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SUCCESS VS. SABOTAGE: A WEIGHTY DILEMMA*

Losing weight can stir up a hornet's nest of emotional issues that were previously hidden by layers of protective fat. When we change, other things change, and those changes are often frightening when we look them in the eye.

First, getting a compliment about your weight means, simply put, that you've achieved a bodily change that is noticeable to others. Great, huh? Well, maybe. It depends on how you feel about being noticed. Some people crave the spotlight and feel excited in its glare, but many overeaters use their excess weight to hide from view. What can we hide from by being overweight? Sexuality. Expectations of others. Or the peering eyes that make us feel transparent. Getting a compliment about weight loss might make us feel good, or it might also make us feel vulnerable and exposed.

Second, a seemingly harmless compliment about our weight loss can be like a delicious apple with a worm hiding inside. When someone says we look great, it implies that we look great now but didn't look great before. So we feel complimented on the one hand, but on the other we feel shamed. Such a compliment can also stir up issues about conditional love and what it feels like to have to earn respect by changing our bodies. I had to lose weight to get approval? I had to lose weight to be appreciated? I've lost weight and I'm suddenly acceptable to the human race? Often such attention doesn't sit well.

A related dilemma is common among overweight folks who've regularly been the target of criticism and taunts from family and friends. It's the rare overeater who hasn't experienced some type of social rejection, the "well-meaning" loved one who consistently brings up the topic of weight, or dieting or the newest miracle approach on the market that you really ought to try. We often feel coerced by these supportive persons who intrude upon us, and then we resist doing anything about weight because we feel we lose our autonomy and self-respect if we give in. The problem—or "fattitude"—we run into is, "I don't want to make my critics happy." We lose weight and suddenly all those previously critical, hurtful faces have smiles on them? Are you kidding me? Why make you happy when you've caused me so much pain?

Finally, we often sabotage ourselves just as we're reaching goal weight because, deep inside, we don't really feel worthy of success. The inner perception of ourselves as being basically flawed, unlovable or outcast can influence our world view as well as our lifestyle decisions. People who don't value themselves don't make healthy choices. And people who don't value themselves also find the idea of being "successful" so at odds with their self-image that they sabotage themselves to keep from succeeding.

So, why would a person put forth all the effort it takes to lose weight, and then, just when the goal is in sight, do things to put him/herself right back where he/she started? The answer is that sabotage is a clear signal that unresolved emotional issues are lurking close by, and bringing them to light is essential to achieving lasting success.

*Excerpted from "Fattitudes: Beat Self-Defeat and Win Your War with Weight," by Dr. Jeffrey Welbert