



Post-Surgery Program



Relationship Challenges



“We have to talk...” - Having Difficult Conversations

As your weight-loss journey progresses there can be significant challenges in some or all of your relationships, from acquaintances to friends, family members and partners. How can you approach the people who matter to you when “something is not quite right”? Maybe you have already tried to talk and it went badly, or you fear that talking will only make the situation worse.

Still, you feel stuck – something needs to happen!

Here are some proven tools/strategies that work when you have made the decision that you will meet the challenge of saving the relationship – or letting it go. The truth is that, sadly or for the best, for various reasons, some of your close relationships will not survive the changes, and that includes your primary relationship with your partner or spouse.

Having The Conversation

1) Prepare for the conversation

Firstly, work on yourself:

- a) What is **the aim** of your conversation? What do you hope to achieve? What would be a good outcome? Beware of your feelings – for example, if you are angry you may find that your approach is to punish rather than to heal.
- b) What are **your assumptions** about the other person? The consequences or effect of their behaviour towards you may not be what they intended.
- c) What **‘buttons’** of yours are being pushed? What is your own “stuff”? A little self-awareness will help to give you insight into your emotions as the conversation develops.
- d) Beware of having a **fearful or negative attitude** towards the conversation before it starts.
- e) Be aware of your **hopes and fears** regarding the future for you and this person.
- f) How have you perhaps **contributed to this problem**? Perhaps there has been some unresolved misunderstanding in the past?

2) Practise the conversation

Practise the conversation with a friend or mentally rehearse it.

3) Begin the conversation

Some suggested introductions:

“I have something I’d like to discuss with you to help me with something I’m struggling with.”

“I need your help with what just happened. Do you have a few minutes to talk about it?”

“I think we maybe have different perceptions about..., I’d like to hear your thinking on this.”

Achieving A Successful Outcome

The work on yourself prior to the conversation is the key. In addition, during the conversation there are three essentials related to the most recent research on how the brain works.

Essentially, the brain is split into two halves. The right brain is largely the 'Emotional Brain', and the left brain is the 'Thinking Brain'. Clearly, any purposeful conversation needs to be centred in the thinking brain.

So, here is your operational plan:

- Be ***flexible in your thinking*** – not 'all or nothing', 'my way or the highway'!
- ***Control your emotions***, so that your ***behaviour*** will be ***moderate***

Remember, you have no direct control over the other person's emotions or behaviour. So by modelling these three things yourself the other person will be better able to keep the lid on his/her emotions and behaviour, and the conversation will get somewhere!

So, when you are in a calm, centred state:

Step 1) Be curious and don't assume.

Cultivate an attitude of discovery. Pretend you are in the dark – because you are! Use a 'you – me – situation' approach, such as:

*"I feel that **you** may be upset with me, and this is worrying **me** because I really value what we had. I wonder if you have the same feeling. Can we talk about the **situation**? What is it like for you?"*

This, of course, may trigger a lot of ***Blamespeak***: *"You've changed", "You're no fun any more", "You seem to enjoy all the attention you're getting", "You're becoming really shallow", etc.*

The key is to work out **what is the pain or fear behind the blame**. Remember, flexible thinking! Steer clear of being drawn into defensive reactions. What is your friend, relative or partner seeking? What do they want to protect you or them from?

Step 2) Acknowledgement.

"I hear what you are saying and I understand." (Make sure you do! If not, ask questions to clarify).

Bear in mind that acknowledgement is not agreement. *"This sounds really important to you"* is not the same as *"I am going to go along with your decision"*.

Step 3) Your turn.

How is it for you? What can you see from your perspective that he/she has missed? Try to put your perspective without minimising his/hers. What do you want? What do you fear?

Step 4) Problem solving.

Sometimes there is no 'magic bullet' solution. As you know, there are aspects of you that are lost forever (not just body-shape!), and you are very happy about it mostly. A relationship with a friend or partner who wants the 'old you' back, for whatever reason (perhaps to feel superior or have a ready-made 'victim'), will not last as you are not fulfilling his/her needs any more.

However, many people just want **reassurance** ('Are we OK?') and are fearful that they may lose you. When it comes to "*Well, what can we do to move forward?*" again focus upon **thinking** by asking, "*So, what is your proposal/suggestion?*"

In response to the proposal you have three options:

- "Yes, that sounds good."
- "No, that really doesn't work for me... How about...?"
- "OK, give me some time and let me think about it."

In Summary:

- Prepare for the conversation.
- Practise the conversation.
- A successful outcome depends upon two things: **how you are** and **what you say**.
- Develop and maintain awareness and self-awareness.
- Be flexible in your thinking.
- Treat blamespeak as information rather than insult. What is the fear behind it?
- Seek to understand and avoid assuming anything. In particular, avoid assuming that your friend/relative/partner can see things your way.
- Stay calm.

A Final Word About Partners/Spouses

The impact of weight-loss surgery on primary relationships can be profound. Certainly, if the relationship was struggling before the surgery, one (or both) partners having the surgery will not resolve those deep differences.

The simple fact remains that the divorce rate following weight-loss surgery is high.

Significantly, if the person was overweight or obese when the relationship or marriage began, the chances of that relationship or marriage ending within two years after the surgery is high, 80 to 85 percent according to some estimates.

Idealistically, we always want the "... *and they lived happily ever after.*" ending. However, if you are in a struggling or dysfunctional relationship then the newfound esteem and confidence you may achieve after weight-loss surgery can perhaps provide you with the confidence to persuade your partner or spouse to accompany you to seek professional help e.g. Relationships Australia, or even, the courage to seek ways out of that relationship.