

Anger: The Unexpected Emotion After Gastric Bypass Surgery

The words I read made me furious. There it was, in black and white, the story of a fussy baby who was spoon fed ice cream to keep her quiet. I was reading a baby book and that baby was me! I was indignant – how dare my parents comfort me – at six months old – with ice cream? No wonder I grew up to be a fat adult addicted to high fat sugary sweets. I was a fat baby and I became a fat child, a fat teen and a fat adult. All because at six months the solution for my tears was ice cream. When I read dusky smelling baby book it unleashed an anger that had been building since the good doctor cut up my God-given stomach and deprived me of every comfort I'd ever known. My gastric bypass made me skinny, but it also made me angry. I was mad as hell, and I was blaming them – my parents – for twenty-five years of obesity. Twenty-five years of suffering and self-loathing. Twenty-five years of social inferiority because I was fat. It was their fault! A normally docile person, I was livid. I was enraged. I was heartbroken. There is so much pain associated with obesity, particularly for children and adolescents, how dare they – they who gave me life – put me in harm's way by making me fat? How dare they? I harbored my anger for weeks festering it in my mind until it took on a life of its own. I was no longer in control of my thoughts because I had surrendered to the anger. Here I should have been at the most exciting moment of my adult life for I had become the new me, yet I was a bitter angry unhappy thin person. Most gastric bypass patients experience anger as they lose weight. I understand now that this phase of anger is common for the recovering morbidly obese person. Most of our anger is about how obesity caused us to be self-loathing: about learning to hate ourselves – since childhood – because of our obesity. We are angry for blaming ourselves for lack of control that caused obesity, we are angry at others who blamed us. We are angry at the people who have belittled us for being fat, then belittled us as “weak” for taking the easy way out – surgery – to lose weight. We are angry at doctors who've told us to lose weight, but didn't tell us how. We are angry at the media that bombards us with pictures of rail thin skeleton models sending the message that unhealthy anorexic behavior is fashionable and obesity is loathsome. That is the same media that advertises thin people joyously eating heaping portions of unhealthy processed fat laden food. We are angry at employers who fail to promote the obese and who make us work twice as hard to prove that obese does not equal stupid. We are angry at the diet industry that has taken billions of our dollars when we fell for their promise of “instant weight loss guaranteed”. We are angry at every person who said, “You have such a pretty face, if you could just lose the weight.” We are angry at a society that deems it politically incorrect to insult people for their race, religion or sexual preference, but leaves the field wide open to defame and humiliate the obese. The recovering obese are very angry. And finally, after years of stuffing angry feelings inside, the anger erupts when we lose weight and discover our new selves. And that makes us angry too! Why did we have to lose weight in order to allow ourselves to be angry? We are entitled to be angry. As a class of people we are subject to the most tolerated form of socially accepted bigotry: it is in our home and social lives, in the workplace, in our leisure activities. We live in a society where half the people are obese – half of those morbidly obese – yet that same society condemns the obese as today's untouchables. We are entitled to be angry. Anger leads us down a path of blaming. We want to blame someone or something for our suffering. It's true, not one single fat person has chosen to be fat. Obesity is not a choice. We want to blame someone else because for most of our lives we have blamed ourselves: that's what fat people learn to do – we hate ourselves for a choice we did not make. But a new movement in psychology, the science of happiness, says there is a better way. This practice says, sure, bad things happen to good people. The science of happiness calls people to muster their inner resilience and accept bad things happen as a matter of fact and then move forward. The science of happiness has us focus on our strengths. According to Dr. Dan Baker, a leader in the science of happiness and author of *What Happy People Know: How the New Science of Happiness Can Change Your Life for the Better*: “focusing on our strengths works because it feels better than focusing on weakness. It creates energy, which is always necessary for transformation. Also, it's self-sustaining and full of rewards.” When I began to understand that my obesity was the result of converging anthropic change – the industrial revolution – that my parents did not intend for me be fat, and that I'd done the best thing I could for my health by having surgery – then my anger subsided. Some weight loss patients have managed their anger by becoming advocates. Advocates for the fair treatment of the obese, for fair treatment in the workplace and improved insurance coverage for obesity treatment. I know some people who are sport and life coaches for children to teach them about nutrition and physical activity. But most importantly, I know WLS patients who are advocates in their own homes. They are affecting healthy change for the next generation. These brave people are teaching their children to eat nutritionally and exercise and avoid the foods and habits that result in obesity. They are the advocates who will keep the next generation off the surgical table and free from the torments of growing up obese. Advocates do not have time for anger. They will step in where genetics can't keep pace and independently, one-by-one, fight the epidemic of obesity. Is it easy to let the anger go? Not all the time. I still get very angry when I see overweight adults mindlessly feeding their children things that will make them fat. Sometimes I just want to shake them and say, “Do you know what you are doing to that child? Do you know what kind of life you are leading her toward?” I'm still looking for a response to this anger but the wounds of childhood obesity do not easily heal. Maybe that's a good thing. Maybe that will be the motivation it takes to leave a better, healthier legacy for future generations – with or without weight loss surgery.

About the Author

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