

# Working your way



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# through **Change**

by Barbara Thompson

I walked up to the automatic sliding glass doors of the Pittsburgh International Airport wheeling my luggage. As I approached the doors, they didn't open. I kept walking and they still didn't open. I was now almost touching the doors and nothing. The doors stayed closed. I stood there not knowing what to do, admittedly feeling stupid. 'Must be a door malfunction,' I thought, but how was I going to get into the airport? Just then someone approached the doors behind me, and the doors slid open and we both stepped through.

At that moment I felt small, vulnerable, and I felt different. I felt like I had changed so much that I was invisible to the sliding door sensor. Everything about me had changed. As much as I had dreamed about being different, about being of normal weight instead of dragging around a body that caused me tremendous back pain and embarrassment, the change still feels strange.

Weight loss surgery is all about change. It is about the wonderful things that you are now able to do and the terrific way that you feel. It is about self esteem and a love of life. But it is also about a period of adjustment to all of the large and small changes that you will experience in the months and even years following surgery.

People will change only when they want to and see the value in doing so. We start the journey accepting that our lives have got to change. For many, it is a reason of health. For some it is the desire to become pregnant. For most, it is a longing to live the life of a normal sized person, and to be there for our children or grandchildren. This is the "need to" kind of change. It is the change that we recognize as vital, even for survival. But having surgery is only the beginning of change along the way.

Not accepting or anticipating how much personal change is involved after weight loss surgery can get pa-

tients in trouble. Approaching the journey with your eyes wide open can give you the tools to succeed. And one of the first changes is to find an emotional substitute when you can't turn to food anymore for solace.

"I turned my obsession for food into an obsession for drugs and alcohol following surgery, I couldn't deal with the change," says Jacques Fleming of Tennessee. "I am happy to say I am now drug free and a full time 37-year-old college student. But I wasn't prepared for how hard not having food to turn to would be."

But there are surprising outlets and positive ways to turn when food is no longer the center your life as Robyn-Posson of Schenectady, NY found out. "I learned decorative art. I had to find something positive to replace food. In fact, I just finished painting a mural of a huge family tree on my living room wall. I am hanging family pictures on the branches. I would love to turn this into a business and do this for other people."

Remember that adjusting to change is a process. It does not happen overnight. It is discouraging when you wake up after the surgery and find that you are not yet thin. There is still a long road ahead fraught with struggling with food, hitting plateaus, and dragging yourself to exercise when you don't feel like it. There is also an adjustment to how your body changes.

"I was surprised that I got so small," says Tammy Beaumont of Ft. Worth, TX. "It is invigorating, but still startling. I never knew there was such a small person inside me. I still don't feel normal, but I'm getting there. I still constantly have to monitor what I eat. I'm one of the few who has to be careful not to lose too much weight. I guess I didn't expect it to be this hard."

As you go through significant change, most people experience the same cycle of feelings as those going through

the grief process. In a way, the journey is a loss of an old life. And as bad as that old life was, it is familiar and comfortable. Everything after surgery is new and requires getting used to. **Ask yourself if you are going through any of these feelings:**

## Denial

“I don’t need surgery.  
I can lose weight on my own.”

## Anger

“Why me? Why can’t I do  
this on my own?”

## Bargaining

“I’ll do it this time.”

## Depression

“Nothing tastes good.  
I’ll never be able to eat again.”

## Acceptance

“I have a new life and I’m  
committed to making this work.”

All of the changes do not only occur with you. As you change, your relationships with others change also. “My mother is super morbidly obese, and she and I used to be joined at the hip,” says Robyn Posson. “We talked on the phone three or four times a day and we spent all our time in pursuit of food. We went out to eat, or we shopped for food. We talked about food, we cooked and we ate. After my surgery I wanted to pursue other things. Food was no longer the center of my life. And with losing weight, I also admitted to myself that my mother, although I love her dearly, is a very negative person. I realized that I didn’t want to be around so much negativity. We spend much less time together. Our relationship has really changed.”

As you are changing, those around you are drawn in and some may not like it. “I haven’t really had any problems,” says Bette Moore of Pittsburgh, “but my friends are the ones having problems. People yell at me, ‘Hey skinny’ or complain that I am losing too much weight. I just tell them that I’m not trying to be skinny. I’m just trying to be healthy. There’s definitely a jealousy thing going on.” ■



## Here are some tips in dealing with change in your life:

**tip 1** A great way to ease into accepting change in your life is to practice change. Anytime you want to get good at something, what do you need to do? Practice, practice, practice! Look at ways that you can practice small changes in your life. Have you had the same hair style for the past twenty-five years? Go to a beauty salon, go through some books and talk to the hair stylist. Do something different. Do you go to the same place every year for vacation? Try going somewhere else. Do you always wear the same basic style of clothes? Get a new style, a new color and make sure it fits!

**tip 2** Accept that there are two kinds of change. There is the “need to” kind of change. That was the change that led you to have surgery in the first place. Your health and well being were suffering to the extent that surgery was your only option.

Then there is the “want to” kind of change. This is the change that you go through when you have lost most of your weight. This is the “I want to lose another 20 or 30 pounds” kind of change. You look really good, but you don’t look perfect. And in the back of your mind you are wondering if those 20 or 30 pounds are worth all of the effort necessary to go through to lose them.

Closely examine if you really want to ramp up the “want to change” to the “need to change” and what discipline it will take to lose that extra weight.

**tip 3** Expect that you will go through times of depression and anxiety through this period of change. Be ready for it and be prepared to get some counseling if you are in distress.