Body Image vs. Health Risk:
What’s Your Motivation for Weight-Loss Surgery?

By David Engstrom, PhD, ABPP, FAcClinP

Body image is loosely defined as a person’s perception of their own physical appearance, or the internal sense of how one’s body appears to others. Although it is a complex subject, research suggests:

1. Body image dissatisfaction is greater in women than in men.
2. A person’s body image is often dramatically different from the way their body actually appears to others.

There is no doubt that there is still a great deal of stigmatization and moralizing about obesity and excess weight in this society. Many scientific studies demonstrate this point. They show that people with excess weight, in comparison with their normal-weight counterparts, are often perceived as being:

- “Less intelligent”
- “Lonelier”
- “Having less self-control”
- “More lazy”

While these perceptions are often not true, they still persist and can have a marked effect. We have all heard remarks like, “she ought to just push herself away from the table,” or “he should get to the gym.”

To the outside world, the reasons people with morbid obesity seek bariatric surgery may be a mystery. The obvious reason might be to “look better” or to “feel better about their bodies.” The bottom line is that society still too often views this procedure as the “easy way out,” or a “quick fix” for lifelong problems.

Perceptions and Social Stigma

Although body image seems to develop naturally as we mature, there is probably a large part of our body image that is socially derived, from these real or imagined perceptions, judgments and comments of other people. When you add this social stigma to a person’s previous failure at dieting, already low self-esteem and poor body image, it is not difficult to imagine that the idea of significant weight-loss through surgery is appealing for a number of reasons.

Despite the fact that a primary goal of bariatric surgery is to prevent, improve or cure medical health problems or co-morbidities, the psychosocial effects of the surgery are just as powerful and important. Several recent studies have reported dramatic positive changes in the body image of patients following weight-loss surgery. So what really motivates people to seek this surgery in the first place?

Motivation

First, a few facts about motivation itself. There are four types, or sources, of motivation.

- External motivation is often initiated by outside sources, like friends, family or doctors. “They made me do it.”
- Guilt-driven motivation is, as one might expect, a result of trying to escape from negative feelings. “I would feel badly if I didn’t do it.”
- Identified motivation is a result of wanting to be like, or identifying with, someone else who is doing the behavior in question.
- Internal motivation is when the desire to change arises within the person. “I like doing it... it’s fun.” Studies that examined motivation to exercise or to lose weight have shown that the most enduring source of behavior change is internal motivation. That is, the more a person’s motivation comes from within, as opposed to some outside agent (e.g., doctor, spouse), the more likely it is that behavior change will continue.
It is clear that there are many sources for motivation, and they should be examined carefully, especially when the subject is weight-loss surgery.

At our practice, we examined the motivating factors for a group of 65 patients who were seeking bariatric surgery. They were each asked about their primary motivating factors, including:

- Health concerns, including medical co-morbidities
- Improvements in self-esteem, including feelings of self-worth and enhanced body image
- Increasing physical functioning, including better mobility and ability to accomplish physical tasks
- Business or job advancement
- Increased social attractiveness

They were asked to rank-order their reasons for seeking surgery, from 1 (most important) through 5 (least important). The results of this assessment are shown below.

**What is your most important reason for seeking bariatric surgery?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reason</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Health Concerns</td>
<td>62%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increase Physical Functioning</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Improve Self-esteem</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business or Job Advancement</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Attractiveness</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

One clear finding here is that health concerns far outweigh all other categories of motivation for bariatric surgery. These may represent either current or future concerns about physical health and well-being. When motivation to improve physical functioning is added to health concerns, the total for both represents nearly three quarters of all primary reasons.

**Body Image and Self-esteem**

Although “body image” was not a separate category, it is assumed that this issue is incorporated into the categories of “improve self-esteem” and “social attractiveness.” Together, these two areas were primarily endorsed by 22 percent of the respondents.

People obviously choose to have bariatric surgery for many reasons, and these cannot easily be broken down into distinct categories. While our data suggests that health concerns are well in front of other reasons, there were secondary reasons, including body image, which play a part in their decision-making as well.

Of equal importance is the person’s source of motivation. Be sure to examine yours, and make certain the decision is an internal one!

**About the Author:**

David Engstrom, PhD, ABPP, FAClinP, is a clinical health psychologist, board certified in Clinical Psychology. He is a psychologist at Scottsdale Bariatric Center. Dr. Engstrom is an active member of the American Society for Metabolic and Bariatric Surgery and currently serves on the OAC Advisory Board.
OAC Membership
Building a Coalition of those Affected

About OAC Membership
The OAC is a grassroots organization and was created to bring together individuals impacted by the disease of obesity. One of the first steps to getting involved and making a difference is to become a member of the OAC.

Membership allows the OAC to build a Coalition of individuals impacted, bringing a unified voice in obesity. These are the individuals that make up OAC’s membership:

- Those who are currently struggling with their weight, whether obese or morbidly obese
- Those who are seeking treatment for their obesity
- Individuals who have successfully and/or unsuccessfully treated their obesity
- Friends, coworkers and family members of patients
- Professionals whose work is dedicated to those affected
- Organizations that support efforts in obesity

You probably find yourself fitting into one of the categories above. This is because obesity affects just about every person in the U.S. and directly impacts more than 93 million Americans. With this number continuing to grow, so must our voice. And that is where YOU become an important part in what the OAC strives to do.

Membership Categories and Benefits
The OAC wants YOU to be a part of what we do. No matter how you’re impacted, having individuals join our efforts who believe in making a difference is essential. That’s why the OAC offers various member categories, so you can get involved at your desired level.

Several valuable benefits also accompany your OAC membership, including an annual subscription to OAC News. Each membership category offers something different. To learn more about membership benefits, please visit the OAC Web site at www.obesityaction.org.

Not ready to join the OAC as a paid member?
You can become a “Friend of the OAC” and still have your voice be heard. When joining the OAC in this category, you can get involved in our efforts while receiving electronic benefits. There is no charge to become a “Friend of the OAC.” To sign-up, check the box below and complete the application.

Name: __________________________
Company: __________________________
Address: __________________________
City: ___________ State: _______ Zip: ___________
Phone: _______________ Email: _______________

Payment Information
Enclosed is my check (payable to the OAC) for $ __________.
Please charge my credit card for my membership fee:

☐ Discover®  ☐ MasterCard®  ☐ Visa®  ☐ Amex®

Credit Card Number: __________________________
Expiration Date: ___________ Billing Zip Code: ___________

Mail to: OAC
4511 North Himes Ave., Ste. 250
Tampa, FL 33614
Or Fax to: (813) 873-7838

Membership Application

Yes! I would like to join the OAC’s efforts.
I would like to join as a/an:

☐ Patient/Family Member: $20
☐ Professional Member: $50
☐ Physician Member: $100
☐ Surgeon Member: $150
☐ Institutional Member: $500 (Surgery centers, doctors’ offices, weight-loss centers, etc.)
☐ OAC Chairman’s Council: $1,000 and up

Name: __________________________
Company: __________________________
Address: __________________________
City: ___________ State: _______ Zip: ___________
Phone: _______________ Email: _______________

Payment Information
Enclosed is my check (payable to the OAC) for $ __________.
Please charge my credit card for my membership fee:

☐ Discover®  ☐ MasterCard®  ☐ Visa®  ☐ Amex®

Credit Card Number: __________________________
Expiration Date: ___________ Billing Zip Code: ___________