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Lessons from “My 600 Pound Life” – A cautionary tale

Tuesday, January 12, 2021



A few years ago I stumbled upon the TV show “My 600 Pound Life.” I watched one episode, fast forwarding through some of the parts that warned of disturbing images, but cheered for the young woman who achieved success and a new chance at life. For those unfamiliar with the show, it follows the patients of a Texas doctor who does bariatric surgery on patients of that weight and greater.

Just recently with my new cable service offering “on demand”, there it was on the list. Were they repeats? No! They are in season 9

I was born in 1947 when Jackie Gleason (top weight 280) and Vivian Vance (Ethel on I love Lucy – top weight 140) were the object of fat jokes, so while I was aware that there were people in the 600 pound category, I was shocked that there were enough candidates to produce multiple seasons of a TV show

Then I began watching. Yes, as before, it was tragic and tough to watch, like a documentary of destruction. In this case, self destruction. I should clarify that the doctor required candidates to prove they could follow the routine that would be necessary after the surgery by first losing a great amount of weight on their own following his prescription of diet and exercise.

I listened to the patients’ reasons for overeating – eating themselves into immobility, medical problems and even early death.

- 1) Food made them happy. It was an escape from the problems in their lives
It was an escape when they felt stressed
In extreme cases it was the only time they felt happy.
- 2) The food tasted good. Eating some and they wanted more.
- 3) All too often taking solace in food was a reaction to an earlier life of deprivation and abuse or a single horrific act of violence. That was the most tragic

The first 2 reasons made me think of the times I have used food in similar destructive ways. Fortunately, I have never endured the horrific circumstances described in #3.

After a stressful day at work, a bag of chocolate chip cookies made me forget it, especially if watching a sitcom on TV – Escape! Escape!

When a family member was ill, I always envisioned the worst outcome. I have an overactive anxiety gene. Diving into the container of ice cream helped blot it out. My kids still remember when I ate the whole pie.

Stop worrying, stop being anxious, just get over it.
Might was well advise someone to grow 2 inches to improve their BMI.

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So why do some overcome difficulties and others fall into/continue along the path of self destruction?

Every episode includes the family members of the patient. So many are extremely overweight/obese themselves. So many enable the behavior of the patient by bringing them food and even denigrating their attempts to change. One horrific husband picked up his wife released from the hospital after her successful surgery and stopped at a drive thru of a fast food place to load up on burgers and fries.

The stories here on Spark people often describe similar toxic, sabotaging people in their lives. Even worse when it's a family member who is supposed to love them.

The Texas doctor insists that the person seeking his help stop blaming others, making excuses and rationalizing their behavior. No surgery unless they are mentally and emotionally ready for the hard work in addition to losing a pre set amount of weight on their own. Therapy, both physical and emotional, are provided.

Several comments are common among the patients

I didn't realize I weighed this much

How did I let it get to this point?

Why didn't I do something earlier?

These are extreme cases, of course, but I have said those very things myself

I was prompted to write this by reading the recent blogs of 2 other sparkers.

If they could admit the similarities to their lives, so could I.

One wrote:

"My dirty little secret is that I watch 600 pound life. Now please do not judge me, I watch it because I feel for the people on the show"

Another wrote:

"Just finished episode 1 of 1000 lb sisters. I'm addicted to that show as well as 600 lb life. It's a bit scary how similar their problems are to mine as far as food"

The last 2 decades have seen an explosion of reality TV shows. DH & I watch only one together – The Amazing Race. Our love of travel made it a favorite. We love seeing places we ourselves have been and those we would want to visit (although repelling off a cliff will never be part of our itinerary).

"My 600 pound Life" will not be a regular show on my list, but my brief time watching it has been a cautionary tale. "There but for fortune...?"



This song was written by Phil Ochs in 1963 in a different context.

I remember the Joan Baez (1964) version better.

Now that will be the song in my head as I seek to fan the flame of my somewhat flickering Spark.

Thank you, Sparkers for your comments on my last blog.

My "later" was somewhat in danger of becoming "why bother" or even "never"

[www.youtube.com/
watch?v=S4BYOJ1tc-k](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S4BYOJ1tc-k)

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AMELIASURVIVING



I love that show, even though it's very sad. I like to hear each person's unique life story. There are so many ways to get broken. I love it when they have successes, but there is a disclaimer at the beginning of the show that says only 5% will be ultimately successful. That's no different than the success rate for losing weight without surgery. I was considering bariatric surgery, but that statistic changed my mind. I don't want to radically change my innards if it doesn't improve my long-term chances.

The doctor can be a bit abrasive sometimes, but he has a good moments too. I guess some people respond better to tough love. I'm no one of them.

137 days ago



NOSEYME



Any story that tells of how a person overcomes is good. People are too critical..like it is said..walk a mile in my shoes. I love when the men walk in high heels..It is funny to watch..but inspirational.

143 days ago



1CRAZYDOG



I feel grateful that I found SP and was able to turn my thinking around and myhealth!

Well done.

143 days ago



JPPERSELL



I have watched my six hundred pound life myself and I found it very painful to watch. The people on there many of them at least have a self destructive behavior. It makes me sad. I myself have been having trouble with my weight. No matter what I do it is still going up. I have no idea why. I track my food and exercise daily and don't skimp on the food tracking I mean I track everything. I pray that I don't end up like one of them one day.

143 days ago



DIANEDOESSMILES



I've learned so much from My 600 lb life. It has helped me to feel not so alone. The more I learn, the more I see how many of us have A LOT in common. Like them, I've worked thru them. Going from 288 to 172.

GREAT BLOG!

143 days ago



BKNOCK



I've never watched it!

143 days ago



HOLDINGMYOWN



My mother was always saying to me~~

THERE but for the Grace of God...Goes you!

Obviously whatever it was was something my mother hated when I did the same thing~~It was always said with disgust. (but you would have to have known my mother)

143 days ago



CUTECAT2019



I have to do this.Thank you for your well written synopsis of these shows. Yes, I watch them, every single one. I've been obese a long time and I never could reach that point where I say yes, it's time. Just do it.

The shows have taught me -

Yes it's hard but absolutely necessary. There is no way out of doing the work.

I need to accept and love myself and use that love as motivation forward.

I need to stop making excuses for my behavior that allow me to continue overeating.

143 days ago



ROBLAINE2



Thank you for writing this. I have also watched My 600 pound Life and sometimes feel very sorry for those suffering from eating disorders. It makes me realize that if I do not take better care of myself, get up and move more, cut out the snacking and watch my proportions that I could end up that way too.

143 days ago



GETULLY

Thanks for writing. I am working hard to not be a candidate for one of those shows.
144 days ago



COOKIE_AT_51

Great thoughts ... thanks for sharing!
144 days ago



USAF-RETIRED

Well, said
144 days ago



GRAMPIAN

You make good sense as usual.
144 days ago

Well Said!



POLSKARENIA

Great blog! There but for fortune.... yes. I just resent feeling unfit, having to struggle moving and hate the difficulty finding decent well priced clothes....
The psychology of abused people is so complex and fat is a hiding place for so many!
144 days ago



JAMER123

I have watched a couple shows and really do feel for the people. I can understand some of their reasoning for accepting food as a saving grace! Thanks for a great blog again!

Well Said! 

144 days ago



WYTCHHAZYL

I had the wonderful opportunity to meet and speak with Dr. Now and Melissa from Season 1 of 600 Lb Life. I adore Dr. Now, because he will pull no punches to get his patients to see what their future (or lack of) will be if they don't help themselves. Melissa has overcome so much in her life and still is the sweetest person. I started watching the show when I was contemplating gastric bypass surgery as I was pretty close to 400 pounds. I learned a lot from the show and even now 4 years after bypass, I watch and learn. It has been getting more and more sensationalized than before and the success stories are less and less. It's a shame really. There is so much to be learned.

144 days ago



QUARTERMASTER3

Well Said! 

144 days ago



AZMOMXTWO

I must admit that I have never heard of this show but I do know what causes me to over eat and I could so balloon up to that weight if i do not pay attention to what I eat
144 days ago



THROOPER62

KEEP SPARKING!


144 days ago



SHAKERATTLEROLL

Well Said!     

144 days ago



RACHNACH

KEEP SPARKING!


144 days ago



JUNETTA2002

I watch the show and am amazed at the people. They say they just cheat once. Doctor Now knows.
144 days ago





THOMS1

I don't think I ever watched either one. I think I was afraid too. I have enough trouble looking at



pictures of myself at 350 lbs.
144 days ago



NOTALOSER1

Love the show! Inspired by those who are the most successful and find myself getting really upset at those who don't embrace the gift they've been given. But then I remember the deep psychological scars that most of these people carry. Like most of you, I was never the size of the people on this show. But they do offer insight into how easily things can go off the rails. This show was the main reason I sought out bariatric sleeve surgery last March. Surgery was in September and even though I've only lost 80 since last May I'm able to do things I haven't done in years. Look forward to reaching my goal weight of 220 by this time next year!

144 days ago



SPARKMYRIE

Oddly enough, I rejoined SparkPeople six weeks ago because of a marathon of 600 lb Life as background noise to working from home. I am still wrestling with all of the questions you bring up in your post, I think I always will regardless of my success or failure with weight loss. If I could speak to everyone on that show, and everyone watching it thinking these same things, I'd love for them to know that they aren't alone in their struggle, or their feelings of shame. If we are all feeling this together, why are we made to feel that our failure and shame are ours alone?

144 days ago



HEALTHYWRITER

I used to deny (to myself) that I was an emotional eater. But I overeat for all of the listed reasons. Fortunately, I weigh myself daily and manage to do some course-corrections to keep myself within about a 5 lb. range. Unfortunately, I've been in that same range for several years. And losing weight doesn't exactly get easier after menopause - wish someone had warned me of that (and, years earlier, of the difficulty I'd face losing it after getting my hyperthyroidism under control - back then, I ate because I had no idea at all of what "full" felt like, and then just kept the same eating habits when my thyroid was normal).

My biggest issue, though, is flavor (love INTENSE, salty, and HOT) and the inability to just have "a taste." And being consistent. I'll have three great days, and be proud of myself for it, then buy a bag of XXXtra HOT crispy Cheetos and be done with it. ;) And not even feel a little bit guilty about it, either (which is kind of a good thing - I mean, I'm not beating myself up over here, either!)

I don't know why I have not been consistent here on SparkPeople - in 2006, I was, and it worked great. I can relate to anyone who says "I didn't know I weighed that much," or "Where has the last 12 months gone?" (Like I said, for me, TRACKING is everything - I know EXACTLY what I weigh, on a daily basis, and that's incredibly helpful for me. But I need to get back to tracking input and exercise, too. Why am I balking at that?)

I don't watch these shows because I do feel compassion and I CAN relate. I once got hooked on Jerry Springer and realized it was because it made some part of me feel smugly superior. (I was on medical leave and had to ask my doctor to release me to work 5 weeks early - before brain rot and a personality disorder set in. He did.) Boy, that is not helpful here, not at all. (That'd be like saying, "Oh, hey, Karma? Could you just throw a couple hundred pounds on my hips and smack me with my own smugness?") So no, I actively avoid them. It COULD be me, and that terrifies me. And THAT is why I am HERE, and why I keep coming BACK here.

144 days ago



KITTYHAWK1949

I have watched a couple of episodes but it makes me sad as I have known several who had weight loss surgery and they not only gained the weight back but have several health issues caused by the surgery. My best friend who choose death over dialyses about 14 years ago was about 500# and was a victim (#3) of a family member and botched weight loss surgery. I also watch Hoarders and worry about my stacks which are no where as bad as the people on the show but still way too much.



144 days ago



ETHELMERZ

It is a life long struggle, and the overeating is just one part of it. And a 74 Billion dollar business just trying to help us to cope. A lot of snake oil sales involved. We do the best we can.

144 days ago



THINCPL2004

I caught a couple of those shows, I watched because I love watching people overcome their adversity, and it helps me put down that quart of Ben and Jerry's.

145 days ago



SUSANYOUNGER

Yes, I am an emotional eater and see how easy it is to just let go. SP really helps.

145 days ago





CHERYLHURT

We won't own a tv.
145 days ago



UPTOIT59

I never heard "There but for fortune" before my mom always said "There but for the grace of God" same thing but I found it interesting! I know that is small but I always walk away from your



blogs having learned something.
145 days ago



YELLOW09RED

Hi Eileen,
I've watched it for almost every season. I'll watch it tonight.



145 days ago



ORTATK

I watch the show many I know also watch. I watch as a reminder to myself how easy it would be to them. I also find myself saying those same things. I am a food addict. I work every day to control it. I have managed to take off nearly 100 pounds and keep it off but it is something I work at. The thought that I could become so dependent on others is so repugnant that I mostly keep on track.

Thanks for writing this post.
145 days ago



RHOOK20047

I watch the show. It always makes me wonder why family and such don't try to intervene before they reach that point. Many things I can relate to sadly. Although, no where near that weight, I could see myself in many of them. The lack of self-esteem, lack of support, feelings of abuse. But in my case I did have strong faith, which has carried me through my life.
145 days ago



SAMMILESSACH

I have watched part of an episode too...and strached my head...going how? I am 30 lbs overweight I have been was 40lbs. Every 10lbs I gain I have to buy new clothes. I don't understand how people say they didn't know they got that big. I don't understand the enablers either. My "vice" is sweets, I am not kidding one time years ago when I went to the gym after a full workout I stayed in my car and ate a package of ho-hos. Before going home, Because at that time they made me feel better. I have never done that again. I truly feel for those 600lb people they have got to stop and gain will power..... when I see that show i think I'll never let it get that bad for me, and try not to judge them or be mean but hope they change.



Thank you for this insight
145 days ago



PHATPAT18

I watch both of those shows and it is amazing how even after surgery and counseling, they often return to eating. So sad.
145 days ago



SAMMILESSACH

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Thank you for this insight
145 days ago



MARTHA324

I too watch that show with a mixture of sadness and horror...and both stem from the same place. For instance, sadness over their lives and horror that for so many they have faced such terrible things. Abuse being one of them.

your memory of the chocolate chip cookies reminds me of walking home from work after a terrible



day and thinking "do I want potato chips and onion dip or taco chips and guacamole?" Salty treats were my go to when I was having a tough day. Of course it didn't do a thing to improve the terrible day except for those minutes when I was enjoying the food. And yes, I did gain weight until at one point I weighed about 230 lbs.

I did lose and gain, and lose and gain.....REalize that I am very lucky to have a supportive partner and friends. What a complicated problem so many of us face.

Thanks for this thought provoking blog.
145 days ago



DRDIVA28

I too abuse food to deal with stressors. I have come a long way but I don't think I will be truly rid of it so I just focus on the right and sufficient energy to fight for today. I can relate to "why bother". My motivation comes from the memory of those I've lost to diabetes. I fight for me and I fight so that the lesson will not be lost. Thanks for sharing. I find that every time someone is honest and open about their struggles, it helps me to be honest and open about mine. I'm still here and I have not given up fighting for a healthier, happier me. One foot in front of the other can cover tremendous distance.

145 days ago



PLCHAPPELL

Great blog
145 days ago



LIS193

KEEP SPARKING!

145 days ago



FRITZYS_MAMA

My favourite thing Dr. Now said was "Chocolate is more important to you than living apparently." That's a good phrase to hear in your head when you're tempted to overeat.

145 days ago



RKOTTEK

KEEP IT UP!

145 days ago



PHEBESS

Your blog resonated with me as well - many of us weren't in that range of 600 lbs, but that was always the fear, wasn't it? What was stopping us from reaching that point, and how easy it would be to get there.

Most definitely there but for fortune.....

145 days ago



MARYJEANSL

I have made those types of excuses too. It is scary to think - well, the way the thought in my head usually runs is "There but for the grace of God go I." I never got to that point, but, given slightly different circumstances, I might have. I have a dear friend who did have weight loss surgery. She weighs 300 pounds now. She did lose weight after the surgery, but the weight loss stalled. I feel for those 600 pound people.

145 days ago



SPEDED2

Back in the day, I watched Extreme Weight Loss for a short time. Eat healthy~move more. So easy, right? The recurring theme for all of the shows, at least my take away, was the fear they and their family/friends experienced. This wasn't said in so many words, but: s/he won't love me if they get thin, they'll find somebody new, my friend and I eat out every day..what will we do if s/he can't do that, how do I deal with the emotional pain if I can't stuff it down with food, and on and on and on and on??

For an Emotional and Behavioral Disorder class I took for continuing education in special education, I wrote a research paper about abuse and risk taking and/or destructive behaviors. Many experts have published their findings about these links. For me, it was, and continues to be, spellbinding reading. Weight loss is a journey of one. Love and support is needed for the journey, but the journey itself is solitary. It always comes back to the choices we make.

Your posts cause me to reflect and ruminate. Thank you.



Stay safe. Be well.

145 days ago



BEATLETOT

I've watched that show several times, but not for awhile. I really like Dr. Now. He's the kind of





guy that you want to hug, but he doesn't look like a hugger. =)

I'm glad you took away some lessons from it. The main thing I took away from it is that people who become that large have serious, serious trauma in their pasts. It seemed like every episode was about a child abuse survivor, usually sexual abuse. It is so sad, but it made me realize that you don't become that large just because you like to eat. There are very severe mental and emotional issues going on, and I kind of wish the show would focus on that a little bit more.

145 days ago



LINDA!

I have watched a few of the episodes. My heart always goes out to the people that star in the programs. I have also eaten my way through sadness/depression in the past. Fortunately, I do love to exercise. That saved me from their fate. You mentioned Vivian Vance. As a child, I always thought she was so heavy. Now I realize 140 is fairly average in our society. Lucille Ball was just thin in comparison.

Great blog.

145 days ago



MTN_KITTEN

Might as well advise someone to grow 2 inches to improve their BMI ... made me laugh out loud.

So why do some overcome difficulties and others fall into/continue along the path of self destruction?

I have often pondered this question. My brother and I both came from the same dysfunction abusive household. He is an alcoholic, drug addict ... I am a food addict. I became a success person ... his life has been in the toilet since his teens.

Why???

Then the life show of 600 lb people who can't seem to get out of their "self-made" prisons.

Why???

145 days ago

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