

Living with Obesity: Men's experiences of losing and gaining weight and the implications for policy and services

The Study

To study men's experiences of living with obesity in both an everyday sense, where they are exposed to the symbolic persecution of being labelled a failed citizen, and their perspectives and stories of engaging with and resisting weight management practices.

- Semi-structured interviews with 29 adult men currently living with obesity who carried varied experiences of practicing weight management strategies in terms of type and amount
- Analysed using Gadamer's (2004) interpretive philosophy of translations between particular experiences and a whole understanding of phenomena

Key findings

A valuable role played by the type of social support instigated through the collective action of practicing weight loss strategies with other men and women living with obesity, which encouraged sustained engagement with services and encouraged long-term weight loss.

While regular sport participation is often associated with a healthy childhood and the development of a sporty identity, it appears that amongst men, the most popular sports they devote time to during childhood, upon which their identities are based, are not sports which are conducive to regular participation throughout adulthood.

Dealing with unanticipated yet significant life events and negotiating gendered expectations connected with the adult life course represented periods of time when notable weight gain was more likely.

Fluctuations in bodyweight were commonly experienced by men who had attended commercial weight loss management programmes.

Distressing encounters with weight regain and harrowing memories of attending commercial weight management programmes cemented some men's deep-rooted fears that they lacked the self-discipline to permanently lose their unwanted bodyweight and were destined to eventually return to the 'old habits' which had led to the development of obesity.

Men who articulated such fears found themselves in a predicament where they were no better off in respect of their desired bodyweight, but worse off in terms of their

sense of self-worth and overall wellbeing than when they set out on their journey to lose weight.

Implications for policy and services

- The type of social support arising from collective action in weight loss strategies with other men and women is more engaging for men than the female-centred group discussion element of conventional weight management programmes.
- To increase the involvement in and adherence to weight management programmes amongst men living with obesity, service providers might look to incorporate weight loss practices relevant to physical activity or diet into their programmes.
- Dietary advice and interventions amongst men in the UK who have recently finished or are about to end their regular participation in football and rugby could act as a preventative strategy against the development of significant weight gain and obesity.
- There is need for greater recognition of the life course context in which weight gain and the development of obesity take place within public health policies, via the various social expectations experienced by men as they encounter and negotiate the adult life course. Early adulthood, becoming a father, the peak of working life, and career progression appear to be pivotal stages in life when men are more likely to gain weight.
- Due to being in the constantly unsettling scenario of facing the omnipresent stigma of living in an obese body, when encountering unanticipated life events men are already in an unstable predicament, which can trigger behaviours that promote a vicious circle of weight gain and depression. Therefore, the lived consequences of weight stigma mean that attempting to lose weight is not always men's most pressing health and wellbeing concern.
- Most men described the experience of attending commercial weight management programmes as unsettling, as aspects of such programmes confused and further emotionalised their relationship with food whilst also adopting a strictly behavioural approach to explain and encourage weight loss.
- We recommend a more affective and genuinely personal approach amongst commercial weight programmes, that sufficiently acknowledges the delicate position that attendees are placing themselves in. As the existing behaviour-focused approach to losing weight employed by commercial weight management services does not fully prepare men to emotionally negotiate distressing encounters with weight regain.
- For men living with obesity who want to lose weight, fears about reverting to old habits, doubts about having enough self-discipline, and the difficulties of living in an obesogenic yet size shaming society are reflected within their ongoing identity adjustments.