Sagging Skin and Body Image Issues After Bariatric Surgery

By Nancy Velazquez, MSW, LSW

Bariatric Social Worker

“I am disgusted with my sagging skin after weight loss surgery (WLS).” This was Melody’s statement at a nine-month post-surgery meeting. Melody’s candid statement resonated with fellow group participants, who also had weight loss surgery. By all accounts all the participants were successful with WLS; reached target weight loss and were living more active lives. In Melody’s case she lost 90 pounds and was no longer insulin dependent. Although she was satisfied with her weight loss she was very unhappy with sagging skin. Melody was unprepared to deal with her new body after WLS.

Body dissatisfaction is pervasive among patients who seek bariatric surgery. Body dissatisfaction is based on real issues associated with obesity. Prior to WLS, the obese individual holds a belief about his body and how others perceived him. After weight loss the individual will hold on to these beliefs for some time and perhaps struggle with integrating the new body.

Melody was aware weight loss after bariatric surgery would significantly improve weight related health issues, such as type 2 diabetes, heart disease, sleep apnea, hypertension, hyperlipidemia, quality of life, increased energy, extended life span and increased self-esteem. However, she was not prepared to face the body reflected in the mirror. Some WLS patients adjust naturally and quickly to the weight loss, others experience significant distress, sadness and sometimes depression.

Body image is the picture one has in his mind about the appearance (size and shape) of the body and the attitude that he forms toward these characteristics of his body. One is not born with a body image; however, body image is shaped by the environment.
An individual’s gender, race, culture and mass media all contribute towards shaping the belief system held about one’s body. Body image is therefore comprised of two parts: perception (how I see my body) and attitude (how I feel about perceived bodily appearance).

Body dissatisfaction is not unique to WLS, it is an American epidemic. Four out of five women are dissatisfied with their appearance (Rader Programs).

Americans are obsessed with thinness and perfectionism. In American culture everywhere we turn we are faced with a message about what is wrong with some part of our body. For example, in 2006 Americans spent $50 billion on cosmetics. In 1997 American men spent $4 billion on exercise and health club memberships, and $3 billion on grooming items. The desire or need to improve some body part is not exclusive to women or to adults.

According to the American Academy of Pediatrics 59 percent of girls reported dissatisfaction with their body shape and 66 percent expressed desire to lose weight. According to Radar Programs, one in four television commercials send out some sort of message about attractiveness. A study found that on average women have 13 negative body thoughts per day and that 97 percent of women in the study admitted to having at least one “I hate my body moment daily” (Radar Programs).

WLS patients may believe negative body image is unique to them and to some extent it is, however the reality is that in American society it is a common concern. The American Society for Metabolic and Bariatric Surgery estimated that 220,000 bariatric surgeries were performed in 2008. These patients all carry an internal image and perception of self which is harder to change than the actual physical body. There are many outside influences on body image and these don’t magically disappear once a patient has bariatric surgery.

We cannot change society’s view on body preference but we can defend against the attack. For example:

- Be realistic about your body
- Ask yourself who defines beauty in this culture?
- Appreciate your current body

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• Pamper your current body
• Exercise
• Surround yourself with support
• Be kind and patient with yourself
• Remember it takes time to accept your new body
• Take time to do a little reality check daily
• Spend time lovingly gazing at your lumps, roles and bumps in the mirror (no judging)
• If appropriate and done for the right reason, pursue reconstructive surgery
• Remember that self-esteem and body image are strongly linked
• Seek counseling
• Reach out to others who had WLS
• Reach out to a bariatric social worker
• Remember it will take years to integrate and adapt to your new healthy body, and always remember why you had weight loss surgery.