

Becky Smith and Catherine Laird

2.1 Patient Story #1

Becky Smith

I was not born obese. Not many people are! My parents actually report that there was concern that I was not quite hefty enough. My birth-weight was 6 lb and 7 ounces (2.9 kg). Almost 43 years later, I hit a peak of 320 lb (145.1 kg). In other words, for someone of my height (5'10" or 178 cm), I was severely obese. My journey towards severe obesity was not a gradual slope, but more of an undulating one. The same could be said of my journey towards bariatric surgery, which I had 7 months ago.

Throughout my early childhood, my weight was normal. I was actually something of a fussy eater and recall frequently being made to sit at the table until my plate was empty. I was a tall girl from a young age and one of the first in my class to hit puberty. I have thick bones—thick ankles and thick wrists. My feet are very large for a female and since my teens I've had

to buy shoes in specialist shoe stores. I distinctly remember family and friends saying what a “big girl” I was. In my head, I interpreted this as fat, but now, when I look back at photographs of that period, I see myself as a perfectly normal, if shapely, young woman. My female friends were less shapely and, on the whole, thinner and more petite than I was. In comparison I felt somewhat oafish. My friends seemed more elegant in their movement and were generally better at sports than I was. Sports that involved running were physically hard for me and I hated them. I was constantly out of breath and red-faced. I didn't hate all sports, just those that involved running. Swimming and skiing were my preferred sports and I both enjoyed and excelled at those in my youth. However, I grew to detest sport at school because most activities involved running and I was often the last to be picked for teams.

2.1.1 Weight Gain Journey

I left home aged 18 and went off travelling the world for a year with a friend before going to university. Having always had home-cooked and fairly balanced meals, the freedom to eat and drink what I wanted in quantities of my choice meant that my diet was less healthy than it had been. Convenience foods and alcohol also played their part during my student days. My weight

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started to creep up and, at the age of 22, I was diagnosed with high blood pressure. I made various attempts to diet on the recommendation of health practitioners, but my weight seemed to “yo-yo” up and down.

In my mid-twenties, I had to have surgery to remove a pilonidal sinus. There were no major complications, but thereafter I experienced acid indigestion on a regular basis. Not long after that surgery, I moved overseas for a period of 2 years and, when the acid indigestion arose, I suppressed it by eating. Returning home to the UK at the age of 27, my weight had increased to 252 lb (114.3 kg). I now shopped exclusively in plus-size stores and didn't feel quite as young and trendy anymore. A year later, with my housemate's support and frequent company, I joined a slimming club and began going to the gym, swimming, and doing yoga regularly. Over the next couple of years, I was successful at losing 50 lb (22.8 kg), proudly gaining a certificate in the process. By the time my 30th birthday came around, I remember feeling toned and comfortable with my size. People commented on how fit I looked.

My thirties was a period of highs and lows where I feel I spent a lot of time searching for myself. My heart was broken twice (for which I sought therapy), I completed a Masters degree, I developed my career, I bought a new house, and I moved countries a few more times. Prior to immigrating to Canada at the age of 37, I spent a year living and working in the Netherlands. There, I was very lonely and unhappy. I lacked social interaction and felt very isolated. On reflection, I probably should have sought treatment for depression. Instead, I ate my feelings. I became lethargic and, although I cycled to and from work, spent almost every evening lying on the couch watching TV.

I left the Netherlands at the end of my 1-year contract and just as my Canadian residency came through. Part of the immigration process required a medical exam and it was then that the examining doctor found blood in my urine. On my return to the UK, prior to my move to

Canada, a ‘leaky’ kidney was diagnosed with protein in my urine.

2.1.2 Pre-Surgical Weight Loss Efforts

Moving to Canada was a positive step and I began to feel my old self again. Initially, I was confident in my decision, challenged in my new job and engaged with my new environment making friends and exploring new places. Again, I joined a slimming club and lost some weight. However, about 6 months after I arrived, I changed jobs and spent the next 9 months quite uncomfortable at work. I was bullied by a colleague and the thought of going to office became a dread. Again, I began to eat my feelings. My new family doctor decided to investigate my ‘leaky’ kidney issue, referring me to a nephrologist, and also recommended I see a doctor who specialised in weight management. All the doctors were concerned about my weight, my blood pressure, and my kidneys.

At the time, I would say when asked that I felt generally healthy and looking in the mirror saw myself as curvy but not obese. I don't think I really recognised that having to lie on the couch every night after work with your ankles up high because they were swollen, lacking in energy, over-reacting emotionally, and sleeping poorly were indicators that my body was not functioning well.

My nephrologist encouraged me to lose weight and I started seeing the weight-management doctor on a regular basis. I did not have a particularly easy relationship with the latter, but kept going as I recognised that despite our disconnection personality-wise, he was trying to get to the root of my weight issue. For the first time in dealing with health practitioners, I felt I was actually being offered structured support rather than just simply being told I needed to lose weight. Although not a psychiatrist, he had a special interest in nutritional orders and had collaborated with a psychologist on a number of papers linking Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) and weight management. He diagnosed me with ADHD and I was put on atomoxetine,

which I feel has helped me with my ability to maintain focus and be less impulsive. I was also sent for a sleep study where it was determined that although I did not have sleep apnea, I was a very light sleeper, easily disturbed by noise. We talked about my seasonal mood changes and he suggested I purchase a seasonal affective disorder (SAD) light therapy lamp and use it every day, which I did. He arranged for me to have a 24-h blood pressure monitoring test and also increased my blood pressure medication to include hydrochlorothiazide and, later, amlodipine. My doctor also encouraged me to go to mindfulness classes, which I hated, but led to me finding an alternative plus-size yoga class, which I loved and, apart from the occasional swim, hike, cross-country ski, or annual 10 km walk for charity, was pretty much all the physical activity I did apart from everyday walking. He encouraged me to be more aware of my health and self-care by, for example, going for regular massages, getting enough vitamin D and omega-3, and not waiting to sort out minor health niggles. He put me on a very low calorie powdered diet, which I used for two meals a day supplemented with a regular meal and was actually quite successful for a while. I lost about 25 lb (11.4 kg) over the year I was on it; I found it quite easy not having to cook. At one point, I was also tried on topiramate (and later naltrexone) to see if that might help stave off food cravings and encourage weight loss. He sent me to see a psychologist who I saw for about three sessions before the psychologist and I agreed it wasn't really that beneficial for me at that point. I wasn't feeling particularly emotionally distressed or troubled and felt that we had had talked through my feelings regarding my weight issues in the sessions. The main driver in seeing the psychologist was really my weight management doctor. I think I went ahead with it because I was keen to try anything to resolve my weight issue, but, at the same time, I don't think I really felt a strong intrinsic motivation to talk through my feelings compared to the previous times I had undergone psychological therapy. From quite early on in our consultative sessions, my weight-management doctor raised the prospect of bariatric surgery, but I was totally resistant to the idea.

My view was that my weight was something that I should be able to control and that surgery was too risky and dramatic. I am generally a very capable person who succeeds when I apply myself and so, in my mind, I felt I should be able to lose weight without resorting to surgery. I was also conflicted in that I felt, and still feel, that someone's aesthetic should not influence how they are perceived but, deep down, I know I felt it did. I have experienced people's judgements and criticisms about my physical being on a number of occasions. It hurts, even if they mean well in terms of their concern for your health. It also presses my 'rebel' buttons and I begin to dig my heels in further. Take me as I am or get out of my life! However, at the same time, I recognised I was (feeling) less attractive and had lost interest in relationships and my appearance. Shopping for clothes, for example, was no longer fun and dating was non-existent.

I think I tried to pretend I was body-confident externally, but really I wasn't. I no longer felt good about my body in terms of its attractiveness. I even tried to boost my confidence by taking part in a nude photo shoot as part of a public art project. I didn't tell anyone about this because I was embarrassed!

During the process of trying various weight-loss strategies under the guidance of the weight-management doctor, I independently met two people who had had bariatric surgery. Speaking to them and hearing about their experiences really helped me start to reevaluate the prospect of surgery. I heard first-hand that they felt it was beneficial, what the surgical process was like, what the post-surgery eating situation was like for people who tend to socialise around food-based events and enjoy food, and how they dealt with the excess skin they now had. I got the 'warts and all' version but the overwhelming sentiment was that it was a positive experience. One of them, who knew me professionally as well as personally, also made the point that I was a smart and capable woman, and that having a weight-problem that I could not control did not make me a failure in life—this struck a chord. I bought some books on weight-loss surgery and started to read articles and blogs as well as visit bariatric

chat rooms. I began to educate myself on the surgical process from a medical and psychological perspective. Eventually, I agreed to being referred to the local bariatric program.

2.1.3 Pre-Surgical Support

I went along to an introductory information session at the hospital, which outlined the various procedure and requirements for surgery, the risks and benefits as well as post-operative lifestyle and eating changes. I took copious notes. Later, I again connected with one of my friends who had had surgery and quizzed her and her partner about their experiences, contextualizing all that I had learnt. By this point, I was fairly confident that surgery was something I was going to do. A few months later, my first appointments at the hospital came around and I met with a social worker, a nurse practitioner, and a psychologist. I asked the questions I needed to, and by the end of this stage, was determined that surgery was the right thing for me. The psychologist encouraged me to go along to the bi-weekly bariatric support group at the hospital where she suggested I ask my outstanding questions regarding my intended surgery.

I was somewhat reluctant to go to the support group meeting as I was guarded about sharing my emotions and feelings with strangers. However, by the end of the meeting I felt very much more positive about it. I valued the companionship of others going through or having been through the process. I recognised the variety of individuals who for one reason or another had become obese. I had learnt some useful tips. My query had been listened to and I had had constructive suggestions made and real examples provided. I felt the group was a safe space to express my concerns. I have continued going to the group, which alternates between an open forum and lecture-style learning sessions, on a regular basis and feel it is very beneficial.

Following my first support group experience, I decided that I would limit the people I told about my planned surgery to a small group: my parents (in the UK), my doctors, my immediate boss who is also a friend, and a few other trusted close friends

here in Canada that I felt would be supportive, non-judgemental and would, to be honest, suspect that I was dealing with a health issue. I didn't want them to worry I was seriously ill and knew I would need their practical support given the distance from my family. I decided to keep it at that. I think the support group gave me the confidence to focus on my own preferences and stop worrying what others would think. I felt strong enough to say to myself that there are people in my life for whom it really is none of their business what I choose to do with my body and they don't need to know everything about me to still belong in my social circle. This was empowering in many ways; I felt I was in the driving seat about the decisions.

My parents, who are both also overweight, were supportive of my decision when I told them of the proposed surgery, but had questions regarding surgical risks. They offered to fly over during the period of surgery and recovery, but I indicated I did not feel this was necessary. My friends were outwardly very accepting and supportive, although wanted to be sure the main reason I was doing it was for health rather than aesthetic reasons. They also wanted to know how it might affect my ability to socialise. I asked one of my friends to be my support person in terms of helping me home and staying with me for a few days as advised by the hospital. She agreed. My doctors and boss were totally positive and supportive.

My next round of appointments came through and I saw the nurse practitioner and had a very helpful nutritional lesson presented by the dietician providing guidance on pre- and post-surgery nutrition.

Things became very real when I was given a surgical date after my surgical consult and I actually felt quite excited about the prospect of what lay ahead in terms of being able to see a solution to my weight problem.

2.1.4 Pre-Surgery

The final appointment was to do various pre-surgery examinations (blood, cardiac, etc.) and I met with a pharmacist to go over my medications

and an anaesthetist who went over my surgical risks. I also saw another team member that day. She asked me about my support person and we started chatting about my parents and when I would next see them (6 months post-surgery). She then said: "Oh, how wonderful! You'll be all skinny and beautiful when you next see them!" Her comment really upset me, but I didn't say anything at the time. I don't think she meant to be anything but positive, but the implications of the words she chose, as I 'heard' them was (a) you are not beautiful now and (b) skinny = beautiful. It still bothers me.

As my surgery date came closer I felt comfortable in my decision, but, as I think many people feel pre-surgery, there were still the concerns that something might go wrong. I rewrote my will; perhaps telling in terms of some of my underlying fears.

Prior to my surgery, I began the process of preparing for surgery by "shrinking" my liver and went on the same powdered very low calorie diet I'd been on previously, but, this time, with no regular food intake at the same time. There was a period of about a week before starting this diet when I binged on my favourite food and drinks as a kind of farewell to old friends. In my mind, I would never eat these things again so wanted one last sentimental taste. These items included pizza, handmade cannelloni, Chinese take-out, Portuguese custard tarts, a gin and tonic, a pint of beer, and mango ice cream.

For the next 3 weeks, I was just on the powdered drinks and allowed other low calorie drinks, but no actual food. In my case, my drinks of choice were water and diet soda. I was quite anxious about this diet as the first few days of being on it coincided with attending a work-related conference involving a number of social events and receptions. Despite my fears, it was actually OK. The first couple of days were the hardest and I felt as if all my senses were heightened in the awareness of food smells and tempting food. Restaurants seemed to jump out at me! However, I navigated my way through and had no real hunger after day 3. I actually quite enjoyed my shakes and the feeling that my journey towards better health had commenced.

2.1.5 Hospital Stay

On the day of my surgery, I called the hospital to check everything was still OK and they asked if I could come in a bit earlier as they were running ahead of schedule. I walked to the hospital with my little suitcase and was warmly greeted by the receptionist who made me feel very positive by telling me his sister was 6 months post-bariatric surgery and how she was very happy with her progress and felt it had been a good decision. Next, the surgeon (whom I had not met before) came in and he was very friendly. I was a bit taken aback though when he lifted my gown and signed my stomach as I was completely naked underneath—we'd hardly said hello! He then, kindly, asked for the number of my support person so he could call her after the surgery was over.

Next, I was taken to sit in a comfy chair with my feet up and a nicely warmed blanket was placed over me. The anaesthetist came and prepped me. It all moved very quickly and the next thing I knew I was being walked down to the operating theatre. This was very strange for me as, based on my previous experience of surgery, I had been expecting to be wheeled down. I was led into the theatre, where the radio was playing, and introduced to the staff in the room. They asked me to get on the table, I was strapped down and then sleep ensued as the anaesthetic took effect.

I woke up in the recovery room and the first thing I noticed was that my back hurt. I had been advised this might be the case, due to the gases used in keyhole surgery. My surgeon was at the end of my bed and told me he'd already called my friend and that everything with the surgery had gone well. He also advised me that the operation had taken longer than anticipated as they found I had a hiatus hernia when they went in so he had to fix that prior to doing the Roux-en-Y gastric bypass. Thankfully, all issues with acid indigestion have now been completely resolved with no reoccurrence post-surgery.

I was still a bit sleepy when I was wheeled up to the ward and was given my liquids, some medicine cups, and instructed on how often I had

to drink. A few hours later, one of the nurses encouraged me to go for a walk around the corridors. He kindly stayed behind me as I pushed the intravenous drip trolley since I was worried I might fall because I felt very light-headed. I did a circuit and then had the confidence to unplug myself from the monitors and do a few rounds every few hours.

My first night in hospital was not great. I was very tired but couldn't sleep. I was told I had to stay sitting up and couldn't lie down flat. Every time I was about to drop off to sleep an alarm would go off. My breathing kept slowing and set the alarms off. I felt really bad as I must have kept the lady in the bed next to me awake half the night as well.

The next day was better and I managed to doze a bit between drinking from the little cups, sipping broth and eating some gelatine pudding. I felt very nauseous at one point and had to have some intravenous anti-nausea medication. My support person visited and one of the nurses told me that my other friend, who had previously had bariatric surgery, had been calling every hour the night before to check on my well-being. In the late morning, a different surgeon came with some students to check on me and was very pleased I was sitting in a chair and had been walking and using the bathroom.

The second night I slept better and the next morning I was seen by a resident and some other students. The resident agreed I could go home.

2.1.6 Recovery at Home

Almost 48 h after my surgery, I was on my way home via taxi with my support person assisting me. I felt tired and weak as I hadn't eaten much at all for 3 days, but was happy to be home. My support person stayed at my place for two nights. I slept a lot but we went for a short walk each day. I also started the liquid diet stage, which I now refer to as the 'white' diet because all the food I ate seemed to be white—yogurt, sieved mushroom soup, sieved chicken soup with protein powder in. By the end of the 2 weeks, I was so bored of the 'white' food that

the pureed stage was a delight! Two weeks is nothing in the scale of things, but when I could finally have crunchy food again in the form of saltine crackers I was so excited.

I was very touched and appreciative when I received a call from the tele-health support nurse at the hospital on day 2 after being discharged. She just wanted to check in on how I was doing. On the third day after getting out of hospital, I went to see my family doctor. We discussed how I was doing and looked at my medications. We agreed on a phased reduction in my blood pressure medication and she asked me to check my blood pressure daily. She also helped me get new prescriptions so that all the medications I was on, including some prescribed by the hospital to take for the first few weeks post-surgery, were small enough in size that I could digest them. I was advised to never take anything bigger than an M&M post-surgery.

One disconcerting thing to arise immediately following my surgery was that my body odour changed. It felt almost as if someone else was inhabiting my body and I didn't like the change in smell at all. I was quite anxious about this, but spoke to others who had surgery and at least two people said they had had the same thing. It lasted a few days and possibly was due to the surgical gases leaving my body, but it was a bit discombobulating.

The first few weeks were quite exciting in terms of seeing the effect the surgery had had. I checked the scale daily and could see the weight coming off. However, at my first support group meeting post-surgery, the issue of checking the scale obsessively was raised by another member and I resolved to then only weigh myself once a week. I have stuck to this and track my weight weekly on a smartphone app.

I ended up being off work for 4 of the anticipated 6 weeks recovery period. It actually did me a lot of good to rest, relax, and build up my strength with my daily walks. I also think it helped me adjust to my new eating and vitamin regime. I was able to focus on my health and my new routine with no other distractions. This was important since I no longer felt hunger and initially kept forgetting to eat so had to get used to

eating my meals according to the clock in order not to get 'hangry'. The days actually went by very quickly and the weather was good, so my daily walks were a pleasure.

The first week back at work was fine and I took my snacks and lunch in every day. The only real issues I had around this time were that I got dizzy if I stood for longer than a couple of minutes and that I felt very nauseous about an hour after taking my morning vitamins, which were taken 30 min after my breakfast as per the dietician's instructions. I either had to lie down or have some protein drink to suppress the nausea.

At 8 weeks post-surgery, I went on a vacation by myself. I took a lightweight suitcase and booked accommodation without meals so I could figure out in my own way what I wanted to eat and when. I had been anxious about this and made sure I took plenty of protein bars with me, but it was actually fine. I was pleasantly surprised to discover that I could usually find something suitable on offer in restaurants or the supermarket. I also started drinking coffee again after 6 years. The reason for this was I found it difficult to go to a café and only have water. I don't really like tea that much and soda of any kind is no longer an option. The biggest issue I had was asking wait staff to bring me smaller portions. I explained I had a medical issue that meant I couldn't eat much, but they would bring exactly the same size served to others even though I had asked for a small portion. I hate wasting food and as I couldn't store food anywhere, I couldn't easily take any leftovers away with me to have later. The wait staff would always look shocked at how much was left on the plate and I felt guilty about the wasted food. A few months on, I've got used to this a bit more now, but am very appreciative of friends who are willing to share food dishes. When eating out now, I usually opt for an appetizer instead of a main meal.

2.1.7 New Habits

I didn't lift anything heavy for 3 months and abstained from any exercise other than walking until my 3-month check up, as advised by the

hospital staff. At 3 months, I started swimming and went back to my yoga class, having let my yoga instructor know my situation. I also changed my job and started a secondment that meant I would not be travelling overseas for work. I saw this as a good move in that I could stick to my eating routine and not have to deal with airline, hotel, and restaurant meals quite as much. My new job also meant that I could start cycling to and from work (15 min each way) on a daily basis. I did this until the cold weather started. My swimming routine has not really stuck, but I am still going to yoga regularly and am generally out and about walking more than pre-surgery. I know I should do more 'proper' sport though.

Around this time, people who didn't know I'd had surgery started to comment on how great I was looking. Very few people made any comment about the fact I had lost weight. I found this interesting and, even now, 7 months on and approaching 100 lbs (45.4 kg) less in weight, very few people actually make note of the fact I have lost weight. They do, however, say I'm looking very well.

Initially, it was only by standing on the scale and because my clothes were looser that I noticed the weight coming off. Personally, I didn't see a visual change for a few months. Eventually though, I noticed my double chin had disappeared and that my face was becoming more defined. Next, I saw it at the top of my shoulders and then around my bust. The weight seemed to be coming off my top half first, but I'm not sure if it was just easier to see the significant change in my upper body at first.

My clothes were getting really too big and they either looked billowy or simply fell off my hips. I had a purge of my wardrobe and also began to learn how to sew by taking classes. I really enjoy my new hobby and the fact I can now alter my clothes to fit has been both satisfying and cost-saving during this transitional period. I was able to donate most of my discarded clothes to my plus-sized yoga classmates and to a local charity.

I started to get interested in shopping for clothes again around this time and had a couple of splurge trips where I bought new clothes. I was, however, conscious that I needed to exercise caution due to the risk of transferring my food

addiction to becoming a shopping addiction. I asked friends to keep a watchful eye on my clothes spending. Although I have bought a few new items, this splurging has settled down.

Around the 4-month post-surgery mark, I began to notice chunks of my hair coming out when I brushed it. I had been warned by the dieticians that this could happen due to post-surgical shock and protein absorption, but it still made me anxious as my hair is quite fine and thin anyway. On the dietician's advice, I started to take a zinc supplement and, following my own research, also began using a keratin-based shampoo and hair oil spray in an attempt to reduce breakage. I was advised not to take the zinc for more than 2 months, but during this time the hair loss slowed, so, despite my initial anxiety, I felt comfortable stopping the zinc at 2 months. My hair is now back to normal in terms of both growth and shedding.

My new eating and vitamin regime had also begun to feel normal. I now take two multivitamins and have six calcium citrate chews spread throughout the day with a B12 tablet every other day; although I'm not always as compliant as I should be with the B12 as I don't like taking this due to the chalky residue it leaves. I also try to ensure I am getting enough protein in and still rely on ready-made protein shakes or bars to supplement my diet. Through trial and error, I've noticed the shakes tend to cause what can be quite uncomfortable constipation so I am shifting to the bars instead.

Apart from 3 episodes in the first 3 months, I have not had any ill effects due to overeating, eating too quickly, or eating foods that are difficult to digest. The first time I vomited was after having eaten a piece of toast for the first time post-surgery. It did not sit comfortably for about 45 min and I felt very queasy. Eventually, it came back up as regurgitation. I had a similar experience two other times when I think I ate my breakfast too quickly. I seem to have learned what is the right pace for eating now and chew my food very thoroughly. I have tried bread since when eating out and it's been OK in small quantities. I have not yet tried rice or pasta, and don't really plan to. Most other foods are fine, but I seem to

have trouble digesting tough, dry chicken or meat and find I just have to stop after a few bites. I now try to avoid meat grilled on a barbecue or reheated in a microwave.

2.1.8 Noticing Shifts

My 6-month check up went very well and I was told, by the dietician and nurse practitioner, that I had lost 53 % of my excess weight and 15 cm from my waist. I had also recently come off all blood pressure medication, although I was still taking the atomoxetine. The hospital staff seemed pleased with my progress.

Shortly thereafter, I went on vacation with my parents. Interestingly, they did not really make a big deal of my weight loss when they saw me, although my mum did comment on my bust having shrunk and that I looked almost as I had done around the age of 17. I think initially they were a bit uncertain about how to deal with my new eating habits, but, after a few days, I think they got used to it and saw it as advantageous to share meals with me in terms of managing their own consumption and also from a financial point of view. This was also the first time I had really spent time around people drinking alcohol socially. I have been surprised at how little I have actually missed drinking alcohol. It really is not something I have craved, even when socialising. I did try alcohol over the holiday period having a glass of wine on one occasion and a gin and tonic on two other occasions. I noticed that I felt the effects more quickly and to a stronger degree than previously.

During this vacation, we took part in a few adventurous activities and I really noticed how much fitter I felt. I no longer was out of breath, red, and sweaty on climbing to the top of a hill. This felt good and I could actually feel my health, as well as my body-size, had shifted.

Looking at photographs of this trip, I can see that I am looking thinner all over. My legs are really starting to look slimmer. I am more comfortable in clothes as I am aware my tummy, my upper arms, and inner thighs are quite saggy in terms of the excess skin. I feel it looks a bit like

an old woman's skin—as if the fat has been sucked out. However, it doesn't bother me too much and didn't inhibit me from wearing beach clothes on vacation. I am hopeful that with time and exercise, it will tone up as I have quite good skin generally. I have noticed that it seems to be much drier though and I need to moisturise a lot more to reduce itching.

I also recently looked at some photographs of myself pre-surgery and the contrast is very marked. What struck me most though was that I could now see how overweight I looked. At the time, I don't think I could see it in the same way I can now. It's as if I didn't see it as distinctly previously and that some sort of visual distortion was occurring when I looked in the mirror or at photographs. I saw what I was wearing and whether I was smiling or not, but not my size and shape. Now, I see what I think is my true self in both the 'before' photographs and in the mirror. Someone said to me at support group that prior to surgery they only focused on their face when looking in the mirror and now they focus primarily on their body. I wonder if a similar type of behaviour is at play with me.

2.1.9 Conclusion

I recognise I am, in many ways, still in the early stages of post-operative life and that I am still adjusting. I don't know yet where my weight loss journey will end, or if it ever will, but I do know that, as of today, I am very pleased that I made the leap to have the surgery. I am glad it took me a long time to actually get there in terms of making the decision to have surgery as I feel I needed that time to really explore the options and get my head around the psychological side of it. I am also immensely grateful for the support I have received from all the healthcare professionals, the bariatric program, my support group, colleagues, friends, and family. I feel that I was truly ready, supported, and prepared to make the lifestyle shift, and although it's still a work in progress, the real physical benefits I am seeing and feeling now provide me with incentive to continue working towards better health.

2.2 Patient Story #2

Catherine Laird

2.2.1 My Story

It has been a long 6 years since my weight loss surgery. Along with many continued health issues, I have also been dealing with mental health problems, mainly depression and anxiety. However, I have been receiving medical help and guidance. As they say, "I have come a long way baby!"

The path is still not clear, nor have the problems fully gone away, but I am much further now than I have ever been. Presently, I am on duloxetine for the anxiety and depression and lisdex-amphetamine for my attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). The diagnosis of ADHD was definitely an eye-opener—I will explain more in detail later on.

So here is my story... I began life as a very skinny, "wirey", very active child. I always needed to be busy. I constantly struggled with school and keeping things in order (hence the ADHD). I battled with dyslexia, but did not find out until I was in Grade 7, at which time the school I was attending suggested to my parents that I be put into a vocational school (schooling that was based on performance and not academic ability). It was such a wonderful time for me, going from grades of 40s and 50s to 80s and 90s. It was certainly a great self-esteem builder, while I was there. However, when I made academic mistakes, it was not the school that pointed it out, but rather by my mother and my siblings. Their comments got to the point where I would simply not say a thing when we were out as a family. There really was no point—defending myself was like talking to a wall. No one cared, or even heard me. I was constantly hearing the messages; "little girls should be seen and not heard", or "if you can't do anything right, don't do it at all".

The ADHD put a damper on my ability to be careful as I was always running into things and getting physically injured, "an accident waiting to happen" my grandmother would often say. I was also unable to complete projects or focus on what

I felt were simple tasks. I was not only surprised, but thankful that my bariatric psychiatrist was able to diagnose me with this problem and help me manage it. I still have my issues, such as my ongoing tendency to be what I call a *perfectionist-procrastinator* (someone who is afraid to start something new for fear of not doing it right). I am not too sure what is worse, being degraded for not being an academic success, or not being able to start or complete things I have started. Even writing this story has been a very big ordeal for me, despite the encouragement I received from my supports. Forgetfulness has been one of my strongest characteristics. The ADHD medication works wonders for me and keeps me focused and on top of things when I need it. I am sure it was great for my doctor to finally make some sense of what I was saying, instead of me going off in 20-different directions.

Now, I turn to the part in the story focused on how I came to the decision of having a Roux-en-Y Gastric By-Pass. As I mentioned in the beginning I was a very skinny, active child and my weight was not something my mother or family worried about early on. All the way up to age 12 years old, I had no issues with my weight gain even though sugar and sweets, and fast food, were not as prevalent as they are these days. Home desserts were a part of my life growing up and my Scottish descent also meant using a decent amount of butter. With the onset of puberty, came all the problems. I started gaining a significant amount of weight around the age of 15, a time when a teen needs more understanding and security. I was told often that “you have such a pretty face”, a comment that comes with a hidden meaning. It was not a very good time to be feeling insecure and vulnerable. It was a time to be social, not socially awkward, the latter being the reality for me. The harder it was to keep the weight off, the more reclusive I became. Hiding in my room, I would keep a secret stash of “goodies” and eat my McDonald’s fries. If it was forbidden to eat, I snuck it into my room, or simply wolfed it down my throat.

I was not the only one dealing with problems. My mother and grandmother dealt with weight issues all of their lives. At first my Grandmother

would tell me, “We are all “big boned”. The translation of these comments was “you’ll always be fat no matter how much you lose”. As a result, when my mother went on a diet, I was expected to do the same, and of course the diets worked— for a short time, but really, how long can one sustain eating grapefruits or bananas for every meal? After weeks of eating little to nothing and losing the weight, 1–2 months would pass and the weight would return with just that little bit extra. So we played the “merry-go-round” or as I like to call it the “diet-losing-gain it back” game together: go on a diet and lose weight; then have fun and feel good briefly; continue poorly managed eating habits with the hope that you will correct them later; followed by gaining back the weight and often gaining more. After each “diet-losing-gain it back” attempt, I would start all over again. It was exhausting and depressing.

I felt hope as the pounds melted away and I began to receive compliments as my figure improved, but this was soon followed by the feeling of failure, the judgments, and the comments made as the weight returned. It made me feel less of a person. Was I someone who is incapable of accomplishing a simple task? I used to repeat to myself “lose weight and keep it off—others do it so why can’t I?”.

Over many years of failing diets and my learning disability, I could feel my self-esteem slipping further and further into a hole. When I was in my 20s, it was the first time I had realised I had some mental health struggles. I did not seek help and these feelings built up to the point where I could not take it anymore, so I took some pills in an overdose. Fortunately, for me they weren’t all that strong; but I was taken to the hospital and was referred to a psychologist. What I found out in this treatment was something I already knew. I wouldn’t be happy, until I could get a job, lose some weight, and find someone to love. Wow! I thought to my self, “what an insight - I can finally move on!” (sarcasm). I quickly lost faith in seeking anymore professional help and as a result, and, I stopped the treatment.

I eventually found work lost weight, and found love, and did this several times.

At the age of 28, I decided once again to participate in a diet program, and once again I was successful. During this time, I was a slim, blonde, and singer for a band. This is when I met my husband now, and soon after was pregnant. Pregnancy was one of the few times that I was not judged for what I was eating or my weight. During pregnancy, I gave myself permission to eat my favourite foods and again, no one thought it was an issue. They assured me, that I would lose most of it once the baby was born, and the rest would come off later. So I continued to enjoy myself.

After three children, many more ineffective diets, more weight gain and lost jobs, I finally gave up and succumbed to my weight issues. I remember thinking, "I am fat, I am always going to be fat and that is all there is to it!". I confined myself to my home and found it hard to do things that others in my life could do. I didn't care anymore. No more diets, no more fighting to look like everyone else. I was done. Then one day at church, a girl who was obese started losing a massive amount of weight. I asked her what she was doing and she told me about a gastric bypass procedure. Curious, I immediately started looking into this. It took me 3 years to make the decision to see someone about it. My family doctor was initially against this procedure, and it wasn't until I received my first appointment for a bariatric surgery orientation that I told my family about my plan to pursue bariatric surgery. To my surprise, I did not get the reaction I thought I was going to get.

I thought they would be happy to know that I found something that could help me lose the weight I was carrying around, especially after their years of focusing on my weight gain. Instead, I felt overwhelmed by my family telling me not to do this surgery. I have to admit, I started to feel unsure again, but I also knew that I had right up until the time of the seeing the surgeon to change me my mind. In the end, I did not change my mind, but things did not go as I had planned. I began to think my family was right again. I came very close to death following a leak after surgery and I fell into a major depression that took me close to 5 months to reach a

point of stability as I bounced in and out of hospital after my surgical complication.

My problems didn't end there, that depression hung around, and problem after problem did not help my recovery. I was told I was the rare patient with recurring problems after surgery, but it did not help how I was feeling. Each time I became physically ill, I was sent back to the hospital to see my surgeon, and each time I entered that hospital, I had a feeling that I would not come out alive. I want to be clear that there was never a feeling of ending my life. I loved my kids too much to do that to them, but I didn't know what to do. I was at my bottoms-end and things were not looking good. Just when I thought I couldn't take another procedure or problem, I had my first after surgery check up with the bariatric surgery program, check up. Things were going to change.

Six months from the time I had the surgery, got sent home for good, and managed to eat food without being sick, I was able to re-connect with my bariatric surgery clinical team. While in the clinic, I was seen alone by the nurse who saw me curled up on the table in the fetal position. The nurse asked me what was going on. I told her I had not eaten in the last 3 days and that everytime I ate I was throwing up "black stuff" and feeling pain. I then had to tell three other people and each time I begged them not to send me back to the hospital where I had had my surgery. Their response was all the same, "I needed to be taken care of by the doctor that performed the surgery".

Finally after reaching my dietitian, whom I had been keeping in contact with over these last few months, she advocated for me and to this day, I see her as a "guardian angel". She gathered my team outside my examination room and told them that no matter what, I was not to go back to that hospital. When the dietitian returned to the room to let me know what was going to happen in terms support, I felt more relieved. My fears were slowly going away.

After undergoing an endoscopy, the clinical team discovered an ulcer. I was given two new doctors and I began treatment for my depression under the great care of the bariatric clinic

psychiatrist. Among these three people, I started a journey of several illness, surgeries, and procedures, followed by many ups and downs. Yet, I was now comforted by knowing that I was being cared for by this bariatric team.

From a psychological perspective, I was taught how to work through my feelings, using procedures such as a cognitive behavioural therapy. I was even taught how to use a "scale of intensity" to label my feelings. Besides started going to support groups, I said "yes" to whatever was available to keep myself involved in the clinics psychosocial programs and I remained engaged with treating the many health issues over time. Attending the support groups was the only way I felt I could keep myself going some days.

I have undergone this procedure and continue to have challenges with eating and my mood, but I am managing. I continue to attend the support group and have worked with my bariatric team to manage my diet and emotion during this journey. I continue to receive psychiatric support and am now in individual psychotherapy to gain a deeper understanding of my emotions and self-image.

Despite these efforts, I was faced with yet another challenge impacting my physical and mental health. I would like to share my reflections during this critical time in my weight loss journey. I was struggling with just having yet another endoscopy done and the surgeon indicated that I needed to have a surgical revision in order to fix some ongoing issues related to strictures, ulcers, a hernia, and other problems. I was nervous, as I was also dealing with problems with my body image at this point after surgery. I had heard similar challenges with body image discussed by other members in the support group. Given these challenges, I wrote this poem. It was a response to a friend's question about how I saw myself after my weight loss and surgery in the context of these challenges.

The Person that I See, Is not the Person that is Me

Things have changed, I know that know. What once was me has changed...
but how?

I'm still the person deep inside. I've only changed my shape and size.

Can it be? I say, "No way, not me."

The person that I see is not the person that is me

Hold on, there's something wrong

As I stare from foot to head—I long...for it to be true in what I see

This person's different; it's just not me

Can it be? I say "No way, not me."

The person that I see is not the person that is me

I'm big and ugly and don't fit the norm. My body shames me in its form

I'm different from the rest of you. I have no meaning. My life's askew.

I fought a battle to win a race. To lost the pounds so I could face,

discussed looks of my demise. Yet soon I'm back to staring eyes.

So I gave up, said "What's the Use" I'm fat and ugly; I'll be recluse

The cries unanswered "Please set me free!" To a person who can truly see

It's ME I say, No way, can't be

The person that I see is not the person that is me

I shamed away from society, of years with my obesity.

I hid my food for no one else. An empty life of doubt in self

So when I look how can it be?

The person that I see is not the person that is me

Suppose it's me.

Not sure as yet, the eyes and brain cannot detect...

That person standing here in front, is different than what I confront

I hear myself, I've tried to change. To make my eyes and brain arrange

Believe in who you are—what you've become.

The work was hard to now succumb.

But yet to hear me say!

It's Me you see! No way, can't be

The person that I see is not the person that is me

I could not listen anymore. And so I opened one more door

And Praise to God

He gave me more

So the Mantra of my new life must be

This person that I see,

Really IS—The person that is Me

At the current time, I have lost a total of 243 lb; I still struggle with the excess skin and this holds me back from feeling good about my appearance.

I am still under the care of my bariatric team. I make regular visits to my psychiatrist and attend regular support groups. I also get involved with any additional programs being offered, which help me keep focused. I still have contact with my dietitian and any other care providers on an as

needed basis. My weight is still something I worry about, but not quite as much. I am presently under the care of a psychotherapist to look deeper into why I do certain things and hopefully find the answer to my "WHY's".

The day will come, when I will no longer be able to receive help from the program due to the "program 5-year graduation", as they make room for future patients. It will not be easy for me to let go, but I know it will be yet another leap of faith in my journey.

I don't know where mental health will be in the future, with advances in future of technology and researchers pushing the horizon of knowledge. I do hope that those going through similar

things as I did will hopefully not have to suffer quite as much as I did early in life.

In summary, as I reflect on my journey, I do want to thank a few people in my life. To my Husband, who was initially against me having this operation, yet took (and still takes) excellent care of me whenever needed based on my health status. To my sister who diligently came to my rescue, on many occasions when I needed it. To my sons, whom I probably have scared to death several times during my journey and who remained patient with me whenever I struggled. Last but not the least, the bariatric team at Toronto Western Hospital, University Health Network, without whom I would not have survived.

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