

Being #EDinformed: If weight stigma was a fairy tale villain...

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What do the big bad wolf and weight stigma have in common? Quite a lot, I think, and hopefully by the end of this article you'll see why.

Let's start with a quick overview of what weight stigma is... In a nutshell, weight stigma is an umbrella term for various negative stereotypes, prejudicial biases, and discriminatory behaviours in relation to body size, weight and shape. It can also be thought of as "fatphobia" or even "fat-ism".

And how it shows up? In so many ways, all over the place, every single day - in our inherently fatphobic society.

Some of the ways that weight stigma shows up will be obviously harmful and will be easily identified as, essentially, discriminative abuse. Think about a bullying employee mocking a higher-weight* colleague for their size, or the higher-weight employee not being considered for pay-rises or promotions in the same way as other (thinner) staff.

It's commonly said that fat people* are the last socially acceptable target for discrimination. I don't think this is true, but I get the point. Whilst some other forms of discrimination have, thankfully, become less socially accepted, people are still quite openly ridiculed - or oppressed - for having more body-fat than is considered (by current cultural storytelling) to be compatible with characteristics such as attractiveness, health, success, intelligence, conscientiousness... and many other traits that, in objective reality, are neither determinants nor consequences of thinness.

Other ways that weight stigma shows up are much more subtle, less noticeable altogether, and are often not identified as harmful – even by those who are the mouthpieces for weight stigma, or by those receiving it. Sometimes, the manifestations of weight stigma can even be considered as caring, and many times weight stigma is "done" to oneself.

Think again about an employee and their higher-weight colleague, but this time the employee is expressing concern about the supposed health risks of weight gain, and offering support in the quest for weight-loss and – so it is typically presumed – health-gain. Or, think of the higher-weight individual themselves, who has perhaps begun to view themselves as lesser than others because of their size, weight or shape.

These are but a few everyday manifestations of weight stigma, and give a tiny glimpse of how weight stigma can look when it has trickled down from its original sources, into the minds and mouths of us – the "general public". And it matters - a lot. People deemed by cultural standards to have "too much" body fat are negatively impacted by weight stigma in many aspects of their lives, e.g. from not being able to easily access affordable clothing, to not being able to access life-saving health care. They may be bullied directly, or indirectly via the media, and they may be discriminated against throughout their communities, at work, within the home, and even at the GP surgery.

For example, it is now understood that one reason higher-weight people are more likely to experience certain negative health outcomes is because *they avoid going to the doctors* – to shield themselves from the distress of being weight-shamed – and, if they do, *they are less likely to be taken seriously*, and may simply receive a prescription for weight-loss rather than, say, a referral for essential medical investigations, or the same advice/medication than a thin patient with the exact same symptoms would benefit from.

Slim people can be harmed by weight stigma, too. For example, there can be a pressure to stay thin, or to get thinner – and the line between being *thin enough* and suffering societally on account of one's body fat is known to fluctuate wildly according to cultural fashions and fads. Unfortunately, at this point in time in the Western World, the line seems to be unnervingly close to “emaciated” – linked, at least in part, to the thorny issue of so-called weight-loss medication.

So, given that there is some notion in the Western World that thinness is associated with all things good, and that fatness is associated with all things bad, and given that weight stigma is all around us whether we notice it or not, it is unsurprising that it has a huge effect on a lot of us... Either in terms of how we view ourselves, others, or the general workings of people, relationships, and social hierarchy.

It is also unsurprising that the effects of weight stigma can contribute to someone's vulnerability to disordered eating, that it can be a catalyst in the development of an eating disorder, and that it can form part of a complex picture to hinder recovery. And anyone of any size, weight or shape can develop eating disorders - of all sorts. Yes, a thin person can develop a binge eating difficulty, and a person deemed (by current biased thinking) to be “overweight”* or “obese”* may be experiencing a restrictive eating disorder such as anorexia nervosa - which can be just as dangerous for a higher-weight individual as it may be if they were thin.

Back to fairytales... I think that weight stigma can be likened to the sort of maleficent presence that often appear in this form of folklore; presences that pose a possible threat and that lead to genuine danger. And I'm not talking about tenuously or in any forced way – I think that a number of fairytale baddies could easily be replaced by weight stigma for a modern audience, with just a spot of tweaking to the narrative.



Take *Little Red Riding Hood* – the female elder in her family has already been consumed by the Big Bad Wolf, and now – in the guise of a loving and kindly grandmother, the threat lures Little Red Riding Hood closer and closer to its unforgiving, pointed teeth in an attempt to devour her too. Could the wolf be weight stigma, and it's jaws an eating disorder? As we know, weight stigma and the preoccupation with weight loss and thinness is frequently passed from older to younger generations within a family, and whilst this is often from women to girls, it can – of course – occur regardless of gender.

How about the evil queen in *Snow White* – despite being cruel and self-serving, she is able to use falsity and charm to achieve power and to take over an entire kingdom, and she has her magic mirror to ensure she can track down her victim anytime, anywhere. Weight stigma victimises so many, yet is somehow able to justify itself as benign or necessary with false claims, and it seeps everywhere so that there is no hiding from it. Again, we see a focus on females, and particularly on young girls as victims, so it seems important to emphasise that weight stigma, and eating disorders, can affect people of any gender and of any age. Of course, *Snow White* also directly addresses the valuing within our society of beauty, often linked to youth as well as thinness.

And lastly – the cannibalistic witch in *Hansel and Gretel*, who lurks in the danger-ridden Black Forest, just in the right spot to lure lost and vulnerable children into her evil trap. Some versions of the story even suggest that the witch has magical powers over the woods. We can perhaps liken the dangers of the shadowy woods, sinister in part due to the witch's presence, to the feared – and real – threats crafted by weight stigma: replace snakes, spiders and wild boars with anticipated social rejection, shame, perceived inadequacy, and discrimination. Hansel and Gretel discover the witch's home, a magical construction of baked goods and sweets, and understandably consider themselves saved. Goodbye frying pan, hello fire. Similarly, many people who are impacted heavily by weight stigma will view diets and so-called weight loss aids or services as homesteads of hope, and sadly find themselves more at risk than ever.

It doesn't take Sherlock Holmes to see, then, that those benefitting most from weight stigma are often major stakeholders in the industries that are involved in perpetuating it.





My point? I do have one! Fairytales can warn us of real-life dangers, and equip us with the knowledge to identify, and respond effectively, to those dangers when they are encountered. The villains are typically cruel and selfish, and whilst their forms in folklore (e.g. a talking wolf, a queen with a magic mirror, or a cannibalistic witch) lack much direct transferability, their harmful behaviours and effective disguises can be seen as symbolic of abuse commonly encountered within humanity – whether from individuals or via insidious cultural forces.

So, if we can use these cautionary narratives for the metaphors and symbolism they offer us, we may better perceive the villain of weight stigma, its lure to the risks of disordered eating, and we can perhaps better challenge weight stigma in ourselves, others, and society.

If we can see the wolf for what it is – a predator in disguise, we can understand that things are not always what they claim to be, and that mistruths are told and re-told until they themselves become fairytales. We can see weight stigma as discrimination – simply, discrimination dressing itself up as something benign or caring.

If we know that there is a magic mirror able to send danger to anyone – in the way of poison hidden in what appear, on the surface, to be gifts – we can remember that weight stigma reaches us in all sorts of sugar-coated ways, and we can remind ourselves that the fruits of weight stigma are toxic beneath the tempting shiny, red peel.

And, if we can understand that the evil witch’s home is – of course – only ever going to be a self-serving trap, and that her grooming of vulnerable children is simply a means to meet her own desires, we can recognise that weight stigma preys on our vulnerabilities and grooms us all, and that no matter how delicious its proposed solutions look, we can work on not being imprisoned and consumed by unrealistic pressures and disordered eating, and we can find solace elsewhere.

I think that part of being #EDinformed has to be tied up with becoming weight stigma aware. Because for so many people affected by disordered eating and eating disorders – not all, but many – an eating disorder is ultimately the wolf’s jaws, the poison apple, or the witch’s oven – and weight stigma has helped to signpost and lead the way there.

*Language matters: The terms “overweight” and “obese” are increasingly regarded as deriving from, and contributing to, weight stigma. Some people choose to describe themselves with the word “fat”, and may refer to this as neutrally descriptive of physicality in the same way as “tall”, for example. Other people are not comfortable with the use of this word, which has often been associated with criticism and abuse, and choose other terms if they need to refer to themselves, or to others, in relation to not being thin-bodied. One such term is “higher-weight”.