

POSITIVE
WEIGHT-RELATED
COMMUNICATIONS
TOOLKIT

Guide for Using Weight-Inclusive and Non-Stigmatizing Visuals

In partnership with
Québec 

 **ASPQ**
ASSOCIATION POUR LA SANTÉ
PUBLIQUE DU QUÉBEC

Guide for Using Weight-Inclusive and Non-Stigmatizing Visuals

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 (ASPQ)*, based on the **conclusions** of the **Quebec Provincial Working Group on Weight-Related Issues (GTPPP)**, 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 selecting positive, non-stigmatizing visuals to illustrate weight issues. 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 people*¹. 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.

Public speeches addressing weight-related issues are often accompanied by visuals that must be selected carefully, because they also convey a message. Very often, these images feature fat people. The way in which they are represented exerts a great influence on the general population. Indeed, visuals can reinforce or reduce negative stereotypes about weight, influence a person's body image, and even have an impact on the behaviour and discourse held towards fat people⁴.

Thus, this guide makes recommendations for choosing appropriate visuals to accompany population-based messages with respect to weight.

The goal is to select photos that:

- Do not foster fatphobia or preoccupation with weight;
- Deconstruct false beliefs with respect to weight;
- Show positive representations of people, regardless of their weight;
- Present the natural diversity of bodies (e.g., ethnicity, build, etc.).

* The term "fat" is used here in a neutral way to describe a person's body size.

Context of use

Images are powerful tools when it comes to conveying a message; notably, because they are accessible to the greatest number, including people with low levels of literacy⁵. These images can be used on their own (e.g., visual report) or to illustrate an article that discusses weight. In both cases, they may be subject to different interpretations by the population, as it is also the case for the language that is used to address weight-related issues.

Thus, whether broadcast in traditional media or on social networks, the images used to illustrate weight-related issues influence the reception and understanding of the message by the public. In order to ensure that the population receives the right information, the image must convey the same message as the article it accompanies⁶. For this reason, images must be selected based on the subject (the message), the intention sought through the communication, the target audience and the broadcasting context.⁷

Recommendations

Images used to illustrate weight-related issues often feature fat people. However, some of these issues, such as excessive preoccupation with weight and fatphobia, can affect anyone, regardless of weight.

In general, when selecting images, it is important to favour^{8,9} :

- **Reality**: positive images depicting people in everyday activities;
- **Diversity**: people with different body shapes;
- **Health**: fat people (or people of all builds) engaging in healthy behaviours.

Weight-related issues are complex phenomena that affect a multitude of people in different contexts. The problem is that often, the photos that illustrate these issues oversimplify them (e.g., only fat people are shown) or focus on only one aspect (e.g., the link between eating habits and weight).

Thus, when selecting images, it is important to avoid^{10,11}:

- **Stigmatization**: images that convey negative stereotypes. For example, systematically portraying fat people engaging in behaviours that are not conducive to health;
- **Dehumanization**: images that put excessive emphasis on certain parts of the body (stomach, double chin, etc.), or that do not show the faces of the represented people;
- **Demeaning**: images that show fat people in unflattering positions or looking unkempt.

Examples

The following examples are taken from press articles and an image bank.

Images to Avoid



(Press article-2022)

Demeaning image

This kind of photo is to be avoided because the represented person is not portrayed in a positive light. Another more positive photo of the person could have been chosen to convey the desired message.

Dehumanizing image

The focus is on the person's stomach and we do not see their face: the represented person is thus reduced to their abdomen. The tape measure, often seen in images, emphasizes the fact that not all sizes are accepted equally in society.

Stigmatizing image

This photo reinforces the prejudice that only fat people are lazy and overeat ultra-processed foods.



(Press article-2020)



(Image bank-2022)

Reality

This image shows a fat person in an everyday context.



(Photo credit: Julie Artacho for *ÉquiLibre*)



(Image bank)

Recommended Images

Diversity

Weight-related issues can affect anyone. For the general public to be aware of this, it is important to represent them in all their diversity.

Health

Adopting healthy lifestyle habits, such as physical activity, is beneficial for everyone's health.



(Photo credit: Julie Artacho for *ÉquiLibre*)

Before choosing an image, photo or video to illustrate weight-related issues, consider the following questions^{12, 13, 14} :

- Could this image convey or reinforce negative stereotypes?
- Does this image respect the dignity of the represented person?
- Are there alternatives? Could another photo or image send the same message, while reducing possible biases?
- Could people be offended by seeing this image, and why?
- What message does this image send?
- What could be the possible consequences of publishing this image?
- Does this photo show a positive representation of healthy lifestyle habits?
- Does this photo present diversity in a positive manner (body types, cultural, etc.)?

Conclusion

Communicating about weight-related issues also means showing the general public the reality of these issues. Sensationalistic images that seek to provoke negative feelings (e.g., shock, disgust, fear) can convey inappropriate stereotypes about the people experiencing these issues. The risk being that the health message is distorted and becomes detrimental to the adoption of lifestyle habits conducive to health and well-being. Thus, when choosing images that illustrate weight-related issues, it is important to select those that convey a positive, inclusive and non-stigmatizing message.

References

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- 4 Savoy, S., Boxer, P. (2020). The impact of weight-biased media on weight attitudes, self-attitudes, and weight-biased behavior
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- 6 Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Visual Communication Resources. <https://www.cdc.gov/healthliteracy/developmaterials/visual-communication.html>
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