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Exploring Retrospective Accounts of Living with Childhood Obesity and Weight-based Stigma

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Declaration for Conflict of Interest

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Aims & Objectives

To carry out a retrospective study to explore the lived experiences of weight stigma in childhood obesity from the perspectives of adults who formerly were children living with obesity.

- To examine experiences of living with childhood obesity in family, school, community and medical settings.
- To identify the impact on physical and mental health of children living with obesity.
- To consider the long-term impact of living with childhood obesity on adults who formerly were children living with obesity.
- To provide recommendations to shape and inform future provision for individuals who have experience with childhood obesity.

Methodology

- **Recruitment**: Via UK obesity advocacy group with snowballing
- **Participants**: 18
- **Age**: 28 to 60
- **Ethnicity**: 15 identified as White, and 3 identified as Black individuals
- **Test Instrument**: Semi structured interviews
- **Time**: 62 mins (mean)
- **Topics**: Family, community, school, healthcare, physical and mental health, long-term impact, recommendations
- **Analysis**: Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006)

Themes

Attitudes of Others

Self-Perception

Relationships with Food

Relationships with Physical Activity

Healthcare

Adverse Childhood Experiences

Attitudes of Others

We were eating breakfast and I was given cereal. And I was given a teaspoon. And I said, "Oh, can I have a spoon?" And my dad kind of passed me this spoon and went, "I forgot your mouth was that big." It was just constant, relentless put-downs, comments. (P3)

This girl had been tormenting me for years, and I actually stood up to her for once, and I really shouted at her in class, and the teacher pulled me aside, and told me off, and I was like, "Are you joking?" you know, "She's been at me for years, and the one time I say something, I'm getting in trouble," so yeah. So, the teachers didn't really intervene, and I think they should've done, because it was obvious what was happening (P21)

[A man on train] was like, "Why are you sitting eating that there, you fat little cow? Haven't you had enough?" but he just honed in then. In the end, my friend said, "Shall we get off and wait for the next train?" So we got off and he was like, "Yeah, go on, take your sweets with you, you fat C--*-T," and now when I look back and I just think- I was 13… he's a grown adult that should have known better really. But yeah, we got off the train and waited for the next train to go home, and then I got in trouble for being late home (P6)*

Self Perception

Everything was impacted. I remember being in tears, which I now recognise as depression, when I was 10, and it was. I was self-harming at 10 because I hated myself and I hated my body. 'Hate' is a really strong word, but I would absolutely describe it. (P2)

The biggest critic in that situation is myself. So, when someone is saying negative, I feel that already five times that, so what they're doing is confirming what I already feel about myself. So my journey with weight has involved an extraordinary amount of self-loathing, self-disgust, which is awful to… especially as a child. It's such a vicious circle, it really is of I'm doing this to myself, I can't help myself, I don't know how to get out of this. I'm ruining myself, and the world is letting me know as well that I'm ruining it, so it's like a double whammy. (P4

I felt, from five years old, that I wasn't good enough, that I was fat and there's something wrong with that. There was something wrong with me, and I had to fix it. I had this then, a cycle, a constant pressure to fix it, but then I couldn't fix it. (P2)

Relationship with Food

food is the only addiction that abstinence can't cure because we can't stop eating so we have no choice but to learn to live with this… (P15)

Just food was everything to me.
Food was my enemy.
Food was my friend. (P3)

[The teacher] said, "She's too fat, so what we're going to do is we're going to restrict what she can eat in the school. We're going to instruct the canteen that they can only sell her certain foods….So all the staff knew, all my friends knew, so I was like a laughing stock. And I would go and say, "Can I have a burger?" and the women took great pleasure, "No." And everyone can hear, "You're not allowed to eat that. You can't eat that, you can eat this." (P4)

Relationship with Physical Activity

Our teachers would stand at the beginning and at the end, there were showers that they used to make you go in and run through…. the teachers, kind of like, laughed it off and mocked me, if you will. They would pull the towel away from me, while I'd run through naked... And then the bullying would get worse because the children would laugh, and they would think it was fun. (P16)

it was cross-country …I was in absolute agony. I had some really, really bad stomach pains. At first, it was a stitch because I'm overweight and I had to run it off. Literally, the PE teacher was stood at the side of me, shouting stuff at me to make me move, almost chasing me round the course. Then it was period pains because I'm of that age. Then it was growing pains, and then it went back to being the stitch and, "You're just moving muscles that you're not used to moving," and all that kind of stuff. I actually ended up collapsing on that cross-country and got rushed into hospital because I had an ovarian cyst that needed removing. I was taken into hospital that night and operated on the following day. (P5)

Healthcare

Three a day, morning, middle of the day and night, which was amphetamine. So, all of a sudden what I now know is an ADHD, hyperactive child was given these drugs. Never slept, which meant I was even more naughty at school, went off the rails. And by the sixth form, so two or three years in, I'd lost loads of weight, so I became acceptable in this school .. By this point I graduated on to [drug]. Hardcore now, hardcore. Wired, absolute-....I think it was cruel beyond measure. So once that happened it became like a blueprint for the rest of my life. (P4)

I went because my knees went backwards and I'm also knock-kneed, and I was told. "It's your weight." I know it's not, now, but I didn't. I just accepted that, "Okay, so my weight is making me do this," which again it goes back to the, "You're a failure. You're a failure." It's a lot of pressure to put on a child, is that, or why my ankles kept rolling, or why my hips were popping out, or my elbows kept going backwards and all these things, because they were causing me pain. There were no tests done. There was no blood test, "Let's do a scan on that. Let's do-" It was nothing like that. It was, "It's your weight". I was like, "Oh, well, I can't fix that," like, "Well, until you have fixed it, there's nothing we can really do for you." (P2 – late-diagnosed Ehler-Danlos Syndrome)

Adverse Childhood Experiences

… getting in with the wrong crowd through desperation and wanting to fit in, peer pressure. So then that turned from smoking weed at 15, to ecstasy, to cocaine. And I noticed that the more drugs I was taking, the more the weight was falling off….. It took for me to get pregnant at 17 for me to stop. I stopped everything. Because at that point, I'd become addicted to heroin, and I was probably the lightest I've ever been in my life. I didn't know how to cope with all that pain. I didn't know how to claw my way back to what I wanted to be…….I turned to drugs, because, on drugs, I didn't feel hunger. I didn't feel anything, and that's what I wanted. I wanted the numbness. (P19)

I wasn't strong enough to kill myself, but there were times I was suicidal, absolutely. I had ideation. I had intent. The only time I ever attempted anything, ..I was seven, and I had a dressing-gown cord and I don't remember being actively suicidal, but I remember tying it round. I had a four-poster bed and I hung from it, just to see what it felt like, at seven.' (P2)

So a lot of my eating and overeating came from the trauma of sexual abuse. So a lot of my childhood stuff, I did block out because it was just like…up until I was about 10, I was always quite slim and quite tall for my age. So yeah, it was only trying to make myself unattractive, so to speak. In my head, as a kid, it was just like, "If I'm fat, he'll leave me alone." (P6)

Recommendations

Sources of information

Mental health services

Education

Communication & language

Zero tolerance

Trauma informed training

Thank you for listening!

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