

DANUBIUS

WORKING  
PAPERS

## Obesity Social Stigmatization - Cause of Depression

Veronica Epureanu<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract:** Obesity involves multiple interactions between genetic, social, behavioral, metabolic, cellular and molecular factors that result in changes in energy balance. Obesity is also a physical disease, but also a psychological one, and a closer look will show that psychological problems not only can foreshadow the development of obesity, but they are intrinsic to weight loss attempts. Discrimination against obese people extends beyond the medical office. For example, at school, students face prejudice on the basis of extra pounds, coming from both colleagues and teachers, points out Dr. Puhl. Discrimination on the basis of obesity occurs early, studies suggest. Of all the psychological factors that can influence childhood obesity, stress is the strongest, but unfortunately it is the last to be considered by parents in such cases. In addition to stress, depression and boredom are other psychological factors that can cause children to overeat. Last but not least, there are social or economic factors that can be associated with childhood obesity. For example, a low level of education deprives the child of healthy eating habits.

**Keywords:** obesity; stigmatization; biological; economic; overweight; psychological factors

### Introduction

Obesity is a complex, multifactorial condition, characterized by an increase in body weight due to adipose tissue. In recent decades, it has become one of the most common nutrition diseases in the world, with the magnitude of a pandemic, according to the WHO report 2011, being considered the disease of the XXI century.

---

<sup>1</sup> Student, Faculty of Communication and International Relation, Specialization Psychology, Danubius University of Galati, Romania, Address: 3 Galati Blvd., 800654 Galati, Romania., Tel:+40372361102, Fax:+40372361290, Coresponding autor: epureanumirela@gmail.com.

Obesity contributes to the increased incidence of diabetes, high blood pressure and heart disease.

Added to all this is the fact that obesity can be a social stigma, because obese people are perceived as lax and unwilling. Given these, it is not surprising that every year millions of people spend large sums of money on diets and medicines to lose weight.

Obesity involves multiple interactions between genetic, social, behavioral, metabolic, cellular and molecular factors that result in changes in energy balance.

Obesity is also a physical disease, but also a psychological one, and a closer look will show that psychological problems not only can foreshadow the development of obesity, but they are intrinsic to weight loss attempts.

“The etiological basis of eating disorders and obesity usually lies in a combination of psychological, environmental, genetic and biological factors. Individuals suffering from psychological disorders (eg depression, anxiety, or eating disorders) may have difficulty controlling their food intake, limiting themselves to an adequate amount, and maintaining a healthy weight. We will notice that many people who suffer from obesity go through the following cycle: mood disorders, overeating and, as a result, weight gain. Often, due to high stress or anxiety, people eat more than in a situation where anxiety is reduced and it seems that in obese people any type of emotion can increase food intake” (Dr. Șerban Vasile).

The psychological factors that contribute to overeating include, on the one hand, a series of constraints that the person imposes on himself, and, on the other hand, the presence of disturbing emotional feelings. Some people continue to be obese due to the moments of compulsive ingestion of food after the end of the diet. Because a diet is a conscious constraint, the collapse of conscious control is one of the factors in increased calorie intake.

Overweight individuals often say they tend to eat more when they are tense or anxious. Often, against the background of high stress or anxiety, people eat more than in a situation where anxiety is reduced. In obese people, any kind of emotion seems to increase food intake.

Although genetic factors can limit the amount of adipose tissue we can easily lose, overweight people can still lose weight following a weight control program. For a program to be effective, it must include more than just a strict diet.

In order to lose weight and not gain weight again, overweight people need to adhere to a new set of permanent eating habits (and not a temporary weight loss regime) and start an exercise program. The combination of drug treatment, exercise and psychotherapy has a much better result than done separately.

Obesity is known to cause serious health problems, but the social dimension is often ignored, this translates, in most cases, into discrimination and stigmatization of people struggling with extra pounds. People are often irrational and dislike homosexuals, discriminate on the basis of prejudice, or hate others who are not like them. Perhaps the most well-known forms of discrimination are those related to ethnicity, sex, race, religion or disability. However, it seems that “plump” people also face such situations in which they are the target of the prejudices of those around them. The number of people with weight problems has increased significantly in recent years, implicitly they face discrimination and stigmatization in society.

If health risks are publicized and known, the social and emotional and mental health consequences remain hidden, less well known, says Dr. Rebecca Puhl of the Rudd Center for Food Policy and Obesity at Yale University for Obesity Action.

### **The Other Side of Obesity - Stigmatization**

Unfortunately, the number of cases of discrimination on the basis of kilograms is increasing, according to the International Journal of Obesity. As evidence, there are two surveys conducted in 1995-1996 and 2004-2006 in the United States, which compared this form of discrimination to another form. After analyzing the data, the researchers found that 28% of obese men and 45% of obese women struggled with discrimination on the basis of body weight, compared to 17% of men and 9% of women who said they were discriminated against for racial reasons.

The prejudices about obese people do not stop here, however. In another study that looked at the perceptions of 400 medical professionals, researchers found that doctors correlate obesity with poor hygiene, hostility and dishonesty (Psychology Today). To these findings are added other studies that have shown that doctors associate this condition with a lack of will and love, but also with a higher dose of indulgence.

Discrimination against obese people extends beyond the medical office. For example, at school, students face prejudice on the basis of extra pounds, coming from

both colleagues and teachers, points out Dr. Puhl. Discrimination on the basis of obesity occurs early, studies suggest. For example, children as young as 3-5 have described their overweight classmates as mischievous, ugly, stupid, lazy, unhappy, and have few friends. Students who have weight problems thus end up facing rejection from peers, harassment, but also biased attitudes from teachers, and sometimes they are less likely to enter college.

At work, obese employees are considered lazy, less competent and lack self-discipline by both co-workers and employers, adds Dr. Puhl. The value of the salary, the chances of promotion and sometimes even employment can be affected by the existence of such prejudices. Moreover, there are cases where obese people have been suspended or even fired from the company in which they worked, even if they have demonstrated that they are competent and efficient employees. Studies have shown that if an obese person and a weaker person show up for a job interview with similar qualifications, the chances of getting the job are on the side of the weaker person.

A group of high school students underwent an experiment in which participants had to write down in order how much they liked or how little a few pictures depicting other girls, shows Psychology Today. In the first instance, the photographs in which obese girls appeared were among the least pleasant images. Instead, when participants were told that obese girls had problems with their thyroid gland, then their pictures were as enjoyable as the others.

Unfortunately, when there is prejudice and discrimination against an obese person, most consider only the controllable aspects of the condition, ie those related to following a diet, exercising and avoiding falling into the trap of foods rich in obesity. Salt, sugar and fat. In addition, obesity involves several uncontrollable factors, such as a medical condition that causes an imbalance in the body (for example, thyroid problems) or genetic inheritance.

One of the most important aspects in the process of changing the lifestyle and returning to a normal weight is precisely the support of motivation and raising the morale of the person in question.

### **Psychological Factors that Influence Childhood Obesity**

Of all the psychological factors that can influence childhood obesity, stress is the strongest, but unfortunately it is the last to be considered by parents in such cases. In addition to stress, depression and boredom are other psychological factors that can cause children to overeat.

The inability of the little ones to cope with strong emotions, especially negative ones - fear, anger, fear, etc. - It can cause them to eat emotionally and risk becoming overweight and later obese. It is very important that such emotions are not “fed” with food, and that children are helped to find appropriate solutions to understand them, recognize them and, finally, to overcome them.

### **Socio-Economic Factors**

Last but not least, there are social or economic factors that can be associated with childhood obesity. For example, a low level of education deprives the child of healthy eating habits.

A precarious financial situation of the family affects the quality of the food that is offered to the child (cheap foods - intensely industrially processed, canned, etc. - have a low content of nutrients essential for growth and development).

#### **Depression and obesity**

Although it is clear that not all people affected by obesity will develop depression and, on the other hand, not all depressed individuals will become affected by obesity, the relationship between the two conditions has become indisputable, as studies have shown and recent research.

The medical center of the University of Leiden in the Netherlands, conducted some studies on the connection between the two conditions, studies led by Dr. Floriana S. Luppino. These are a number of 15 studies that have shown that the presence of obesity increases by about 55% the risk of depression in mentally balanced people, and the development of depression entails the risk that a person with a normal weight becomes obese., the risk being 58%.

Other studies and research have shown that 1 in 4 cases of obesity is associated with anxiety disorders. It was also pointed out that obesity seems to cause more than

simple forms of depression, being real cases of clinical depression, and one of the triggers is obesity.

Dr. Luppino pointed out that obesity causes patients great dissatisfaction with their own body, as well as a sharp drop in self-esteem, especially in Western areas where thin bodies are seen as models of perfection. Therefore, one of the most common theses regarding the link between obesity and depression is that overweight is viewed in a negative way by the present society, which will lead to its internalization by the affected individual, then, unfortunately, to deep feelings of self-rejection. A negative body image is closely linked to depression and a much less healthy life. Regarding the initial presence of depression, it can lead to the development of obesity because antidepressant drugs have extremely many side effects that will usually interact with the endocrine system. Moreover, depression can cause obesity due to the fact that, very often, it triggers an increase in appetite, drowsiness or various sleep disorders. Also, it is very unlikely that those people who are affected by depression will be able to find the energy needed to exercise, and can thus easily fall into the trap of extreme sedentary lifestyle.

Both obesity and depression are very important health problems that are significantly affected. The experts who participated in the studies whose results were set out above state that, in order to avoid or solve problems, much better collaboration is needed between experts in both fields. This implies the need for better monitoring of the weight of depressed patients, but also of the mental state of people affected by obesity.

## **Conclusions**

According to Eva Shelhub, the brain is always in the “on” position. He takes care of thoughts, movement, breathing, heartbeat, senses, he works hard 24 hours a day. That means a supply of quality fuel. For this reason, what we consume directly affects the structure and function of the brain and ultimately our mood. As an expensive car, the brain works best when it receives only premium fuel. Quality food nourishes the brain and protects it from oxidative stress. Studies have found correlations between a diet rich in refined sugars, poor quality foods and impaired brain function and even worsening mental disorders (depression). For many years, medicine did not make a connection between mood and nutrition. Today, however, nutritional psychology shows that there is a close connection between food and

mood. Both the psychologist and the nutritionist can help find the balance to achieve well-being.



## References

*The Negative Stigma of Obesity and its Consequences.*

Flynn, M. A.; McNeil, D. A.; Maloff, B. et al. (2006). Reducing obesity and related chronic disease risk in children and youth: a synthesis of evidence with 'best practice' recommendations. *Obesity Reviews*. Suppl. 1: pp. 7-66.

Eva Shelhub MD (2015). *Nutritional psychiatry: Your brain on food*. Harvard Health Blog.