

# Weight Stigma at Work

How employers can shift  
the narrative to enhance  
culture, performance,  
and overall health

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# The impact of weight stigma – and the opportunity for employers to lead change

Weight bias and stigma are widespread societal issues that don't stop at the office door. More than 40% of adults in the U.S. have faced weight stigma,<sup>1</sup> which is defined as unfair treatment, discrimination, or abuse because of one's weight. In the workplace alone, an alarming 15% of workers report that colleagues have made false assumptions about them based on their weight, and nearly three in four employees who have experienced unfair treatment at work due to their weight say it has made them feel like quitting their job.<sup>2</sup>

The impact of weight stigma is far-reaching, affecting employees' health, job opportunities, and earnings. For employers, these impacts present challenges that include morale, culture, productivity, recruiting and retention, healthcare costs, and potential legal issues.

As science and research expand our understanding of weight health and how to treat it, there's a growing awareness that prevailing attitudes about weight and body size must also evolve. With Americans spending an estimated 71% of their time working,<sup>3</sup> employers have a unique opportunity to lead the change by addressing weight bias in the workplace and helping to end weight stigma.

## Weight bias

Negative attitudes, beliefs, and stereotypes associated with higher body weight or obesity.

## Weight stigma

Unfair treatment, discriminatory behaviors, or abuse because of weight or body size. Weight stigma is identified as a social determinant of health that impacts health outcomes and can be a barrier to health equity.



*We have reached a pivotal moment in the way we talk and think about health, wellness, and our bodies. I'm on a mission to help us to keep talking about it all, regardless of what side you're on.*

**Oprah Winfrey**

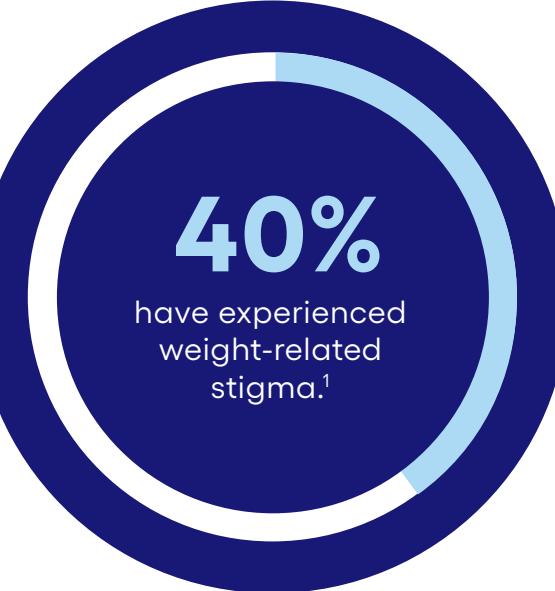
From *Making the shift: A new way to think about weight* – a virtual event hosted by WeightWatchers in May 2024

# Understanding weight stigma

Despite heightened focus on inclusion strategies, weight stigma isn't going away. Tracking research shows that while biases related to race and gender have decreased, negative attitudes about body size held steady between 2007 and 2020.<sup>4</sup>

The attitudes reflect deeply ingrained and unconscious aspects of weight bias and the resulting stigma. Today, overweight and obesity are often attributed to a person's lack of willpower, overlooking the complex biological, genetic, and environmental factors that also play a significant role. As a result, stereotypes about weight are perpetuated in the media, among workplace peers, and even within families.

## Weight stigma by the numbers



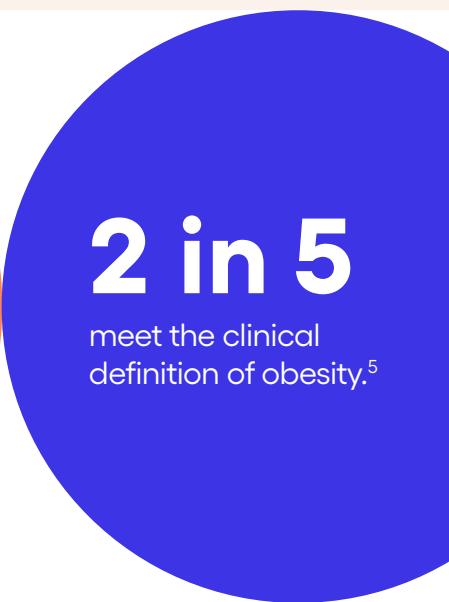
**40%**

have experienced weight-related stigma.<sup>1</sup>



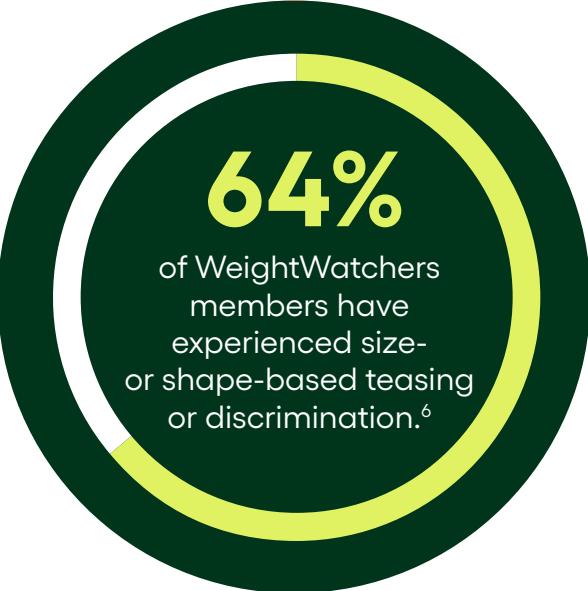
**1 in 3**

American adults are classified as overweight.<sup>5</sup>



**2 in 5**

meet the clinical definition of obesity.<sup>5</sup>



**64%**

of WeightWatchers members have experienced size- or shape-based teasing or discrimination.<sup>6</sup>

## The obesity penalty for employees

A first step in addressing weight stigma at work is recognizing the scope of the issue.

The reality is that employees with obesity face what is called an “obesity penalty” related to their employment opportunities, career advancement, and wages. Overall, individuals with obesity or higher body weight earn less than their counterparts, even when accounting for other factors like education, experience, and job performance.<sup>7</sup> The pay gap is more pronounced for workers who are more highly educated.

### A significant pay gap

Compared to their coworkers<sup>7</sup>

#### Women

with obesity  
and a bachelor's  
degree earn

**12%↓**

with obesity  
and a graduate  
degree earn

**19%↓**

#### Men

with obesity  
and a bachelor's  
degree earn

**5%↓**

with obesity  
and a graduate  
degree earn

**14%↓**

Deeply internalized biases are behind these striking wage gaps. Research finds that employees with obesity are 27% more likely to be perceived as lazy and 23% more likely to be perceived as unmotivated.<sup>2</sup> In contrast, average-weight employees are 35% more likely to be perceived as high-performing and 31% more likely to be perceived as motivated.<sup>2</sup>

These stereotypes can extend to hiring decisions. Over the course of their careers, people with overweight or obesity experience longer periods of unemployment compared to their peers. One long-term study showed that white women with overweight and obesity were unemployed 11% longer, and one long-term study showed that young workers with overweight and obesity experienced a 6% increase in unemployment duration.<sup>8</sup> While much of the weight-related bias in hiring may be unconscious, half of people managers say they tend to favor interacting with “healthy-weight” employees.<sup>9</sup>

## Weight stigma and well-being

Beyond employment experiences and wage gaps, weight stigma's most significant impact is on overall employee health and well-being. The direct business costs associated with obesity are well-documented. Employees with overweight and obesity are more likely to develop weight-related comorbidities, including type 2 diabetes, hypertension, sleep apnea, cardiovascular disease, and certain types of cancer.<sup>10</sup> In turn, employees with these conditions drive reduced productivity, higher absence rates, and increased healthcare costs.

Employees with obesity are also at greater risk of more severe on-the-job injuries. According to a study by the National Institutes of Health, workers with obesity were up to 68% more likely to experience injuries than workers with lower weights.<sup>11</sup>

Weight stigma also plays a significant role in overall employee well-being. The pervasive, internalized stigma of living with overweight and obesity, not necessarily the weight itself, makes people more susceptible to anxiety, depression, and low self-esteem.<sup>13</sup> But the effects of weight stigma are not only on mental health. Research shows that experiencing weight stigma can result in poor metabolic health and increased obesity risk.<sup>14</sup>



## Business impact<sup>12</sup>

Annual costs per employee with obesity are:

Absenteeism

**+\$891**

Short-term disability

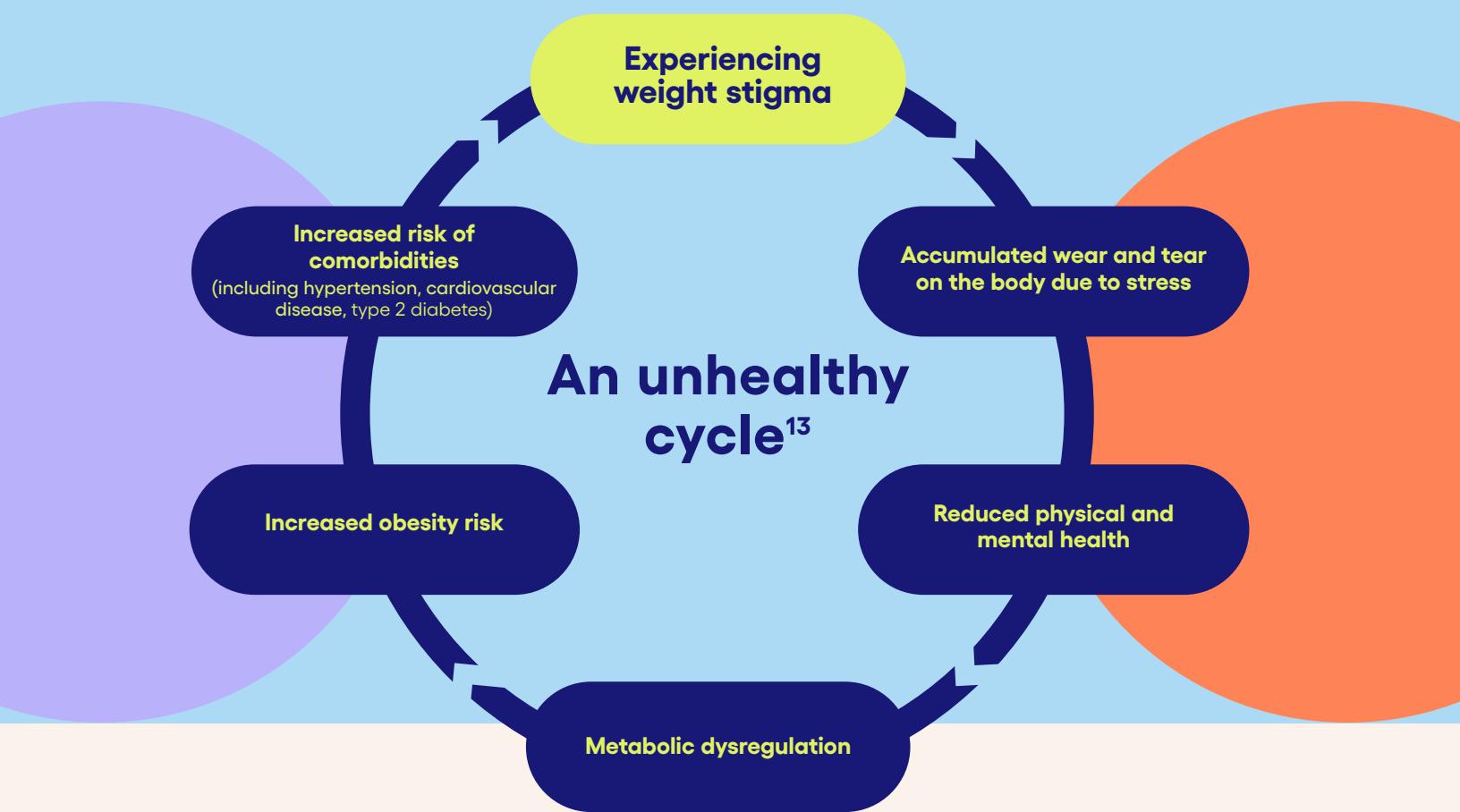
**+\$623**

Long-term disability

**+\$41**

Worker's compensation

**+\$112**



#### REALITY CHECK:

### Weight stigma's effect on health equity

Weight stigma can affect healthcare access and quality. Doctors receive little specialized training in obesity treatment. Today, less than 1% of U.S. physicians are certified by the American Board of Obesity Medicine.<sup>15</sup> There is also growing research showing that healthcare providers have biases against people with obesity. For example, a global study among patients enrolled in a weight management program found that 67% of patients with a history of overweight or obesity report weight stigma from doctors. The study also showed that participants with higher internalized weight bias reported greater healthcare avoidance.<sup>16</sup>

**<1%**

of U.S. physicians are certified in obesity medicine<sup>15</sup>

In addition, doctors spend less time with patients who have higher body mass indexes (BMI). These higher-BMI patients are nearly three times more likely to say they have been denied appropriate medical care.<sup>17</sup> As a result, they report they have avoided seeking medical care due to weight stigma.<sup>17</sup>

Weight stigma and the lack of specialized training in obesity medicine also contribute to an over-attribution of patient symptoms to obesity. This type of bias against people with overweight and obesity does more than affect a provider's judgment and decision-making. It can result in a failure to explore other diagnoses and treatment delays.<sup>17</sup>

Patients with higher BMI are nearly

**3X more likely**

to say they have been denied appropriate medical care<sup>17</sup>

## THE SHIFT:

# Addressing weight stigma

While weight stigma is a societal issue, its prevalence presents an opportunity for employers to lead the way in increasing awareness and shifting the narrative.

The rapidly evolving weight health landscape has opened the door to increased discussion about weight stigma and new approaches to address the issue.

Based on evolving science, the American Medical Association (AMA) recognized obesity as a disease in 2013. The primary objective was to change how the medical community tackles this complex issue in order to drive better prevention and management of obesity-related conditions. The recognition of obesity as a chronic condition marked a significant shift away from the belief that obesity is the result of personal choice or a lack of willpower.

Providing fully covered benefits that treat obesity as a chronic disease acknowledges the underlying metabolic, genetic, and environmental influences that increase obesity risk. It also facilitates acceptance and insurance coverage for evidence-based treatments, including behavioral therapy, anti-obesity medications, and bariatric surgery.

Advancing science is shifting the emphasis around weight health from relying solely on willpower and lifestyle changes to a more comprehensive, full-spectrum approach that combines behavior change with medical treatments when clinically appropriate. Reaping the benefits of improved weight health and ensuring access to care requires a shift in mindset through the elimination of outdated weight biases and stigma.



*When we talk about obesity, we're really talking about biology. Obesity is a neurometabolic disease. When we're treating obesity, we're not just treating for weight loss...It's about optimizing and improving health.*

**Ania Jastreboff, MD, PhD**

Associate professor of medicine,  
Yale University School of Medicine

Director of the Yale Obesity Research Center & Co-Director of the Yale Center for Weight Management

From *Making the shift: A new way to think about weight* – a virtual event hosted by WeightWatchers in May 2024



## Employers as change leaders

From diversity, equity, and inclusion to environmental issues, employers have been a powerful catalyst in driving meaningful societal change. By utilizing their resources, economic clout, and ability to lead by example, employers are uniquely positioned to empower and accelerate social change within their organizations and across society.

With the transformative changes happening in weight health, employers have a unique

opportunity to be ahead of the curve in addressing weight stigma and realizing tangible business advantages. Strategies to eliminate weight stigma can strengthen inclusive workplace cultures, emphasize employee care, and, most significantly, improve access and equity in weight healthcare. Over time, these outcomes create the ripple effects that change beliefs, redefine health and well-being, and lay the groundwork for meaningful regulatory and legislative support.

### FYI:

#### Emerging legislation aimed at reducing weight stigma<sup>18</sup>

Public support is growing for legislation to help address weight stigma and discrimination. While no current federal laws prohibit weight-based discrimination, a few states and municipalities are taking action to define and provide protections.

- **Michigan** includes body weight as a protected category in its civil rights statute.
- **Massachusetts, New Jersey, New York, and Vermont** are considering legislation to prohibit weight discrimination.
- **New York City** amended its Human Rights Law to ban employment discrimination based on a person's height and weight.
- **Binghamton, New York; Madison, Wisconsin; Santa Cruz, California; and Urbana, Illinois**, all prohibit weight bias at work. **Washington, DC**, bans discrimination based on personal appearance.

# 8 actions employers can take to address weight stigma

- 1 **Assess the current state.** Review HR data and employee survey responses for potential bias and discrimination patterns linked to employee experiences, compensation, promotions, or recruiting.
- 2 **Review the organization's inclusion policies.** Add or enhance policies to address weight-related bias, harassment, and discrimination. Ensure accessible facilities and accommodations for employees of all sizes, such as appropriately sized furniture, equipment, and restroom facilities.
- 3 **Ensure equity in hiring, promotion, and performance evaluations** to emphasize job-related criteria, qualifications, and contributions.
- 4 **Shift the focus of employee benefit programs from weight loss to weight health.** Offer employees access to a full spectrum of solutions, from behavioral health to coaching and clinical support.
- 5 **Review healthcare plans** to identify opportunities to provide comprehensive coverage for weight health, such as behavioral therapy, nutritional counseling, and anti-obesity medications.
- 6 **Provide training and education** to raise awareness about weight stigma and unconscious biases related to body size. Challenge stereotypes and promote more inclusive attitudes.
- 7 **Encourage the formation of employee resource groups** focused on body positivity and size inclusivity. These groups can engage employees and help them advocate for change, offer support, and normalize discussions around weight stigma and discrimination.
- 8 **Foster an open and supportive culture** where employees feel comfortable reporting incidents of weight-based discrimination or microaggressions without fear of retaliation.

# Putting the focus on weight health

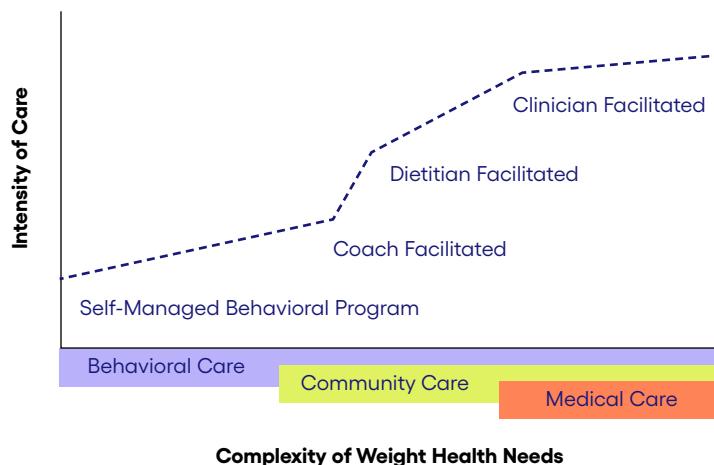
Shifting the narrative to banish bias is a foundational step in addressing stigma and creating an inclusive culture. While there's no one-size-fits-all solution, employers can play a pivotal role in changing beliefs and eliminating weight stigma by providing full-spectrum weight healthcare for employees.

As the weight health landscape continues to evolve, forward-thinking employers have new

options to support individual employee needs through a blend of workplace culture and covered benefits. Strategies can be customized to align with organizational objectives with the flexibility to scale as needs and objectives change.

Ultimately, full-spectrum weight health platforms provide science-proven treatments for each patient's needs. Across the spectrum, care options can increase in intensity from behavioral to medical interventions that enable employees to improve their weight health and prevent, treat, and potentially reverse weight-related comorbidities.

## Weight health is a spectrum



“

*Love it. Lose it. Maintain it. We're here for it. We're watching our weight for what it tells us about our health. That means a spectrum of solutions... We've changed our product, our philosophy. We're building the program, a company, and a community that we're proud of, that we can be a part of, that is going to help provide solutions to people.*

From *Making the shift: A new way to think about weight* – a virtual event hosted by WeightWatchers in May 2024

## Learn more about WeightWatchers for Business

The new WeightWatchers for Business weight health platform helps to prevent and treat obesity plus other cardiometabolic conditions like diabetes by managing the full spectrum of care all in one place.

Built upon a science-proven and research-backed weight management behavioral program, our solution helps employers control costs tied to weight-related chronic conditions, including GLP-1 utilization, while maximizing long-term outcomes.

Rather than fragmenting care, we designed a platform to individualize the experience based on true clinical need. Our platform includes:

- Full-spectrum, scalable, behavior change programs, including Diabetes and GLP-1 Programs
- Virtual clinic and medication management
- 24x7 individualized coaching and highly active digital and IRL communities
- Integrated personal health insights

## WeightWatchers for Business

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[ww.com/forbusiness](http://ww.com/forbusiness)



<sup>1</sup> Puhl RM, Lessard LM, Pearl R, Himmelstein MS, Foster GD. (2021) International comparisons of weight stigma: addressing a void in the field. *International Journal of Obesity* (2021) 45:1976–1985.

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<sup>3</sup> How many work hours in a year? We counted the days and crunched the numbers, USA Today, October 2023.

<sup>4</sup> Charlesworth, T. E. S., & Banaji, M. R. (2022). Patterns of Implicit and Explicit Attitudes: IV. Change and Stability From 2007 to 2020. *Psychological science*, 33(9), 1347–1371.

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<sup>6</sup> Pearl RL, Himmelstein MS, Puhl RM, et al. (2019). Weight bias internalization in a commercial weight management sample: prevalence and correlates. *Obes Sci Pract* 5(4):342-53.

<sup>7</sup> The obesity pay gap is worse than previously thought, The Economist, November 2023.

<sup>8</sup> Groves, J., & Wilcox V. (2023). The impact of overweight and obesity on unemployment duration among young American workers. *Economics and human biology*, 51, 101280.

<sup>9</sup> Laws, Policies Can Counter Weight Discrimination at Work, SHRM, May 2023.

<sup>10</sup> Jensen MD, Ryan DH, Zpovian CM, et al.. 2013 AHA/ACC/TOS Guideline for the Management of Overweight and Obesity in Adults. *Circulation*. 2014; 129 (25\_suppl\_2):S102-S138. doi:10.1161/01.cir.0000437739.71477.ee

<sup>11</sup> Gu, J. K., Charles, L. E., Andrew, M. E., Ma, C. C., Hartley, T. A., Violanti, J. M., & Burchfiel, C. M. (2016). Prevalence of work-site injuries and relationship between obesity and injury among U.S. workers: NHIS 2004–2012. *Journal of safety research*, 58, 21–30.

<sup>12</sup> Employees with obesity may have higher loss of work productivity than those with normal weight, Endocrine Society, June 2023.

<sup>13</sup> Westbury, S., Oyeboode, O., van Rems, T. et al. (2023). Obesity Stigma: Causes, Consequences, and Potential Solutions. *Curr Obes Rep* 12, 10–23.

<sup>14</sup> Weight stigma: As harmful as obesity itself?, Harvard Health Publishing, June 2022.

<sup>15</sup> America's doctors need more obesity medicine training, Axios, May 2024.

<sup>16</sup> Puhl RM, Lessard LM, Himmelstein MS, Foster GD. (2021) The roles of experienced and internalized weight stigma in healthcare experiences: Perspectives of adults engaged in weight management across six countries. *PLoS one*, 16(6), e0251566.

<sup>17</sup> Tomiyama, A., Carr, D., Granberg, E. et al. (2018). How and why weight stigma drives the obesity 'epidemic' and harms health. *BMC Med* 16, 123.

<sup>18</sup> Weight Bias & Stigma. uconnruddcenter.org, Weight Bias Policy | UConn Rudd Center for Food Policy and Health. Accessed July 11, 2024.