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Obesity in the United States of America

Ana L. Cruz

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As indicated by the *Obesity Medicine Association Clinical Leaders in Obesity Medicine*, obesity is “a condition characterized by the excessive accumulation and storage of fat in the body” (Welcome). It is a chronic disease that has dramatically increased in just the United States of America, especially over the last 3 decades “affecting as many as 72 million Americans” (Correll 2010). Many people are uneducated about this disease which is why it is often overlooked and stigmatized in today’s society. As this illness has no simple or one solution it can be categorized as a wicked problem. This wicked problem that I am speaking on in this essay, it breaks people mentally and physically, on so many levels. Looking at this wicked problem in depth, we can see that there are a number of different factors amplifying this problem; however, this evidence in which I will provide demonstrates the major causes of this wicked problem we face day in and day out and it is important for society to understand and have sympathy for this problem in order for a change to be made in our society.

If we want to get to the root of this problem, we have to ask an important question: Why is losing weight such a difficult task in the United States? There are three different answers to this question. The first answer is the U.S. Healthcare system. Unfortunately, our government and this world are based on money. This is no different when speaking on obesity. Because this system is made for people that are able to afford it, people that suffer from obesity and are not financially stable are not able to receive the proper care that they deserve. Statistics collected by the *Surgical Endoscopy* show that people suffering from obesity tend to not receive the best treatment from medical professionals compared to the rest of the population. In fact, this study proved that doctors are more inclined to improperly educate obese patients on their options for weight loss, including invasive and noninvasive options, compared to other patients. Also, the prices of any weight loss options can be very expensive and unaffordable for obese patients as

well. The second answer to the question is the difficulty of dieting in this society. Dieting in this case means having a specific plan for eating that fits an obese person's lifestyle and does not expect them to eat a lot less, completely change their lifestyle right away, or cost too much to maintain the diet. It is no secret that social media is crawling with a multitude of new dieting and workout plans, however, these plans are either too expensive, too confusing, or the goals are too unattainable for those with obesity. One example of this is the no carb diet. First of all, the no carb diet requires that the participant purchase more expensive, no-carb food, the parameters are pretty simple for this specific diet, but the goal and stepping stones are so incredibly difficult. It is so difficult to cut out all carbs, not to mention it is incredibly unhealthy to not supply the human body with carbs. The third answer to this question is social judgement. In our society, it is very common that people shame those with obesity because obesity is not today's fad, it is considered 'disgusting', or as the Oxford Languages define it, obesity is "the condition of being grossly fat or overweight" (2011). Now yes, this definition is simply using scientific word choice, but the choice of words could be misinterpreted, and this simply adds to the stigma. If we want society to change we have to start being more sensitive and understanding of obese people and their circumstances.

In order to combat the negative stigma on obesity another question that should be asked is: Where does this disease stem from? In most cases, people become more susceptible to having this illness when they suffer from anxiety and depression. The *Sociology of Health & Illness* states that "...American culture valuing ambition, hard work and self-control, fatness emerged in the popular imagination as an unseemly marker of laziness" (Rasmussen, 2012). Although people with obesity tend to binge because they are trying to compensate and find some normalcy or happiness from the sensation of eating; something that they can always count on. Due to the

fact that they are bingeing, obese people also tend to develop and addiction to food. This form of addiction, while it may not seem too serious, it is just as dire as someone becoming addicted to drugs and alcohol. Through the act of overeating, obese people are putting themselves at risk for countless diseases and death, just as a drug addict or alcoholic would. Now that we know the dynamics of this disease, we must take a closer look at how it affects different genders and ages.

If we want to figure out how this disease affects either gender, we must start with one question: how does obesity affect men? Men experience obesity completely different from women. Just as a woman, obesity in men “impairs the body's responsiveness to insulin, raising blood sugar and insulin levels” (2011), but men also experience other symptoms that women will not. For example, excessive fat in a man suppresses the testosterone hormone. Obesity also impairs a man’s fertility and increases chances of erectile dysfunction. Along with that, obesity has the ability to seemingly conceal prostate cancer in a man. It does this by lowering the Prostate Specific Antigen (PSA) levels in men which makes it harder for doctors to detect and diagnose prostate cancer. On another note, compared to women, when men have this illness, they usually have a more difficult time confronting it as men are more strong minded than women (Harvard Health Publishing: Harvard Medical School 2011).

Now we must ask: how does obesity affect women? Women undergo completely different experiences with obesity. Studies show that impoverished women are actually more likely to have obesity due to the fact that on average they suffer from depression more than an impoverished man. Holly Rose, an obese American woman, has been dealing with her disease since her mother’s death. Due to her depression, Rose became obese and addicted to food, she explained the sensation as “...cravings and hunger as insatiable and overpowering” (Rose, 2020). Thankfully, Rose has since been able to fight and recover from her addiction and she is working

on becoming healthier, but there are so many other women who too suffer from depression and obesity who cannot find the will and the proper resources to have a healthier lifestyle.

One of my biggest questions when starting my research was: When do we start recognizing obesity in someone's life? The simple answer is 'as soon as possible.' It all starts when they are young, so if we want to decrease this problem in America, we need to begin acting at the first signs. Now, it is harder to determine if a child is showing signs of obesity due to the frequent height and weight fluctuations, but starting a child on a healthy lifestyle, will influence them to continue living with a healthier lifestyle as they mature and can make their own decisions. Circumstance also plays a role, studies show that children that are forced into the U.S. Child Welfare System are more likely to be obese, "...obesity was highest among children 12–18 years" (Rao et al., 2020). This is just another supporting factor in how society negatively affects people with obesity. With all of this being said, children are our future, we need to protect and do what is best for them, it is very important to focus and learn from this information so we can give them the tools they need to lead our future.

Obesity is a wicked problem that cripples people. Based on this information provided, we can now understand that there are numerous mental and outside components that influence obesity. With that being said, this evidence demonstrates the crucial causes of obesity that Americans face every day and it is imperative for our society to adapt, understand and have sympathy and love for those suffering from this chronic illness. If we want to decrease obesity in the United States, it is important that society refrains from putting a stigma on obesity. Many people do not realize it, but no matter what way we look at it, obesity is a disease and people suffer with not only the symptoms of obesity, but also, the shame that society forces on these already hurting people. Shame is not a tool used to help someone lose weight or gain confidence

and nowadays, it seems like we cherish the new social media fads so much that we forget to have sympathy for those who do not match the “perfect image.” As a society we should not be shunning, but lifting up and supporting people with obesity, so that they can feel confident and comfortable enough to start a journey toward a healthier lifestyle. Our system works in a way that it does not support those who feel like they do not have a voice, nor does it support those who are not financially stable, and the only way for this problem to de-escalate is to bring this attention to our society and government because it all starts at the top. Previously in this research essay I mentioned finding a solution to this wicked problem, but the thing is, there is no simple answer. I can’t find a magical solution to one of the most prominent chronic diseases in American history, but we can work together to recognize the problems that surround and fuel this disease in order to slowly start making a change. The way I see it, if we can get fast food chains to offer healthier options, make dieting programs more affordable and effective, or even start support groups for people with obesity who want to better their lives, we can take this one step closer to lessening obesity in this country. At the end of the day, it all comes down to love, we have to be able to love our neighbors enough to want to create a long-lasting and much needed change in the United States of America.

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