

Is Bariatric Surgery Right For You?

The prevalence of obesity has reached epidemic proportions. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), obesity is the largest public health concern of the 21st century. It results in physical and psychosocial co-morbidities, as well as poor quality of life. Heart disease and stroke, diabetes, sleep disorders such as sleep apnea, and cancer are just some of the medical conditions that are associated with obesity. It is also associated with debilitating psychological symptoms such as depression, as well as impaired health-related quality of life. This is especially true for the morbidly obese, who face an added challenge of stigmatization and discrimination. Since obesity is caused by a complex interplay of genetic, social, cultural, psychological, and environmental factors, it continues to be a challenging public health concern to overcome.

An individual who is 100 pounds overweight or has a BMI greater than or equal to 40 kg/m² is considered morbidly obese. Although traditional treatment options, such as diet, exercise, and behavior modification are necessary to reach optimal weight, research has shown that this alone is relatively ineffective for the morbidly obese. For many people struggling with morbid obesity, weight loss eventually leads to weight gain, frustration, and disappointment. With these extreme cases, bariatric surgery is the treatment of choice and is evident with the demand increasing dramatically in the past few years. The most common types of bariatric surgery are: gastric bypass, adjustable gastric band, vertical banded gastroplasty, and gastric sleeve surgery. These options should be discussed thoroughly with a bariatric surgery specialist.

Since improved quality of life and enhanced psychosocial functioning are important goals of bariatric surgery, success following surgery should not only include weight loss, but also improvements in eating behavior, psychosocial variables and quality of life. Therefore, it is important for individuals to learn to adjust their eating behavior and lifestyle both before and after surgery in order to maintain long-term weight loss. There is a chance of not losing any weight, gaining weight, or having other adverse reactions if lifelong compliance with behavioral changes is compromised.

Here are the lifestyle changes that have been correlated with successful outcomes after having bariatric surgery:

1. Adjustment of eating patterns.
2. Adherence to a strict nutritional and exercise regimen.
3. Acquiring adequate coping skills to manage emotional eating, and difficult emotions such as anxiety and depression.
4. Acquiring adequate social support both at home and in the community (e.g., joining a bariatric support group or other weight-management group).

Psychologists have found that compliance with the above lifestyle changes is correlated to psychosocial factors, personality, and behavioral factors. Since success is dependent on these changes, psychologists play a key role during all stages of bariatric surgery including assessment, treatment, and maintenance. During the assessment phase, psychologists are able to provide both the client and other

members of the multidisciplinary team valid psychosocial and behavioral predictors of success after bariatric surgery.

What should you expect a psychologist to focus on during the pre-surgery or assessment phase?

1. Weight history
2. Eating behavior
3. Psychosocial and psychiatric problems
4. Expectations of bariatric surgery
5. Influence of weight on mood and psychological functioning
6. Motivation for weight reduction and undergoing bariatric surgery
7. Attitude of the social environment towards the persons weight and desire for bariatric surgery
8. Dieting history

Assessing these areas allows practitioners to effectively target risk factors that the client can work on with a psychologist, nutritionist, and/or exercise specialist in order to maximize success post-surgery. Since maladaptive coping skills such as emotional eating do not change simply through surgery, psychologists continue to be an integral part of care post-surgery. Through continued individual and/or group therapy, clients learn to change their relationship with food so it is no longer used as a tool to cope with difficult emotions such as fear, anger, depression and/or anxiety. Psychologists, therefore, tend to view bariatric surgery as a mechanical solution to a problem that requires further psychological and behavioral work in order for it to be a success.

Our health psychologists are experienced in working with people who have chronic health conditions such as obesity. We have extensive experience conducting evaluations for patients interested in bariatric surgery and therapy to help patients make the necessary lifestyle changes associated with positive results pre and post-surgery. For more information please contact us at:

officemanager@lepageassociates.com