When I was younger, I was one of those unfortunate kids who went through an awkward phase—when you start to look older, but you’ve still got the “baby fat.” Other kids taunted me about those extra pounds, to the point where I couldn’t sleep at night. In retrospect, it wasn’t the end of the world—but it sure felt like it.

Kids can be cruel. But when it comes to weight issues, so can adults. That was one of the topics discussed at our recent Healthy Outcomes Conference (HOC).

Obesity is on the rise among Canadians: a 2014 report from Memorial University finds obesity rates in Canada tripled from 1985 to 2011. And it’s more than just being a few pounds overweight, explained Adam Marsella, senior external affairs manager with Novo Nordisk, at the HOC. He talked about the stigma around obesity. People assume those who are obese are lazy and unmotivated. Those struggling with obesity may not get jobs or may be passed over for promotion as a result.

He urged people to think of obesity not as a personal failing but as a chronic disease. In fact, he wondered, is the stigma around obesity all that different from the stigma around mental illness that used to be so prevalent?

One person likened obesity to alcoholism: it’s an addiction requiring treatment. But there’s a critical difference, another argued. You can avoid alcohol, but you have to eat to live.

Although genetic factors influence obesity, employers can play a pivotal role in employee health. For example, Heather Ricketts, national manager of employee and labour relations with Sleep Country Canada, described the company’s efforts to help employees change their exercise and eating habits. Analysis of claims data identified diabetes, hypertension and high cholesterol as key drivers of drug plan costs. And a health risk assessment found nutrition was the top risk factor for employees, followed by weight management and exercise.

So, in September 2012, Sleep Country Canada held a weight loss challenge. Key to the program’s success were strong support from senior leaders and a powerful communication campaign, including employee testimonials. There were also substantial incentives, including a cash prize, an iPad and a Caribbean holiday. In total, 135 employees participated, with a cumulative weight loss of 899 lbs.

We live in a fast-food-paced world, and we often don’t do a good job of managing our own behaviours. Of course we should exercise more and eat better, but how many of us do it? That’s why employers are in a unique position to support employees in living healthier lifestyles. Instead of falling back on stereotypes or cruel words, we should help each other out.

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