



## Quality of Life of Pre-Surgery Bariatric Patients: A focus on appearance

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*Introduction* Obesity has become a worldwide epidemic, impairing the health and overall quality of life for those who suffer from it. According to the World Health Organization (2013), more than 500 million adults worldwide are obese, and bariatric surgical procedures are currently considered one of the most successful long-term solutions for morbid obesity (Picot et al., 2009). Although evidence indicates that patient motivation to undergo the surgical procedures is mainly health related, individuals also seek the procedure to improve their appearance (Sarwer, Dilks, & Spitzer, 2011). One study found that nearly 33% of the participants were motivated to get bariatric surgery based on concerns about and embarrassment with their appearance (Libeton, Dixon, Laurie, & O'Brien, 2004), while another study indicated that 18% of the participants wished to improve their appearance by getting bariatric surgery (Dixon et al., 2009). Given, the purpose of this study is to examine 1) how appearance impacts quality of life of pre-surgery bariatric patients physically and socially; 2) how appearance takes the place in their motivations to undergo bariatric surgery; and 3) what kinds of wardrobe issues they have experienced.

*Methodology* Twelve adult participants of both genders (10 females and 2 males) were recruited from two pre-surgery weight-loss classes offered by the bariatric center of a large hospital located in the Midwestern region of the United States. IRB approval was obtained from the human research offices of the researchers' university and the hospital, and the researchers' visit dates and times were pre-arranged with the director of the bariatric center. During the class visits, the director first introduced the researchers to class participants; the researchers then briefly overviewed the scope of the study and circulated a sign-up sheet for those interested to provide their names, contact information, and projected surgery dates. The inclusion criteria were adults actively seeking bariatric surgery within the next 3 months at the time of recruitment. From the class recruitments, 33 potential participants signed up for the study participation, and a researcher followed up with them to schedule interviews. A total of 12 participants agreed to participate in the study. Each interview took 45 minutes to 1 hour at a location convenient for the participant (e.g., the hospital cafeteria, a coffee shop around the participant's neighborhood). Upon permission of the participants, the interviews were audio-taped and transcribed verbatim.

*Results* The following 4 themes were identified from the interview data: (a) participants' quality of life in the personal context; (b) quality of life in the social context; (c) motivations for the surgery; and (d) wardrobe issues. Overall, the participants reported that they were dissatisfied with their physical body and appearance, and this dissatisfaction negatively affected their self-esteem and social relationships with others. However, as they had begun the surgery preparation procedure, such as attending information sessions and weight-loss classes, which are the

requirements for insurance coverage, they had already experienced a positive influence of the procedure in their quality of life. Although participants answered that they were seeking bariatric surgery primarily for weight loss and clinical reasons, such as musculoskeletal and cardiovascular complications, they also expected the surgery to positively change their appearance. Changes in appearance were strongly related with the participants' psychological responses to their body and quality of life. For instance, a 56-year-old interviewee stated that having a bariatric surgery would be her lifetime chance to have her dream come true as it would help her ride her horse in a cowboy outfit again, which she had not been able to do so since she was in her 30s. In addition, changes in appearance were anticipated to improve their social relationships with family, friends, professional co-workers, and even with anonymous others such as people who they ran into at a shopping mall. They noticed others staring at them in public places and assumed that it was due to their oversized body and poor appearance. Several wardrobe issues were mentioned, including insufficient clothing sizes, a limited number of retail stores selling their sizes, lack of trendy items for their sizes, and privacy issues related to changing areas (e.g., too closely located to the public, open spaces).

*Conclusion and Implications* This study identified the quality of life issues in pre-surgery bariatric patients as related to appearance. Although the bariatric surgery was sought for clinical purposes, whether they realized or not, improved appearance was another key motivation of the medical intervention. It was anticipated that appearance would positively impact the bariatric patients' quality of life in both personal and social contexts. Furthermore, the results of this study suggested that the apparel industry would provide better service to those who are oversized by offering more product options in sizes and styles as well as being aware of psychological discomfort due to the location of changing areas in the retail shopping environment. This study was limited to a small number of interviewees due to the nature of the qualitative approach. Future research could be performed with the employment of alternative methods of data collection (e.g., quantitative or longitudinal), recruitment of different demographic profiles of study participants (e.g., adolescent patients, those in different locations, more male patients).

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