

The background of the slide features a blurred image of a measuring tape and a scale. The measuring tape is positioned vertically, showing numbers 93, 95, 96, 97, and 98. To the right, a circular scale is partially visible. The overall image is in a muted green color palette.

Why Debunking the “Obesity Epidemic” Won’t Solve Weight Stigma

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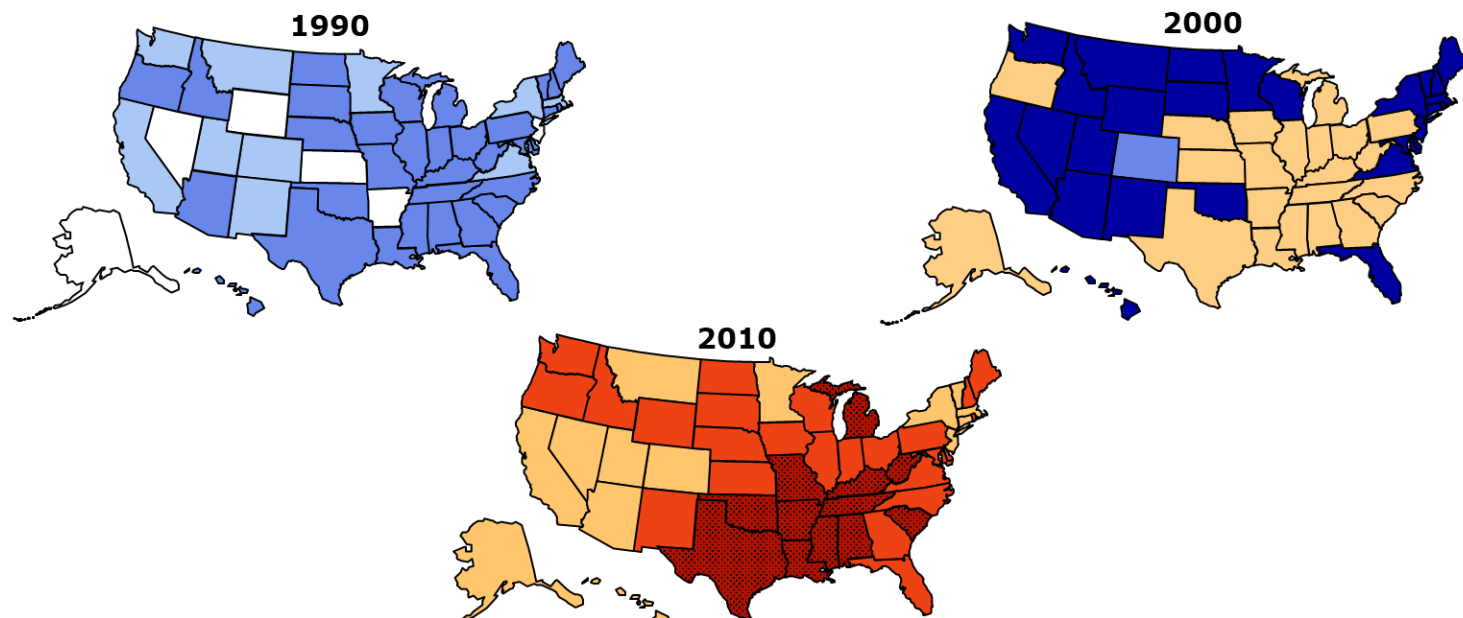
JUNE 28, 2023

RAFOX@UCSD.EDU

Obesity Trends* Among U.S. Adults

BRFSS, 1990, 2000, 2010

(*BMI ≥ 30 , or about 30 lbs. overweight for 5'4" person)



“When we first began to use these [maps] in 1998, invariably the audience responded with a growing murmur, then a gasp as the increase in the prevalence unfolded...After people have seen the maps, we no longer have to discuss whether a problem with obesity exists. These maps have shifted the discussion from whether a problem exists to what we should do about the epidemic.” (Bill Dietz, quoted in *Fat Politics*, p. 42)

Weight stigma researchers & fat activists are facing a big problem:

The fight against weight stigma is being co-opted by the people *responsible for weight stigma*.



Bill Dietz @dietzwcd4 · Mar 4, 2022

A6. We must first recognize that it exists. Research shows the greatest sources of [#weightstigma](#) are people's families & health care providers. Negative outcomes can result, including patients avoiding appointments and potential treatment. [#WorldObesityDay](#) [#TOSchat](#) (1/2)



1



4



9



Bill Dietz @dietzwcd4 · Mar 4, 2022

Replying to [@dietzwcd4](#)

A6. The [#obesityepidemic](#) impacts us all. Become part of the solution w/ the help of our Understanding Obesity Guide. We provide key facts, background, & how to talk about [#obesity](#) w/o perpetuating [#weightstigma](#). Learn more: stop.publichealth.gwu.edu/understandingo... [#WorldObesityDay](#) [#TOSchat](#) (2/2)

HOW DID WE GET HERE?



My argument: weight stigma research has constructed weight stigma as a problem of *knowledge about fat bodies* rather than a problem caused by *obesity elimination efforts*.

As a result, anti-obesity actors and institutions have been able to co-opt the problem of weight stigma to expand obesity elimination efforts.

To date, weight stigma is considered a problem of inaccurate knowledge about:

The causes of weight gain: People blame obesity on a lack of individual willpower rather than the “accurate” biological or social-structural causes

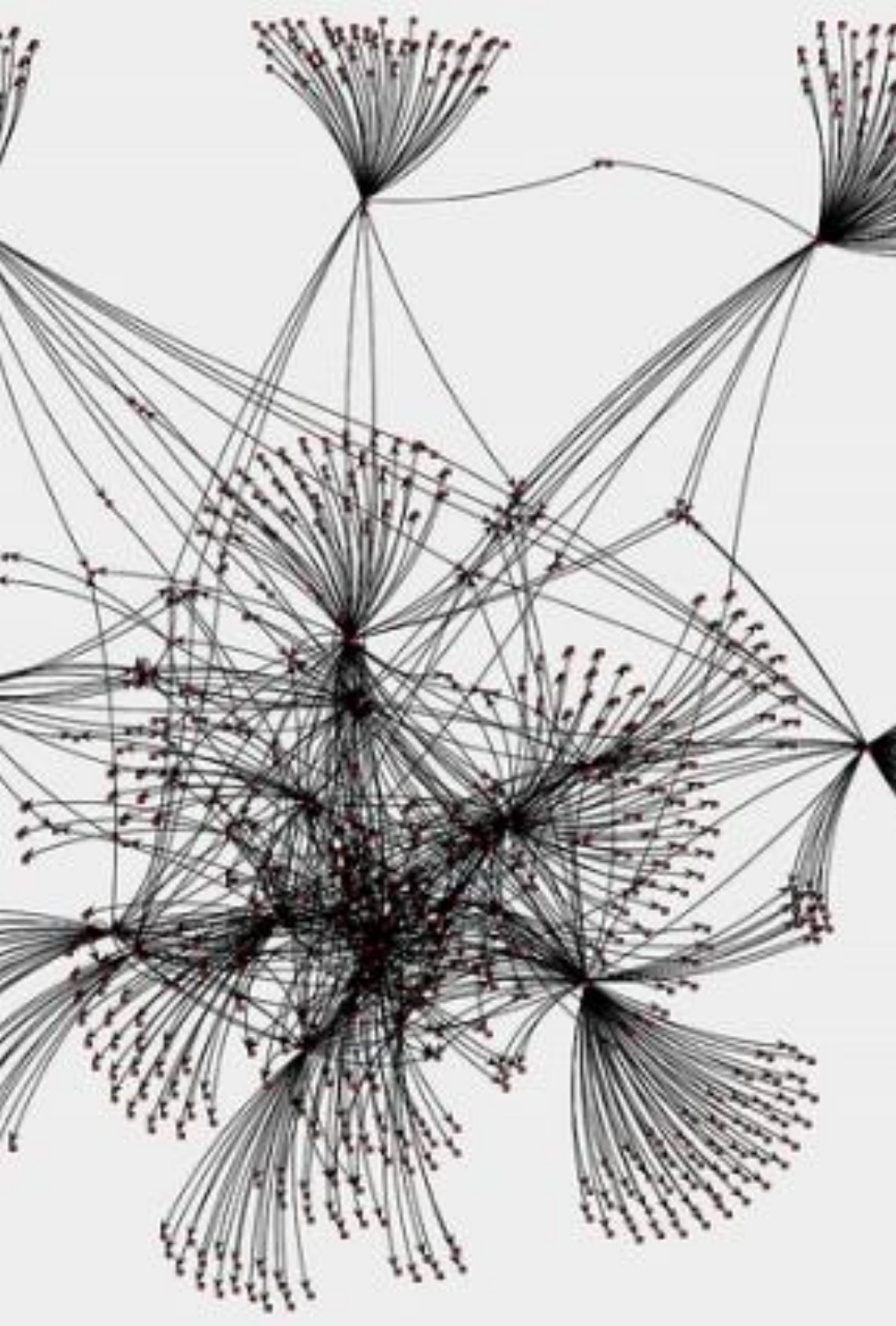
The relationship between weight and health: People inaccurately assume fat people are unhealthy and blame them for that.

The efficacy of weight loss efforts: People inaccurately assume fat people can lose weight and view those who don't negatively



*“There is no nice,
unstigmatizing
way to wish that
fat people did
not...exist.”*

*- Marilyn Wann,
Preface to the Fat
Studies Reader*



Anti-obesity efforts
constitute a structure of
oppression:
the anti-obesity assemblage

the *anti-obesity assemblage*

The anti-obesity assemblage is a network comprised of anything (idea, person, object) that works to enable or enact the elimination of fat people from the world.

This can include standards, people, institutions, technologies, practices, representations, and discourses.

Anti-Obesity Assemblage

Enabling
Obesity
Elimination



Enacting
Obesity
Elimination

Causes

Fat
Oppression



Obesity Elimination is Enabled By:

The transformation of fatness into “obesity”

The transformation of fat people into an eliminable threat

Generating new knowledge about “obesity”

The Anti-Obesity Assemblage

Obesity Elimination is Enacted By:

Facilitating the pursuit of thinness via individual disciplinary practices

Facilitating the pursuit of thinness via disciplinary standards & spaces

Anti-Obesity Assemblage

Enabling
Obesity
Elimination



Enacting
Obesity
Elimination

Causes

Fat
Oppression



Enabling Obesity Elimination Causes:

Widespread devaluation and discrimination.

Diminished ability to imagine living a good life while being fat.

“Obesity” becomes the defining characteristic of fat people.

The Anti-Obesity Assemblage

Enacting Obesity Elimination Causes:

Widespread physical and mental suffering of fat people.

Suffering attributed to obesity itself, feeding back into the AOA.

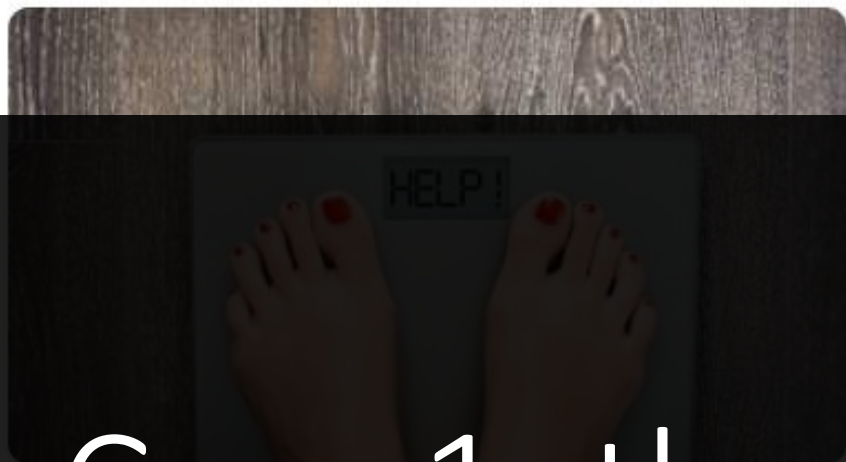
Debunking obesity science is expanding the anti-obesity assemblage

The BMI is a bad measure of health

The majority of weight loss attempts fail

☰ Top stories :

American Medical Association changes BMI Policy >



Case 1: the BMI

American Medical Association says BMI standards are 'racist'

23 hours ago

AMA asks doctors to de-emphasize use of BMI in gauging health and obesity

1 week ago



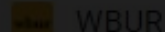
Doctors admit BMI and has caused 'harm'

2 days ago



Doctors urged to go beyond BMI alone as health measure

2 days ago



Doctors urge AMA to encourage doctors to de-emphasize use of BMI when a

1 day ago

The Bizarre and Racist History of the BMI

Body Mass Index has been used in recent decades as a referendum on individual health. But it was never meant to be.



Your Fat Friend · Follow

Published in Elemental · 7 min read · Oct 15, 2019

WELLNESS RACISM HEALTH WELLNESS

The BMI Is Racist And Useless. Here's How To Measure Health Instead.

Body mass index numbers don't give a full picture of well-being, and they yield to discrimination against marginalized bodies.

By Christine Byrne

Jul 20, 2020, 04:00 PM EDT | Updated May 19, 2022

and Problematic History of Mass Index

racist roots behind BMI — and why it's not the standard of health it's been



BY ADELE JACKSON-GIBSON

PUBLISHED: FEB 23, 2021

THE SCIENCE OF FAT

After 'The Biggest Loser,' Their Bodies Fought to Regain Weight

Contestants lost hundreds of pounds during Season 8, but gained them back. A study of their struggles helps explain why so many people fail to keep off the weight they lose.

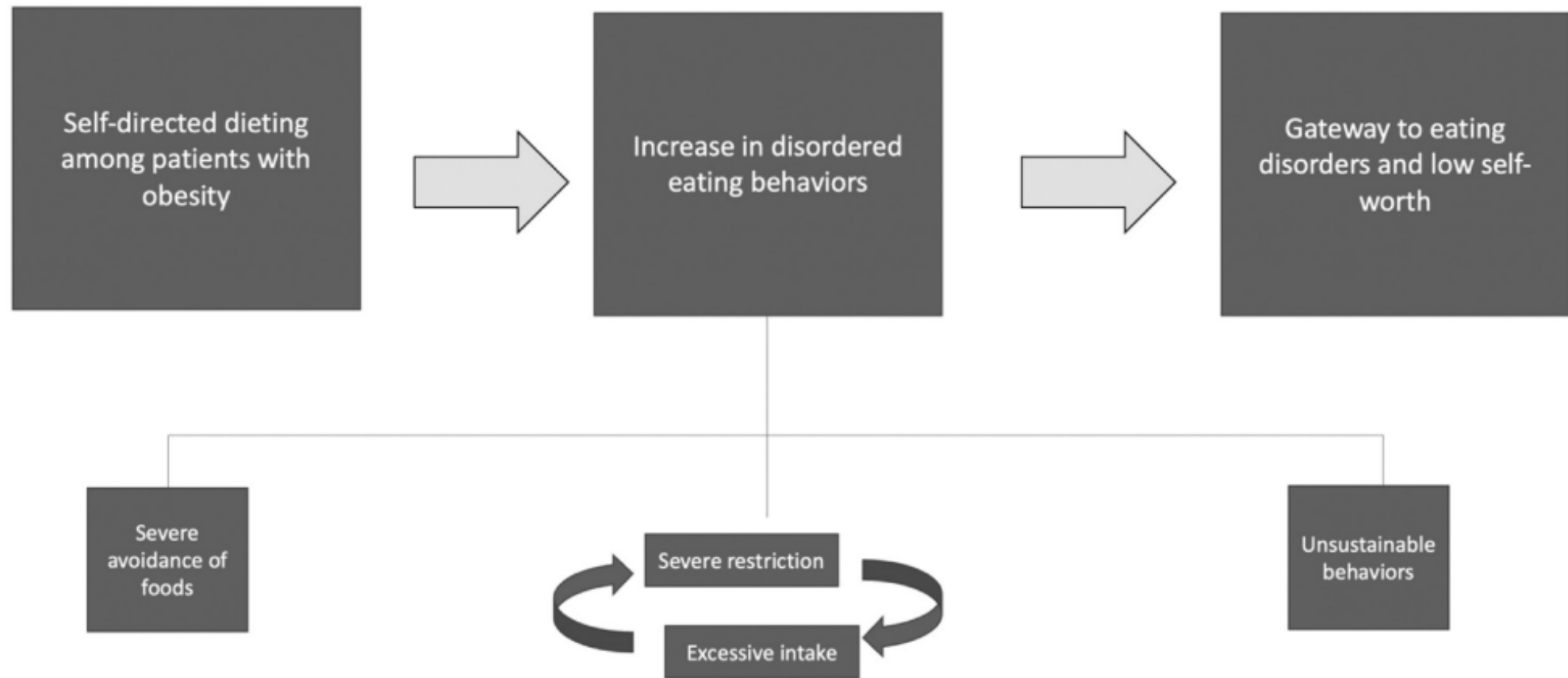
Case 2: weight loss dieting fails 95% of the time

World Obesity Federation Position Statement

Obesity: a chronic relapsing progressive disease process. A position statement of the World Obesity Federation

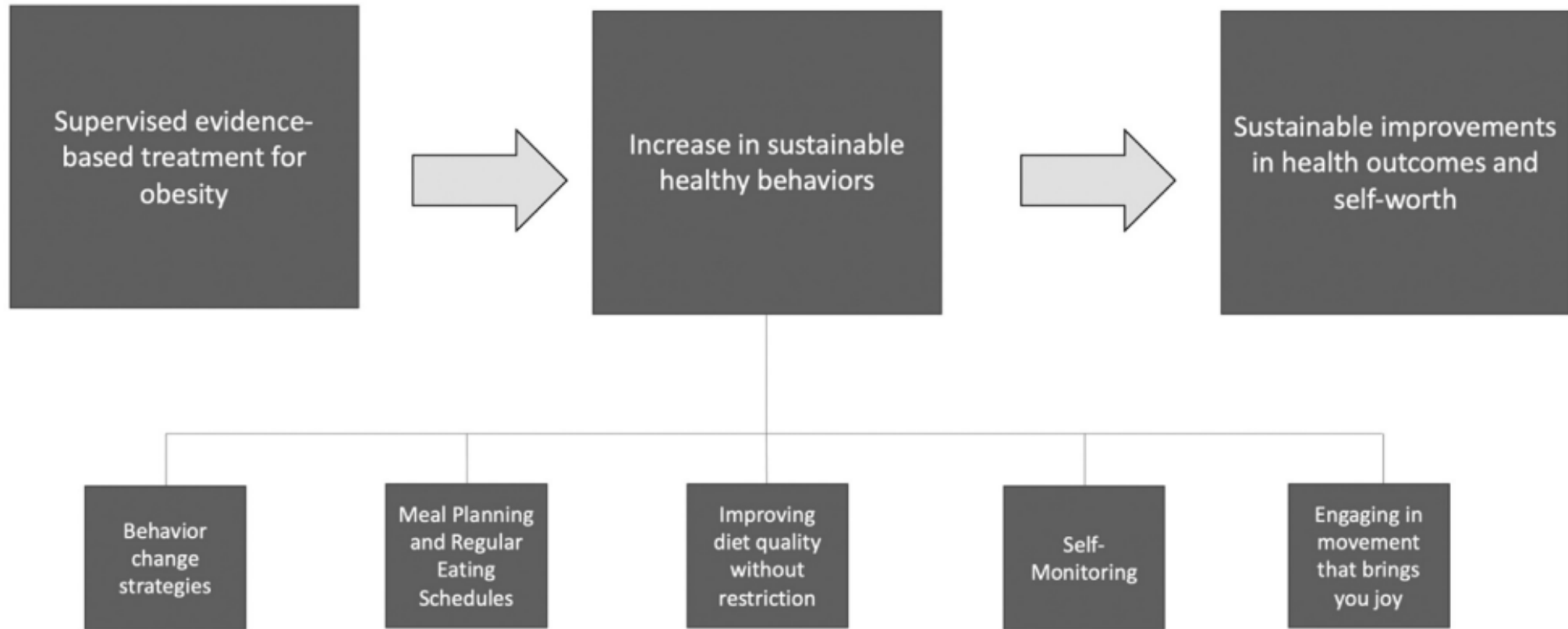
Received 6 March 2017; accepted 20 March 2017

The Anti-Obesity Assemblage responds...

A

“Fad diets, often oriented toward achieving appearance ideals rather than improving physical health, are often promoted in media. Cyclical in nature, these diets promise unrealistic benefits and may promote disordered eating behaviors.”

B



“ In contrast to self-directed diets, which often promote reaching an “ideal” body size by implementing overly restrictive changes, supervised evidence-based behavioral weight management encourages sustainable changes to promote long-term health.”



Debunking “obesity” science without calling for the divestment from obesity elimination efforts can lead to:

- Expanding the anti-obesity assemblage by adding resources
 - Increased media attention
 - Increased funding & partnerships
- Anti-obesity actors increasing their authority and expertise by absorbing critiques
- Distraction from messages of valuing fat people and dismantling the anti-obesity assemblage
- Activist burnout

Inaccurate knowledge about “obesity” is only one small part of a very big problem. It’s time to tackle the whole problem.

It’s time for weight stigma researchers to start fighting the anti-obesity assemblage.



Thank you!

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