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The complexity of obesity; it's much more than 'move more, eat less'

Stuart W. Flint

Applied Obesity Research Centre, School of Sport, Leeds Beckett University, Leeds, LS6 3QS, UK.

Book review: The elephant in the Room: One Fat Man's Quest to Get Smaller in a Growing America, by Tommy Tomlinson

Despite the wealth of scientific evidence to demonstrate the complexity of obesity, society is continually informed that weight gain, and loss, is simple. This societal discourse revolves around the messages that people gain weight because of moral failings – laziness and gluttony – and that weight loss can be achieved rapidly from engaging in more exercise and reducing food consumption. Tommy Tomlinson's book challenges these widespread messages and societal perceptions. He provides an in-depth account of his thoughts, attitudes and behaviours towards his weight and weight loss efforts. His memoirs demonstrate that there are many other factors that have and continue to influence his health behaviours and subsequent weight, that go beyond the simple energy balance message. Through Tomlinson's book, the pervasiveness, impact and acceptance of weight stigma and discrimination is evident, and like many people, his self-perceptions and responses to experiences of weight stigma epitomize the internalization of these harmful and inaccurate perceptions. This in-depth account is only made possible by Tomlinson providing his memoirs recalling his lifelong experiences, offering a refreshing account from a person living with obesity; all too often people's accounts and experiences are overlooked. This includes the highs, lows and set-backs, which should be expected given the complexity of obesity.

Tomlinson begins by describing his decision, one of thousands he had made previously, to reduce his weight. However, unlike many weight loss decisions, Tomlinson did not set a weight reduction target. Instead, he wanted to demonstrate willpower. His success on this occasion may in part reflect the conscious decision to have a more controllable target by focusing on changing some of his health behaviours (e.g., eating behaviour) rather than on the outcome i.e. weight reduction.

Tomlinson comments on his weight stigma experiences, where his comments demonstrate internalisation of societal messages. At points, he refers to himself as 'animalistic' and in the prologue uses the title 'killing the hog'. People with obesity are often dehumanized and referred to as animals perceived to represent either a large size or the stereotypes of gluttony such as elephant, hippo or pig. Tomlinson's use of dehumanizing language unsurprising. Empirical research has demonstrated that people with obesity also report stigmatizing attitudes about obesity, which is only to be expected given the pervasive and consistent societal messages we receive and are likely to internalize. He later comments that he found dating difficult, attributing the unrequited interest to his appearance. Even when he was in a long-term relationship, the internalized experiences weight stigma – i.e. other people's feelings of disgust towards him because of his weight – meant that he questioned why his partner (and now wife) was in a relationship with him.

Throughout the book, the experiences that Tomlinson - like many people with obesity – is indicative of how society hinders rather than supports people to cope, and how this leads to, for example, self-hatred, and reduced self-worth and self-esteem. Tomlinson discusses how he feels when he mentions his weight, suggesting it's like admitting to a crime. This feeling might be expected given that obesity is often framed as immoral, and is discussed by politicians, the media and other societal sources alongside behaviours that are typically forbidden by law (e.g. drug use). These negative experiences led to feelings that he is unable to fit into the world around him and this was reinforced by physical inaccessibility, leading to anxiety about what he perceives as 'normal' daily activities, and experiences reinforced these feelings – such as a hospital he attended for surgery not having a gown that was large enough to fit him.

As a journalist, Tomlinson experienced weight stigma from newspaper readers. Some did not accept his opinion as a person with obesity, other told him they were disgusted to see his face in the newspaper next to his column – disgust is an emotion commonly directed towards people with obesity. People of all backgrounds including a nurse sent these harmful messages. Weight stigma and discrimination is pervasive and ingrained in society. Indeed, empirical research informs that the commonality of these comments is unfortunately not a surprise, and neither is the comments from healthcare professionals. The impact of weight stigma and discrimination can be extensive, impacting physical and mental health concerns, and may lead to maladaptive health behaviours – Tomlinson mentions his negative emotional response to receiving these consistent comments.

Tomlinson's personal account allows readers to gain a greater understanding of the challenges that he faced in achieving his goal of losing weight. Obesity and body weight more generally are much more complex and multifaceted than we are led to believe. His memoirs provide insight into his chronic weight management attempts. Obesity is not simple. Weight loss is not rapid or easy. Many factors outside of a person's control influence body weight and weight management behaviours. Thus, Tomlinson provides an insightful reminder of what empirical evidence tells us, which contrary to the typical societal messages we receive.