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# Confronting Weight Bias

Weight-based harassment and discrimination are real—and getting worse. Acknowledging and addressing the issue is the first step toward eliminating it.

December 4, 2023 | [Matt Gonzales](#)

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When confronting weight-based bias and harassment in the workplace, there's no shortage of personal testimonies. Take, for example, Anna Burns.



The stereotyping continued as an adult. Once, her chief people officer openly commented about not wanting to eat a cupcake because she was going to the beach that weekend, “implying that if she ate the cupcake, she would look fat, like me,” Burns said. After it was explained to the manager that what she said had caused Burns harm, the individual did not feel the need to express remorse or take accountability.

"I've experienced weight discrimination across my lifetime, throughout different years, cities and industries," says Burns, a diversity, equity and inclusion (DE&I) consultant in Bridgeport, Conn. "Because it's so accepted and ingrained in our culture, anti-fat bias is the norm, and in my experience, no time, place or space is immune from it entirely."

Burns isn't alone.

[More than 40 percent of U.S. adults](#) report experiencing weight-related stigma at some point in their lives. In the workplace, this can take the form of teasing, taunting and microaggressions. Research has found that as obesity rates have risen in the U.S., so too has weight discrimination. With nearly 1 in 3 U.S. adults classified as overweight, and more than 2 in 5 meeting the clinical definition of obesity, it follows that a significant number of people in today's workforce are likely to face weight-based workplace discrimination, potentially harming their job opportunities and career advancement.

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According to recent SHRM research on the state of weight discrimination in the workplace, 72 percent of U.S. employees who have experienced unfair treatment at work due to their weight say it has made them feel like quitting their jobs, and 11 percent of HR professionals say an applicant's weight has played a role in decisions their organizations have made during the job application process.

"Weight discrimination in employment has been documented for several decades, so this is not a new problem," explains Rebecca Puhl, a professor at the University of Connecticut and deputy director of the university's Rudd Center for Food Policy and Health. Puhl has conducted research on weight-based discrimination for more than 20 years, and she has published more than 180 studies on the topic.

"[Weight discrimination] can be present in different ways in the workplace, including unfair hiring practices, such as refusing to hire qualified job applicants because of their body size; fewer promotions; stigma or stereotypes from co-workers and supervisors; and wrongful job termination," Puhl says. She notes that such discrimination can also be manifested in more subtle, difficult-to-prove ways at work, such as assigning office chairs that cannot accommodate employees with larger bodies or failing to provide accessible bathroom stalls.



is another challenge that larger workers face—but only if they are female. Just a 10 percent increase in body mass can result in a 6 percent reduction in salary for women, according to [research cited by NPR](#). Conversely, the report showed that overweight men don't seem to face a similar weight bias—in some cases, white males seen as overweight - actually earn more.

When a woman

"becomes overweight," she is less likely to land a public-facing role in a better-paying, white-collar job, according to [research by Vanderbilt University](#). Women who are considered medically obese or morbidly obese are more likely to work in low-paying, labor-intensive roles in industries such as home health, food preparation and child care.

# 15% of U.S. workers say others at work have made false assumptions about them because of their weight at some point in their career.

Source: *Exploring Age and Weight Discrimination in the Workplace*, SHRM, 2023.

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Ingrained in our culture, anti-fat bias is the norm, and in my experience, no time, place or space is immune from it entirely.

ANNA BURNS



## Discrimination at Work

Sean McLean's experience of weight discrimination in the workplace began with a jacket.

In 2018, McLean was a college student and worked as a stocker for a grocery store in Boston. Company policy required each employee to wear a store-themed jacket while on the clock. However, none of the jackets were big enough to accommodate McLean's size.

He tried working without the jacket, but his managers told him he would be sent home if it happened again. They sternly reminded him that employees must present themselves "in a certain way" in front of customers.

McLean acquiesced to wearing the biggest size available, despite his discomfort. For weeks, he asked managers if they had ordered a bigger size for him. They assured him that they planned to purchase a larger jacket. They never did.

"I was finally told that they just didn't order that size because it would have to be a special order," McLean says. "I got the feeling that my managers never really cared about my comfort. I felt like I lost my individuality working there, as if I didn't matter."

Weight discrimination can be so ingrained in workplace culture that it can even supersede rank. Despite his managerial status, Ryan, a former content manager in Orlando, Fla., who requested anonymity for this story, was openly taunted by his co-workers about his body size for years. He says his size made his direct reports not take him as seriously. They would consistently undermine him, make snide remarks about his appearance and take extended breaks throughout the workday.

Ryan noted that employees didn't treat managers who were smaller in size the way they treated him.

"Employees whom I managed would joke around all the time about my weight," says Ryan. "I just rolled with the punches. But some days it was tough to hear. I'm a confident person, but when people

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Obese employees are more likely to be perceived as:

**LAZY**

**27%**

**UNMOTIVATED**

**23%**

**UNPROFESSIONAL 17%**

Average-weight employees are more likely to be perceived as:

**HIGH-PERFORMING**

**35%**

**HARD-WORKING**

**32%**

**MOTIVATED**

**31%**

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Source: *Exploring Age and Weight Discrimination in the Workplace*, SHRM, 2023.

talk about how big you are all the time, it gets to you. That's textbook weight discrimination. Many obese people like me suffer in silence."

## Few, but Mounting, Legal Protections

Thus far, Michigan is the only state that has passed a law declaring weight a category that is protected from discrimination. State legislatures in Massachusetts, New Jersey, New York and Vermont are considering their own legislation to prohibit weight discrimination. But while weight-based bias remains legal in 49 states, several cities are making moves to end this practice:

- New York City has enacted an ordinance amending its Human Rights Law to ban employment discrimination based on a person's height and weight.



encompass weight. —M.G.

## The Negative Impact of Weight Stigma

SHRM research found that obese employees are more likely to be perceived as lazy (27 percent), unmotivated (23 percent) and unprofessional (17 percent), while average-weight employees are more likely to be perceived as high-performing (35 percent), hard-working (32 percent) and motivated (31 percent).

McLean says his early experiences in the workplace contributed to a negative self-image. "I think at that time, I felt I deserved this to some degree, as if it was my fault for being the size I was, and that my employer, or anyone else, shouldn't have to cater to me because I'm overweight," he says. "It made me embarrassed to look how I did, almost uncomfortable in my own skin."

It's common for people with bigger bodies to be blamed for their weight. A widespread misperception is that stigmatization is a justifiable way to motivate obese individuals to lose weight. But multiple studies demonstrate that weight stigma makes people more susceptible to anxiety, depression, low self-esteem and other mental health challenges that contribute to poor physical health.

"The unfortunate truth is that 'fatphobia' is deeply ingrained in our culture," says Ally Duvall, a body image program manager at San Diego-based Equip Health, which provides virtual treatments for eating disorders. People who experience weight discrimination are also at an increased risk of developing a negative body image, worsening their relationships with food and resulting in disordered eating behaviors, Duvall explains.

"Even though it can feel uncomfortable and countercultural to challenge our societal fatphobia, weight-based discrimination is unacceptable, harmful and has no business being in the workplace," she says.

[Researchers at Harvard University](#) found that experiencing weight stigma can result in poor metabolic health and greater weight gain. Individuals who are overweight may cope with the stigma by increasing their alcohol and substance use and avoiding health care settings or social encounters.

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# 72%

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who have  
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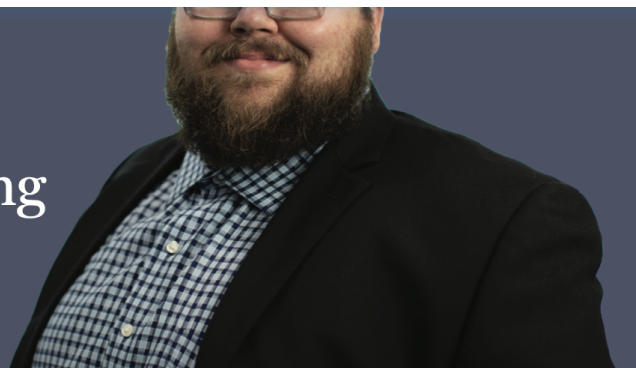
Source: *Exploring Age and Weight  
Discrimination in the Workplace*, SHRM, 2023.





I got the feeling that my managers never really cared about my comfort. I felt like I lost my individuality working there, as if I didn't matter.'

SEAN MCLEAN



## Health Care Implications

"You see weight discrimination in hiring and in determinations of promotions and salary," says Patricia Nece, a retired federal employee who served as the chairperson of the board of directors with the Obesity Action Coalition, a nonprofit based in Tampa, Fla., that actively fights weight bias, stigma and discrimination.

"There's also a third area: the health care that is offered to people that want to do something about their weight through employee health plans," Nece says. "It's not the same as anyone with another type of disease."

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Nece encourages business leaders to review their health insurance policies to ensure they're providing options for employees who wish to address their weight. She says health care plans should include anti-obesity medications, which employers have been increasingly considering in recent months. Nece also says these plans should include intensive behavioral therapy and nutritional counseling.

Given the association of excess weight with specific health issues, there has been talk of extending to overweight and obese individuals the protections afforded under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA).

A disability under the ADA is a condition that substantially limits a person's ability to perform one or more major life activities. Under the ADA and most state laws, obesity is not typically considered a disability. However, weight can be associated with conditions that do qualify as a disability or impairment, says Joseph Schmitt, an attorney with Nilan Johnson Lewis in Minneapolis.

Schmitt says weight has been mentioned as an actual or perceived disability under the ADA for many years. "That said," he adds, "most plaintiffs' firms and government agencies like the [U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission] have not previously made it a point of emphasis.





concept under the ADA: the importance of conducting a case-by-case analysis of whether the particular employee's specific condition constitutes a disability," Schmitt explains. "Employers must address these issues on an

**11%**  
of human resource professionals say obese employees at their organization are not always treated as fairly as average-weight employees.

Source: *Exploring Age and Weight Discrimination in the Workplace*, SHRM, 2023.

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individualized basis and refrain from cookie-cutter treatments."



in the interactive process with employees who suggest they may need some type of an accommodation."

**'Most people have no idea about the many challenges larger-bodied people face in every phase of our lives.'**

PATRICIA NECE



## Proactive Steps

To further combat bias and stigma associated with weight, Duvall suggests company leaders:

- Implement no-tolerance policies that prohibit weight discrimination.
- Train hiring managers to recognize weight-related biases during the selection process so candidates are fairly evaluated.
- Remove weight-loss-based wellness programs, which can lead to unhealthy weight-loss habits.
- Communicate the implications of "diet talk" in the break room.
- Ensure there is adequate seating and space to accommodate people with larger body sizes.

Employers that proactively address weight-based discrimination in the workplace and adopt a no-tolerance policy toward it can make it easier for their employees of all sizes to take advantage of development opportunities and succeed in their careers, uninhibited by the fallout of harassment and discrimination.

Employee education is a good place to begin. Nece, who has been obese since childhood, says, "Most people have no idea about the many challenges larger-bodied people face in every phase of our lives." Shining a light on that is a solid start.

*Matt Gonzales is an online writer/editor for SHRM who focuses on inclusion, equity and diversity.*



## Drugs?

"Miracle" weight-loss drugs have long been hawked far and wide as easy treatments for excess weight and obesity, often attracting acolytes who testify to their effectiveness in ads that plaster media outlets. But in the absence of any evidence-based medical claim to their effectiveness, these drugs have been largely dismissed by the mainstream health care providers who would prescribe them and the insurers that would pay for them.

That may change soon, due to the influx of evidence suggesting that diabetes drugs already on the market may be clinically effective for taking off and keeping off weight. For now, employers do not widely cover weight-loss drugs. Data from the International Foundation of Employee Benefit Plans (IFEBP) found that less than a quarter (22 percent) of employers cover any prescription drug specifically for weight loss. But in an October 2023 survey by Accolade, a provider of employer health care programs, 43 percent of employers said they intend to offer such coverage in 2024.

The FDA approved Ozempic in 2017 for the treatment of Type 2 diabetes. In 2021, the agency approved Wegovy, a drug with a higher dose of the active ingredient in Ozempic (semaglutide), to treat obesity. More recently, another diabetes drug, Mounjaro (tirzepatide), has been gaining attention for its potential to decrease the weight of its users. While Ozempic and Mounjaro are not currently indicated for weight loss by the FDA, they are being prescribed off-label for that purpose.

That leaves employers with the decision of whether to cover such drugs for their workers. They're not cheap: [Wegovy costs about \\$1,400 a month](#) when insurance doesn't cover it, and it may need to be taken continually to keep the weight off, meaning a long-term commitment for employers—and a much higher price tag.

"Employers are considering it and taking into consideration what their employees are asking for," says Julie Stich, vice president of content at IFEBP. "But they are concerned about the price. A lot are saying, 'Maybe we wait a little bit longer to see how effective these drugs are in the long term.' "

The question of whether to cover such drugs is contributing to a larger conversation about how to address weight loss in the workplace.

Office-based weight-loss initiatives have historically been limited to physical wellness challenges—such as step challenges, biometric screenings or even weight-loss competitions. But in recent years, there has been more recognition that obesity is a disease, which is changing the conversation employers are having about how to address it.



There are significant advantages to helping employees shed some pounds. By supporting workers who want to lose weight, employers may also help mitigate serious health conditions, such as high blood pressure and Type 2 diabetes. Obesity is a significant contributor to the cost of managing these and other weight-related conditions. A quarter of U.S. employers said obesity has the largest impact on overall health care costs, according to 2022 data from IFEBP.

"If the employer wants to help manage weight, that might make a positive impact on some of the resulting health conditions," Stich says. "And I think in the workplace, we should get beyond any stigma surrounding weight and look to provide support, solutions and understanding. We should look at it when we talk about whole-person well-being." —Barbara A. Gabriel

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