



How to Control Your Weight? Have Surgery.

Anne was 43 when she had bariatric surgery. She had no choice. Her scale was nearing 600 pounds, and it was either surgery, or a long slow decent into death, with every moment until then a disappointment that life had turned out that way for her.

Her dietician said she "ate hedonically." It wasn't a term Anne understood, but, she knew from the disapproving tone with which it was delivered, that it meant she should be ashamed of herself.



In Annes' life everyone spoke to her in disapproving tones. And if it wasn't the words, it was the stares, the pointed finger from across the street, the quickly dropped eyes when she passed close to anyone at the store.

Being severely obese is being an object of scorn.

"Where is your willpower?"

"Why don't they just say no to the third helping?"

"Looks like you need more exercise - pushing away from the table."

"Do they feed you from a trough?"

The sight of obese people turns off the humanity in others. We assume they are overeaters – to be sent to OverEaters Anonymous. Somehow we allow cruel words to be spoken within earshot of an obese person. They need to hear our disapproval, maybe that will motivate them to quit eating so much. Right?

And what are they to do about the rude comments? How can they respond? How can an obese person say, “Look at me, there is a real person inside here. Look at me, can’t you see me?” Who would listen?

Anne had the face of an angel. An angel in exceptional pain. And sicker than any angel you could have imagined.

Meeting the Human Face of Obesity

I met Anne while I was a short term resident of the Bariatric Wing of a large hospital. They called it a “wing,” but it really was an entire floor.

First, I didn’t know there were so many bariatric patients they had to dedicate an entire floor to them. Second, I didn’t know exactly what “bariatric” really stood for. I was about to find out in a very personal way.

Wikipedia says “Bariatrics is the branch of medicine that deals with the causes, prevention, and treatment of obesity .”

Now, I WASN’T there because I was obese – far from it – I had wasted down to the skinny weight I was when I got out of the Army. I was sent to that ward due to hospital overcrowding elsewhere. That turned out to have a powerful impact on me.

(My apologies for this digression, but it may help you understand why I had to spend several days in the Bariatric Ward of the hospital.)

Speaking of the Army, that was why I was there. Thanks to the genius of the minds running the Vietnam War, they sprayed highly toxic Agent Orange to defoliate the jungle, making it easier to spot and kill the VietCong.

I began my pain-filled strolls. With an IV on wheels, my hospital gown barely tied in the back, my bare behind felt every draft.

As it turned out Agent Orange killed more GI’s than enemy...it just killed us slowly years later after we returned home, each with one of a variety of horrible diseases that

left many of my comrades dead over the ensuing years. Thus, I was at the hospital for emergency Agent Orange-related surgery, and they sent me to the Bariatric Ward.

Now, I'd never been to a Bariatric Ward before. And I was surprised. Curious. Astounded. In the end, saddened.

This was the place people come to prepare for and recuperate after bariatric surgery – lap band, stomach stapling, gastric bypass, etc. Anne had been there almost a month, with many days ahead before she would be well enough to leave.

Now my doctors told me I couldn't leave the hospital until I could walk three continuous laps around the entire floor. At first, it was all I could do to get up to go to my bathroom, so it was going to be a challenge.

Highly motivated to leave as soon as possible, I began my pain-filled strolls. With an IV on wheels, my hospital gown barely tied in the back, my bare behind feeling every draft, I ventured out as often as I had the strength.

Stomaching the pain, I had to take frequent stops to rest up. And that is how I met Anne. A resident just two doors down from my room, she became a frequent stop on my slow excursions. I had many heart-to-hearts with Anne.

Anne's mom came to visit daily. Fully 350 pounds herself, she was a master at chit-chat. She was not a supporter of lap bands, and found occasion to throw in little digs about Anne's choice. After all, she said, she learned to control her weight, what was wrong with her daughter. Anne's face always turned to the small window to the side of her bed in those moments, but never replied.

My second day there, during late afternoon visiting hours, Lacey came in and plopped down on a side chair. Lacey, Anne's daughter, was 16, brooding, with a bad complexion, and



over 200 pounds. She didn't talk much, grunted when spoken to, and left as quickly as she arrived.

Clearly there was a three-generation weight problem in Anne's family. And whatever was said prior to Anne coming to the hospital, they had no way to discuss their weight problems, nor solutions. The mood was always thick with sarcasm and negativity in that room. Only after I had been to Anne's room a dozen times on my rounds, and after my third day at the hospital, did she open up. And it broke my heart. When I think about it now, I still feel her despair, her hopelessness, that divorce from ordinary life she opened to me that last night.

As it turned out, my life-saving surgery opened a door into a world that had been hidden from me - I never knew it existed.

Losing 500 Pounds

Except for me, the entire wing (totally booked - they gave me the last bed) was made up of pre and post-operative obese people. Three dozen or more. Everyone seemed to weigh in excess of 500 pounds. Besides their extreme weight, they were beset with diabetes, hypertension, heart disease, various forms of cancer, asthma, and obstructive sleep apnea, knee replacement surgery, to name a few of the big-name problems.

Now, as it turned out, my life-saving surgery opened a door into a world that had been hidden from me - I never knew it existed. I came to be very thankful for my time there, despite the close call to my mortality that brought me there.

Like Anne, for nearly every one there, surgery was their only hope, their last link to life - literally to life - for salvaging whatever quality from life they could. After surgery, they were immensely sick. Recovery slow. Some had been there for weeks. I had never seen any of this up-close. The pain sunk deep into my chest and wouldn't leave for days.

I was totally surprised that so many lives were at stake to extreme obesity. I knew the numbers, of course, and knew the percent of persons with extreme obesity was climbing faster than the total number of those who were obese. But, they were just numbers quoted by myself and all of us weight loss professionals. Up close to human souls trapped in these out-sized bodies, the numbers quickly became very personal.

The Curiosities of the Bariatric Ward

Ever curious during my journeys down the hall, as I peered into the small cramped recovery rooms with open doors, I saw the widest arm chairs aside the beds I had ever seen. The powered beds tilted straight up to help the occupants get into and out

of bed, after strapping them in with huge velcro fasteners for the tilting. The wheel chairs were large enough to fit 2 people side-by-side. I didn't know they made such things.

I wondered how they could possibly use the tiny restrooms, with their coat-closet-sized rooms stuffed with a toilet. A nurse told me they didn't - couldn't - they were just too large to fit, so an orderly had to help them use hospital alternatives.

It was the look on the too-human faces that struck me - and in many ways they still haunt me today. These weren't fat people. Nor obese people. These were people. Very sick people.



Extreme Obesity: Is It Contagious?

I visited with family members of the bariatric patients. Most of them, too, were exceptionally overweight. The pain and concern written with ingrained frowns and forced smiles on their faces made we want to cry. How could it come to be, I wondered, how entire families, even those not blood-related, were themselves obese, or closely following that path?

For those who had undergone surgery, they were on the road to some kind of recovery. Many things would improve in their lives, and perhaps they would even get some kind of life-quality back. But their family members were still on the road to accumulating their own excessive weight, and their journey was far from over.

For all the recovering patients, they could not again consume food like they had formerly. The surgery had permanently changed that. For each, they had to change nearly every aspect of their lives in order to allow the surgeries to do their jobs.

None could tell you how they got from 250 pounds to 300 pounds, from 400 pounds to 500 pounds and beyond. It just happened.

But, whatever the success surgery would have in reducing their weight, the personal pain, the emotional scars, their sense of losing a lifetime of what should have been pleasant memories, the catastrophic dis-assembling of their sense of self-worth, would take many, many more years to recover. If then.

No One Chooses to Be Obese

None of these bariatric patients started out with a desire to be captured by extreme weight. None thought their excess weight would eventually land them there, confined to a hospital bed, trying to figure out how to piece a shattered life back together.

Being extremely obese is not a statement of character. It is a near fatal assault on your life.

None could tell you how they got from 250 pounds to 300 pounds, from 400 pounds to 500 pounds and beyond. It just happened. Not overnight, but it happened step-by-step until there was no other solution than the one that had brought them to the brink of death, and here to the hospital.

Somewhere along the road to accumulating their debilitating size, they dieted. Repeatedly. They fasted. Dieted again. Worked out. Walked. Read everything they could get their hands on about how to lose weight. Worked out the best they could. And all of it, sooner-or-later, failed them.

Losing Weight Before Her Last Dreams Are Lost

Anne married young to her high school sweetheart. Already overweight, her husband had said, "I'm overweight too. Besides, I love a woman with real curves."

Three years after Lacey was born, he was gone. "You're too fat" he said, as a thinner woman appeared in his life.

Anne had been alone since their divorce, and moved in with her mother. A few years later Anne had to quit her job, her increasing weight making it difficult to do just about anything. She became depressed, angry, then resolved that life would just keep getting worse.

“Lacey went from being my cute, cheery 5th grader, to a sullen teenager in middle school,” Anne said. “Her grades are terrible. She has few friends. I know she never brings them home because she is ashamed of me. Lacey spends most of her time after school online.”

“Mom, I’m too fat and ugly for anyone to date me, so get off my back,” Lacey had told Anne when the subject of her first prom came up.

“I had dreams for myself before I got married. I had even bigger dreams when Lacey was born. But in just a few years all my dreams evaporated,” Anne told me through ample tears. “What is the use of dreaming?”

“Then I had all those dreams for my beautiful little girl.” She reached for another tissue. “But now she won’t even talk to me. And her life is evaporating even faster than my did. At least I got married and had her.”

Somewhere along the road Anne lost the life she had, the dreams she had nurtured, her sensuous sense of self long ago vanquished. Her every moment had been consumed for a very long time with just survival. Survival. And survival isn’t living.

“What’s the use of bariatric surgery if you don’t have a life?”

For many years she questioned if life was worth the titanic struggle. Her interior pain was larger than her body could ever be. It showed. Her anguish, like that of the three dozen souls on that hospital floor, radiated despair deep into the halls.

Somewhere along the road Anne’s weight quit being a problem of will power, of insatiable cravings. Somewhere along the road a tipping point occurred in her body. Weight gain accelerated.

“Do you think I should just give up? Should I just say my life is over and give in to whatever happens after here?”

Every person I talked to at the hospital described the same sensation she had of helplessly standing by while their weight ballooned. It was as if they were watching a 3D image of someone else doing all kinds of things that caused unstoppable weight gain.

That last night, after visiting hours, on my final stroll before my release, Anne motioned for me to step into her room. Alone, the room lights dimmed, she had

clearly been crying for some time. Tissues were scattered across her bed and on the floor.

“Do you think I should just give up? Should I just say my life is over and give in to whatever happens after here? My mom doesn’t respect me. My daughter – I just don’t understand how I can help her – I don’t even know what to help her with. I just don’t know what to do. I don’t have a life any more. What should I do?”

I didn’t know how to respond. Words escaped me. Looking directly into her eyes, tears falling fast from my own, I leaned in, kissed her on the forehead, her angel face sad beyond measure. She closed her eyes as I held her hand for a very long time. She squeezed it one last time when I moved to leave. “Turn off the lights, please,” Anne requested. I could hardly see the switch through the tears.

As I began my wobbly stroll back to my room in the dim hall, a nurse leaned in as I moved past, and whispered, “Don’t you think at some point they would just tell themselves it’s time to quit eating so much?” Astounded, not usually taken with violence, I had a sudden urge to push him down the stairs.

Excess Weight Is a Symptom of Disease

Excess weight is a symptom of a disease. The greater the weight, the greater the disease, and the more additional diseases will attack the overweight body. At some point, that cluster of diseases will find a way to kill you. If you are a woman, it will take multiple diseases over decades for them to kill you. For men, heart disease will take you relatively quickly. Or a stroke will leave you confined to having others care for your every need for the rest of your life.

At a certain point, weight loss surgery is the only way to control weight - it is the only way to save a life.

Sadly, at some point surgery is the only option to lose weight. No one knows why so many people gain so much weight. No one. It is way past blaming it on too many calories, or too little exercise. It is much more complicated than that. But the “why” is tragically unknown.

Thus, at a certain point, weight loss surgery is the only way to control weight - it is the only way to save a life. But saving dreams? ...Saving dreams is not something that surgery is very good at.

At some point considerably before the surgery option, before your entire body runs amuck, you may still have the option of doing something effective. If you don't take that direction, you have about a one-in-six chance of meeting your family from the tilting bed of a Bariatric Ward. Of course, you know that the 1 in 6 will NOT be you, right?

HOW DO YOU CONTROL YOUR WEIGHT? HAVE BARIATRIC SURGERY. Or visit with someone who has. I thank the Army for giving me just such an experience.

Thank you Anne, for opening my eyes through your heart. Everyone should have an Anne in their life.



– Boyd Jentsch

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HEART PLAN – WEIGHT LOSS SUCCESS Begins in Your Heart