

COMMENTARY

Beneficial role of mindfulness interventions in reducing weight stigma

Tao Yang

Department of Management, Cameron School of Business, University of North Carolina Wilmington, Wilmington, NC, USA
Email: yangt@uncw.edu

Weight stigma is rampant in the workplace and substantially hinders the career progress of overweight workers. The focal article (Lemmon et al., 2024) briefly noted several interventions that, by emphasizing uncontrollable factors of a person's weight, helped mitigate weight stigmatization. In this commentary, I extend the conversation and propose mindfulness interventions as a promising avenue for reducing weight stigma at work.

What do we know about mindfulness?

Mindfulness refers to the state of consciousness marked by nonjudgmental present-moment awareness and attention (Brown & Ryan, 2003). Since its introduction into the organizational sphere (Glomb et al., 2011), mindfulness practices have been burgeoning in the workplace. Mindfulness practices not only benefit workers' well-being (for a meta-analysis, see Bartlett et al., 2019) but also promote high-quality social connections through, for example, felt gratitude (Sawyer et al., 2022) and prosocial behaviors (Hafenbrack et al., 2020). In the realm of mindfulness and body weight, research has suggested that mindfulness training, for the most part, helps overweight and obese people with weight management, effecting weight loss primarily through reduced eating behaviors (Carrière et al., 2018; Olson & Emery, 2015; Tapper, 2017). Nonetheless, there is scarce attention on the role of mindfulness interventions in reducing weight stigma, a main culprit behind weight-based self-devaluation and discrimination. Below, I elucidate why mindfulness interventions have the potential to counteract weight stigma.

Why does mindfulness reduce weight stigma?

Stigma is a negative attitude attached to a person's characteristic that is considered undesirable or deficient. Weight stigma involves stereotypes and prejudice against fatness, as well as a tendency to discriminate against those who are considered overweight. As Lemmon et al. (2024) noted, weight stigma not only affects the perpetrators who disapprove and discriminate against fatter people but also plagues the victims, hindering their abilities to develop positive self-views and effective coping methods. I propose that mindfulness interventions reduce weight stigma in two important ways. First, mindfulness reduces overweight workers' self-criticism and fosters self-compassion. Second, mindfulness softens observers' judgments against fatness and promotes compassionate responses toward overweight workers.

Mindfulness prevents weight-based self-stigma among overweight workers

The key features of mindfulness involve present-moment awareness and nonjudgmental acceptance (e.g., Liang et al., 2018). Mindfulness allows individuals to perceive internal (e.g., thoughts, emotions, bodily sensations) and external experiences (e.g., others' comments and actions) as they are, without judgment or deliberation. Individuals in a mindful state are neutral observers, simply sensing these experiences as fleeting objects passing through their "mental radar," without commenting on them (Brown et al., 2007). This suggests a core process of mindfulness—decoupling of the self from experiences (e.g., Glomb et al., 2011). The core process is germane to mitigating weight-based self-stigma held by those with excessive body weight.

The stereotypes that fatter workers are less competent, less cooperative, and more selfish are so deeply ingrained that those who are overweight even internalize these biased opinions and form a tainted self-view. Mindfulness fosters awareness and acceptance of individuals' own bodily characteristics such as weight. Fatter workers who are mindful are aware of their body size but would not engage in self-criticism or interpret fatness as a personal taint. Mindfulness facilitates decoupling of the self from bodily features such as weight, thereby thwarting negative self-talk and the internalization of fatness stereotypes, which curbs weight-based self-stigma. Emerging evidence based on interventions that incorporate some mindfulness elements has provided preliminary support for the above arguments (Hopkins, 2023; Lillis et al., 2009), but more rigorous research is needed.

Importantly, mindfulness not only reduces self-criticism but also promotes self-compassion for overweight workers. Self-compassion involves being kind and patient toward one's own deficiencies, perceiving one's predicaments as a part of the broader human experience, and acknowledging one's shortcomings with a receptive and supportive attitude (Neff, 2003, 2023). I posit that mindfulness interventions, by cultivating nonjudgmental awareness, allow overweight workers to experience kindness, warmth, and patience toward themselves rather than judge themselves coldly. Further, the kind and warm feelings toward oneself make overweight workers feel connected to other people with similar body sizes and develop a fuller understanding that being overweight is a part of the larger human experience. Moreover, the nonjudgmental stance of mindfulness allows workers to approach their body sizes with an accepting attitude, without ruminating on their fatness. As Neff (2023) succinctly summarized, "mindfulness is the pillar on which self-compassion rests" (p. 196). Preliminary evidence supports the beneficial role of mindfulness interventions in promoting self-compassion (for a review, see Barnard & Curry, 2011). In sum, less self-criticism and more self-compassion—stemming from mindfulness interventions—help reduce weight-based self-stigma among overweight workers.

Mindfulness curbs weight stigma and discrimination among observers

Weight stigma is prevalent not only among overweight workers but also among individuals (e.g., coworkers, supervisors, clients) who interact with those workers. Driven by the aforementioned weight stereotypes, the observers discount fatter workers as sloppy, selfish, incompetent, and undeserving of respect or fair treatment. I contend that mindfulness plays a pivotal role in reducing observers' negative judgment and discrimination against overweight workers. Mindful nonjudgmental awareness allows observers to perceive fatter workers' body size as a neutral characteristic, without levying on them the standard of being slim. When judgmental thoughts about fat workers begin to creep in, mindful individuals are able to redirect attention to these thoughts. Rather than reacting to the contents of the thoughts, they simply register the thoughts as they are passing through their mind and gently letting them go. The receptive attitude of mindfulness allows observers to be aware of negative thoughts and impulses as they arise, but not get caught up in them.

Further, mindfulness promotes compassionate responses such as care and support to overweight workers. By decoupling the self from experiences, mindfulness frees up observers' mental space and promotes other-oriented cognitive, affective, and behavioral tendencies that culminate in compassionate responses. Specifically, mindfulness fosters perspective-taking (e.g., Hafenbrack et al., 2020; Sawyer et al., 2022), allowing individuals to cognitively envision the world through the eyes of overweight workers and develop a fuller understanding of what their lives are like. Mindful observers may re-perceive fatness as a challenge rather than a taint. Moreover, mindfulness fosters a warm feeling toward others with sufferings (e.g., Hafenbrack et al., 2020), allowing observers to feel compassion toward, and close connection with, workers with hardship such as excessive body weight. Lastly, mindfulness promotes more flexible behavioral tendencies (e.g., Glomb et al., 2011, Good et al., 2016), allowing observers to pause and consider more appropriate responses toward fatter workers. In sum, mindfulness promotes observers' prosocial thoughts, feelings, and action tendencies that shape their compassionate responses toward overweight workers. The compassionate tendencies resulting from mindfulness ultimately aid in the combat against weight stigmatization and discrimination.

What is the unique advantage of mindfulness interventions?

Mindfulness interventions are uniquely advantageous in mitigating weight-based stigma and discrimination compared to education or information-based programs. Weight stigma is deeply rooted in implicit biases in which fatness is, without conscious awareness, stereotypically associated with deficient qualities (e.g., being incompetent, uncooperative). Although information-based interventions—such as antidiscrimination campaign or workshop on the etiology of obesity—help shape declarative attitudes toward fatness (Danielsdóttir et al., 2010), weight-based implicit biases operate under the conscious “radar” and are difficult to detect or pivot (Schupp & Renner, 2011). Mindfulness training is particularly well suited to counteract implicit biases (e.g., Yang, 2020) and thus forestalls stigmatization, as it fosters ongoing monitoring, conscious detection, and effective regulation of weight-based stereotypes. Rigorously designed mindfulness interventions are much needed in this area.

How to design mindfulness interventions geared toward reducing weight stigma?

Given that organizations often customize mindfulness programs to fit specific work settings, I believe any mindfulness interventions involving the cultivation of nonjudgmental present-moment awareness would be generally conducive to reducing weight stigma. Nonetheless, several issues are worthy of consideration. First, mindfulness training may be adapted to include body size and weight as additional stimuli to which participants attune their attention. Individuals may be encouraged to pay attention to their natural thoughts and behavioral tendencies when dealing with fatness. This will foster heightened awareness of weight-related stimuli and more effective self-regulation. Second, mindfulness training may be deployed in combination with other types of interventions such as self-compassion interventions (e.g., Germer & Neff, 2019). But doing so creates challenges in isolating the unique effect of mindfulness, as the observed effect of weight stigma reduction is a function of mindfulness and other intervention elements. Lastly, because weight stigma is deeply entrenched, a single session of brief mindfulness training might not effect noticeable changes (Barnard & Curry, 2011). Mindfulness interventions over an extended period may be more desirable to produce robust effects on weight stigma. Individuals may be encouraged to engage in daily micro dosages of mindfulness practices to strengthen the effects of interventions.

Conclusion

In this commentary, I discuss the beneficial role of mindfulness interventions in reducing weight stigma. I articulate that mindfulness practices, by fostering nonjudgmental present-moment awareness, not only mitigate self-stigma among overweight workers but also thwart observers' stigmatization and mistreatment of those who are overweight. Self-compassion of overweight workers and observers' compassionate responses, both stemming from mindfulness interventions, play pivotal roles in combatting weight stigma. I further discuss several practical considerations of implementing mindfulness programs to effectively reduce weight stigma in the workplace.

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