

5 SIMPLE WAYS

TO FURTHER
SUPPORT YOUR
BARIATRIC
PATIENTS

By **The Fresh Start Program**

The Opportunity To Further Support Patients

Right now most Bariatric Clinics are experiencing a very common problem in their practices. It's estimated that around 30% of bariatric patients experience significant regain after their surgery. According to a survey carried out by Bariatric Support Centers International in conjunction with Stanford University¹, patients with post-surgical weight regain attribute their regain to internal psychological factors (e.g. lack of accountability, lack of motivation, and emotional issues) and inadequate support. 90% of patients experiencing regain also reported the need for specially targeted bariatric programs to help maintain weight loss post-surgery and 82% reported that they would attend a "back on track" program if it was offered by their clinic.

In addition, many patients feel unsatisfied even when they have met their weight loss goals. According to bariatric psychologist Lorraine Langsford², even though bariatric surgery is considered successful from a medical perspective if there is a 50% reduction of excess weight sustained at 5 years, the patient perspective is considerably different. Her research found that patients are "happy" with a 77% reduction, they believe a 60% reduction is "acceptable" and they are "disappointed" with a 49% reduction. 78% of patients also have a desire for body contouring after their surgery because of loose skin issues, and even where patients have body contouring (only 21%), many are still deeply dissatisfied with how they look.

Clearly, there are a significant number of patients who are struggling to create new healthy lifestyle behaviours to support their surgery, and there are also many patients who are struggling to adjust to the other challenges that accompany their surgery, including dealing with excess skin, ongoing self-esteem issues, adopting healthy lifestyle habits and breaking others, and relationship challenges.

If you're like most Bariatric Clinics, you're probably providing some kind of multidisciplinary approach at your clinic to help support patients. Patients can come in for follow-ups, have a number of appointments with a Dietitian, and probably also have access to a Psychologist. You may also be giving your patients access to an Exercise Physiologist and perhaps you

¹Adler, S., Cook, C., Stevens, H., Robinson, A., Luce, K., Schoreder, D., Hall, J. and Safer, D. (2015). *Weight regain post-bariatric surgery: patient insights*. Available at: <http://www.bsresourcecenter.com>

²Langsford, L. (2016). *Body image and its relevance to bariatrics*.

even have your own gym. Many Bariatric Clinics and their teams however, despite their best efforts, are finding it a challenge to keep up with the needs of their patients, especially when it comes to mindset and lifestyle support.

In addition, many bariatric patients, especially the ones who are struggling, fail to come back to their follow-up appointments. From our experience of connecting with and supporting hundreds of bariatric patients on our mindset and lifestyle coaching program, this is due to a multitude of factors. For example, some patients simply can't find the time in their busy lives to make their appointments, some patients live too far away from their clinic to make it convenient, and some patients report that they are too embarrassed to come back to appointments as they are back to their old habits, or their weight loss isn't at the point that their surgeon or dietitian has indicated for them, and they feel that they have let their clinic down.

This all means that even with the multidisciplinary team that you may be building, help doesn't necessarily always reach all patients, or the patients that need it most, and the help that *is* there can also be focused primarily on weight loss, and not necessarily the accompanying challenges and mindset issues that patients face.

On the flip-side, despite the challenges presented by their patients, some clinics *are* managing to support their patients even more fully, whilst spending less time on administration and their own follow up. ***In an increasingly competitive field, the extra support that they are offering is also helping them to stand out from other clinics, as prospective patients clearly see the value in this additional support, and recognise that they are going to need long-term assistance.***

Regardless of where your practice is located, the size of your team and the size of your patient base, you can further support patients using the effective techniques that we'll be sharing in this document. And if you're not delivering some or all of the strategies that we'll cover, then imagine what impact your practice could have on your patients if you had a structured, regular and systemised community-based bariatric patient support program that started even before the patient had their surgery. A support program that can be

applied and accessed no matter where your patients live, how far they have to travel or how busy they are, so that you can have the peace of mind that your patients are getting comprehensive post-operative lifestyle support.

That's exactly what some clinics are doing in Australia, using some simple lifestyle coaching and group support practices and programs that are focused on supporting all of their patients, not just the ones that are doing well or that are happy to come back to appointments, because we all know that the journey after bariatric surgery can have many different kinds of successes and challenges, especially as the time since surgery increases.

So, what would your practice look like, and how would it be perceived by your current and prospective patients, if you were doing something similar? Imagine how you would stand out from other clinics and lead the way in this increasingly competitive field.

Here are 5 ways that you can start doing it immediately. These suggestions are based on our experiences of running specialised bariatric support services since 2010.

1. Email Notifications And Education Delivery

We know it might seem basic, but one of the first places to start with a support program is to capture all of your patients' email addresses and then to use an email platform service so that you can communicate with all of your patients on a regular basis, and in a simple and efficient manner.

In Australia, a very high proportion of households have access to the internet and use email daily (approximately 86% in 2016-2017 according to the Australian Bureau of Statistics³), so it's really important to tap into the changing nature of communication rather than relying solely on more traditional methods.

Many clinics haven't embraced email in the same way their patients have, and are therefore missing out on the benefits of using email to communicate with and support their patients. Relying solely on phone numbers and postal addresses to contact your patients is expensive, time-consuming and inefficient. Clearly there are specific situations when calling your patient is the most appropriate and possibly the only option, but if it's a more general communication, then using email will be much easier, more effective and will save you time and money.

Email platforms can be used to:

- automatically remind patients of appointments to decrease no-show rates;
- send post-surgery information and reminders to reinforce your instructions;
- deliver your latest educational resources (e.g. healthy recipes or motivational tips);
- notify patients of upcoming events or support sessions;
- conduct surveys and gain feedback; and
- check in with patients when you haven't heard from them and they haven't responded to your phone messages.

There are many email platform options these days that allow you to email multiple people at the same time and also to automate when your emails are sent out (e.g. a reminder

³Abs.gov.au. (2018). 8146.0 - Household Use of Information Technology, Australia, 2016-17. Available at: <http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/mf/8146.0>

scheduled to go out 7 days before a support workshop). For example, you might like to consider a service called “Mailchimp” at www.mailchimp.com (which is free for up to 2,000 contacts) which enables users to customise and systemise emails easily and efficiently. Other popular options include Aweber, Constant Contact and InfusionSoft.

It is, of course, incredibly important to get permission from your patients to send them emails and also to comply with data protection and privacy laws.

2. Private Online Support Forums

Using an online support forum is another simple way to communicate with and further support your bariatric patients. The advantage of running a support forum is that it also allows patients to interact with other people who have had bariatric surgery, to seek help and empathy in relation to what they're going through in the months and years after surgery, and to discuss the positive, and at times challenging, impact that surgery can have on all aspects of their lives.

Many people who have bariatric surgery are lacking a support network. This can be due to physical isolation depending on where the patient is based, as well as other factors. For example, one major influence is the common social stigmas attached to bariatric surgery, therefore many patients may choose to keep their surgery secret from everyone they know, or to only disclose the fact that they have had the surgery to their closest friends and family members for fear of facing judgement and criticism for their decision. This can make their journey extremely lonely.

Using an online forum is a great way to overcome this challenge and can be used to:

- build a community and support network for patients;
- deliver educational resources and motivational tips;
- notify and remind patients about upcoming support events; and
- remind patients of the importance of going back to the clinic regularly.

One of the simplest ways to set up an online forum is to create a group using Facebook and to invite your patients to join it via emails or clinic information methods e.g. posters and surgical information packs. According to Social Media News⁴, in 2017 around 60% of Australians were active users of Facebook and 50% of the country logged in at least once per day. Globally, Facebook now has 2.01 billion monthly active users!

There are however a number of aspects that *must* be managed when offering an online support forum. One of the major issues is that of privacy. If you offer an open Facebook

⁴Cowling, D. (2018). *Social Media Statistics Australia – January 2018*. Socialmedianews.com.au.
Available at: <https://www.socialmedianews.com.au/social-media-statistics-australia-january-2018/>

group then many patients won't want to join it because their Facebook friends will see that they have had bariatric surgery. It's therefore important to make the group settings both 'private' and 'secret' so that no-one other than members of the group will see who is in it. This means that the group will not actually be "visible" on Facebook, so only your patients will know it exists and be able to request access. If patients still have privacy concerns around who in the group may know them, then they can join the group using an alias or fake profile to further maintain their privacy.

Another major issue with support forums is that they need to be moderated. There are many open online forums for bariatric patients on the internet and you only have to have a quick look at them to see the types of medical and dietary questions posted by patients. Responses and advice from patients can be incorrect, misleading and are sometimes potentially dangerous. In addition, although generally most people are incredibly supportive on these forums, you will always have a small minority of people who are not or who can be judgmental about what other members have posted about or are doing. It is therefore essential to have a dedicated member (or members) of your team constantly moderating the forum. It is also recommended that you have a disclaimer on the page (with regular reminders) advising that your forum is a positive space for encouragement, motivation and support and also that everyone's personal circumstances are different, therefore medical and dietary questions should be directed directly solely to the clinic and not to fellow patients.

Another issue with online forums is that of successful patients posting their achievements which can lead to struggling patients comparing themselves and feeling disappointed. The moderator must therefore ensure that posts are regularly made to remind everyone that they are on their own unique journey, not to compare oneself to others on the site, and to actively ask who is struggling and who needs support.

Using constant, thoughtful and deliberate moderation can help turn your Facebook support forum into an extremely powerful tool to further assist your patients.

3. Group Support Telephone Calls / Webinars

Our next suggested strategy is another robust way to further support your patients, and is a very convenient and cost effective way of running support groups. This is through the use of regular phone/webinar-based group support meetings.

Many patients lead very busy lives and aren't always able to attend appointments or group support meetings at their clinics. Using a phone/webinar-based support program is an easy way to make group support meetings accessible no matter where patients live or how busy they are. Patients can access support from the comfort of their own homes, and you can even record meetings and send them to registered attendees who can't make it to the meeting.

Using a telephone/webinar-based group support meeting system allows you to:

- easily deliver educational resources and content;
- interact and answer patient questions in a secure, positive environment;
- facilitate patient interaction and sharing of experiences with fellow patients; and
- coach and support multiple people in one session.

In terms of when to offer these, you can explore with your patients what times and days best suit them, however from our experience, Monday and Wednesday evenings at 7.30pm / 8.00pm seem to suit the most people for these support sessions.

There are a number of great technology options available to run these sessions with. Zoom and AnyMeeting offer affordable basic options. For more reliability and functionality, we would highly recommend GoToWebinar (this is the system we use).

It is important to clearly explain the ground rules of the group at the beginning of each session e.g. the need for confidentiality and supportive comments, and to avoid unnecessary "story" that distracts from the session, and uses valuable time that could be used covering useful information or coaching a participant through a challenge. It is also recommended that sessions are run for approximately 1 hour, so that they feel

manageable to the patient, and focus on a particular topic. Longer sessions (i.e. 2 hours) can be run on a weekend morning.

Running a group session over the phone or computer requires a high level of facilitation skill and therefore an experienced, professional and trained facilitator, ideally one that has coaching expertise, must be used. It is however an extremely valuable way to further support patients on their post-surgical journey.

4. Group Support Meetings

Although telephone/webinar-based group sessions are a fantastic way to offer convenient and accessible support, there will always be some patients who prefer face-to-face sessions and contact, or who struggle with technology. Face-to-face sessions can also be longer and more in-depth and are an incredibly valuable tool to use to support your patients.

As we have already mentioned, life after bariatric surgery can be lonely and secretive for some people, where there may not be much or any understanding or empathy around the new post-surgical lifestyle, therefore having face-to-face connection with and support from other people going through the same challenges is very beneficial. From our experience of running many, many face-to-face workshops, one of the highlights of our workshops for many patients is simply the opportunity to interact and connect with others in a structured format.

Face-to-face workshops also allow you to delve much deeper into the challenges that patients face, to share tools for overcoming these challenges and to get perspectives from patients who have found solutions that work for them. This all takes place in an environment that is away from the patient's usual environment, so they can simply focus on themselves and the experience of the session.

Using a face-to-face group support meetings allows you to:

- delve much deeper into challenges that patients face;
- facilitate longer patient interactions in a secure, positive environment;
- enable patients to share their perspectives and experiences with fellow patients; and
- coach, support and educate multiple people in one session.

From our experience, Saturday and Sunday sessions of around 3 hours in duration, starting at 9am or 9.30am seem to suit the most amount of patients. If weekday sessions are to be offered then these would ideally be shorter (approximately 2 hours) and they should not start before 5.30pm, to allow people the opportunity to get to the venue in time after their work/family commitments.

Although face-to-face group support sessions are probably one of the most beneficial and effective ways to support patients, the biggest challenge is convenience and accessibility. Trying to find 3 hours at the weekend or 2 hours during the week (plus travel time) is a challenge for most people. This is why it's highly recommended that if you offer face-to-face sessions that you complement these with shorter, more-frequent telephone/webinar group sessions. It is also advisable that you record the content of the face-to-face group support sessions, either at the time, or afterwards via a video format, so that those that are keen to attend, but unable to, can still benefit from the tools and reflection activities shared.

5. 1:1 Phone Coaching

Group meetings offer a fantastic, cost-effective way of supporting and assisting many patients. Some patients however will not feel comfortable sharing in a group environment, or the logistics and timing may not work for them. They may also need much more attention and assistance to overcome their particular challenges. In general, having 1:1 support for all patients is highly recommended, regardless of their feelings about group environments or their need for additional support, so using phone-based 1:1 coaching support can really benefit patients, and help them feel both supported and empowered.

Using phone-based 1:1 coaching allows you to:

- offer highly individualised and tailored support;
- assist patients in a convenient and accessible manner (with no travel involved); and
- build greater rapport and connection.

From our experience of coaching hundreds of bariatric patients over the phone on a 1:1 basis, it is recommended that sessions focus on mindset, and putting healthy habits into practice, rather than solely providing more information about what patients should be doing in terms of their food and exercise. Patients are often given lots of valuable information by their clinics about what to eat and the importance of movement and exercise, but if patients are struggling however, then generally the real problem is not a lack of knowledge about what they should be doing. The true obstacle is most often their mindset (motivation, self-image and poor coping strategies) and they must get much more assistance with this.

In our 1:1 phone sessions we use a wellness coaching methodology based on positive psychology, motivational interviewing and appreciative enquiry approaches. Coaching is an especially powerful way to support bariatric patients to create behavioural change, because it is focused on helping them to take responsibility for their own actions and results. Coaching helps patients to discover their strengths, to clarify their values, to increase their awareness, to set their priorities, to meet their challenges, to brainstorm possibilities and to design positive action plans. Patients are enabled to generate a new self-image, to create

new supports and environments, and to take new and resourceful actions. By empowering patients to find their own answers through non-judgmental and provocative questions, and offering powerful reflections, coaching helps create lasting change.

Although 1:1 coaching is a powerful methodology for creating change, because it requires a set amount of time from a qualified, experienced and professional coach, it is more expensive than group support options. To keep prices affordable, we therefore recommend offering a 1-hour 1:1 coaching session as part of your standard support, then using the group coaching and support program format. Additional 1:1 support can then be provided by making short 1:1 10-minute “laser coaching” session slots available each week and by offering optional 1:1 coaching packages.

When Should Patients Get Access To Support?

The short answer is, as soon as possible. In 2015, a consecutive cohort of patients post-bariatric surgery (Sleeve, Bypass and Band) who had completed at least 6 months of our Fresh Start Program were asked to answer a subjective questionnaire on their experience by an independent phone survey. We have partnered with a number of independent surgeons to enhance their surgical practice with greater patient support and this independent reviewer was one of those surgeons.

Patients were asked at what point they wanted support to start from and they were given the choice of 3, 6, 9, 12 or 18 months post surgery. 92.7% felt that access to the program should start at the 3-month mark post surgery. The other 7.3% said it should start within 6 months of surgery. In order to build trust and foster a supportive and engaged relationship, and to also start to embed the expectation of the surgeon and clinic that patients need to make lifestyle changes as soon as possible before and after surgery, we recommend starting the lifestyle support before patients even have their surgery.

What Does Your Clinic Provide Already?

As you probably know, a comprehensive, ongoing group support program is the *gold standard* in Australia. It's a requirement of the Centre of Excellence in Metabolic and Bariatric Surgery (COEMBS) program that their accredited clinics provide organised and supervised support groups for all patients who undergo, or have undergone bariatric surgery.

Although meeting the gold standard in terms of patient support will clearly help your patients, as well as assist you to stand out in your field and help you to attract prospective patients, meeting that standard however can be time-consuming and labour-intensive. Developing a support framework and educational content, organising bookings, sending reminders and carrying out follow-up calls, facilitating groups, dealing with technology, moderating forums, delivering weekend and evening sessions, gathering feedback so that you can continue to improve the support - it all takes time, effort and focus, and you and your colleagues probably have enough to do running a busy bariatric practice.

Most clinics that we speak to aren't doing any of these strategies, because they're understandably busy enough already. Others may be offering one or two of these options, wishing they could do more but unable to due to their workload and commitments. So, where does your clinic sit? What do you think your clinic would look like if you actually did all of this (possibly with no extra work)? How do you think your patients would view your support? What impact do you think that this would have on prospective patients and on helping you to stand out in an increasingly competitive field? Would you like to find out?

We are offering to give you a complimentary blueprint on how to run a comprehensive and effective long-term support program. We're also offering to run a free sample workshop for a group of your patients entitled "Get Back On Track" to show you how to do it. As part of this complimentary work for you, we'll also give you feedback from your patients about the workshop, and the support that they want.

The Reason For This Offer

The reason that we are offering to do this for you for free is that we know that a certain number of clinics that we do this for will want us to build and run their support programs ***for them.***

We will not, however, pressure you into becoming a clinic partner, because we let the value of the complimentary work that we provide to you speak for itself. Instead of trying to convince you of all the benefits of partnering with us, we would rather just demonstrate that we can really help you by actually helping you, and your patients, with our compliments.

Free Support Blueprint And Sample Group Workshop

In terms of how it works, we will set aside some time to have a conversation with you, or your clinic's practice manager, to personally review your current patient support model and to explore your current patient challenges. Next, we will work with you to determine your support goals. After that, we will give you a blueprint of how to run an entire support program based on over 9 years of development. This will include details around how to run and structure support sessions, what topics to focus on in support sessions, how to organise the administration, follow-up and reminders in an efficient and effective manner, how to ensure that all of your patients feel supported, how to deal with patients who are struggling and need extra support, and how to ensure that your program is meeting the specific needs of your patients. We will also show you how you can market your support program to attract new patients to your clinic.

After this we can then deliver a sample group workshop ("Get Back On Track") for a group of your patients at your clinic to show you the approach that we take. We will organise the logistics, take bookings, deliver the content, facilitate patient interactions and gather patient feedback for you.

We believe that once we do this for you, one of these two things will happen:

1. The first possibility is that you see the value in the patient support blueprint and sample group workshop, you see the potential that it has for your clinic, and you decide to build a comprehensive support program yourself. If that's the case, we are happy that we could help and wish you all the best with this.
2. The second possibility is that you see the value in the patient support blueprint and group workshop and you will want us to actually build and run a support program for you. In the event that that is your decision, we will get started on setting that up and be able to deliver our program to all of your new patients in as little as a week, on an ongoing basis.

Assisting You - Two Options

If you want us to build and run your support program for you, we will integrate one of our 2-year bariatric patient support programs into your clinical package. You have two options available:

Option 1: Fresh Start Online

Our fully online program includes:

- a pre-surgery introductory program;
- regular interactive group webinars;
- a private and moderated support forum;
- healthy lifestyle resources;
- guaranteed responses to any email or support forum questions;
- additional access to further coaching options (including 1:1 coaching and retreats); and
- access to a 'Get Back On Track' program.

Option 2: The Fresh Start Program

Our original and comprehensive program also includes:

- a 1:1 goal setting session;
- face-to-face group workshops; and
- regular follow-ups at the 6, 12, 18 and 24-month stage to check progress and encourage participation.

Both programs are all designed and delivered by our own experienced and qualified professional health coaches. We also take care of all the administration that goes with the services offered above, including the bookings, the reminders, the follow-ups, confirmations, rescheduling and feedback gathering, where applicable.

The Price Per Patient

In the event that we decide to work together, the total price, per patient, for **2 years of support** (where you enroll all of your patients on to one of our programs as part of your standard surgical program) is:

Option 1: Fresh Start Online - \$97 per patient

Option 2: The Fresh Start Program - \$450 per patient

We deliberately keep it very, very affordable because our aim is to create long-term clinic partnerships, and this is where the majority of our business has come from.

Next Steps

If you're interested in our support services, first, let us give you a complimentary "taste" of what it's like to partner with us. After that, if you would like to, then we can talk about your clinic joining us as a partner.

The first step in this process is to complete a short questionnaire that gives us some more information about how your clinic works and what your goals are. This information helps

us to start tailoring the support blueprint towards your clinic before we talk so that we can make the most out of our discussions with you. Then we will schedule a time to go over the support blueprint for you, and to plan your sample group workshop for you.

Qualifying Clinics

In order to make sure that any potential partnership is a good fit, we ask that you meet some specific and reasonable criteria:

1. ***You represent an established Bariatric Clinic.***
2. ***You appreciate the need to give patients assistance to create a supportive mindset and healthy lifestyle.***

We only work with clinics who recognise that patients need mindset assistance in order to create, and sustain, healthy lifestyle habits to support their surgery and achieve the best long-term health results.

3. ***You want to support all of your patients right from the start, to set them up for success.***

We also only work with clinics who want to support all of their patients and set them up for success right from the start by including the support as part of their standard surgical program, so that they're making necessary lifestyle and mindset changes before any struggle starts. If you're a clinic that only wants to assist the ones who come back saying that they are struggling, or the ones who put their hand up for support, then we aren't for you.

As long as you're an established bariatric clinic and are interested in *truly supporting all of your patients right from the start* then we would be delighted to help you, with our compliments. If you get value out of the help that we provide and want to become a partner, then that's great!

Ready To Receive Your Complimentary Assistance?

Register here and we can get started:

<https://freshstartprogram.mykajabi.com/p/complimentaryassistance>

Thank you for taking the time to read this and we look forward to meeting with you in the near future.

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