

Staying Silent about Bariatric Surgery

by Pamela Davis, RN, BSN, CBN, MBA

Is bariatric surgery (weight-loss surgery) the dirty little secret in your life? As a nurse and someone who has worked in the field of bariatrics for more than 10 years, I am amazed — and quite honestly, at times a little dumb-founded — by the number of people who choose not to reveal they had bariatric surgery. As a patient however, on a very personal level, I do understand.

I had gastric bypass surgery 15 years ago. My husband knew my plans. My sons knew my plans. The people I worked with knew my plans. Heck, strangers on the street knew my plans! My mother, however, did not know. Why? Because I didn't tell her.

I threatened my husband and boys within an inch of their lives if they told her. Why? Because I knew I needed to surround myself with positive and supportive people. I knew after more than 30 years of hearing about my weight, I did not need or want to hear again how I just needed to be stronger and have more willpower. Since I really did not see my mother that often, I thought I would be fine not sharing my plans.

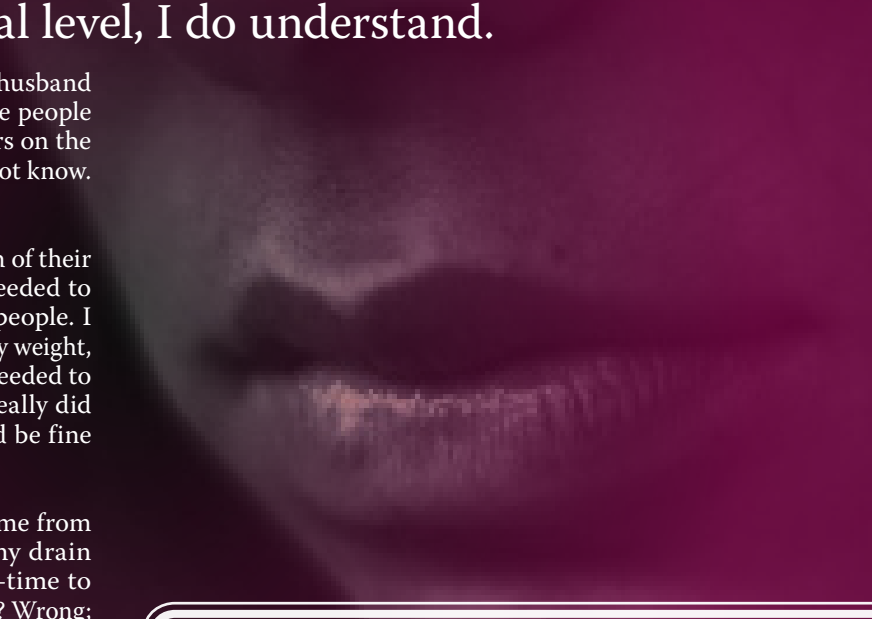
As luck would have it, two days after I came home from surgery, she dropped by and there I sat with my drain dangling. So, here it is, the moment of truth—time to come clean and say, “I had bariatric surgery,” right? Wrong; I lied. I said I had my gallbladder out and because of a complication, I still had a drain.

Fast forward three months later, and I see my mother again. I am now down 75 pounds. I still had no plans to divulge I had surgery; however, when she asked, “Do you have cancer?” I said it. “I had that stomach surgery to lose weight,” and there it was, the look. There was that “oh,” response.

You know what happened then? Nothing — except I no longer felt like I was keeping a secret.

Early in my career in bariatrics, I had a patient who told her husband the day before her surgery, “I’m having surgery tomorrow and I’m going to need a ride to the hospital. Will you take me or do I need to call a cab?”

When I asked her why she waited so long to discuss it with him, she had a similar story as mine; she did not want to be talked out of surgery or told it would not work.



“I knew after more than 30 years of hearing about my weight, I did not need or want to hear again how I just needed to be stronger and have more willpower.”

I have worked with people who do not tell their extended family or their friends they have had surgery. When asked how they are losing so much weight, they simply say diet and exercise. While technically you are losing weight through diet and exercise, you are leaving out one major component: "I had bariatric surgery."

The Importance of Sharing Your Story

Why is it so important for you to share that little tidbit? Unlike someone who has migraines or high blood pressure, we wear the disease of obesity for the world to see. No matter how hard we may try, we can't hide our weight. This also means we can't hide our weight-loss. People know when we are losing weight. You can hide your shrinking body in baggy clothes, but you can't hide your face; and honestly, why would you want to?

So, you have had surgery. You are losing weight. You are feeling good. You, and more specifically your weight-loss, are now topics of conversation. People want to know how you did it. What do you say or not say and why?

Starting the Conversation

The ideal conversation would go something like this:

Friend/Frenemy/Co-worker/Family member: "OMG, you look fabulous! Have you lost weight? You have lost weight. What did you do?"

You: "I had bariatric surgery."

Friend/Frenemy/Co-worker/Family member: "Good for you. Was it a difficult decision? I know so many people considering surgery. Would you be willing to speak with them?"



At this point you, my dear friend, would pay it forward by sharing your experience with others who are considering having the surgery.

I believe we are often pre-programmed to expect ridicule, doubt and a lack of support when discussing our weight-loss challenges and the idea of bariatric surgery. We are afraid the conversation may go more like this one:

Friend/Frenemy/Co-worker/Family member: "OMG, you look fabulous! Have you lost weight? You have lost weight. What did you do?"

You: "I had bariatric surgery."



Friend/Frenemy/Co-worker/Family member's possible responses:

- a) "I know someone who had that surgery and now she's bigger than she was before the surgery."
- b) "Oh. Well have you seen so-and-so? He lost more than 100 pounds but he did it the hard way instead of taking the easy way out."
- c) "Why? Why would you let someone cut you up when all you need to do is eat less and exercise more?"
- d) Some combination of the above.



"I ask you to think about your journey. Think about all of the factors you considered when choosing surgery. Think about the people who supported you on your journey, if you had supportive people. If you didn't have a support system, think about what it would have meant to you to have someone you could talk to about your excitement and your anxiety."

This still does not answer why so many stay silent about their decision to undergo bariatric surgery for the treatment of their obesity. I believe I know the answer - fear. Fear that we will not be supported. Fear that we will be the only person in the world to have bariatric surgery and not lose an ounce. Fear that we will regain the weight. Fear that we will let someone down.

So instead of sharing with the very people who care about us and support us, we keep our treatment a secret. You could definitely argue that it's nobody's business if you have surgery. True, it is no one's business but your own. It is your choice if you undergo any treatment or not and it is your choice if you share your treatment and your journey.

I ask you to think about your journey. Think about all of the factors you considered when choosing surgery. Think about the people who supported you on your journey, if you had supportive people. If you didn't, think about what it would have meant to you to have someone you could talk to about your excitement and your anxiety.

Own your treatment method. Find your voice. I implore you to pay it forward.

About the Author:

Pamela Davis, RN, BSN, CBN, MBA, is the Bariatric Program Director for Centennial Center for the Treatment of Obesity in Nashville, Tenn. Ms. Davis is a Registered Nurse, Certified Bariatric Nurse and Certified Case Manager. Ms. Davis also serves on the National Board of Directors for the Obesity Action Coalition. In 2001, Ms. Davis had laparoscopic Roux-en-Y gastric bypass surgery at Centennial and has since developed a passion for working with others living with obesity.

Ms. Davis will also be speaking at the 5th Annual Your Weight Matters National Convention in the breakout session "Balancing Perspective: A Look at Real Life Post-Bariatric Surgery."



Resources for managing relationships after bariatric surgery:

- Relationships After Weight-Loss Surgery (Obesity Help, 2015)
- Relationship Challenges Before & After Weight-Loss Surgery (OAC; Dr. Medlin)
- Baby Steps – Emotional Adjustment After Weight-Loss Surgery (OAC)



ABOUT THE OBESITY ACTION COALITION (OAC)

The Obesity Action Coalition (OAC) is a National non-profit organization dedicated to giving a voice to individuals affected by obesity and helping them along their journey toward better health. Our core focuses are to elevate the conversation of weight and its impact on health, improve access to obesity care, provide science-based education on obesity and its treatments, and fight to eliminate weight bias and discrimination.



VIBRANT COMMUNITY



NATIONAL AWARENESS CAMPAIGNS



ANNUAL CONVENTION



ADVOCACY



PUBLIC EDUCATION

LEARN, CONNECT, ENGAGE

The OAC knows that the journey with weight can be challenging but we also know that great things happen when we learn, connect and engage. That is why the OAC Community exists. Our Community is designed to provide quality education, ongoing support programs, an opportunity to connect, and a place to take action on important issues.

Through the OAC Community, you can get access to:

- Weight & Health Education • Community Blogs
 - Community Discussion Forum
 - Ongoing Support • Meaningful Connections
- AND MUCH MORE**



JOIN TODAY: GO TO [OBESITYACTION.ORG/JOIN](https://obesityaction.org/join)

info@obesityaction.org

(800) 717-3117 | (813) 872-7835 | Fax: (813) 873-7838



@ObesityActionCoalition
@ObesityAction