

This book speaks to the physical and emotional changes that are necessary for you to be successful after weight loss surgery. Linda invites you to join her in exploring "What's Not Working," and "What Is Working" as she navigates her new-found life.

BEYOND THE REFRIGERATOR: NAVIGATING LIFE AFTER WEIGHT-LOSS SURGERY

By Linda Ouellette, LPC

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BEYOND THE REFRIGERATOR



NAVIGATING LIFE AFTER WEIGHT-LOSS SURGERY

Define your own recovery.

LINDA OUELLETTE, LPC

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Print ISBN: 978-1-64719-593-9

Email ISBN: 978-1-64719-594-6

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Published by BookLocker.com, Inc., St. Petersburg, Florida.

Printed on acid-free paper.

BookLocker.com, Inc.

2021

First Edition

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Beyond the Refrigerator

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This book provides content related to topics physical and/or mental health issues. As such, use of this book implies your acceptance of this disclaimer.

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INTRODUCTION

Before bariatric surgery I was 100 pounds overweight, with Type II diabetes, hypertension, and sleep apnea. I “qualified” for weight-loss surgery with a BMI over 35, and co-morbid conditions. These health issues resolved as a result of my weight-loss surgery. From the very first day after my surgery, I have not needed any medication for diabetes or for hypertension. Both of these conditions are within a normal range for me now. My sleep apnea has resolved. Bariatric surgery saved my life.

What bariatric surgery did NOT do was “cure” my desire or need to overeat* and, to be completely honest, I really thought it would. Sure, I went to those support group meetings before my surgery. I heard them say that the surgery was only a tool; that the surgeon was operating on my stomach, not my brain. I smiled and nodded politely but, secretly, I did not believe them. I thought my eating disorder* would be gone after the surgery. (**for the sake of clarity and brevity, and because I view my desire or need to overeat and my obsession with food to exceed what might be considered “normal” I will use the term “eating disorder” to describe my experience with food.*)

I remember a friend who had had the surgery telling me she did not think about food all the time anymore. When she told me that, I thought the surgery would be worth it just for that, even if I never lost any weight. I know now that she was

probably one of those unusual overweight people who *did not* have an eating disorder.

I lost 80 pounds in the first eight months after my surgery and then my weight loss leveled off. I did not lose all the weight I wanted to. My eating disorder reminded me of that fact *every day*. I had not gotten down to the weight I wanted to be, the weight my eating disorder wanted me to be. I even began to regain a little weight two years post-surgery, which my surgeon assured me was typical. I kept the 80 pounds off for over a year, but slowly, the compulsive eating returned, and my weight began to inch its way up. They told me that I was going to have to change my lifestyle after the surgery, and I did for a while, a short while. Then old behaviors began to creep back in, as I could get away with them, and, over time, as I could physically eat more, my portions got a bit bigger, and my weight started to increase.

I did not know that my stomach would be able to hold more food over time. I had chosen the vertical sleeve gastrectomy for just that reason. I had heard about the stomach pouch stretching with the gastric bypass and with the adjustable lap band. The sleeve, the surgeon said, was different. Because of the direction of the cut on the stomach, and the fact that one was left with a small cylinder for a stomach rather than a pouch, there was not going to be stretching to worry about. In the very first days after surgery, I could not “eat” much at all. I say “eat” because for the first two weeks my surgeon’s food plan limited me to a disgustingly sweet protein drink. In the third week I could add one egg, once a day. To be able to go

two whole weeks without food, my eating disorder was in heaven! I would never have made a good anorexic because I love to eat too much. My surgeon told me about how everything was swollen internally at the start, and that I would soon be able to consume more than the initial two ounces that constituted a “meal.” My surgery nutritionist had pretty much put the fear of God into all of us and I behaved according to their rules, for a time. I remember the first cracker I had. I felt guilty because it was really the first carbohydrate, I had had in four months, and I knew that crackers were not exactly on the food plan. We were warned about “snacking” and were told to limit ourselves to three small meals a day, with nothing in between. When I ate that first cracker the world did not tumble down around me. I did not become violently ill. The food police did not appear to snatch me away from the jaws of death (well, except maybe in my head!). As time went on, I could gradually eat more food, even well past the time of swelling. I no longer believed the surgeon when he told me my stomach had not stretched. His theory was that the excess food was backing up into my esophagus. Well, whether my stomach had stretched or there was some other explanation, I could certainly eat more at two years post-surgery than I could at a year. And I could eat more at a year than I could at six months.

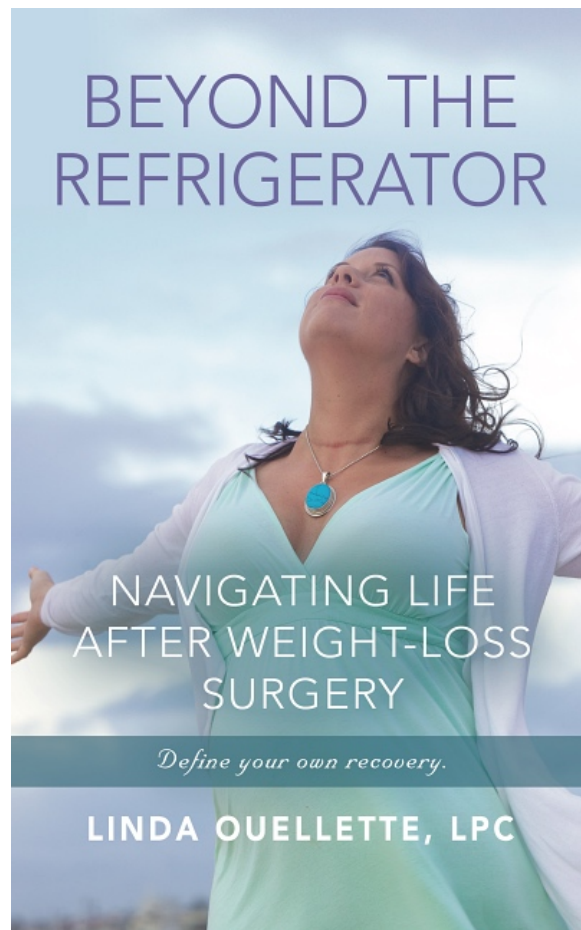
My eating disorder interpreted all of this as “I am a bad person.” I am “bad” because I let old behaviors creep back in. I am “bad” because my weight had gone up. I even wondered if there was a way that I could write this book without

mentioning the weight gain. My eating disorder at its best. My eating disorder still tried to convince me that I was hopeless, and I would never change. If that were true, then why not overeat? I wrestled with those beliefs; they were so ingrained.

At two years post-surgery, I had to go back to the idea of changing my lifestyle. Surely, it was not too late! I had not ruined my surgery, or my stomach, or my life! I could learn to deal with this eating disorder, and all the thoughts and feelings that went along with it. FEELINGS??? Ugh! I overate so I would not have to feel feelings. I found that I could no longer avoid them and still maintain my weight. The need for soothing and comfort was what brought me to food in the first place, so awfully long ago. I would learn to get comfort and soothing from other sources. I would learn to talk back to my eating disordered thinking. Working with a nutritionist, I would learn about what foods and portions were right for my “new” body. With a broader understanding of the complexity of what I was dealing with, I embarked on a journey. A journey I will share with you. My husband traveled this journey with me, and you will hear about his experiences as my invaluable support person. Others have traveled this journey as well, and I will share some of their experiences.

I know that I am not alone in my journey. Weight-loss surgery is becoming more popular. Already there are people talking about weight regain after weight-loss surgery. People are talking about the emotional experience of food and understanding that people who have had bariatric surgery are not immune from weight gain and continuing weight

struggles. Admitting, though, that the continuing struggle points to an eating disorder is a leap that we seem hesitant to make. The correlation between deciding to have weight-loss surgery and already having an eating disorder needs to be addressed. There are a host of solutions available to people with eating disorders that would assist people who had had weight-loss surgery and are struggling with weight regain. My eating disorder will be with me for the rest of my life. Losing weight changed me externally, but the internal work still needed to be done. I needed to make peace with my eating disorder if I was going to thrive in my new body and enjoy my new life.



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