



## TOOL E6 Raising the issue of weight – perceptions of overweight healthcare professionals and overweight people

TOOL  
E6

<b>For:</b>	Healthcare professionals, particularly those who are overweight
<b>About:</b>	This tool provides the results of research undertaken to investigate the experiences and beliefs of overweight healthcare providers who provide weight management advice, and the views and perception of information of patients receiving weight-related information from overweight healthcare practitioners.
<b>Purpose:</b>	To provide an understanding of the perceptions of overweight healthcare professionals and overweight people.
<b>Use:</b>	Overweight healthcare professionals can use this tool to help them raise the issue of weight with overweight patients.
<b>Resource:</b>	<i>Overweight health professionals giving weight management advice: The perceptions of health professionals and overweight people<sup>222</sup></i>

Like the population as a whole, some healthcare professionals are overweight or obese. Anecdotally, it is known that these health practitioners can find it difficult to give advice to overweight patients. Research was therefore commissioned to look at the attitudes of overweight healthcare professionals and overweight patients. The results are not conclusive and more research is required to provide overweight practitioners with guidance on how to raise the issue of weight with their patients, but the research contains some messages that are worth consideration by health professionals.

### Perceptions of overweight healthcare professionals

#### Credibility and professionalism

- Overall, **most health professionals felt their expertise and empathetic manner were most important to their credibility**. Although some acknowledged that their weight may affect how their patients view them, many thought that being overweight or 'not skinny' would have a positive effect in building a relationship with overweight patients.
 

*"I often discuss whether I can be taken credibly in my role (dietitian) given that I myself am obese."*

*"Despite being overweight as a practitioner you still have valid expert advice on weight management. However, patients may feel that it is not such valid advice if you cannot follow it yourself!"*
- Interestingly, nearly all health professionals thought that overweight and particularly obese colleagues were less credible than they perceived themselves to be:
 

*"The trainer was morbidly obese and although clearly technically competent, his physical appearance was distracting and caused me to question his validity as a trainer. There is no rational thought behind this perception, but clearly this has been instilled into my psyche by the continuous cultural and media-driven accepted norms."*

- Some health professionals thought that being overweight – and particularly being obese – would hinder the credibility and professional reputation of a health professional.  
*“How can a health professional who does not value a healthy weight help other people?”*

*“I remember a dietitian who was very overweight and thinking, ‘How can she give advice?’”*

### Underplaying the significance of personal weight

Although all health professionals who participated in the research self-selected themselves as an ‘overweight health professional’ defined as having a BMI of over 25kg/m<sup>2</sup>, and many reported weights and heights indicating a BMI well over 30kg/m<sup>2</sup>, several viewed themselves or thought they were perceived as a healthy weight.

*“..... although my BMI is 34, I don’t necessarily look that big because of my age and height; I’m just sturdy.”*

### Reflexivity

Interviewees found it difficult to answer a question about what effect their own weight might have on whether the subject of weight is discussed. This was not something they had thought of before:

*“It’s not something I have really thought about until now.”*

*“It’s impossible to know if my weight has any effect. I mean, how would we ever know and how could you measure that?”*

### Perceived advantages of overweight health professionals

Health professionals thought that sharing personal experience of weight management helped them to be more empathetic and build rapport with their patients. As a result, some said they referred to their own weight or used personal examples of behaviour change.

*“I can relate to them. I gained five stone in a year so normally I would not have had an issue with my weight and now I have a huge issue with my weight. I can say ‘I understand what you are going through.’”*

### Mentioning health professionals’ own weight during consultations

- Most health professionals (70%) said that they mentioned their own weight and lifestyle in consultations. This was often used to demonstrate strategies to change eating behaviour and increase physical activity. Those who mentioned their weight felt that it helped them to empathise with patients.

*“I have found the patients I do mention it [weight] to are more likely to be open and honest with me.”*

*“A patient has said that they would much rather be seen by someone who wasn’t skinny so would have an understanding of how difficult it is.”*

- A small proportion of the sample said they would not mention their own weight. Participants in this group were generally against the idea of using personal references in the consultations. A few referred to the notion of talking about their own weight as unprofessional and not patient-centred.

*“No – I work in a patient-centred way and use the skill of immediacy to direct the conversation back to the person.”*

*“No, I don’t mention my weight as it’s a patient-centred consultation.”*

- So they viewed reference to their own weight as shifting the focus away from being patient-centred to health-professional centred. This was a dominant theme among those who did not mention their weight.

### Impact of health professionals’ own weight on raising weight as an issue

Some health professionals said their own weight made it less likely or more difficult to discuss weight loss with patients:

*“It does hinder me. How can I provide advice if I am clearly struggling to follow my own advice?”*

*“I do feel uncomfortable about discussing weight management because I am overweight. I think I may be more likely to discuss weight opportunistically if I was not overweight myself.”*

## Perceptions of overweight healthcare professionals by overweight people

### Value of advice from an overweight healthcare professional

Some people thought that seeing an overweight healthcare professional was helpful. The main benefits were thought to be greater empathy and insight from the healthcare professional and a feeling of trust:

*“She was sensitive and understanding and very encouraging. She acknowledged her weight and said if it was easy to lose weight, she’d be a size zero! She was funny and I felt understood and not demeaned in any way.”*

### Mentioning healthcare professionals’ own weight

It was felt there was a need for overweight professionals to mention their own weight, particularly as it could be distracting otherwise. People also wanted to hear personal weight loss ‘tips’, yet this is likely to be problematic because it moves the discussion away from a patient-centred, evidence-based approach.

However, there were some problems associated with healthcare professionals who had lost weight, with them being:

*“... like a reformed smoker.”*

*“They hate fat and forget how hard it is.”*

### Negative perceptions

- There was a strong reaction among overweight people that advice from an overweight health professional, particularly those who were not empathetic, was hypocritical and uninspiring, with respondents questioning the validity of the advice:

*“They can only give text book advice and it’s slightly hypocritical.”*

*“They should practise what they preach.”*

*"I was relieved to find an overweight doctor – I thought that she would understand the problems and how difficult it is to address the issues but ... she was very dismissive and quite patronising. I went into the surgery feeling low and came out feeling guilty and thought I was a total waste of her valuable time as I wasn't ill in the conventional sense. After that, I tended to avoid the doctor. Even though it was a few years ago now, it still affects the way I feel and act at the doctor's."*

- Several participants raised the issue of the stigma around health professionals being overweight. This attitude demonstrates the crucial need for reflexivity in weight management practice. In some instances, health professionals who were overweight were perceived as more judgemental, with patients suggesting that health professionals take out their own weight issues on patients or that they are self-conscious about being overweight.
- There was some hostility towards overweight health professionals because of their weight, demonstrating how pervasive weight bias can be.