



Fatphobia

An all-too-common reality in Quebec

The way we treat ourselves and others within our family unit, on the street, at work, at school, in medical contexts, in the media, and in all other areas of our lives has a great impact on our health and well-being. Human relationships based on kindness, mutual understanding, and mutual assistance contribute to personal growth and fulfillment. On the other hand, relationships tinged with negative stereotypes, devaluation of others, and discriminatory behaviour can be particularly harmful. Putting demeaning labels on differences that exist between people is called stigmatization.

“Stigma stops people from reaching their full potential. And we as a society are poorer for that.”

– **Dr. Theresa Tam,**
Chief Public Health Officer of
Canada¹.

Weight-based prejudice

Stigma manifests itself in different contexts and targets various identities, characteristics, attitudes, practices, and health conditions¹. Stigma based on body size is called fatphobia. It feeds on stereotypes and negative prejudices which target people* whose weight is considered to be «too high». For example, one of these prejudices consists of thinking that fat people* lack the will to change their lifestyle habits. In reality, fatphobia is often rooted in a lack of awareness and education about the complex factors that influence body weight².

More than half of Quebecers think that fat people are not fit, don't do enough physical activity, and eat too much and poorly³.

*Did you know?
Most people,
regardless of their
weight, don't do
enough physical
activity.*

¹ The terms “fat persons” and “fat people” are used to refer to people considered to be overweight. The adjective “fat” is preferred for its neutrality in describing the corpulence of individuals..

Fatphobia also feeds on the conflation often made between thinness and health. As a result, many people wrongly believe that body weight accurately reflects a person's level of control over their lifestyle habits, which leads to negative views about fat people¹.

37% of Quebecers believe that fat people have poor self-control³.

18% of Quebecers believe that fat people are lazy³.

These stereotypes about fat people are the basis of discriminatory behaviours that influence the quality of life of those targeted and create significant health inequities¹.

Fatphobia is an all-too-common reality in Quebec society, which is not without repercussions. Indeed, its various manifestations have negative consequences on the physical and mental health of the people who experience them^{2,4,5}.

Understanding fatphobia and its impact on health and well-being

Intrapersonal fatphobia

Intrapersonal fatphobia refers to the internalization of weight stigma. It can be experienced by everyone, regardless of body size^{2,6}. Common manifestations include the (irrational) fear of gaining weight and the tendency to blame one's weight when negative events happen⁶. Intrapersonal fatphobia can even cause some people to believe they deserve to be discriminated against and treated negatively because of their weight⁴.

In Quebec, seven out of ten women and six out of ten men think they are too fat⁷.

The social acceptability of weight stigma tends to encourage the internalization of fatphobia, which is associated with a desire to control one's weight at all costs⁵.

Over the last 12 months, 60% of Quebecers have made efforts to lose or maintain their weight⁷.

This internalization leads to unhealthy behaviours motivated by excessive preoccupation with weight. This occurs when a person's preoccupation with their weight is so great that it becomes harmful to their physical and mental health¹⁰. This is notably reflected by the use of weight-loss products, services and programs (e.g., laxatives, diuretics, appetite suppressants, fat burners, restrictive diets, excessive exercise, etc.)⁵. However, these weight-loss solutions pose a serious risk to physical and mental health.

Interpersonal fatphobia

Interpersonal fatphobia is mostly experienced by fat people. It manifests itself through mockery or denigration of individuals due to their body size⁶.

One in four Quebecers has experienced discrimination based on their weight, whether in personal relationships, in stores, at work, when looking for housing or in the health system³.

The percentage of Quebecers who have experienced weight discrimination rises to 44% among people with a body mass index (BMI) greater than 30 kg/m². Furthermore, 37% of Quebecers report having been victims of inappropriate remarks or comments regarding their weight³. The most frequently cited consequences of these remarks are a reduction in self-esteem (67%) and a desire to undertake means of losing weight (23%)³.

Are you shocked by these numbers? To get rid of our prejudices, we must first become aware of them.

*Did you know?
The vast majority of people who lose weight through dieting end up regaining all the weight.^{8,9}*



*Did you know?
Adopting lifestyle habits
that promote well-being and
health is beneficial
for everyone, regardless
of weight.*

Institutional fatphobia

Institutional fatphobia, which stems from cultural and social norms, is a reflection of how society treats fat people⁶. It manifests itself, for example, in fat people having difficulty finding clothing that fits them, the absence of suitable seats in public spaces and the lack of medical equipment suitable for all weights. Thus, fat people are restricted in their ability to obtain services and participate in leisure activities.

Institutional fatphobia is also reflected in the media. Fat people are often portrayed pejoratively on television, in movies, in newspapers, and on social media, thus reinforcing the desire to conform to the social norm of thinness. In the case of women, this pressure is intensified by the specific expectations that society places on them⁶.

Fatphobia is also present in the healthcare system as medical fatphobia, one of its most pernicious manifestations^{2,6}. Indeed, people whose BMI exceeds a certain threshold are often labelled as having a medical condition, regardless of what they are actually experiencing². Moreover, the use of BMI itself has become increasingly controversial because it does not directly measure the presence of fat in the body, nor does it accurately indicate the presence of health problems. Many fat people have been denouncing the stigmatizing attitudes of certain health professionals towards them. For example, certain professionals may choose to focus on a person's weight rather than addressing the reason they are consulting. Such experiences can lead fat people to avoid health services, delaying the diagnosis and treatment of medical conditions².

Compared to people with a BMI between 18.5 and 25 kg/m², people with a BMI greater than 30 kg/m² are three times more likely to report having been victims of weight-based discrimination in the health system³.

Consequences of fatphobia on health and well-being

The various manifestations of fatphobia can have significant consequences on health and well-being, regardless of one's weights^{2,4,5,11}:

- Decreased sense of self-efficacy;
- Low self-esteem;
- Poor body image;
- Difficulties with social integration;
- Increased risk of developing eating disorders;
- Increased risk of using food as an emotional management strategy (particularly to reduce stress);
- Reluctance to use primary health care;
- Increased risk of psychological distress (e.g., symptoms of depression, anxiety, etc.);
- Weight gain, difficulty losing weight or weight fluctuation;
- Chronic stress on the body which can disrupt certain bodily functions, such as glucose metabolism and cardiovascular function;
- Barrier to the adoption of healthy lifestyle habits (e.g., reluctance to practise sports in public);
- Increased risk of mortality.



How can we act against fatphobia?

Fatphobia, whether intrapersonal, interpersonal or institutional, is omnipresent in Quebec and has negative consequences on physical and mental health. In order to reduce it, we must first become aware of our prejudices, recognize them, and act to create healthy, safe and inclusive living environments for all.

Resources

To learn more about the topic and become an agent of change, check out the following resources:

- » ÉquiLibre : equilibre.ca
- » Bien avec mon corps : bienavecmoncorps.com
- » Anorexie et boulimie Québec (ANEB) : anebquebec.com
- » Arrimage Estrie : arrimageestrie.com
- » Grossophobie.ca : grossophobie.ca
- » Rad (dossier sur le corps) : rad.ca/dossier/corps
- » Conseil du statut de la femme : csf.gouv.qc.ca/article/publicationsnum/quiz/quiz-grossophobie
- » Méfiez-vous des apparences trompeuses ! : apparencestrompeuses.ca

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For more information, contact:

Collectif Vital
514 598-8058
info@collectifvital.ca

