Body Language

Fat shaming won't make a person lose weight. So what's a better approach?

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When media personality Kim Kardashian shared on The Tonight Show that she suffered fat shaming after packing on the pounds during her first pregnancy, many people could relate. Today, more than two-thirds of U.S. adults are overweight or obese.

But the problem isn't unique to Americans. According to 2012 statistics, in Canada, roughly 4.7 million adults reported a height and weight that classified them as obese. Also in 2012, more than 60 percent of Australians fit into the same category.

Experts shudder at these statistics. Carrying extra body weight increases the risk of numerous illnesses, including diabetes, metabolic syndrome, coronary heart disease, high blood pressure, stroke and respiratory conditions, just to name a few. But given that so many people are tipping the scales, some believe being fat is becoming the new normal. What can we do?

Public speaker, coach and author Marcia Meislin says in her Huffington Post blog that in the past, she would heap verbal abuse on herself after each episode of binge eating. She thought this self-administered fat sham-ing would help her kick the habit. It didn't.

And when others do the fat shaming, the same results apply.

"Shaming people only increases all sorts of negative effects," says Edward Abramson, PhD, a clinical psychologist and author of the book Emotional Eating: What You Need to Know Before Starting Another Diet. "Fat shaming tends to make people withdraw, and that increases the likelihood that instead of having a moderate amount of the dessert or the ice cream or the chocolate, or whatever, the person who has been shamed will binge eat. They'll gobble the food down and as a result tend to consume more than they would if they could just sit and eat a meal normally."

According to recent findings, fat shaming puts those who are overweight or obese at increased risk of engaging in the very behaviors that most likely packed on pounds in the first place: excessive food intake and physical inactivity.

"Overeating is a common emotion- regulation strategy, and those who feel the stress of

stigmatization report that they cope with it by eating more," write the authors of one study conducted at Tallahassee's Florida State University of Medicine.

But when folks perceive of their weight as normal and they're in fact overweight or obese, they do place themselves at risk of chronic diseases and poor health.

Abramson agrees, but offers a less stigmatizing way to address the issue. "I like to talk about healthy eating rather than telling people, 'You should go on a diet; you're too fat,'" he says. "[We should] talk about eating healthy for health, which doesn't include high-calorie, high-fat, processed foods, visits to McDonald's and junky snack foods, especially sugary drinks. Sugared drinks are probably the single greatest cause of obesity in kids."

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