

Gaining Perspective

lessons
from
long-term
losers

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he was the only one left standing in a room filled with nearly 75 people. All eyes were upon her and all ears listening intently to the story she would share.

As is often the case, I began this particular support group by asking all of the WLS patients in the room to stand. Then, I had them sit down by group according to how long they had been a WLS patient. "All those who are within three months of surgery may sit down. All those within the first year, sit down. All those within two years sit down, five years... ten years, fifteen years", (I was sure I would get her with that one), yet still, she remained standing. As everyone turned towards the back of the room to see why we were continuing on with this exercise, I quickly glanced at a friend from the bariatric surgeon's office, who shrugged her shoulders, with a clear, "I don't have any idea who she is" response. "Welcome," I said. "We are happy to have you here tonight. And, how far out of surgery are you?" "Eighteen years" she proudly replied. "Eighteen years! I repeated, (keep in mind this was 1998) Wow, you look wonderful. Won't you tell us a bit about your story?"

Lessons from long-term losers

Stories of WLS successes abound these days. Stories of life-long dreams coming true, stories of weight loss, health returning, wheel chairs abandoned, oxygen tanks out of the picture, medications history. All are exciting and inspiring. These stories make great news items, create interesting magazine features and even have become the focus of a reality show. But I, like you, have read and seen hundreds of stories, but as the years pass, I find myself asking, “so where are they now?” Where are those infamous losers who were featured on the cover of *People* magazine in 1998? Where are last years, “Biggest losers?” And more importantly, have these weight-loss winners maintained their weight loss? Are they healthy, are they happy, have their relationships changed, have they had complications?” Would they do it again? What have been their challenges?

I just celebrated the ten-year anniversary of my weight loss surgery. It is a significant milestone for me and a cause for intense evaluation, reflection and of course, a medical check up. As I see new WLS patients experiencing their own journey, writing books, lecturing, starting foundations, companies and selling products, it is exciting to see the energy and the great desire to give back by paying it forward, but it also causes me to feel like I am now viewed as one of the ‘old bariatric broads.’

But with that title has come a sort of wisdom that only time and experience can provide. Ten years as a WLS patient has provided a unique perspective, cultivated a new and deeper understanding of what it takes to maintain the weight loss prompted by a surgical treatment, what it takes to stay healthy, and what it takes to identify and truly change habits for a lifetime of success.

In addition to sharing with you insights from my own experiences, (including some intimate details) I am also

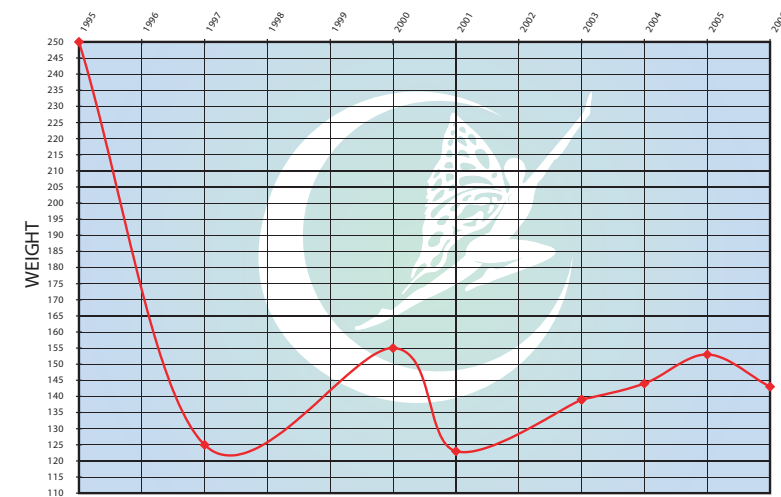
pleased that in future issues of *WLS Lifestyles* magazine I will introduce you to several other WLS veterans who will also share their stories of their own long-term challenges, successes and the truths about their life, their health and their perspective today on weight loss surgery.

the end of invincible

Yep, the honeymoon ended. Some time between years two and three. I found that I had to be much more careful with what I ate. As soon as I let refined carbs back into the picture, maintaining my weight became a challenge once more. I had to start paying attention to fats, calories and exercise. Throughout the first year it seemed that I could do and eat anything and my weight continued to drop. Once I reached my goal, exactly one year later, I felt that I had it made. That was true, for a while. I know differently now. As you can see from my 10-year weight loss progress chart, my weight has fluctuated 15-25 pounds or so through the years. And my weight has proven to be a very accurate reflection of my focus and commitment to each of the Success Habits™ principles and visa-versa.

In addition to compliance with the Success Habits™ principles, I also have also had to “learn” how to maintain. I, like most WLS patients, have spent a lifetime in a losing mode. Consequently we have learned how to lose, but we have never learned how to think/act/be a thin person. I have had to learn, and I am still developing a “maintenance mentality.”

■ **Lesson 1:**
Develop a maintenance mentality



10-year
weight-loss
progress chart
for Colleen Cook

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body image issues

For the first several years, I'll admit, I was nearly obsessed with what size I was wearing, how I looked, what people thought of me. Year one was quite a trip. From a size 22/24 to a 6/8 I didn't stay in one size very long. It scared me to death when the compliments and comments about how great I looked stopped. I was no longer a novelty, but rather, I blended in to normal. Then I began to fret over thoughts like, “I wonder if I look fat in this? Do I look like I am gaining weight? What are they thinking? Why don't they say something?”

At only 5'2" every five pounds shows. Worrying about what others think may be vain and may be considered “unhealthy”, but the truth is, what people think, does matter to me, and that serves as a very powerful motivator for me to work to stay within my goal weight range. Am I a size 6 today? Nope. I am 46 years old, I wear 8's and sometimes 10's and though I have not had a tummy tuck, or thigh lift, I did have my breasts put back where they belong.

Now, I know that these sorts of things are not important to everyone, but I do believe it is important to feel good about oneself and to make the changes necessary to have a positive and healthy self image and sense of well-being.

■ **Lesson 2:**
Image can be a powerful motivator

fear of the scale

As I have researched and prepared for this article, I have been quite surprised, that given the fact that I have a scale within 20 feet of my office, I have not kept a close record of my weight throughout the years. You see I am one, who fears the scale. Though I know that weighing regularly is one of the most vital habits for long-term success, still I struggle with it. Prior to surgery, I spent many years not knowing what I weighed. Thinking that if I did not know what it was, then it wasn't what it was! Well, it is what it is and I have learned that the only way to control my weight, is to know exactly where I am and take responsibility for what I weigh and adapt my behaviors accordingly. Our 1998 Success Habits™ Study revealed that the most successful long-term weight-loss surgery patients weigh at least once a week. That habit alone, my friends, will serve you well for a lifetime. By weighing in weekly, you will be able to adjust your calories in and calories out and effectively manage your weight. Ignore it and it will surely sneak up on you.

■ **Lesson 3:**
Weigh once each week

exercise

As much as I hate to admit it, to myself and everyone else, exercise works for me. Through the years I have exercised on and off and my weight has responded accordingly, (*See 10-year weight-loss progress chart*). There seems to be no down side to regular exercise. I look better, feel better, eat better, handle stress more easily, and have a much-needed sense of well being when I exercise. But never the less, it continues to be a struggle for me and likely always will be. It is hard work, time consuming and not much fun, but experience has taught me that it is an absolute must.

■ Lesson 4:

Exercise is a keeper

six-year post-op complication

Just as I felt it was important to include this information in my book, *The Success Habits of Weight-loss Surgery Patients*, I feel it is important to include it here in my 10-year retrospective report. At six years post-op I was hospitalized for a very rare and serious complication. The diagnosis was a 'reverse intussusception.' As I understand it, that means that my bowel had kaleidoscoped into itself just below my stomach pouch. Part of my bowel had to be removed and I received two blood transfusions. All is well, but please know how critical bowel obstructions can be, and never think you are immune to complications from weight loss surgery no matter how far out you are.

■ Lesson 5:

Never ignore abdominal pain, ever!

annual blood work

As you likely know, having your blood work done each year is essential for your good health. I have been fairly committed to that resolve. Good thing! At seven years post-op, my annual blood work revealed that my B-12 level was 151. Dangerously low, I began weekly shots and within one year, my levels were up to 1040. I backed off a bit, and gave myself a B-12 shot once each month, or so. Within one year, levels were still ok, but had rapidly dropped to 596. The following year, my B-12 level dropped again to 276. Obviously, absorbing B-12 is an issue for me, and one that will require close monitoring and treatment.

My blood pressure is also a challenge for me to keep under control. I was put on blood pressure medication prior to my surgery in 1995 and my hope was that once I lost the excess weight, that I would be able to discontinue taking it. I have tried off and on to do without it, but it seems that blood pressure meds will always be part of my regime.

■ Lesson 6:

Have your blood work done annually

It has been quite a journey these past ten years and I am pleased to be able to share with you these few personal insights and experiences. I have had the wonderful opportunity of working with literally thousands of WLS patients throughout the country. Each WLS patient has their own, unique goals but we all share in one common dream - the hope that our decision to have weight loss surgery will be one that will serve us well throughout our lives. I am excited about my upcoming interviews with other WLS veterans and looking forward to sharing with you their wisdom, insight and perspectives.

As always, yours for greater health and happiness,
Colleen. ■

Colleen Cook is Speaker, Author and President of Bariatric Support Center International, a company that specializes in providing long-term education and support for weight loss surgery patients and professionals. For information visit www.bariatricsupportcenter.com

If you are 10 years post-op or more, and would like to be considered for an interview for an upcoming "Lessons From Long-Term Losers Feature" please email Colleen at: cmcook@bariatricsupportcenter.com



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