Beyond the Scale: Incorporating a Weight-Neutral Approach into Worksite Health Promotion Programs

Kylie Peterson, MPH, CHES®
Diversified Insurance Group
Director of Health and Wellbeing
Hello!

I’m Kylie Peterson

I’m passionate about promoting wellbeing for all employees regardless of shape or size, and I believe that inclusion and compassion are the key to helping people improve their health.
Presentation Objectives

1. Gain a foundational understanding of weight research and identify the habits and behaviors that contribute to adverse health outcomes

2. Recognize weight bias in the workplace and learn how to promote an organizational culture of caring and inclusion

3. Apply a weight-neutral, evidence-based approach to the following worksite wellness program components: biometric screenings, health promotion challenges, and employee health education
1. The Science Behind Weight and Health

Discern between behaviors and outcomes
State of the (Health) Union

- Between 2007-2008 and 2015-2016, rates of obesity rose from 33.7% to 39.6% among adults\(^4\)
- Chronic diseases are responsible for seven out of 10 deaths in the U.S.\(^{10}\)
- The healthcare costs associated with chronic conditions are equal to $3.5k per person\(^{14}\)
However...

- BMI is not a reliable predictor of morbidity and mortality\(^6\)
- Overweight and active individuals are generally healthier than their thin and sedentary counterparts\(^{12}\)
- 1/4 of those with a normal BMI have risk factors for chronic diseases\(^2\)
- 80-95% of dieters regain lost weight\(^5\)
Obesity is Multifactorial and Complex

- **Genetic and Biological Factors**
- **Socioeconomic and Cultural Factors**
- **Individual Behaviors and Environmental Factors**
2. Weight Bias in the Workplace

Create a culture of caring and inclusion at work
Weight bias has been associated with adverse health outcomes including anxiety, depression, low self-esteem, and increased mortality risk.\(^1\)

Those living with obesity are treated unequally at work and within the healthcare system because of their size.\(^9\)
How Does this Present in Corporate Culture?

- Wellness program risk levels and associated surcharges
- Attitudes, beliefs, and rhetoric surrounding food choices, lifestyle habits, appearance, etc.
- Crash-dieting contests
- Focus on attaining a cosmetic ideal
Who Needs to Improve their Health?

Everybody, regardless of size or weight, can improve their health by:

- Getting enough sleep
- Eating more fruits and vegetables
- Reducing alcohol intake
- Eliminating nicotine products
- Moving for 30 or more minutes a day
- Managing daily stressors and getting care for ongoing mental health issues
Food for Thought

Even *if* there were a direct, measurable link between extra weight and adverse health outcomes 100% of the time, what would be the benefit or purpose of shaming and mistreating our fat colleagues?
3. Application of Weight-Neutral Approaches

Promote healthy behaviors and habits for all employees
From Weight to Wellbeing

- Mental health resources and programs
- Financial wellness
- Organizational health focus
- Social connectedness
- Community service
Biometric Screenings

- Privacy is a priority
- Consider removing weight and/or BMI as a screening metric
  - Consider a blind weigh-in
- Add a mental health component to your screenings
- Focus on blood cholesterol, blood pressure, and fasting glucose
Health Promotion Challenges

■ “Biggest Loser” contests
  ○ Replace with a walking or other activity challenge
  ○ Sponsor a charity walk or run

■ “Maintain, Don’t Gain” holiday challenges
  ○ Replace with a gratitude, mindfulness, service, or joyful living challenge
  ○ If you still want to address physical health or nutrition, host a healthy holiday potluck
“Beat Sweets” challenges
  ○ Replace with a fruit and vegetable challenge or a “real food” initiative
  ○ Make environmental changes

Calorie tracking tools
  ○ Can promote disordered eating, especially among employees with a history of ED
  ○ Promote budget and money tracking tools instead!
Health Improvement Programs

- Weight loss programs are not inherently bad
- How do your insurance carriers and other vendors approach weight loss?
- Look for programs with stamps of approval from reputable medical organizations
Employee Health Education

- Hire onsite fitness instructors that represent a myriad of body types
- Become familiar with your wellness vendor’s health education modules
- Be mindful of how you communicate wellness initiatives
- Promote non-diet approaches
In Summary

**Fat ≠ Lazy, Immoral, or Unhealthy**
It's not possible to ascertain someone's health, value, or lifestyle simply by looking at them.

**Become Familiar with Your Own Biases**
Recognize judgemental thoughts and attitudes, and consider how the society we live in has shaped these beliefs.

**Kindness and Compassion are a Best Practice**
Almost no one's health improves in the face of shame, guilt, stigma, or discrimination.

**Create Inclusive Program Materials**
Work with your wellness vendor or wellness committee to create health promotion initiatives that include everyone and avoid singling out employees in larger bodies.

**Promote Mental Health and Financial Wellness Resources**
Health is more than exercise and nutrition; apply a holistic health philosophy to your program and encourage employees to manage stress, save money, and connect with loved ones.

**Focus on Health, Not Weight**
Adopting healthy behaviors such as eating more fruits and vegetables, increasing physical activity, and cutting back on alcohol can improve biometric markers of health, regardless of whether weight loss is achieved.
“The only way to solve the weight problem is to stop making weight a problem—to stop judging ourselves and others by our size. Weight is not an effective measure of attractiveness, moral character, or health. The real enemy is weight stigma, for it is the stigmatization and fear of fat that causes the damage and deflects attention from true threats to our health and well-being.”

— Linda Bacon, Health at Every Size®
Thanks!

Any questions?

Kylie Peterson
Diversified Insurance Group
kpeterson@diversifiedinsurance.com
References


Special thanks to all the people who made and released these awesome resources for free:

- Presentation template by SlidesCarnival
- Photographs by Unsplash
- Backgrounds by SubtlePatterns