

POSITIVE  
WEIGHT-RELATED  
COMMUNICATIONS  
TOOLKIT

# Target Audiences and Their Vulnerabilities with Respect to Weight-Related Messages

In partnership with  
Québec 

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

# Target Audiences and Their Vulnerabilities with Respect to Weight-Related Messages

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.

In order to create healthy and inclusive communication tools, the ASPQ sought to know and understand the characteristics of its target audiences, particularly the people who could be the most affected by these communications.

Through four personas, this document presents **profiles of people who may be vulnerable to population-based communications on weight-related issues**.

A persona is a fictional person created based on social, affective and cognitive information, in order to be representative of a specific type of target audience<sup>1</sup>. Thus, the persona makes it possible to guide reflections and actions deployed around this target audience.

This document is intended for health professionals, organization spokespersons, and communications professionals who wish to address weight-related issues in the public space and take their audience's reality into account when creating their message.

# Creating *Personas*

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The creation of this document's *personas* was based on a series of individual interviews with volunteers, selected according to characteristics associated with vulnerabilities to weight-related issues, such as:

- Presence of (excessive) preoccupation with weight (e.g.: repeated dieting, body image issues, etc.);
- Experiences in connection with fatphobia;
- History of eating disorders;
- Interest in or history of bariatric surgery.

Diagram – Methodology for constructing *personas*



Following these interviews, four personas were created. Although all of these personas can be considered vulnerable, meaning that they could be negatively affected by messages that address weight-related issues, they are differentiated by their personal history, their expectations (needs), their resources, and their position on these issues.

When constructing weight-related messages and choosing visuals to accompany them, these personas can be taken into account, in order to adapt the content for a specific audience.

# Personas and their communication preferences

The *personas*, whose first names are fictitious, can be separated into two groups, according to their level of vulnerability and their psychological state:

High vulnerability to weight-related issues	Critical distance from weight-related issues
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>→ Multiple attempts to overcome a mental health disorder (e.g., eating disorder)</li><li>→ Solution-oriented mindset</li><li>→ Well-being significantly affected by fatphobia and preoccupation with weight</li><li>→ High sensitivity to the outside world, which results in a strong or very strong vulnerability to weight-related discourse.</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>→ Persistent negative thoughts around the body image</li><li>→ State of mind oriented towards listening and self-care</li><li>→ Lower impact of fatphobia and preoccupation with weight on well-being</li><li>→ Rejection of social norms related to thinness, which allows low to moderate vulnerability to weight-related discourse.</li></ul>
Corresponding <i>personas</i> : <b>Beatrice</b> and <b>Emma</b>	Corresponding <i>personas</i> : <b>Justine</b> and <b>Camille</b>



## Beatrice

### Personal history and weight-related vulnerabilities

Béatrice has been dealing with weight-related and mental health issues since early childhood, following traumatic events that led them to develop intense compulsions. Consequently, their mental health remains fragile. They are very vulnerable to weight-related issues and messages.

### What are their needs (expectations)?

Béatrice wishes to be accompanied in a supervised and progressive healing process to relearn how to love and accept themselves as they are.

### How to talk to them?

The issues that Béatrice experiences with respect to their weight are simply manifestations of the larger mental health challenges they face. Even if they are not diagnosed with an eating disorder, they may experience the symptoms on a daily basis. Thus, for them, only addressing the question of weight may seem reductive or superficial, in view of their deeper issues. They would like the issues they experience in connection with their mental health to be recognized, named and accepted.

In general, Béatrice would prefer to avoid using physical qualifiers to define people, because they do not provide any useful information, according to them. However, if their use is necessary, they prefer:

- Overweight rather than “obesity”
- Round rather than “fat”



## Emma

### Personal history and weight-related vulnerabilities

From a young age, Emma has had a naturally larger build than others. However, it is difficult for them to accept it, because of the pervasive thin ideal in society. Thus, their self-esteem was damaged during the pivotal years of their life. They have repeatedly dieted and live in deprivation, between cycles punctuated by hopes and failures. They are very vulnerable to weight-related issues and messages.

### What are their needs (expectations)?

Emma wishes to deconstruct their identity, so that it no longer focuses on their weight. For them, it is also very important to denounce the dangers of dieting. Emma needs the diversity of factors that influence weight to be clearly communicated, in all their nuances, so that their life experience is better understood.

### How to talk to them?

Emma doesn't like the term "fat" because it reminds them of the insults they had to endure in the schoolyard. Scientific terms like "obesogenic environment" do not speak to them. Emma appreciates positive or neutral weight-related terms. More specifically, they prefer:

→ "Round person" or "overweight person" to designate people with a large build.

Finally, Emma finds it important to remind people of all ages that they can grow and strive for well-being.



## Justine

### Personal history and weight-related vulnerabilities

For a long time, Justine's life has been ruled by an obsession with their body image, the need to perform, and anxiety about the gaze of others. A change in their life led them to transform their state of mind and they now are in remission.

### What are their needs (expectations)?

Justine wants to share their experience to help others.

### How to talk to them?

For Justine, communications must be accompanied by concrete means to support people who are experiencing weight-related issues and accompanying mental health issues. For Justine, it is especially important to dissociate weight from health, and to transform social standards around beauty and thinness. They want the story of "real people" to be shown and told, in order to create empathy and less judgment.

Justine believes that the term "obesity" necessarily induces judgment, and pushes the person into a problem, rather than helping them to free themselves from it. Thus, they prefer to consciously disconnect from mainstream messages, to detach themselves from being told what to think and better manage external influences.

More specifically, Justine:

- Is comfortable with the term "fat people", but feels that the negative meaning associated with the adjective "fat" should always be deconstructed before using it;
- Likes messages that hammer the fact that there are no effective methods for long-term weight loss, as it reduces personal guilt and rekindles the debate related to the thin ideal.



## Camille

### Personal history and weight-related vulnerabilities

Camille had to deal with intrusive thoughts, insecurities, and the gaze of others for a long time. Their social and economic status (precariousness, financial insecurity, food insecurity, etc.), as well as their career (job where physical appearance is important) have impacted their experience with weight. By detaching themselves from social standards, they have been able to develop their critical thinking, which helps protect them.

### What are their needs (expectations)?

Camille would like to hear messages that help them develop their knowledge about nutrition. They also need financial support.

### How to talk to them?

Camille feels necessary to stop weight polarization: for them, a thin person is not necessarily more efficient and a fat person can do a lot of things with their body. They would like us to talk about something other than weight and appearance. For them, fat people shouldn't just be talked about in speeches related to weight. They believe that it is important to make them visible in other contexts, in order to stop amalgamations.

On the other hand, Camille likes clear and punchy statements that leave no room for doubt, such as:

→ "Fat people can be healthy".

They're also comfortable with the term "fat people."



# Conclusion

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The four *personas* in this document, despite their different life experiences, agree on the importance of the following points when it comes to creating messages:

- Awareness of the physical consequences of mental health-related disorders (e.g., weight gain or loss);
- Positioning of emotional health as a part of a healthy lifestyle;
- Deconstruction and explanation of terms (e.g., for Camille, the word fatphobia automatically brings to mind “fear of fat people”).

On the other hand, differences can also be observed, especially in the preferences given to certain terms. Thus, the most vulnerable personas have particular difficulty with terms like “fat”, which are still attached to bad memories. Thus, the use of the expression “fat person” must always be accompanied by an explanatory sentence, such as: “The expression fat person is used here in a neutral way to describe the corpulence of the concerned people’s”.

The personas presented in this document are reflective of experiences found within the population. They must therefore be taken into account, when designing messages, and to better understand the audiences to whom they are addressed. Béatrice, Emma, Justine and Camille are among those who receive our general public communications. Their life experiences help build healthy and inclusive communication to address weight-related issues.

## References

- 1 Bornet et Brangier : La méthode des personas : principes, intérêts et limites. (2013)

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