

The New Guy

2 People, 1 Scar:

Marriage and Weight Loss Surgery

by Steve Tomsic



“I am worried that you will change and then leave me.” These words fell on me like an avalanche covering an unfortunate skier. I had no idea that Rachel, my wife of only a few years, was carrying this burdensome thought and fear. It struck me hard and caught me off guard.

Weight loss surgery is life altering, and relationships will inevitably change. Some relationships may end: a marriage, a family relation or a friendship. At the same time, many relationships succeed and thrive after the procedure. Our marriage has succeeded, but neither of us is blind to the bumps in the post-op road. We are still together today because we were committed to working through the challenges and were fortunate enough to be able to do so effectively.

Throughout the pre- and post-op period of our lives together, there has always been an emphasis on communication. Rachel and I both struggled with the fear of changes. On occasion, it was brutally difficult to hear and say some things, but honesty helped us to understand each other. Lastly, we continued to work together toward our goals, whether it was my weight loss, happiness in our marriage, Rachel going back to school or the idea of starting a family.

I often say that my wife and I both had surgery; the only difference is that I have the scar. That is the best way for me to describe the process of going through weight loss surgery while being in a relationship. My decision would affect Rachel as much as it would affect me. It would have been irresponsible of me to assume that this decision was mine and mine alone. Ultimately, I had to make the final decision about whether I would go through with the surgery, but the decision-making process was a team function from the beginning.

We had only been married a few years when WLS came up in conversation. While I was obese when we met, I put on another hundred pounds in the first couple of years. My weight was a barrier to our intimacy before we married, but by the time I considered WLS, the intimacy issues surrounding my obesity had ballooned into the proverbial elephant in the room that no one was talking about. I weighed over 400 pounds and we were struggling as a young couple in love. Rachel took a chance on honesty and we had a very emotional conversation about how my weight was affecting our lives. In that conversation she confessed that she was struggling with not feeling attracted to me. These words were like a freight train running me down in a tunnel. I did not feel attractive and I had pulled away over the last few months because I was not happy with myself. I saw the light of that train long before it hit me. I tried to ignore it.

We often talked about my fears of dying young and how that would impact a family. We wanted a family together, but Rachel eventually shared her concern that I would not be able to play with the kids. She also let me know that she was afraid that we would start a family and that I would die from my obesity, leaving her and our children behind. We talked about how difficult it would be for a child to lose his or her father at a young age. These concerns grew to the point that we knew that our greatest desire of having a family would have to wait until I figured out how to get control of my weight problem.

Throughout the process of researching WLS, Rachel and I kept our dialogue strong. We processed things together and discussed how this would change our lives. We tried to proactively look at this from different angles. How would surgery and weight loss impact me? How would it impact Rachel and her security in our marriage? Would I feel the need to leave and have the adolescence I

never had? How great would our sex life be after I lost weight? How soon could we try to have a family after I regained my health?

We felt like Lewis and Clark exploring lands that few others had ever seen. Our adventure began, a date was set and our surgery occurred.

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There are many changes that occur to us and our loved ones after we have surgery. I heard the strangest things come from my wife's mouth: things like, “I think you may have lost too much weight,” and “You need to go to the doctor. That bone I can feel just isn't right. I don't think that should be there.” We laugh about it now, but there was a lot of fear about all of these changes. Neither of us had seen my body like this. We could see and feel bones that we hadn't seen before. Meanwhile, our intimacy was thrilling for a change. Rachel confided in me that she actually felt guilty after I dropped over a hundred pounds, because it felt like she was sleeping with someone else.

While I was going through amazing changes and adjustments, I was aware that Rachel was going through them as well. Thinking back, she says she felt like her weight was under scrutiny because I had lost so much weight and she wanted to be healthy and attractive for me. She felt some guilt and some jealousy about all of the attention I was receiving. It took her time to become reassured that our marriage was not going to end because of this. But she also was excited at all of the new things we could do together; she cried at my niece's 4th birthday party when I effortlessly climbed on the floor to play with her. One of her fears was vanquished that day.



Rachel and Steve

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Rachel reminded me that the most difficult adjustment for her was the constant attention that was on me. She experienced a temporary loss of her individual identity during my weight loss. Everything was about me and my weight loss and how good I was looking. Our family and friends always asked about me. Our peers and coworkers consistently asked about me and made comments about me. For over a year, every time Rachel had a conversation with anyone, it inevitably revolved around my successes at weight loss and my improving health. Of course, she was proud of our new life together but she acknowledges it was hard at times.

Rachel is my partner in this new life. Today, I expressed to her that I could use some help at the grocery store. I didn't want to buy any snack foods that I knew would cause me to struggle with snacking. Together we made the effort that was needed. Likewise, Rachel has asked me to help her with walking daily. We continue to remain honest about our feelings. These can be difficult conversations to have at times, but they are necessary to a healthy marriage. While the fears are less today, they do pop through the surface now and again like a weed in the garden. We try to pluck them as quickly as possible so they don't grow too big and take root too deeply.

During one of my recent presentations, I received a question about how a couple can manage through the changes of weight loss surgery. My response is that there is no simple way. However, there are a few things that have made a difference in our lives:

- 1. Start with the idea that surgery will affect both partners equally.** Any relationship will have to face changing dynamics. It is important to remember that everyone, not just the person losing weight, will experience concerns and fears due to all of these changes.
- 2. Honest communication can be difficult, but it is necessary.** Listening and sharing openly are important to maintaining balance and understanding.
- 3. Everyone involved must be committed to success.** This commitment has to be from both people. If one person is not committed to the changes, you may find yourself having problems that cannot be resolved.

If you find yourself struggling and you want to work on your relationship, consult a counselor or religious leader or pick up some self-help books. If you are the one who had the surgery, remember that your significant other had the surgery too. You may have the scar, but you both went through weight loss surgery, together.