



Sport Psych WORKS

ABOUT SPW

SportPsych Works is a longstanding APA Division 47 newsletter-style fact sheet series, originally developed as a joint initiative of the Science and Public Interest Committees. With those committees now integrated into the Cornerstone Committee, the Diversity Collective is reintroducing and stewarding SportPsych Works for its next chapter.

Designed to be engaging, practical, and evidence-informed, each issue translates current sport, exercise, and performance psychology research into accessible resources for practitioners, coaches, athletes, educators, students, and organizations.

The series bridges research and practice through timely, actionable guidance while centering culturally responsive, equity-informed, and strengths-based perspectives.

SportPsych Works recognizes culture, identity, context, and lived experience as fundamental to effective sport and performance psychology and seeks to foster well-being, belonging, inclusion, and excellence across diverse performance settings.

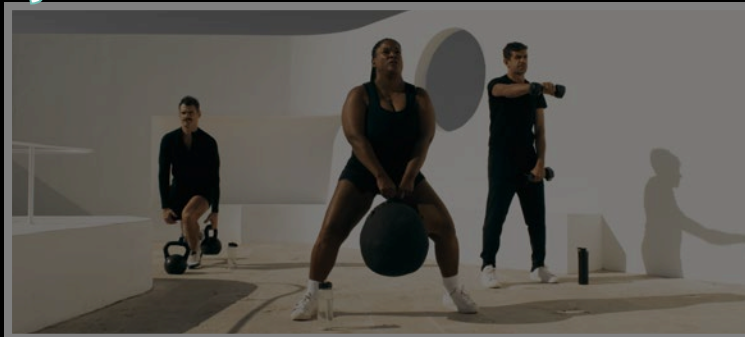


WEIGHT-INCLUSIVE APPROACH TO SPORT, EXERCISE, AND PERFORMANCE PSYCHOLOGY

“So in 2015, I ran this race, and I didn’t run super well ... Alberto [coach] yelled at me in front of everybody else at the meet, and he told me that I’d clearly gained five pounds before the race. It was also that night that I told Alberto and our sports psych that I was cutting myself. And they pretty much told me they just wanted to go to bed... part of me wonders if I had worked with more female psychologists... where I’d be today.” (Mary Cain, 2019)

In the field of sport, exercise, health, and performance, weight-centric beliefs are commonplace. Weight-centrism assumes that thin = faster/better performance, and that thin = healthy. However, research shows that weight-centric approaches can do more harm than good. This article outlines the potential harms of weight-centric approaches and introduces an alternative, weight-inclusive approach to sport, exercise, and performance psychology.

WEIGHT-INCLUSIVE APPROACH TO SPORT, EXERCISE, AND PERFORMANCE PSYCHOLOGY



UNDERSTANDING THE TOPIC

Weight-centric approaches view weight as a major determinant of health and performance. Physical inactivity and sedentary behavior are presented as major causes of weight gain and poor health, and exercise is widely marketed as a weight-management tool (Franco et al., 2025). As a result, weight-centric professionals prioritize thinness, leanness, lower body fat, and/or alteration in weight and body composition for health and performance enhancement (Busanich et al., 2012, 2014, 2016; Papathomas & Lavallee, 2014). However, research paints a more complicated picture. Systematic reviews of over 200 intervention studies for weight management among children found that physical activity has little to no effect on weight (Spiga et al., 2024a; 2024b). Researchers also found, in a systematic review and meta-analysis of BMI and all-cause mortality across 150 studies with over six million participants, that higher BMIs were associated with significantly lower risks of cardiovascular mortality (Wiebe et al., 2023).

Furthermore, weight-centric approaches often fail to consider the negative consequences of prioritizing these factors. Not only are health and performance determined by more than just weight or body composition, but research also shows that an emphasis on weight can lead to mental health concerns, such as body dissatisfaction, disordered eating, and increased injury risk, and contribute to a toxic fitness culture (Derbyshire et al., 2025; Schinke et al., 2021). Moreover, the body expectations can be weaponized by coaching staff or health and fitness professionals and result in weight stigma, weight-based bullying, shaming, and discrimination (Willson & Kerr, 2021). Given the dominance of weight-centric perspectives in health and fitness settings, it is important for professionals to reflect on and prepare for how they will address the role of weight in their sport, exercise, and performance psychology practice.

UNDERSTANDING THE EXPERIENCE

"PE is always the time when I feel the worse about myself. I'm taught that my fatness represents something bad; that perhaps I am bad because I am fat. I'm taught that if I made simple changes to my diet and exercise, that I wouldn't be fat anymore. This confuses me, as I'm often dieting at home alongside my mother, and I'm just as active as most kids I know. And yet, they're not fat. I can hear the dismissal in my PE teacher's tone; he doesn't think much of me, this fat kid that he's stuck with for the next several years at my small private school." (Pausé, 2019)

"I have definitely gotten fatter over the years of having my platform, so I think that the microaggressions have happened at different levels now. And one of the ways that I think it happens the most often is when there's people who are like, 'You're so brave. I could never.' Those little remarks, I don't think people actually interrogate on what that means because what I hear is, 'If I looked like you, I would never have the audacity to be outside. And I can't believe that you have the audacity to be outside and living your life.'" (Chen et al., 2024)

UNDERSTANDING THE RESEARCH

Weight stigma is characterized by the social devaluation of people with larger bodies (Côte et al., 2025). Research consistently shows that weight stigma is pervasive in sport, exercise, and performance psychology and acts as a barrier to meaningful and sustained participation in sport and physical activity (Derbyshire et al., 2025; Lee et al., 2025).

The good news is, research shows that educational interventions can reduce weight stigma amongst fitness and health students and professionals (Squires et al., 2025; Zuest et al., 2024). Specifically, learning about the complexities of weight science, the Health at Every Size® principles (ASDAH, n.d.), social determinants of health, attribution theory, and weight-inclusive approaches that decenter weight can help improve students' and professionals' attitudes towards people with larger bodies and increase their knowledge about weight-inclusive approaches to health and physical activity (Escun et al., 2025; Fogaça et al., 2024; Zuest et al., 2026).



PUTTING IT INTO PRACTICE

- 1 Examine your taken-for-granted assumptions about weight and health
- 2 Complete the Weight Implicit Association Test to identify your biases regarding weight (Project Implicit, n.d.)
- 3 Complete free evidence-based online trainings on weight science, weight stigma, and weight-inclusive approaches to physical activity (see <https://www.weightinclusivethinking.com/>)
- 4 Proactively cultivate a weight-inclusive culture by adopting weight-inclusive policies, language, and images
- 5 Establish a system of support for athletes and clients who have been adversely impacted by weight stigma and weight-based discrimination

LET'S REFLECT

If physical activity did not change your body shape, size, or health status, would you still engage in physical activity? Why or why not?

When, where, and how did you receive messages about good vs bad bodies? How have these body messages influenced your views on health and physical activity?

Who and what benefits from idealizing thin and toned bodies and pathologizing fat bodies? Who and what is harmed by idealizing thin and toned bodies and pathologizing fat bodies?

THE BIG PICTURE

WHEN REFLECTING ON THEIR EXPERIENCES WITH SIZE-INCLUSIVE PHYSICAL ACTIVITY, ONE INTERVIEWEE (RITA) PRAISED THE IMPORTANCE OF DIVERSITY IN INCREASING EXERCISE MOTIVATION:

"DIVERSITY ACTUALLY MAKES ME GO THERE BECAUSE IT FEELS INCLUSIVE. YES I'M A LARGER LADY, BUT I THINK A LOT OF PEOPLE CAN LOOK AT THEMSELVES AS BEING DIFFERENT, AND SAYING I'M THE ONLY BLACK LADY HERE; I'M THE ONLY ASIAN LADY; I'M SO TALL, EVERYONE IS SHORT; OR I'M 80 YEARS OLD AND THERE'S A 20 YEAR OLD. LIKE ONCE YOU GET THE DIVERSITY, YOU GET THE DIFFERENT SHAPES AND SIZES, IT ALMOST SEEMS EASY TO GET TO AND GO." (MYRE ET AL., 2023)





CONTINUING THE CONVERSATION

KEY TAKEAWAYS

1

Weight stigma is prevalent in sport, exercise, and health contexts and acts as a significant barrier to meaningful and sustained participation and success

2

Pursuing (free) continuing education on weight-inclusive approaches to health is one way to reduce weight stigma (<https://www.weightinclusivethinking.com>)

3

Sport, exercise, and performance professionals should advocate for and adopt weight-inclusive language and policies within their organizations

RESOURCES

Weight Inclusive Thinking for Fitness Spaces Online Training
(<https://www.weightinclusivethinking.com/wit-fits>)

Weight-Inclusive Physical Activity Resources (<https://weightinclusivepa.com/>)

Association for Size Diversity and Health (<https://asdah.org/>)

National Association to Advance Fat Acceptance (<https://naafa.org/>)

Weight Inclusive Research and Education (WIRED) Collaborative (<https://wiredcollab.wordpress.com/>)



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