

**Podcast Transcript:** Anti-fat bias in the workplace

**Opening Credits**

Intro music plays with the voice-over artist saying, "Talking Inclusion – with Ariel Chapman"

**Ariel:**

Welcome to Talking Inclusion with from Inclusive Employers. I'm Ariel Chapman - my pronouns are he and him and I'm a senior consultant at Inclusive Employers and your host for this third series of our Inclusion and Diversity podcasts. These podcasts are for anyone who has an interest in inclusion and diversity. In our podcasts, we share life stories and experiences, learn about best practice and hear practical advice for employers, from our guests and from Inclusive Employers own inclusion and diversity experts.

Before I introduce our guests, in case you don't know us, we are Inclusive Employers. Our mission is to make every workplace an inclusive employer where every colleague values differences and can contribute their skills and experiences fully to their organization. Together, we're taking action towards more inclusive workplaces and celebrating progress towards making inclusion an everyday reality for everyone.

Before we start this episode, I want to issue a trigger warning. This podcast discusses eating disorders, disordered eating, diet culture, fat shaming, cultural ideologies and food. Anti-fat bias is a rarely addressed topic as it is one of the most

normalized and accepted forms of prejudice. This is seen in the media, in medicine and the workplace. And this episode aims to discuss the topic honestly and look at how we can address this type of bias in the workplace.

Today I'm joined by Naomi Wilcox-Lee from Teach First. Hello, Naomi.

**Naomi Wilcox-Lee:**

Hi, thanks for having me today.

**Ariel:**

And I'm also joined by our own inclusion and diversity experts who are here to share their personal take and experiences on this topic. I'm joined by inclusion and diversity consultant, Ruth Egan. Hello, Ruth.

**Ruth Eghan:**

Hi, thanks for having me.

**Ariel:**

And finally, Senior Inclusion Diversity Consultant, Raquel Silvestre. Hello, Raquel.

**Raquel Silvestre:**

Hello everyone.

**Ariel:**

First, we're going to talk about why we're talking about Anti-Fat Bias.

So, a quick note before we start. So in today's episode, we will use the term fat to describe people in bigger bodies. Fat activists and campaigners against weight stigma are reclaiming the word fat as a neutral term to describe themselves.

It should not be assigned negative or positive connotations, it is simply a descriptor. That said, as with all inclusive language, we will always be led by the person and the language that they use and never assume how they wish to be described. And I'm personally so pleased to welcome you to this episode.

Tackling anti-fat bias and weight stigma is personally important to me and something I'm passionate about addressing in workplaces and wider society.

Early this year at Inclusive Employers, we launched our first guide and member webinar on tackling anti-fat bias in the workplace, and the feedback was phenomenal and it seems to have really helped to bring this really important conversation to the forefront of people's minds when it comes to inclusion. And if you aren't already clued up on anti-fat bias, anti-fat bias is pervasive in society and it holds up the thin body as the ideal body type with negative ideologies attached to fat people.

Anti-fat bias often plays out in assumptions based on the size of a person's body. Having a negative attitude towards fat people and discriminating against people because they are fat or perceived to be in a bigger body. Anti-fat bias is rooted in the idea that there is an ideal body size and weight, which is simply incorrect. And unfortunately, studies consistently show that anti-fat discrimination is more

prevalent than we may believe. In fact, in the UK, 62% of Britons think people are likely to discriminate against someone who is in a bigger body. This is higher than other forms of discrimination, including ethnic background, sexual orientation, or gender.

So today we're going to begin to unpack anti-fat bias and the impact it has on workplaces today.

So Raquel, I'm going to come to you first here, as anti-fat bias and weight stigma are not often topics when discussing inclusion, what made you recognise the importance of these topics?

**Raquel Silvestre:**

Thank you for bringing me in. And it is actually the first time I'm talking about this topic so openly. And I love that we are creating the space and opportunities to do so.

So to tell you about myself and my situation a little bit, I grew up in Portugal by the sea, where half of the year we go to the beach. And with my curvaceous body, as I like to say, I felt very self-conscious about my size. That clearly didn't fit the norm.

And then I also, on reflection, I regret as a child and then as a youth, stopping doing things because of that. So I loved playing volleyball, for example, but didn't join the team because the uniform included very short shorts, and I didn't feel comfortable with that. Stopped judo, because when applying for competitions, I had to enter my

weight and felt ashamed of it, really. And later in my youth, I was part of a Bahai-Inspired dance workshop and people would comment after the performances how the chubby one dances so well. So I was, in fact one of the trainers.

So in reality, it was like I was receiving those microaggressions concealed within an intended compliment. So many times, for example, I heard my mom almost like justifying my size as genes from the other side of the family. And I felt like a kind of self-detachment from it, as if justifying it. And that was my African descendancy as well. So I faced weight stigma all my life, but just in recent years, I started to consider the deep-rooted implications of anti-fat bias.

Like any other bias, we need to become consciously aware of the implicit associations we make, the stereotypes we create, and how this can very easily become prejudices we portray about others, and then influence how we see people, how we treat them, and ultimately make decisions that affect their lives.

So for example, like passing people from a promotion because of the size of their body, the same way we would favour someone for being tall. So it is just too ridiculous to be true, but it is a sad fact which research is making more and more evident like you shared before Ariel.

So just continuing on that reflection, I feel like I'm in a time in life when I feel more confident or confident enough to challenge fat biases and depreciative comments. And one very recently, for example, the other day in a very quotidian conversation

with my mom, my mom mentions how someone was looking so beautiful in their pregnancy. “It is all baby belly”.

And I just thought and immediately in that moment I was conscious of my three pregnancies and how beautiful I felt regardless of my size. And I felt the need to say, although the comment wasn't about me, I felt the need to say, you know what, I wasn't just “baby belly”. but I felt beautiful when I was pregnant and then I wonder how my mom might have perceived me in those times, so it felt really personal. And that led to a conversation challenging our perceptions of what constitutes beauty and how unconsciously we endorse and favor certain shapes while depreciating others.

So interestingly enough, the two times I was living in Mozambique, I lost a considerable amount of weight, naturally. And I was perhaps walking more, the food seemed more natural and wholesome. This is what I can perceive as why. But what is interesting is that people start asking me if I was well, if the country was treating me all right, so to speak, because over there curves are celebrated and seen as a sign of wellness. So me losing weight made people wonder if I was ill or not happy at all. So it's really understanding the concept of beauty and wellness and health as socially constructed concepts and how do we relate to that?

**Ariel:**

I'm going to come to Ruth in just a moment, but there was something there around those microaggressions kind of masquerading as a compliment or someone thinking that they're being helpful. I think that's something that's really difficult sometimes

to have people understand because we're told that there is this ideal body type or ideal way to look. So how did it feel challenging those sometimes well-intentioned comments but obviously that you know intention doesn't negate impact. How does it feel when you're challenging those?

**Raquel Silvestre:**

Yes, well, when I was at that time, like between 18 years old and 25, I would just perhaps smile and say, “thank you”, because I was seeing it or receiving it as a compliment. And then moving on to the most important bit, which was the conversation about the themes, the social interventional themes that we were showing through dance and theatre. So trying to jump that and kind of parking it.

But nowadays, I also have one of my daughters who may be perceived as oversized. And I try consciously or intentionally not to pass those comments or those perceptions or to let her be as free as she likes and to dress as she likes and avoiding comments that may lead to covering up, for example. So I'm conscious of that and if I hear it, now I feel like, you know what, what you're saying is really, let's unpack that. What is the underlying comment or underlying thought that only a certain body of fat free body, let's say, is dancing well or can dress in a certain way.

So the importance of really accepting who we are, and challenging people. And sometimes when we open that conversation of unpacking, it's when we help others to reflect as well and change their ways.

**Ariel:**

And Ruth, I'm going to come over to you. Something that Raquel talked about there were cultural differences. So, you know, different groups are impacted by anti-fat bias differently. So what are some of the intersections with anti-fat bias that people may not be aware of?

**Ruth Eghan:**

I think that's a really important question to this. And different cultures have different attitudes.

And two cultures that I'm really aware of are the culture that's here in the UK, and in Africa as well. So growing up, I felt very conflicted. Because in the UK, there's messaging that the skinnier you are, the prettier you are. and that was felt in school and you know if you were bigger, you weren't as cool or you weren't part of the popular crowd of people and it became sort of worse when the government introduced weight check-ins in primary school where in classes parents would give consent for their children to be weighed. and then it would be sort of standardised nationally and you'd sort of see where you are, where your children are in terms of the country.

And for the first time, we were having those conversations at school. I remember being 11 and some of my fellow students would be like, “oh, I was sort of normal for my age. Where were you”? And it's like we're having these conversations at 11 years old. So it's creating a pattern of, you know, fat shaming and, you know, making one feel really unpopular and, not being comfortable within your own skin.



So I was aware of that culture and I knew that, you know, I was bigger. Like, I've always been bigger myself. But I think... Because of all of that, I took it upon myself and I lost weight, I lost a lot of weight and it wasn't from a place of love or from a place of even health. I was doing so because I wanted to fit in with the culture.

And interestingly, when I would interact with, you know, my family members and I used to go back to Ghana quite often to see family and things. they would say, you know, what happened to you? Are you okay? Similarly to what Raquel said. You know, is everything okay? Your parents feeding you? Is school taking care of you? What's going on?

And I was kind of confused. I was like, wait a minute. So I've lost all this weight. In England, I'm getting great reviews. Everybody's telling me "I look healthy, I look well". And over here, I'm getting, "you're sick. You must be depressed. Something must be going on".

So it was really conflicting. And then, you know, being compared as well to other family members at the time were more curvaceous as well and saying, you know, they're healthy, you know, look at your cousin who's, you know, more curvy than you, she's really healthy and you're just here sick.

So, it can really create confusion and just hatred, and I got to a point where I realised You know, I've got to do things for myself. I can't do things to fit in with

society or what society says is okay. I need to really make sure that I'm happy within myself and that's all that matters.

So if I do want to lose weight, it's not from a place of hatred where, you know, I'm encouraging a culture of fat shaming and, you know, making others feel uncomfortable in their skin. But I'm actually promoting inclusion and if I am tired I can take a break, I don't have to go to the gym every single day and I don't have to stick to a certain amount of calories. I can be healthy and be happy and take that time that I need.

So I've really become confident in myself in promoting inclusion and promoting wellness, because through those two themes and those two methods, people are going to feel more comfortable and they are going to work harder within their roles because there's that encouragement to do so. So I think it's always good to get to, as Raquel said, to unpack why are comments being made? Why are those microaggressions being made? Where does that come from? What culture does that come from? and always consider that in conversations as well, and promote that wellness and inclusion aspect.

**Ariel:**

There's so much there because we're bombarded with messages constantly to lose weight that thinness equals health, and that and I think that's part of the work that people need to stop making those assumptions that first, you know thin body does equal health or thin is better because that's simply not true, it's not it's not always

based in scientific evidence at all. How can individuals begin to challenge or address those messages because we are often surrounded by them all the time.

**Ruth Eghan:**

I think it's so important to speak up and use your voice.

If you're at Inclusive Employees, you know that we always say that it's important to speak up, and you know, I think when you're aware of exclusionary behaviour, you need to call it out.

So that might be in promotional methods, in terms of external and internal sort of messaging and adverts as well. in terms of things that are being shown. Because if you're working in that industry and you're being part of a society that promotes a certain look, then you know it's wrong. You have to challenge that. You have to bring in representation of all people. And the reality is, 99% of people don't look like what a lot of the imaging that's brought out from these advertising companies. So if you're in those positions, you know, do something about it. Let's see representation of, bigger people. Let's see representation of people from different backgrounds. Because with that, then there's able to be, you know, a messaging that promotes inclusion and gets, you know, the younger generation to actually see, the importance of accepting everyone and being comfortable in who they are.

And actually, what we'd start to realise as well is that, you know, that starts to trickle into every aspect of society. And then people at workplaces as well can really look at their policies. and in terms of challenging those recruitment biases, because I

think recruitment is a big area where there's a fat bias, and statistics show as well that people that are bigger are likely to be declined for jobs, job roles and promotions, so I really think it's important for organisations to undergo a whole culture review and see where the unconscious bias is.

### **Music Break**

#### **Ariel:**

Now, we're going to look at Teach First's approach to Anti-Fat Bias.

Naomi – I would really like for our listeners to learn more about the strategy you've taken. at Teach First to address anti-fat bias.

#### **Naomi Wilcox-Lee:**

Yeah, first I want to say how happy I am to be having this conversation. And I think a real in-route for us at Teach First was me spotting the factsheet, which Inclusive Employers made, downloading that, sharing that with anyone who would listen to me, and then attending the session with one of my colleagues, Jenny.

And from my perspective, this is something I'm personally really passionate about. I've always been sort of what I'd say, anti-diets, really coming from my background in sort of feminist organising and smashing the patriarchy and coming in from it from that point of view.

I would say for most of my life, I've experienced a lot of thin privilege, but still felt the weight of that pressure to conform to a particular body type, and particularly, I sort of identify as non-binary and a woman, but the woman part of me has felt that pressure so heavily throughout my entire life, and as I've got older, I've had children, I'm going to be 40 this year, my body, as all of our bodies, has inevitably changed. And while I can't say I've experienced anti-fat bias, I certainly feel that weight of expectation and what you were talking about, Ruth, that there's one body type that is held up as the one way to be, and we know that's just not true.

So this is something I've sort of done a lot of learning about in my own time, and when I saw that, you know, an organisation Teach First was working with was doing some work in this area, I was so excited because as you said, Ariel, it's just never mentioned. It's the first time I've seen a DEI organization talking about it. And it's something I try and bring up in my own conversations, my role since the start of the year. I've been in various different roles at Teach First, but I'm now our employee experience manager with an oversight of EDI for our employees, so it feels really relevant to the remit of my role.

And I would say upfront, we're really at the start of our journey in this at Teach First. I think it is such a new thing for people to be talking about, to be talking about it at all is something.

So what Jenny and I did after we attended the great session that you and your colleague delivered, Ariel, was to create our own session to deliver internally, to share some of that learning, share some of the learning we've both done as well.

We have a series of different lunch and learn events that colleagues can come along to, so we advertised it as that. And we really tried to focus specifically in on discrimination, which happens in the workplace.

I found a really fantastic post and podcast that Vinnie Wellsby, who's known as Fierce Fatty. They are on Instagram and they have a great podcast. And they had a post where they gathered together a lot of statistics. Like Raquel said, there is research now, showing the very real evidence discrimination, which fat people experience in the workplace, and we wanted to try and focus on that. And from that really, to me, it really makes the case that I feel it should be a protected characteristic in terms of discrimination based on body size. It's not, and what we see with a lot of organisations is that of course because it's the law, we focus our inclusion work on the protected characteristics that are described in the Equality Act. And I think it's our responsibility to say what else is there that we need to consider that we can also be explicitly inclusive about.

A different example of that for us at Teach First is that we've started to look at socio-economic and class background. That's something that's not in the Equality Act, but we know that is also somewhere where people can experience discrimination. And similarly as body size, as we've talked about.

So Jenny and I delivered the session. We had great attendance, really, and we talked through that and we shared some resources and tried to... We try to pitch it at a level where people who are very new to this could access that information. I

appreciate that some of us have been learning about this for a long time, but it's such an unusual thing to talk about still, that I think for some people it's very new and it is very counter-narrative to everything else that we hear. Ruth was talking about what happens in schools. We hear the messaging from our own government, from the media, in every single film and TV show.

So it still feels quite counter-cultural to be saying, actually, some of that's just not true at all. And we could make a better world for everybody, really, if we start to think about some of these things.

**Ariel:**

I've often thought about that link between body size and health is not as clear as we're told it is. But you know, even if that was true, that doesn't mean that we would treat fat people with any less respect or dignity or make sure that they're included in their work. So that's really good.

So what has been the reaction from colleagues when you first started talking about, because I know from experience when I've talked to friends or family about it, it's been a fairly even split of some people are "Oh that sounds great, Yeah, I'd never thought about it like that" and other people are y'know the messages that we've been told around Fat and weight and body size, they're so ingrained it's really difficult to kinda breakthrough, so what has the reaction been?

**Naomi Wilcox-Lee:**

I would say that, specifically talking about the session we did, the reaction was so encouraging and so positive.

I know that some of that is because people chose to come to that session because they're already interested in learning about this, so they've self-selected to be there. And I was amazed at the positive responses we had afterwards, people reached out to me privately in messages. We have a recognised system at our work and I got recognition for the session. The chat during the session was lots of people just like, 'wow', finally I've got the opportunity to talk about this, which is, I know how I felt in your session. So that side of things was really positive.

I think a question for us to consider is, what about everyone else that isn't interested, doesn't think that was important, it wasn't there at the session? I would say I found it challenging in some spaces to raise this, and something else I wanted to mention, which has an overlap here, is that I think in our awareness of looking after employees that have disordered eating or history of eating disorders, some of the very same things we can do to make the workplace more inclusive of people in different size bodies. are the same things that will make it a safer place for people with eating disorders. And some of those people are the same people as well. And we spoke about this in our session.

There's an idea that if you've got an eating disorder, there's one way that you look and it's very thin, and actually all body sizes can experience eating disorders very often. It's people who are in bigger bodies.



I have found, and I hate that this is the case, but I found that it's easier for people to take some of this seriously if you approach it from a point of view of protecting people who are experiencing eating disorders. Although the same things make the workplace more inclusive for people in bigger bodies. And I try to never shy away from explaining that as well.

One thing that came up in our session was talking about how healthcare cover which employers can provide might sometimes be problematic. because a lot of that asks for information about weight and height and essentially comes back to figuring out a BMI, which is something I think is incredibly problematic and has a really deeply problematic origin and is not a very helpful determinant of health. And yet it's still something which a lot of private healthcare insurers use.

I realised that with our healthcare that we're provided with, to access some of the rewards. there's a questionnaire you have to complete that asks some very challenging questions, particularly if you've had any experience of disordered eating or just some difficult questions. So something I'm really proud of that we've literally just implemented is having a content warning on if you want to complete this health review, it's going to ask you about these different things to do with your weight, to do with your waste circumference and you may want to avoid it if that protects your mental health. And you know, it's based on real life experience of colleagues speaking to me about that being a challenge, and personally, I can't complete that form. I find it too impossible.

So that was one practical thing we've done so far. I think there's a lot more we can do and I'm really excited that we've started the conversation and interested to see where it goes. And to try and help people understand where we're coming from with this and bring them on that journey really.

**Ariel:**

That's such a wonderful example. And it also, when you were speaking then, it made me reflect quite a lot, and I know this is something that came up during our members' webinar around anti-fat bias, was how to address diet culture within workplaces as well.

So, you know, we are not in a position where we're ever going to tell people to not share what they, you know, we're not going there to shut down conversations between colleagues, but. actually navigating when you've got colleagues talking about what diet they're on or what slimming or weight loss clubs that they're part of can be really challenging again for anyone in the workplace regardless if they have an eating disorder, disordered eating and whatever size body they are. Have you begun to think about how you would navigate those conversations Naomi?

**Naomi Wilcox-Lee:**

It's something we talked about at the end of the session we delivered and we asked people to, we used the mentor and we asked people to share some actions that they would take away to help make our workplace more inclusive of people in all different size bodies. And that's something that came up.

A lot of people shared that sort of diet talk is problematic for them. I find it particularly difficult and sort of just have to walk away if ever I hear those sort of conversations. It's really difficult to challenge, but it's really difficult to listen to. And if you really think about what the implications of talking about wanting to be thinner are, you are making a comment on everyone who isn't like that, as well as upon yourself. So, you know, some people definitely share that that's an action they want to take away, either to challenge that talk when it comes up personally, or to commit to not having that talk themselves.

I don't think we've thought yet about how we can really share that learning further. And we're still in such a space of hybrid working that sometimes, you know, it's hard to know how to challenge those in-person things that are happening in the offices when often we're not in the offices together. So I think there's something to work through there. But I did think when I was reflecting beforehand that is such a big thing and it's so normal. not just in work, at the school gate when there's other parents there, I overhear the same sort of things and it sort of makes me tense up a little bit. It's just so normalised and it is still, I think, fairly unusual to have conversations like this where we're challenging that sort of thinking and talk.

**Raquel Silvestre:**

That is so interesting, if I may, Ariel, in relation to the diet culture as well, how the perceptions are if, and this time of the year, it seems like people are thinking about it even more, and we can see the gym promotions and healthy eating promotions and people are consciously looking to have that beach body, let's say, presentable and to walk with pride. in the beach, for example.

And I say it's interesting, because sometimes even occupying spaces, I feel self-conscious about the conversations, and sometimes I feel like because I'm in the room, people turn to me to talk about the diet they are on. And I almost feel like lectured about the healthy eating, and besides of the weight stigma as well by health providers, insisting “Do you eat healthy” , “do you walk daily?” And I'm like, ‘yeah’.

So it's really, it becomes very tiring and frustrating. And something that has happened from January that led for me to lose weight, but in a slow motion.

So in six months, like eight kilos, but people are starting to notice now and they're come to me saying “What are you doing”?, and they are quite surprised when I say, “actually, I had a hormonal test, and I'm making an effort to balance my hormones. I got out of this contraceptive implant, and it's making a huge difference” and then people realise, “ah, okay” - it's not the usual, oh, I'm eating healthy now, I'm exercising more, and if needs be, I can just say, I continue to eat wholesome food because that contributes to hormonal balance, I continue to walk daily and have personal targets because I want to feel healthy, strong in myself, and it really helps with just clearing my thoughts and so on.

So it's a wholesome attitude to a lifestyle. And I found that as a way to challenge the perceptions of the diet culture and the weight stigma as well. That's not all, well, it's just a way. to challenge what people may think of how fat people may live in their personal lives as well.

**Ariel:**

Yeah, because it's rooted in all those assumptions, again, that people make, and that's where Anti-fat bias comes in, the assumptions, you know, don't move, eat unhealthy foods and whatever, you know, unhealthy, healthy means as well.

There was something Naomi talked about there, that, you know, the people in the room understood it. They got it. They were really on board. And so a question to you, for Anti-fat bias, but I guess it comes to most inclusion topics, what do we do to bring people along on that journey when they might not necessarily choose to be there or they don't think it matters to them?

**Raquel Silvestre:**

I think it's supporting people to relate to their own concepts of beauty, of health, of wellness, to bring people to reflect about their own positioning.

So how do they see their own bodies, and how do they feel in their own bodies? how do they consider their own judgements and the judgements we make when we are with different people in different situations, and particularly when surrounded by fat people, fat colleagues. The assumptions we may make and what we say or do because sometimes just facial expressions of disgust I must say, for example if we are eating together or an inner assumption that a fat colleague is overeating now, or feeling judged by just whatever I may pick.

So it's all that self-consciousness and bringing people to understand the impact that it has on others. But that reflection of our own perceptions, how we frame beauty and health, I think it's really important.

And then the major element in the workplace. is then becoming conscious of the implicit associations that we make, like you were referring to Ariel, and how we may perceive it as people who are fat, as unhealthy, as a choice, as a failure, because we assume people are just too lazy to make an effort or don't eat healthy, don't move enough and lack of willpower to change the way they look.

So with all those assumptions, how can we turn this bias around? And how can we continue to educate ourselves and challenge ourselves and others in this sense and to not let the weight stigma and anti-fat bias interfere with our decision-making?

I think that is key that can affect how colleagues are or who gets recruited to our organisations, who gets promoted. And then if we really want to build a culture of belonging and inclusion, then hearing from colleagues how they are feeling in the organisation, upholding that respect and dignity of everyone, and something that we haven't spoken of is, how do we cater for oversized colleagues as well in that sense of dignity and respect, so that everyone feels like they belong and that they are accepted - accepted for who they are and enabled to bring their best self to work. So this self-reflection is key, even if it doesn't affect us directly. It may affect indirectly through family members and then overall in the workplace, so being knowledgeable of those statistics and lived experience that people are sharing and

how it impacts their lives directly. I think we need to connect with that humanity if we want to build inclusive workplaces.

**Ariel:**

I loved that point that actually we haven't talked about yet. We're talking about fat accessibility, essentially, when it comes to work spaces as well. And that covers so many things, not just our attitudes and tackling that bias, but even just the physical space around us.

Ruth - I'm going to come to you. I wondered if you had anything you wanted to say around fat accessibility and what workplaces can do.

**Ruth Eghan:**

Absolutely. I think workplaces can look at their furniture. So if it's an in-person role and there's a requirement to go into the office, I feel like the furniture that's provided needs to be accessible for that people because a lot of the time sometimes you get office spaces that are very, you know, they're modern so sometimes the chairs and tables and things seem to be a lot smaller, but I think there needs to be an allowance of room, there needs to be furniture that's appropriately sized for everyone, and I think part of getting to that point is actually undergoing training.

So I feel organisations as well need to have you know these kind of conversations if you're a member with Inclusive Employers, you know really think about having this training available to colleagues. so that they can see the importance and also the organisation's commitment to actually making changes.

I think something as well needs to be done to the employee assistance programmes and the messaging there, because it does tend to focus on BMI and levels of obesity, and if someone is going on an employee assistance app, and they're seeing that there's messaging around, them being obese, it's kind of negating its purpose.

So I feel like those things need to be looked at, and with that being looked at, it also means that the messaging, so when it comes to talking about food, especially where you might have a social work event where, you might be going to a restaurant. not referring to food as naughty or good because that can really make someone feel unsettled. I've been in that situation and it's like okay I'm not going to order any more food then, I'm not going to do anything which is not what we want people to feel, we want people to feel included.

So I think it's important to really look at the messaging and character development of staff, and really making sure that it's a priority within the inclusion package.

Naomi mentioned as well that in terms of this topic, I do really believe that once people really do see the why and there is that commitment, then there is more likely to be a push for change I believe, because I think that we need to look at this holistically. We should be focusing on... you know, how people are feeling and we should be making sure that people feel that they're able to be their best professional authentic selves at work. So that means they can bring their whole self, their weight, their mind, their religion, their sexual orientation, their gender, they can be themselves. And that's what we really need to get to because if you think



about it, we already have a lot of societal pressures - There's a lot of discrimination in every area, and to add this on top of it, you know, can you imagine having, you know, different protected characteristics and then you've got as well anti-fat bias showing up, Just makes the whole thing, you know more exclusive and we don't want to get to that place. So let's look at people's hearts. Let's get to the heart. Let's let's not look at You know focus on appearance, but let's get to the heart of people.

And that links so well, I think something that Naomi said earlier that, you know, sometimes we focus on the protected characteristics because that's what's covered by law. And that's missing those whole parts of someone's identity as you just put so beautifully there, Ruth. And also misses the intersectionalities as well between identities. If we're just looking at those singular characteristics in isolation, we're missing whole aspects of how someone navigates the world.

And so it's really important, yeah, that we're starting to consider, particularly I think when it comes to anti-fat bias, the deeper role that organisations can have because it's not necessarily protected by law. So organisations have a responsibility, a duty, a role here to support fat people in the workplace and also to support colleagues in being better allies to fat people as well.

## **Musical Break**

**Ariel:**

Now, let's focus on advice and support.

We've shared here some deeply personal stories, and it's great to hear about the fantastic work that Teach First and Inclusive Employers are doing to address Anti-fat bias in the workplace. And of course as discussed at the beginning, this form of discrimination is one that is often overlooked by society.

And it's still seen as acceptable to discriminate against or make jokes about fat people. So it's really important that we start to consider the deeper role that organisations have in supporting fat people in the workplace, and supporting colleagues to be better allies to fat people too.

So I'm going to come to you first Naomi - how do you think organisations could start with addressing anti-fat bias in the workplace?

**Naomi Wilcox-Lee:**

I think it has to start with raising awareness that this is an issue. That might start with one or two people that are already interested, have already listened to the podcast, read the books, you know, and can bring and share that and just start that conversation.

Like we've said many times, it's not something that's necessarily automatically coming up. So I think the most important first step would be raising that awareness. And then the other thing I was thinking as you were speaking is that we can show allyship in this situation and something I think Inclusive Employers have shared in

their allyship program, which we do at Teach First, is this concept of courageous conversations.

So when we notice something that is an issue, maybe there is some wording that isn't quite right or someone has said something in a meeting or at a restaurant that's on a work meal. Having a framework to approach a conversation with that person or with that team is really, really helpful. And I think it's the age model of explain what the action is, explain what the impact of the action is likely to be or has been, and then explain what they can do differently. And I've always found that really, really helpful in giving me the courage to have these conversations, because it's not always easy.

**Ariel:**

Thank you. And that's our starting point for our organisations.

Raquel, when it comes to our members, how can members begin to think about anti-fat bias in the workplace? Where should they start?

**Raquel Silvestre:**

As we've been mentioning in today's podcast, I think that self-reflection, not seeing as something out there and that relates to someone else, but trying to understand. So Naomi mentions the responsibility of the organisation to raise, increase the awareness on this topic and explicitly commit to being inclusive to all body sizes.

But then there's also the responsibility on individuals to seek to know, to have that curiosity also, and feel empowered to make changes. So how can we educate ourselves and learn to challenge situations?

I love the aid model that we use in terms of how can we challenge the conversation as it's happening, and bringing, highlighting the action or what was said. and then the impact that it had on us.

So for example, I may say, when you speak about your diet and lecture me on that, I feel frustrated and I feel judged, and perhaps in the future, so that's the aid model being used, but calling in people into this conversation really helps for us to educate each other and to let people know how it feels. I think it's time to be seen, not time to hide. and get away and avoid those microaggressions. Like I said, in my younger years, just smile and say thank you when I'm being hurt with something being said.

So it's time for challenging and to make, yeah, to make this anti-fat bias and weight stigma visible. and for us to have more moments and more spaces to talk about it, to empower each other, to challenge. But it needs to start with each individual. And we were talking at the beginning, how can we bring in those who may not have an interest on the topic, and I think we'll just start with those who have and build that wave of power. And then the others will certainly be touched by it somehow and be brought in their own time. But to feel that we have that responsibility. of becoming conscious about our own bias and thinking about how to overcome, not just in the workplace, but in all walks of life, with our children, with our friends, with our

neighbours. So it's really a way of life, of self-reflection and feeling we can change, and that change starts with us.

**Ariel:**

And I guess part of the issue as well, because this is something that we, a lot of organisations, have never considered. And we're starting to have these conversations with those excellent tips there from Naomi and Raquel. Ruth - Can you help us understand some of the signs of anti-fat bias in the workplace that people can look out for? Because we've got those great tips but actually there could be people thinking oh this isn't an issue where I work, this isn't an issue in my organisation but I would say it most likely is. What are some of those signs that people can look out for?

**Ruth Eghan:**

I think it's when there's clearly in groups and out groups, and you know, with we've talked about microaggressions what we say our messaging, but I think when people feel excluded to the point that when it comes to you know social events that are held and you know might be involved going to a restaurant, you see people not be part of that or for some reason, there's a reluctance to sort of get involved in activities to do with food or just discussions in general.

You can see a real divide. I think that's definitely a sign that there's something in the messaging that is being translated and actually affecting people that are fat, that are bigger. And when it even comes to, we've talked a lot today about diet culture as well, people even not approaching or there's no harmonious line of communication

around, you know, anything. People are more likely to isolate and hibernate away from the negative messaging. So you can really see the clear example of exclusion.

And when you see those signs of people being left out, rejected, judged, overlooked, you can really see a breakdown. You'll start to see a breakdown in performance as well. And even with promotions, you'd see that the people that are being promoted, they all look a certain way or maybe they have a certain protected characteristic. And it's as if there's a bias around size.

So I think people need to be open and honest, and really look at their teams and see actually there's people as well that are bigger, that are fat and that are working hard and well and they're not being promoted. We need to look at ourselves. We need to undergo that culture review. We need to look at our unconscious or conscious bias messaging that we're promoting, because at the end of the day it's about the impact.

I think there's something around impact versus intent and you need to see how people are feeling. So conduct a survey, see how people are feeling, have a section on this, that's something I would recommend, have a section on this, see how people feel people feel about the messaging. that will really point you in the right direction because I think industries that are more focused on appearance you know you'd probably see it more overtly, you'd see anti-fat bias more overtly but in industries that you know where it might not be the absolute focus it's a lot more subtle so you might need to really undergo that consultancy review and really see where it shows up.

**Ariel:**

So before we finish, there's many fat activists who have trailblazed when it comes to fat acceptance and tackling anti-fat bias. So I'd really love to know some of the people who have inspired you the most and it could be someone we've all heard of, it could be just someone personal to you. So who has inspired you the most when it comes to fat acceptance? If I come to you first, Raquel.

**Raquel Silvestre:**

When you asked that, I just think straight away of [Queen Latifah](#). So Queen Latifah is an Afro-American actress. She started as a rapper. She was very revolutionary in terms of gender equity and Afro-American rights, but what I love about her is, as an actress, she became more and more visible. And she's always been oversized, let's say. Is that the appropriate word? Now I'm confused whether it is or...

**Ariel:**

I would probably use the word fat, but it's up to you on what language you'd want to use.

**Raquel Silvestre:**

Okay, but yes, she's always been a fat girl, as she says, and she owns it. She looks beautiful in my sight. She's been, it feels like she's gone through a lot of challenges because of that as well. But I just love how she brings herself to the spaces she occupies. And yes, I want to be like her.

**Ariel:**

Thank you, and what about you Ruth?

**Ruth Eghan:**

For me, Lizzo, I really love [Lizzo](#). I feel like she embraces her beauty. She's not shy, she's not afraid. She's really confident in her own skin. And I love the way she, you know, creates a platform for people across, you know, different races and ethnicities to really be themselves and showcase their body and doing so in a positive light.

So I really think she's kind of shown me especially that it's important to accept who you are, and once you know who you are, you know, nothing can stop you, the sky's the limit and I feel that her positivity brings, you know, a shift in the music industry, in what people are promoting and I think similarly with Queen Latifah as well, being that presence and having that representation means that other artists can think about the way they're portraying anti-fat bias as well. And also that means that the listeners of that music as well can also think about that. So it creates that societal change that we need in this area.

**Ariel:**

Thank you and Naomi, over to you, who's inspired you the most?

**Naomi Wilcox-Lee:**

Thanks, I love those first two. I actually have a couple. [Aubrey Gordon](#), people may have heard of, presents a podcast called [The Maintenance Phase](#), has a couple of books out and has been really key in my learning around this area.



She Used to post under Your Fat Friend for a long time before revealing who she is. And also a comedian and journalist called [Sophie Hagan](#). Definitely recommend you follow them on... Instagram and something I wanted to share that Sophie has done when she goes on tour is that she always emails ahead to the theatres and asks them specifically about whether their seating is accessible for fat people and works with theatres to make sure that it is and probably doesn't work with theatres where it's not, which I thought was a really great like act of something practical in terms of inclusion and maybe something workplaces can do, you know, if they're hosting conferences or anything like that. So Sophie's another one I would recommend.

**Ariel:**

Thank you so much. I'm definitely, yeah, Aubrey Gordon, Sophie Hagan, are probably the two that I would put on the top of my list of influenced and inspired me the most as well. I think the Mates in the Phase podcast was what brought my awareness to this subject. And it was nice to hear people talking about anti-fat bias, weight stigma, wellness and all of that stuff in... a way that challenged our perceptions of what it means to be in a bigger body or to be fat. So yeah, they're top of my list too.

So a huge thank you to Raquel and Ruth from Inclusive Employers and a huge thank you to Naomi from Teach First for joining us on this episode all about anti-fat bias.

I hope you've all enjoyed this episode and for more information about how you can make your workplace more inclusive and how we can support you to do just that you can visit our website. at [inclusiveemployees.co.uk](http://inclusiveemployees.co.uk). Done.

## **End Credits**

# Music playing whilst voice-over artist says

"You've been listening to Talking Inclusion.. with Ariel Chapman.

If you've enjoyed listening to this podcast, then please subscribe and leave a review from wherever you get your podcasts.

Find out more about Inclusive Employers, at [inclusiveemployers.co.uk](http://inclusiveemployers.co.uk)"

## **Music Ends**