



American Obesity Epidemic

Larry Johnston's Battle to Take His Life Back

Most American adults, 68 percent, are overweight, and of that total, half are obese. Even children are affected with this American epidemic; 32 percent of children are overweight with 17 percent obese, including 10 percent of toddlers and infants. According to Centers for Disease Control and Prevention 2007-08 data, trends show that the rates of obesity are leveling, but not climbing, settling at a still too-high rate. Perhaps something in our environment, our psyche or our culture is beginning to shift.

Recently, a 33-year-old man in South Carolina died at home at 800 pounds. That news triggered Larry Johnston to speak out.

My name is Larry Johnston and I am and have been very obese all my life. I am 43 years old and at the time I write this, I weigh currently 355 pounds. At my highest point I weighed 475 pounds.

In the 1980s, I weighed 350 pounds, and the excess weight was affecting my health, causing phlebitis and ulcerations in my right leg. I still worked at my job as much as I could, with the pain and discomfort.

My first attempt to reverse this weight situation began with bariatric surgery. In my case, vertical banded gastroplasty. I had the surgery done in 1991, but instead of weight loss, I became more and more ill. By 1993, my weight was still increasing and I was suffering from fevers. I returned to medical care where the doctor diagnosed gall bladder disease and hiatal hernia. The second surgery revealed that the original banded gastroplasty was somehow missing and needed to be replaced during the hernia repair and gall bladder removal.

This second surgery was more successful with regard to controlling the excessive weight gain, and my weight began to drop from 475 pounds back to 350 pounds, but while my food intake had been restricted to reduce dietary calories, nutritional problems developed, and the leg problems with phlebitis and ulcerations continued unabated.

At this point, doctors informed me that I was now having problems with protein metabolism, and actually suffering from malnourishment. A rare autoimmune disease related to the conditions was diagnosed, requiring stomach tubes and iron infusions. I was obese and yet still starving. With the weakness of severe anemia and leg condition, I finally became homebound, requiring a wheelchair and nursing home care, at 30 years of age.

Only a year later, while in nursing home care suffering from a cascading and overwhelming array of health problems, now also including skin cancer on one leg, doctors decided the original bariatric surgery was not a success, and should

be improved with gastric bypass surgery, which was done in 1998. After that surgery, my condition became even worse for a time, requiring constant protein shakes to maintain minimum protein levels; but by 1999, I regained the strength to return to the doctors for help, but now choosing a third doctor, hoping for a better result with a new opinion and a different perspective.

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This doctor's perspective was different indeed. Alarmed at my condition, he had me immediately admitted to the hospital to regain my strength, correct my dangerous protein deficiencies and prepare for reversing the previous surgeries. His plan was that my stomach and system needed to be returned to normal.

Four weeks later, the reversing surgeries were performed, and many months were required to recover from the stomach issues to begin to return to normalcy.

How would you define normalcy? After suffering from increasing and morbid obesity, with all of the accumulating life-threatening health problems, I lost my job; spent my young adulthood in a nursing home confined to a wheelchair with a feeding tube. I had been declared disabled since 1996, and could only work a few part-time jobs between health and medical surgeries, recovery times and illness. In 2009, my marriage ended. With my strength and resolve returning, I was determined to take control of my life and make the changes myself.

Beginning with my surroundings, I thought moving from Maine before winter would be a fresh start, and settled on the much warmer town of Little River, SC. The weather change was a factor, and I wanted to walk whenever I could without concern for snow. I wanted a sunny place near a fitness center that I could walk to, and I eventually found the perfect new apartment. I would do the 3 mile walk. I would have to, every day, with the bandages and braces, step by step.

My first visit to the gym, Life Quest, was exciting, and then quickly perplexing. I had no idea what to do or how to use the equipment, at all. Was the equipment even sized for me? Where do you start? What if I did something wrong and actually made my health worse? Maybe it was all a mistake. I went home feeling defeated.

Another day brought another perspective, and I made the walk back. This time, asking for help, I learned that there was a separate personal training studio located in the building, and the trainers would know what I should do. John Meyers is now my trainer at True Personal Training. I'm

in a physician-supervised program there with Dr. Walker. I train with John three times a week – at 7 in the morning after the three-mile walk to the gym and training studio, followed by the three-mile walk home again. I walk along the main road, and people honk at me. One guy even pulled over and chased after me to tell me that he sees me walk nearly every morning, and he was so inspired by my determination that he joined a gym.

My goal is to get down to a manageable weight and get my health back. And my plan is to be in the Myrtle Beach Marathon in February. Maybe I won't finish, and I'll walk, but I'll give it my best shot.

Larry's journey has become much more than getting in shape; he wants to help others with his story. How his obesity came about isn't entirely clear, he says. Is it strictly diet and activity levels, something in our food or environment, a virus, or is there something else that is making most of us fat, and one third of us obese, including infants and children? Larry takes full responsibility for his circumstances, but also asks why the community, the government and our society don't address obesity the way they do addictions to alcohol and drugs, by working to get people back on a productive and socially connected path with a buddy system or sponsors.

I want others like me to take their lives back, to be "over-comers."

The medical community addressed Larry's situation by recommending three bariatric surgeries to reduce his stomach and one surgery to undo the damage of the first three. By the year 2000, Larry reports that he was taking 37 pills every morning and 26 every evening, which included pills for pain, stomach function, supplements to replace missed nutrition and other ailments resulting from his out of control weight. Besides the direct medical costs, there were ambulance rides—one alone costing \$9,000—costs for home nursing care, nursing home stays and home equipment, totaling what Larry guesses must be a million dollars. What was missing with every doctor visit was counseling and instruction on diet, exercise and health, with an accountability structure something akin to drug or alcohol programs, which would have cost a tiny fraction of the amount of money spent by Larry or medical insurance providers and community safety-net systems like Medicare and disability.

My prayer is that my story will help others walking in my shoes to take a stand with me to help create a system that treats obesity more successfully, more sensitively, not just medically, with the tools that work. I want others like me to take their lives back, to be "over-comers."

For more info, contact Larry Johnston by email at larryboyjl@msn.com. You can also contact True Personal Training in Little River at (843) 602-3330 or visit TrainingTrue.com.