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# Association between weight status and men's positive mental health: The influence of marital status

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## KEYWORDS

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**Summary** The purpose of this study was to (1) examine the association between weight status and men's positive mental health, defined as the presence of symptoms of emotional, psychological, and social well-being, and (2) evaluate the moderating effect of marital status. A total of 645 men aged between 19 and 71 years self-reported their height and weight and answered a questionnaire measuring their emotional, psychological, and social well-being. Analysis of variance

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revealed that mean levels of emotional, psychological, and social well-being did not significantly differ according to men's weight status. Moderation analyses indicated that, for men in a relationship (married or living common-law), there were no significant associations between overweight, obesity, and the three components of positive mental health. However, for single men, overweight was marginally associated with higher emotional well-being, while obesity was associated with lower psychological well-being and marginally associated with lower social well-being. Results of the present study suggest that health professionals and researchers should take the characteristics (such as marital status) of men with obesity and overweight into account when working with them. Mental health researchers may need to examine men in each weight category separately (e.g. obesity vs. overweight), since the association with positive mental health can differ from one category to another.

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## Introduction

Obesity and overweight have been associated with many physical health problems, such as cancer, type II diabetes, and cardiovascular diseases [1]. The relationship between excessive weight and mental health is much less documented and remains unclear. Most studies have reported no association or a negative association [2–5]. Still, others have indicated that overweight and obesity can be positively associated with mental health [6–10].

To explain those conflicting results, gender has been identified as an important moderating variable [2,3,6,9,10]. In a meta-analysis of 17 community-based studies that examined the association between obesity and depression, de Wit et al. [2] found that this association was more clearly present in females. That study also found that the male group was rather heterogeneous and concluded that different subgroups of men should be distinguished in future studies investigating the association between weight status and mental health. Since being in a relationship has often been identified as a protective factor of men's mental health [11], marital status could be an important variable to consider, and the association between excessive weight and mental health could differ between single and married or living common-law men. However, this moderating effect has never been tested, and research is needed to address this gap.

Most studies on the association between weight status and mental health have focused on depression and conceptualised mental health as the absence of depressive symptoms [4]. To balance this

vision of mental health, Keyes proposes the concept of positive mental health, which comprises emotional, psychological, and social well-being [12]. To our knowledge, the association between excessive weight and men's positive mental health as conceptualised by Keyes has never been examined. Thus, the aim of the present study was to examine the association between weight status and positive mental health, and to test the moderating influence of marital status in this relationship.

## Overweight and obesity

Overweight and obesity are defined as “abnormal or excessive fat accumulation that may impair health” [13]. Body mass index (BMI), an indicator commonly used to assess overweight and obesity, is calculated by dividing weight in kilograms by height in metres squared ( $\text{kg}/\text{m}^2$ ) [13]. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), overweight is defined as a BMI between 25 and 29.9, whereas obesity is defined as a BMI of 30 and over [13].

In Canada, in 2014, 61.8% of men were considered to be in the obesity or overweight category, representing more than 8 million Canadians [14]. Even though men are more likely than women to be in the overweight or obesity category (61.8% vs. 46.2%), they are underrepresented in studies focusing on weight management [15]. In a systematic review of randomised trials of weight loss interventions, Pagoto et al. [15] reported that, on average, men represented only 27% of participants and that only 5% of the trials used samples composed exclusively of men. Thus, there is a need for studies focused exclusively on men with overweight or obesity.

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