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From Personal Blame to Systemic Change: Rethinking Obesity

Doctors and experts are challenging the way we talk about obesity, pointing to factors beyond personal control. Instead of blaming individuals, they say it's time to address the bigger picture.

Obesity is often framed as a personal failure, but the real issue is systemic. Beyond the physical health risks, societal judgment and bias fuel shame. Experts argue that real change starts with changes in our own systems to end the obesity epidemic in Americans.

"I used to think I just needed more willpower. I would feel ashamed and embarrassed shopping for clothes, and going to meet with my friends." The words come from a mother who has lived with obesity for years. Her voice wavers while sitting down on the cafe chair. She has asked to remain anonymous, but her pain is unmistakable.

"During menopause, I just started gaining weight out of nowhere," she explains, frustration layered beneath exhaustion. "Everything I was doing to try to lose weight was just not working. I don't know how I got this fat. I barely even eat."

She tried everything; walking instead of driving, taking stairs instead of elevators, even investing in an at-home exercise bike. "I'd lose a little, but it would always come back," she says. "And then people look at you like you're lazy. Like you don't care."

Headlines often flash ways what you as an individual can do to lose weight. It's known to be simple: eat less, exercise more, and the weight will come off. But as obesity rates remain high in 2025, experts are pushing back against this view, arguing that a much larger system is setting people up for failure.

Dr. Anastassia Amaro- medical director of endocrinology at Penn Medicine sees roughly around 700 patients each year struggling with obesity. Many arrive at her office ashamed, convinced it is

their fault. “Patients often believe they’re at fault for choosing the wrong lifestyle,” she shares, “But my job is to help them see that obesity is a disease.”

“We disassociate the individual from the disease” She shifts in her office chair, the fluorescent lights humming softly. “We do not say someone is obese, but rather an individual with obesity” she describes in her grey office cube. Obesity is viewed as a stigma and we need to change the language. Her approach is to disassociate the individual from disease, as well as to treat them clinically and medically.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), more than 40% of American adults are classified as obese. The consequences of the disease put the well-being of Americans at risk. Dr. Amaro discusses some of the common implications that come along with the disease are diabetes, cardiovascular disease, joint pain, fatty liver, inflammatory skin conditions, heart disease, sleep apnea, and more. She shares how treatments like Ozempic are useful, but without change in our food industry and prevention, this epidemic will remain in America.

“We already have a large number of people who already have obesity. We cannot reverse obesity by simply adjusting their diets. It’s not sustainable... It’s not sustainable to maintain weight loss in someone who already has obesity. So that means they need treatment.” She sighs. “On the other hand, it is clear that unless we change our food industry, the approach to feeding our children. We will not conquer obesity as an epidemic.” She says firmly.

Yet, the conversation often focuses on changes in individuals rather than addressing the root causes that drive obesity. The real changes need to be made, in our own systems in America.

I sat down on Zoom with Dr. Alexis Blount, a public health expert, to discuss the significant influence major food corporations have on public health.

According to Dr. Blount, many food companies prioritize profits over consumer well-being. The food industry is mostly driven by financial gain rather than nutritional value, leading to mass production of highly processed foods with long shelf lives. These products, while cheap to manufacture and easy to market, often contain additives that can disrupt metabolism and contribute to long-term health problems.

She highlights the “culture of craving,” where constant exposure to fast food advertisements influences consumer behavior. “When you're on the highway—you see fast food signs, trigger that idea of how you're hungry, and when you see that you'll just stop and grab some food,” she shares.

The manipulation runs deep, she warns, targeting the most impressionable among us, children. “Marketers are trying to appeal to certain markets, and healthy foods don't really market. How often do you see a commercial or billboard for an apple or a carrot?” Dr. Blount asks.

The negative impact is even greater in lower-income communities, where access to fresh, healthy foods is often limited. “Healthy eating shouldn't be a privilege,” Dr. Blount adds. “But in many low-income neighborhoods, fresh fruits and vegetables are either too expensive or not available.”

She emphasizes the need for a societal shift in how health is approached and to focus on prevention rather than treatment. “We have to switch towards a focus on health rather than disease and prevention rather than treatment. For example, all the things our society did to make smoking less acceptable had a very important public impact. We as a society should make health something that we want and not exclusive to certain groups of people,” she explains.

Dr. Blount raises questions about why health education is not prioritized in schools. “Why do we teach algebra? Some of us may never need to use again... We should have the same approach to sports, recreation, and health.”

Some initiatives have attempted to address obesity by promoting exercise or dieting, but these efforts ignore the root causes: lack of food industry regulations, economic inequality, and failure to educate.

For individuals struggling with obesity, this shift in perspective can be life-changing. As the narrative around obesity evolves, experts stress that the solution isn't about punishing individuals, it's about fixing the systems that have made health an uphill battle.

References

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