DO THE PSYCHOLOGICAL EFFECTS OF STIGMA LINGER AFTER OBESE ADOLESCENTS TRANSITION TO NORMAL WEIGHT?

RESEARCH PROBLEM & DATA

Although the effects of childhood obesity on physical health are well-documented, we know much less about the potential long-term impacts on mental health, particularly on self-image and self-esteem. Because obesity is a stigmatizing condition—one that is associated with social rejection, isolation, and discrimination—obese individuals often internalize the devalued label and suffer harm to their sense of self. If the stigma associated with obesity becomes part of one’s identity, the harmful effects of stigma may outlive the condition itself. To examine the potential lingering effects of stigma, the authors considered body image discrepancy (the evaluation of one’s own body in relation to one’s idea of a preferred body) and self-esteem trajectories of young girls who transitioned from obesity to normal weight during the course of adolescence.

This study relied on data from the National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute’s (NHLBI) Growth and Health Study (GHS), a longitudinal, multisite study of 2,379 females (who were 9 or 10 years old in 1987) assessed annually across a 10-year period. The authors modeled trajectories of body image discrepancy and self-esteem to compare the pattern of change over time for three groups of girls: (1) girls who transition from the obese range to the normal weight range during adolescence, (2) chronically obese girls, and (3) girls who remain in the normal weight range throughout adolescence. They also examined how black and white formerly obese girls differ in patterns of body image discrepancy and self-esteem.

KEY FINDINGS

- Black and white girls who transitioned from obesity to normal weight had a body image discrepancy that was similar to that of chronically obese girls and greater than that of girls who were consistently in the normal weight range. These findings suggest that girls who transitioned from obesity to normal weight internalized a normative body as the ideal body and recognized that their own body was discrepant from the ideal. Even after transitioning to normal weight, both black and white girls who were previously obese continued to perceive their body as discrepant from the ideal.
- Black and white girls who eventually transitioned from obesity to normal weight had self-esteem levels at the beginning of the study period that were similar to those of chronically obese girls and lower than those of girls in the consistently normal weight range. This provides evidence that girls who transitioned out of obesity experienced negative consequences of stigma. Obese white girls who transitioned from obesity to normal weight did not exhibit change in self-esteem over time, suggesting no significant rebound for girls who lost weight. In contrast, black girls who transitioned from obesity to normal weight experienced increased self-esteem over time.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Adolescent obesity has both physical and mental health consequences. The physical effects of excess weight begin to dissipate shortly after weight is lost. However, this study suggests that the mental health ramifications linger. Interventions and treatments for weight loss in adolescent girls ought to include a mental health component and should be sensitive and nonstigmatizing, focused on health-related rather than appearance-related issues. Such interventions could have long-term positive impacts, given the established links between mental health and physical health and between adolescent self-esteem and future health, educational attainment, and economic prospects. Given the study’s findings that self-concept trajectories appear to be resistant to change once set in motion, addressing weight-related self-concept issues early on among obese youth and youth at risk for obesity is crucial.