel wrote that evidence increasingly indicates that overweight is not a simple disorder of willpower but a complex disorder of energy metabolism. The experts concluded that diets almost always are disasters, with dieters regaining the weight they had lost.

Myth #2. People are overweight because they lack willpower

This very basic myth says that individuals should be able to control themselves, and there is something morally wrong with them if they keep giving in to fattening foods. It says that being overweight means being a weak-willed slob, leading to related stereo-types of "lazy" and "stupid." It also ignores the "obesity gene" factor.

Willpower Doesn't Work in the Long Run

Choice and "willpower" are certainly an element in weight gain prevention for the average person. Since we have seen plenty of people who decided to lose weight and then did it within a few weeks, we believe that willpower is the key. What we ignore is the fact for virtually everyone who is significantly overweight gains it all back within a few months or years. Dieting is hard on the body and the psyche—and it is ineffective 95% of the time (Martin 2007).

When Martin Seligman, director of clinical psychology at the University of Penn-sylvania, reviewed the dieting studies, the best result he could find was one in which 13% of the dieters maintained their losses after three years. About 90% gain all or almost all their weight back within four or five years, many within a few months. It may be that the 10% who succeed over the long term 1) watch every bite they eat, 2) are more or less obsessed with watching their weight, and 3) were close to their natural weight anyway and would weigh only a few pounds more if they had never dieted

The "Weight Gene" Can Mutate

Scientists at the Rockefeller Institute in New York have discovered a genetic mutation they think is responsible for at least some types of obesity (Friedman 1995). As a result of this "faulty" gene, the body's fat stores don't tell the brain how big or small they are, so the brain may not be able to properly regulate appetite, food intake, and/or food metabolism in ways that in turn regulate the body's fat stores.

Myth #3. Obese people just need to get on the right diet

After years of reviewing the scientific literature on dieting and weight loss, Martin Seligman (1994) concluded that

- Dieting may make overweight worse, not better.
- Dieting can have negative side effects, such as repeated failure and hopeless-ness, depression, fatigue, bulimia, and anorexia.

Long-term change requires new eating and activity patterns that constitute a life-style, not a "diet." People who keep the weight off think of the new pattern as a life-long one. Even then, obese persons may not be able to get it off or keep it off.

Myth #4. Being obese poses health risks; being too thin does not

Seligman's review led to less-firm conclusions about the health risks of overweight, but he does suggest that underweight is clearly associated with a substantially greater risk of death. Staying 20% or more underweight, as virtually all high-fashion models do, can over time greatly reduce stamina, impair the immune system, and lead to other types of health problems. More on the risks of obesity to health and long life later.

Myth #5. *Obese people are less productive workers*

Most jobs don't require much physical activity, which means that obese persons could be just as productive as others in such jobs. Activists concede that obese people are not appropriate for all jobs, such as those performed in tight quarters or those requiring certain physical abilities. Airline attendants and ballet dancers are examples. But for most jobs obese persons should not be disqualified from applying. They should have a chance to take whatever physical tests are required. If the job requires running down a track every day, let *all* the applicants show that they can run the track. In addition, employers should consider making reasonable accommodation to obese persons, as they do to persons with disabilities.

Myth #6. *Poor persons are more likely to be obese*

High protein, low fat meals generally cost more than high carbohydrate, high fat ones—whether the ingredients are purchased at a grocery store or the meal is bought at a fast food chain. The food budget obviously has an impact on diet.

Still, the idea that poor persons are more likely to be fat implies that they are less informed and less in control of their lives. In fact, it's more likely that obese persons make less money because they are obese than that being poor leads to a higher incidence of obesity. The pay gap is a major workplace issue that we will discuss in detail later.

Whether the issue is weight, height, attractiveness, skin color, or other aspect of appearance, your goal is to learn more about experiences of various types of people. And the ultimate goal is to move beyond myths and stereotypes to working productively and profitably together.

How Does Fat Prejudice Affect People?

Perhaps the cruelest aspect of obesity prejudice is that people tend to believe the obese could become slender if they simply summoned adequate willpower and self-discipline, in other words, character. The devaluing of obese persons often has the effect of invading their privacy, as well as limiting their job opportunities. Obese persons, especially women, face workplace discrimination and prejudice across the entire employment spectrum—from getting hired, to getting paid, to holding onto the job, to being offered opportunities to get ahead, to getting promoted (Fikkan 2005, Rothblum 1990, Roehling 1999). More about this in the section on legal workplace rights.

Research indicates that obese job applicants and employees face the following types of discrimination as compared with leaner employees:

- Applicants are seen as having more negative work-related attributes (Polinko 2001).
- Trainees receive more negative expectations from trainers, and employees receive more negative evaluations and limited opportunities (Jasper 1990).
- Salespeople are rated as being less punctual, enthusiastic, productive, competent, well-mannered, and trustworthy than average-sized salespeople (Jasper 1990, Larkin 1979, Zemank 1998).
- Salespeople are assigned less important, less desirable sales territories (Ballizi 1998).
- Managers are rated as less desirable and worthy of recognition (Decker 1987).
- Salary differences are significant, especially for women (Pagan 1997, Register 1990, Sargent 1994).

The Message: You're Inferior

Obese women say that little glances and comments they receive are often more damaging than overt discrimination, wearing away at their self-esteem and confidence,