

Tips for Ensuring Long-Term WLS Success

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After the Honeymoon

The first year after weight-loss surgery is a powerful and exciting experience, fueled with amazing changes and a restoration to health and balance of body and mind. For many, this time seems almost effortless in terms of needing to look within for answers of how to lose weight. The physical restriction from our bariatric surgery took care of that for us. We are more easily satiated as our food needs are taken care of pretty quickly and easily each day. Our life no longer revolves so much around food and eating.

During this first stage after WLS, what I call the “honeymoon”, we replace the time previously spent with food, with more interesting adventures. It is a time spent enjoying our newly evolving bodies - buying new clothes, receiving compliments from others, beginning to be physically active, traveling, reclaiming all the normal activities of living that slowly slipped away when we were obese.

Eventually, life begins to settle a bit, we get to a normal weight and are then challenged with learning the art of healthy weight maintenance. For most bariatric patients, healthy weight maintenance is not a skill that we’ve practiced for very long as most of our experience has been based on a past filled with yo-yo dieting and struggling with obesity.

As the initial “melting-away” process concludes, the “honeymoon” begins to end. The compliments begin to recede slightly, our closets are filled to the brim with new clothes, and most of the new adventures and milestones have now been experienced. This period becomes challenging as our external worlds aren’t feeding us to keep the euphoria going, like they used to do.

Let’s look at the tasks we’re confronted with after the “honeymoon”

This is a time when many people begin to fumble and slip with their weight and food issues. It’s when we most often see those old pesky habits returning to our repertoire of coping skills. Some are trying to lose that last bit of weight that is stubbornly holding on, and others begin to see a bit of regain slowly creeping up.

In the ideal, during that first year of post-op life, we would have been digging deep, doing what I call the emotional excavation work, to root out those habits that caused our obesity in the first place; the first year, post-operatively, is the time to do some serious soul-searching to come to terms with our relationship to food, and to develop a strong plan of relapse prevention.

But the first year after surgery is deliciously euphoric, and effortless in some ways, and we often get caught up in the other various aspects as mentioned above. So our skill level, in terms of emotional excavation, might be weak and still undeveloped.

After the “honeymoon” is over, if a person has still not mastered their weight loss, it is imperative to seek out support: 1) to develop insight in regard to one’s relationship to food; 2) to learn how to develop a healthy relationship to food, and 3) to learn how to develop and implement a plan or strategy for long-term WLS Success. Being willing to do this work will guarantee a much greater level of success for the long-term — the rest of your life!

Developing Insight and Self-Inquiry

Most people who struggle with obesity have a history, on some level, of disordered eating. Eating disorders exist on a continuum. The most extreme disorders are actual eating disorders like anorexia nervosa, or bulimia, or compulsive eating. The other end of the continuum is much more subtle in nature. It might look more like inability to plan, or stick with a plan, or a few days a week of disordered eating or getting into foods we know are not good for us or do not support our long-term WLS goals.

It’s important to begin to discern, where, on the disordered eating continuum, our eating and relationship to food falls. Becoming obese didn’t just happen overnight; even if we struggled with it all our lives, there is a psychological or emotional component in addition to the physical manifestations. We need to understand what was at work within us that helped us get to our obese state, so that we can make sure to provide a mental tune-up to those areas, as needed, to ensure long-term WLS Success.

Most of us are experts in being self-critical and judgmental. We need to develop a compassionate awareness of our inner dialogue or what some call their “inner commentator”, so that we can use that same voice in a more positive way. We must train our “inner commentator” to be supportive and gentle if we are to do the emotional excavation work of insight and self-inquiry.

Self-inquiry is a task where we look back in our lives and trace our beginning roots to how we developed our attachments to food, specifically overeating or misusing food. For some people, journaling is an excellent way to work with this task. Others find "talking it out" with a friend, clergy or therapist to be helpful. Local support groups or internet groups are also helpful tools.

We are faced with examining our relationship to food and how it served us; how it worked for us (AND how it stopped working for us and became limiting and endangering). We need to see the pay-off of how food met our needs. During the emotional excavation work, we arrive at a deeper understanding of how we began to use food to substitute for other things; with this understanding we are empowered to make new choices and develop new habits post-operatively that will ensure our long-term WLS success.

One thing that is a pretty sure-fire guarantee: If we do not get to the core of our disordered eating habits and/or compulsions we are destined to begin repeating those same old embedded patterns, once the physical restriction of our weight-loss surgery begins to ease up. Without doing this emotional excavation, most people will begin to see weight regain.

Now the good news is that this emotional excavation doesn't have to be necessarily painful and/or a time-consuming experience. It can be done in many ways, but most critical to long-term success is that there is a reckoning with the past so that we are free to make healthier, life-sustaining choices in the future.

WLS insight or self-inquiry work involves tasks and a logical thought process; tasks such as developing an inventory of all the ways we related to food in the past, of how we used food and had our needs met with food; tasks like making plans and developing strategies; of learning to watch how our thoughts influence our feelings and behaviors. This self-inquiry results in tangible tools that help us develop an even more concrete plan for our future so that we do NOT repeat the past.

Emotional Eating

Once adequate insight and self-inquiry has been done, most bariatric patients come away with a list of the ways they participated in emotional eating over the years. Once we understand what our primary emotional eating tendencies are, we are then empowered to begin to create a strategy and plan of action to avoid falling into those vulnerable potholes in the future. We learn to replace food and eating with other, more powerful options for action.

We often begin overeating for emotional reasons because we have not yet developed the skill to tolerate intense feelings. When we are in the throes of disordered eating, the ability to tolerate intense feelings is short-circuited by using food to quell uncomfortable sensations, thoughts and feelings. We resort to food, our drug of choice: the ultimate comfort substance. One of our tasks in experiencing long-term WLS Success is to learn how to tolerate intense emotional feelings to empower ourselves to make other, more life-enhancing choices.

Making the Connection Between Perceptions, Thoughts, Feelings and Behavior

We live in a feel-good society. "I'm going to do something because I *feel* like it." When we can learn to act from information other than what we *feel*, we empower ourselves for long-term WLS success. One of the skills that we must develop is to learn to pay attention to what we are thinking, for it is our thoughts that lead to a certain feeling or emotion, and what we are feeling leads to subsequent actions. It goes like this: *Before* we felt a feeling that made us choose a certain food or disordered eating behavior, we had a *thought*. And it was that originating *thought* that led us to feel a certain way which in turn led us to make a decision to do a specific action or behavior, i.e., like overeating for example.

By beginning to learn to slow down that process sequence, we are able to gain greater mastery over our actions and behaviors, including overeating or flirting with disordered eating. It is vital to our long-term WLS Success to build up this skill of slowing down long enough to discern our thoughts from feelings and our feelings from our actions.

Developing a Plan for Long-Term WLS Success

As we develop the skills earlier discussed, it is important to rely on concrete, tangible tools that will also ensure long-term WLS Success. When we notice that we are unable to just keep it simple and work our tools, it is important to then review the previous steps of developing insight and self-inquiry. And with our new compassionate attitudes, we can do more emotional excavation to get to the root of what's driving us to deviate from our long-term WLS Success Plan.

By following the necessary steps for insight and self-inquiry we can empower ourselves to live our dreams for long-term WLS success.

Long-Term WLS Success Plan

Long-term WLS Success involves engaging in the following, simple but extremely important tasks — every single day. (It is interesting to note that naturally thin people report practicing these same skills in maintaining their weight.)

1. Meal Planning. Stick to a structured eating plan and stay accountable to your dietary intake, using tools such as www.fitday.com, if necessary to get real with what you're putting in your body.
2. Mindful Eating. Practice Mindful Eating. Put your fork down between bites and develop an awareness in your mind's eye, of what is happening in the moment – pressure on the tongue, taste, texture, swallowing, swallowing, swallowing, feeling the food move down your esophagus, taking a few breaths before picking up the fork again, asking yourself “Am I satiated?”, “Am I full?”.
3. Inner Dialogue. Develop a growing awareness of your “inner commentator” in terms of how it supports or does not support your long-term goals, and replace the negative self-talk with more affirming self-talk.
4. Grazing. Avoid grazing behavior — once you begin, you may not so easily be able to stop.
5. Weighing. Create a “weight-window” for yourself and weigh yourself weekly to make sure you stay within your window.

6. Vitamins and Supplements. Be dedicated to take your supplements and vitamins EVERY day.
7. Hydrate. Drink at least 64 ounces of water a day.
8. Exercise. Move your body in some form of exercise at least 3-4 days a week.
9. Restorative Activities for the body, mind and spirit. Incorporate restorative activities on a regular basis for yourself. Remember to love yourself as you would love a child. Nurture Yourself.
10. Personal Accountability. Practice Personal Accountability. Refrain from using excuses and recognize when you lapse into excuse making, and then make a course correction and get back on track.