

POSITIVE
WEIGHT-RELATED
COMMUNICATIONS
TOOLKIT

Guide for Using Weight-Inclusive and Non-Stigmatizing Language

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Québec 

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ASSOCIATION POUR LA SANTÉ
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Guide for Using Weight-Inclusive and Non-Stigmatizing Language

This guide, as well as the other tools in the Positive Weight-Related Communications Toolkit, were developed by the *Association pour la santé publique du Québec (AS PQ)*, based on the **conclusions** of the **Quebec Provincial Working Group on Weight-Related Issues (GT PPP)**, involving the collaboration of over fifty stakeholders concerned about the health and well-being of the Quebec population. This guide is part of a broader effort to redefine the way in which weight and the issues associated with it (obesity, preoccupation with weight and fatphobia) are addressed in the public space in Quebec.

This guide provides recommendations for using weight-positive language. It is intended for health professionals, organization spokespersons, and communications professionals who wish to address weight-related issues in the public space.

Introduction

Obesity in particular and weight in general are complex subjects. Weight-related communications and interventions must consider both scientific knowledge and popular beliefs. For example, the widespread idea that we have complete control over our weight negatively influences the judgment made about fat people¹. In reality, a multitude of factors, such as genetics, socioeconomic status, lifestyle habits, mental health, taking certain medications, and many others, have a significant impact on a person's weight². And many of these factors are out of our control as individuals. In addition, weight bias and fatphobia have a negative impact on physical and mental health, regardless of a person's actual weight³.

How to publicly address weight-related issues by choosing appropriate terminology is particularly important. In fact, messages disseminated through the media (news channels, radio, print media, social networks, etc.) often constitute the primary source of information for entire segments of the population and greatly influence behaviour, particularly in relation to health⁴.

Thus, this guide includes recommendations for choosing appropriate terminology to promote health while:

- Reducing the risk of fostering fatphobia and preoccupation with weight;
- Deconstructing false beliefs with respect to weight.

Context of Use

Speaking publicly about weight-related issues requires being aware of the connotation of words used, the target audience and their level of literacy, and the context of the speech. In addition, depending on their reality and their relationship with body image, target audiences can be very vulnerable to population-based messages on weight. These vulnerabilities influence their perception of weight-related discourses. For a better understanding of these issues, reading the document on **personas** is strongly recommended.

Obesity

Obesity is still largely defined by body mass index (BMI). Specifically, it refers to a BMI greater than 30 kg/m². This indicator has limitations, as it does not provide direct information about a person's health, but it can be used to follow trends at the population level. Numerous studies associate obesity with an increased risk of chronic diseases⁷.

How to approach obesity as a social phenomenon?

Obesity is a complex phenomenon, influenced by several environmental, social and individual factors. In general, it is important:

- **To add nuance:** In theory, the concept of obesity is used when an individual's weight is associated with health risks. In practice, however, the way to measure these risks is still debated in the scientific community;
- **To remain neutral:** The use of certain terms, especially if they are negative, should be avoided, as this can foster prejudice;
- **To focus on healthy lifestyle habits:** Lifestyle habits influence health, well-being and quality of life, regardless of weight (or BMI).

Examples of expressions to avoid in the public space and why they should be avoided

Examples of expressions to avoid	Justification
Burden of obesity	Presents obesity as necessarily a problem and a hardship for affected individuals and for others. Encourages the belief that people considered obese are a burden on society.
Suffering from obesity	Implies that there is necessarily suffering linked to having a body mass index greater than 30 kg/m ² .
Obesity epidemic	Describes obesity as contagious.
Morbid obesity	Associate obesity with "morbid", a pejorative adjective.

How to designate people affected by obesity?

The term “obesity” is perceived negatively by many people, because it implies that anyone with a BMI greater than 30 kg/m² is necessarily sick or must necessarily lose weight to be in better health. However, the link between weight and health may vary, based on a multitude of factors. It is important to be aware of this word’s connotation when using it on a population-based level.

Proposed expressions and reasons to use them

People considered* to be obese	<ul style="list-style-type: none">→ When a person has a BMI that exceeds 30 kg/m², they are considered obese.→ The word “considered” draws attention to the social and above all biomedical construction of obesity.→ This expression speaks for both the medical field (concept of obesity), the social sciences (idea of societal construction) and the population in general
People considered* to be overweight	
Fat people	<ul style="list-style-type: none">→ This expression can be used in a neutral way to refer to people with a large build→ It is advisable to accompany its use with an explanatory note**.

* The word “considered” can also be replaced by “judged” or “perceived”

** Example: The term “fat” is used here in a neutral way to describe a person’s body size

Fatphobia

Fatphobia refers to stigmatization and discrimination against fat people. Many devaluing prejudices and stereotypes about weight contribute to this phenomenon.

How to avoid fostering fatphobia?

In general, it is important:

- **To explain the factors that influence weight in a nuanced manner:** Physical activity and diet are not the only factors to consider when explaining why weight is increasing among the population. Focusing only on these two elements puts excessive responsibility on individuals. In reality, several factors are beyond our control, such as genetics and socioeconomic environments.
- **To choose appropriate terminology:** Avoid negative adjectives or terms that induce judgment. A high weight is not something negative in itself or a condition caused by a “lack of willpower”. It is possible to be overweight and still be healthy; just as a thin person can be unhealthy.
- **To choose respectful images in communications:** Sensationalist images that seek to provoke negative feelings (e.g., shock, disgust, fear) can convey stigmatizing stereotypes and prejudices with regard to weight.

Inclusive and respectful terms, without negative qualifying adjectives, are always recommended.

How to designate people affected by fatphobia?

Intrapersonal fatphobia, which is an internalization of weight-related prejudices and negative stereotypes, can affect anyone, regardless of weight. However, fat people are generally the most affected by interpersonal fatphobia (e.g., mocking and insults) and institutional fatphobia (e.g., refusal to hire, unsuitable urban infrastructures).

When designating people affected by fatphobia, a neutral description of corpulence can therefore be used, in the event that it is important to qualify the person's physique:

- Thin people
- Fat people

Although thin or fat are neutral qualifying adjectives, "fat" is a term that may resonate negatively with some people, because of their personal history of fatphobia. In an individual context, it is therefore important to always ask the person which expression suits them best. In a population context, taking into account the characteristics of your target audience and remaining neutral is essential. It is therefore recommended to use the expression "fat people", accompanied by an explanation (e.g.: the term "fat" is used here in a neutral way to describe a person's body size).

Also, many fat people choose to reappropriate this expression, to counter the pathologization of fatness that is associated with the word "obesity".



Preoccupation With Weight

How to avoid excessive preoccupation with weight?

Excessive preoccupation with weight can be induced, when people are exposed to single, unrealistic standards of beauty; when negative portrayals of fat people are presented on television; when health messages position weight as the main (or even sole) factor of several diseases, without providing nuances; when weight is presented as easily controllable; or when the weight-loss industry promotes its products, services and methods^{5,6}.

To avoid causing preoccupation with weight, it is important to:

- **Emphasize that health is not just a question of weight.** Science shows that improving one's lifestyle helps reduce the risk of chronic diseases, regardless of its impact on weight. No matter a person's weight, a healthy lifestyle is always beneficial!
- **Reject standards of beauty** that perpetuate the cult of thinness in women and a muscular body in men.
- **Explain that a person has little control over their weight in the long term.** Thus, building a healthy relationship with one's appearance is essential for good physical and mental health.
- **Promote the adoption of lifestyle habits conducive to well-being and health as essential** for a positive body image and flourishing mental health.

How should we designate people who express (excessive) preoccupation with weight?

Weight preoccupation can affect anyone, regardless of weight.

A neutral description of corpulence can therefore be used, in the event that it is important to qualify the person's physique:

- Thin people
- Fat people

Healthy Lifestyle Habits

It is important to promote healthy lifestyle habits based on their benefits and not as a way to manage or lose weight. A person can be fat, even if they are active and eat healthy. Body diversity is natural. In the end, regardless of weight or state of health, feeling good about yourself, having restful sleep and a circle of people you trust, practising regular physical activity and eating healthy and balanced meals are surefire ways to improve one's quality of life.



Conclusion

We recommend using this guide and the other tools in the *Positive Weight-Related Communications Toolkit* when constructing population-based messages with respect to weight.

Weight should not be a taboo subject or cause for stigma in our society. It must be approached in a respectful and inclusive manner, so as not to harm the population's well-being.

References

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