



Guidelines for respectful language and image use

– WITH THE AIM OF REDUCING WEIGHT STIGMA



Guidelines for respectful language and image use

Thank you for wanting to use images from the Danish National Center for Obesity's image bank. By doing so, you contribute to counteracting bias through a respectful portrayal of individuals with obesity. We are pleased to provide this free resource.

This document will guide you in using respectful, non-stigmatizing language and imagery when it comes to communicating about obesity and obesity-related topics. With that said, there is no single correct way to do so. This guide should therefore be regarded as an inspiration to be mindful of how we communicate about obesity. It is not an encouragement to censor or refrain from discussing the subject, but an encouragement to consider an often unconscious stigmatizing narrative and image selection when communicating about obesity. You can read about the terms for using images from the image bank in the document 'Terms of Use of Image Usage' located under each image in the image bank.

This document has been developed with inspiration from 'Shift' from Australia and '[Language Matters: Obesity](#)' from England. You are welcome to seek more inspiration from these documents, which contain background information, examples, and references for further reading.

Introduction

Many individuals hold conscious and unconscious biases when it comes to obesity, which impact how we speak and communicate about the subject - and most importantly, how we perceive and interpret language and images. Words and images shape reality. Therefore, the use of dignified images and respectful, factual language can create a more neutral conveyance that contributes to reducing weight stigma.

This guide is intended to support everyone in more respectful communication about obesity. The goal is to equip you to communicate about obesity-related topics in a more neutral and factual manner, with the intention of avoiding unconscious, stigmatizing, and stereotypical portrayals of individuals with obesity. Research shows that weight stigma has negative consequences for the mental, social, and physical health of individuals with obesity. Learn more on the Danish National Center for Obesity's website, where we have compiled [knowledge about weight stigma](#) (in Danish).

Critics might say that we are glorifying obesity. But this is about something much more important. It's about a proper, humane approach and portrayal of human beings. Words have power. Images have power. So, anyone who communicates about obesity - whether it's authorities, the media, researchers, or others - have the power to contribute to and influence the perception of individuals with obesity. If those of us communicating about obesity can help promote a positive tone (in this area as well as others), we can positively contribute to the public's perception of obesity. We have the opportunity to create a narrative and a visual representation that is relatable, rather than feeling shamed and met with biases.

Seek more information about obesity, stigmatization, treatment, and other aspects related to obesity on our website: www.ncfo.dk (in Danish).

8 considerations when communicating about obesity (Source: [Shift](#))

Shift is a guide for people working with media and communication. Below are eight pieces of advice from the guide that you can reflect upon before communicating about obesity-related topics, regardless of your field of work.

Balance the messaging

Recognise the complexity causes and solutions of obesity. Take the opportunity to acknowledge that obesity is a complex condition influenced by many factors outside of the individual's control.

Stop the 'blame game'

There is no quick fix to overweight and obesity. Avoid framing stories that place the solutions solely within the individual's responsibility and perpetuate the personal failure narrative.

Use person-first language

Put people before the condition. For example, say "people with obesity" or "people who are overweight" rather than "overweight or obese people".

Use neutral and scientific words

Colloquial or combative language e.g. "fatter" or "war against obesity" can be stigmatising. Choose words that are neutral or scientific terms, e.g. "Body Mass Index", "body weight" and "health priority".

Choose respectful images

Treat people with obesity with dignity and respect. Consider images that portray our diverse, multicultural society rather than images of isolated large bodies.

Picture the environments

Obesity stories don't always need to feature images of people. Diverse imagery can help tell the full story of obesity causes and solutions e.g. supermarkets, food marketing and public green spaces.

Break the stereotypes

People with obesity are often stereotyped as lazy, uneducated or lacking will-power. Consider imagery that breaks down these stereotypes. Various international image banks are available (links to these can be found in [Shift](#) on page 20), and the Danish one can be found at www.ncfo.dk/imagebank.

Promote help-seeking

Provide an invitation at the end of each story that directs people to options for support if they want to make behaviour changes or have concerns about their health.

Shift contains more background information, further advice, and specific linguistic examples.



Words create reality

(Source: [Language Matters: Obesity](#))

Language Matters: Obesity is a guide aimed at healthcare professionals. It revolves around language and the conversation that takes place between healthcare professionals and individuals with obesity. However, the principles can be applied by everyone. *Language Matters: Obesity* includes, among other things, ten principles that can contribute to a respectful conversation. These principles have been developed based on lived experiences from individuals with obesity, researchers, healthcare professionals, and research.

Seek permission

Unless introduced by the person living with obesity, prior to initiating the conversation, seek the person's permission to discuss their weight.

(Body) language and tone

Use language (including tone and non-verbal gestures) that is:

- » Free from judgement or negative connotations, particularly try to avoid the threat of long-term consequences or scolding ('telling off')
- » Person-centred, (also known as 'person-first') to avoid labelling a person as their condition. An example is talking about 'a person with obesity' rather than an 'obese person'
- » Collaborative and engaging, rather than authoritarian or controlling.

Language has power

Be aware that language, both verbal and non-verbal, has enormous power that can have positive or negative effects.

Some words are unacceptable

Recognise that some words, phrases and descriptions are potentially problematic, whatever the intention of the user.

Avoid combat and humour

Avoid using combative language when referring to people's efforts to reduce overweight or obesity, and never use humour or ridicule.

Stick to the evidence

Communicate, accurate, evidence-based information/data when discussing weight.

Don't blame

Avoid language which attributes responsibility (or blame) to a person for the development of their obesity or its consequences.

Don't generalise

Avoid language that infers generalisations, stereotypes or prejudice

Be empathic

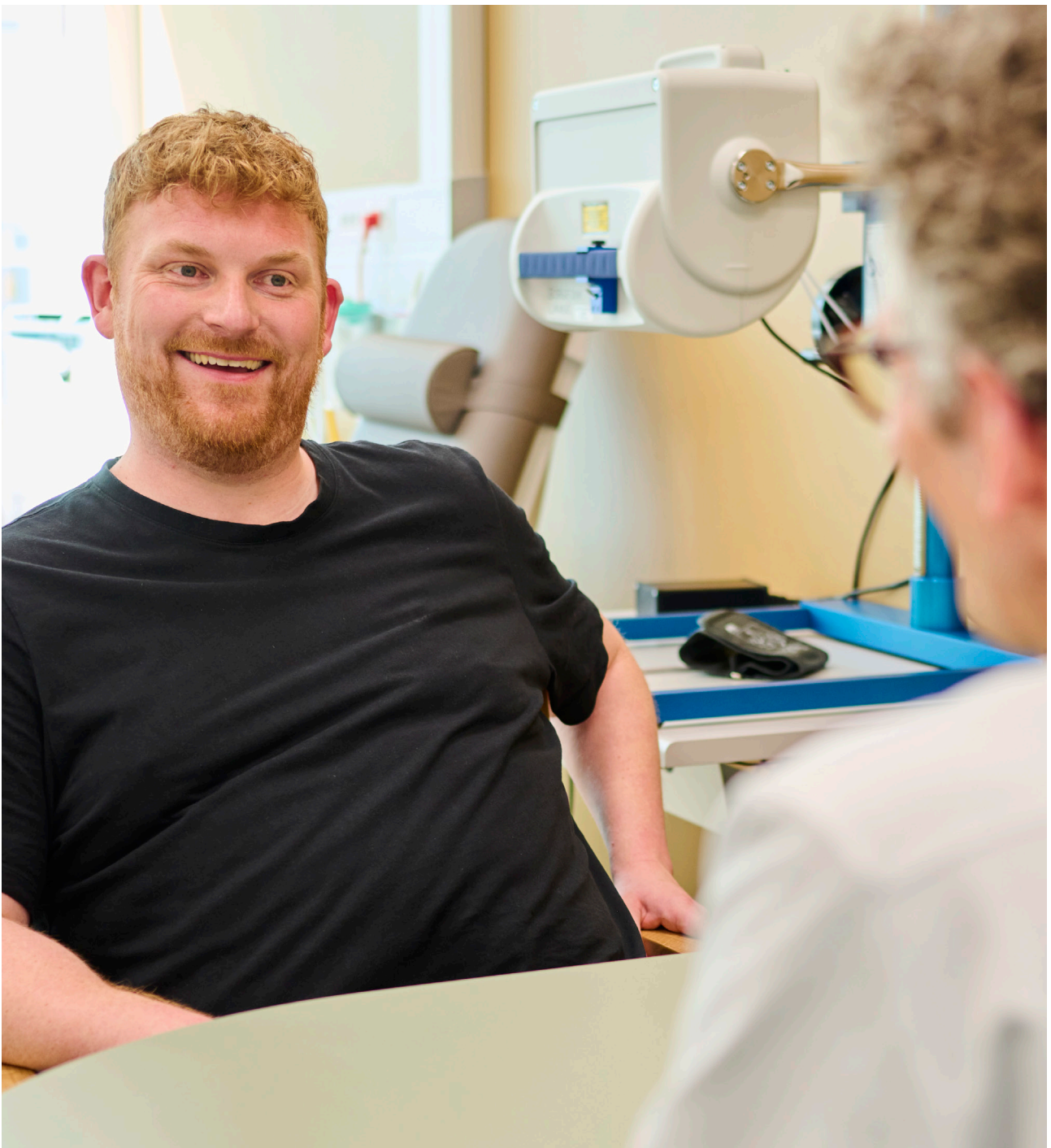
Use or develop an empathic language style which seeks to ascertain a person's point of view of their condition, rather than making assumptions.

Listen and explore

» Listen out for a person's own words or phrases about their weight and body image and explore or acknowledge the meanings behind them

» Consider how to limit any negative effects from language. Listen out for negative language used by others around you and consider ways to address this.

Language Matters: Obesity contains more background information, further advice, and specific linguistic examples.





Purpose and background of the image bank

The long-term purpose of the image bank is to contribute to a general shift in attitude towards obesity, promoting a more dignified, unbiased, and non-stigmatizing view of children, adolescents, and adults with obesity. The aim is to provide respectful images of people with overweight and obesity, and for Danes with obesity to see themselves reflected respectfully in the images they encounter in articles, reports, and other contexts when the topic is obesity.

The media and others who communicate about and depict 'obesity' play a central role in shaping the public's understanding and attitudes towards the subject, thus influencing the perception of individuals with obesity through language and images.

It became clear to the Danish National Center for Obesity (NCFO), established as a knowledge center in 2020, that the way people with obesity are portrayed in the media and many other contexts can contribute to perpetuating negative bias. Often, only a belly is shown with a measuring tape around it or the whole person engaged in a stereotypical activity like eating junk food, spilling food, watching TV, playing computer games, and the like. A quick examination of various Danish media revealed that most of them use images that can be stigmatizing when the subject is obesity.

Moreover, as a knowledge center, it was difficult for us to find respectful images that we could use for various purposes, depicting the everyday lives of people with obesity. There are other image banks with diverse, non-stigmatizing images, but their images rarely have a Nordic character. For instance, they might depict mountains in the background, palm trees on the beach, and the like. Therefore, we wanted to develop a Danish image bank with dignified images to contribute to

changing the narrative about and perception of people with obesity through images.

We began searching for funding for the image bank, and in early 2023, we succeeded in obtaining funds from the alliance 'Børnevægt i balance,' administratively serviced by the Novo Nordisk Foundation, for the development of the image bank. The image bank opened in 2023. NCFO has been responsible for the development - from idea to launch. Our hope is that the images can contribute to a different understanding of individuals with obesity, thereby reducing weight stigma.

About weight stigma

Weight stigma can have negative consequences for the mental, social, and physical health of both children, adolescents, and adults living with obesity. Among other things, it can lead to low self-esteem, depression, anxiety, increased food intake, reduced physical activity, and subsequent weight gain. Therefore, it is important to work towards reducing stigmatization of individuals with obesity through education about the complexity of obesity and the consequences of weight stigma. Hopefully, this will increase well-being, reduce feelings of guilt and shame, and create a respectful tone when the topic is obesity. The way we communicate, talk about, and depict obesity can

shape and perpetuate our thoughts and biases about people with obesity. This is why dignified images are important in the fight against weight stigma. Read more about weight stigma [on our website](#) (in Danish).

Obesity is a complex condition

Many hold the mistaken belief that obesity is a simple result of what you eat and how much you exercise. This notion contributes to the idea that weight is something individuals can and should have complete control over. Consequently, people with obesity are often seen as lacking self-control, self-discipline, willpower, backbone, and other biases. People develop obesity due to a complex interplay of many different factors - from genetic,

biological, and psychological to social, cultural, and environmental. Factors that to a greater or lesser extent lie beyond the individual's control.

Learn more about and gain insight into the complexity of obesity [on our website](#) (in Danish).

Our hope is that with increased knowledge about the complexity of obesity and the consequences of stigmatization, we can contribute to reducing the prevalence of weight stigma. So, our clear call to you, who want to communicate about obesity, is: be open, curious, and empathetic. Use neutral language and stay informed about obesity-related knowledge.





Thank you for wanting to use images from the Danish National Center for Obesity's image bank. You are contributing to important work towards less weight stigma. Thank for reading along and staying updated.