

Addressing obesity stigma in the workplace

THROUGH DIVERSITY, EQUITY & INCLUSION (DE&I)

To provide employees with appropriate resources and support, consider these perspectives:

People living with obesity face social challenges and discrimination in the workplace. This is coupled with feelings of inadequacy, and not being worthy of care or recognition. Self-esteem affects a person's ability to work at their capacity and be productive in the workplace setting, which results in an increase in presenteeism and absenteeism.

"The person living with obesity may be the brightest mind in the room, but discrimination based on physical appearance and size holds them back."

"If an employee is appropriately valued, they will likely be more productive, have greater self-worth, reduce absenteeism and achieve more."



DR. SEAN WHARTON, MD, DOCTORATE IN PHARMACY AND MEDICINE, AND CO-LEAD AUTHOR OF THE CANADIAN OBESITY GUIDELINES

It's not just managing weight and eating, it's managing all areas that unravel and spill into family relationships, mental health and well being.

For me, size inclusivity wasn't fairly represented in the workplace. Those in my professional setting believed elevated weight was a lifestyle choice I made. What they didn't know was that those with a higher BMI can still be healthy and contribute. As my weight increased, I was pushed back professionally. I had less courage and wisdom to fight, and zero self-advocacy. I became less client-facing with an in-office presence. I felt invisible. I lost out on a promotion.

"Chronic depression is driven by living with elevated weight – they go hand in hand."

"Elevated weight dramatically affected my confidence, work presence and the ability to perform my job. I didn't want to be seen."



SANDRA ELIA, CERTIFIED FOOD ADDICTION COUNSELLOR

Weight stigma and bias exist in the workplace. Research shows people in bigger bodies find it harder to get jobs and feel appreciated in the workplace. Through benefits coverage, employers can show employees that they are worthy of treatment options. We need to stop making assumptions that those living with obesity are not disciplined, driven or smart simply because of their size.

"Being in a bigger body is not a lifestyle choice. Employers need to understand this and recognize that obesity is a medical condition."

"Where we are now with weight stigma in the workplace is where we were years ago with stigma surrounding mental health issues. We now need to follow that same framework with obesity."



NICOLE ARDIEL, GBA, CHS, BA, EMPLOYEE BENEFIT SPECIALIST

IMPLEMENTATION OF DE&I PRINCIPLES ARE ESSENTIAL FOR THE WELLBEING OF ALL EMPLOYEES

To support those living with obesity, employers should:

- Recognize employees' value at any size, and offer assistance, when appropriate, as with any other illness or disability
- Offer training programs for all staff that are rooted in science
- Ensure health benefit plans offer coverage, then announce and normalize it to staff
- Remove team building activities, and health and dietary competitions that would require size as a factor to participate
- Allow individuals to choose health and wellness that fits them – healthy weight does not always mean a smaller size
- Review office equipment to ensure accessibility needs are met

To support those living with obesity, health benefit plans should:

- **Provide access to treatment for obesity management as a chronic disease and not a “lifestyle” category**
- Ensure employees have evidenced-based resources that align with the **Canadian Adult Obesity Clinical Practice Guidelines**:¹



MEDICAL NUTRITION THERAPY

Personalized counselling by a registered dietitian with a focus on healthy food choices and evidence-based nutrition therapy

Coverage of dietitian/nutritionist



EXERCISE

30-60 minutes of moderate to vigorous activity most days of the week

Coverage of exercise health support professional (i.e. kinesiologist)



PSYCHOLOGICAL

Cognitive approach to behavioural change; psychotherapy if appropriate

Coverage of psychologist/ cognitive behavioural therapy, including iCBT*



MEDICATIONS

For weight loss and to help maintain weight loss

Coverage of obesity medications, with reasonable limits



BARIATRIC SURGERY

Surgeon-patient discussion

Adequate leave policies and return to work accommodations

*Internet-based cognitive behavioural therapy

To learn more about how to support employees living with obesity in the workplace, please contact Novo Nordisk Canada Inc. at NNCICustomerCare@novonordisk.com

Reference

1. CMAJ. 2020 August 4;192:E875-91. doi: 10.1503/cmaj.191707