

Bariatric Surgery

Coping with anxiety or difficulties eating after surgery

Who is this leaflet for?

The information in this leaflet is for anyone who has had a bariatric procedure (band, bypass or sleeve) and is experiencing the following:

- Difficulty eating food either at meal times, snacks and/or social eating
- Anxiety about eating
- Frequent vomiting after eating
- Feeling as though the food is getting stuck
- Feeling extremely restricted when eating

This leaflet aims to help you to gain a broader understanding of the brain and body's stress response and how this may contribute to difficulties eating after bariatric surgery.

Understanding the body's emotional regulation systems

The body has three emotional regulation systems: threat, achieve and soothe. All three are vital for our survival. It is common to bounce from stress mode to achieve mode, with very little time in soothe mode. The body learns very quickly from being in 'stress mode' and over time less is needed to trigger this system. The stress system is also known as the 'fight or flight' response.

Stress

Fight/Flight response, anger, anxiety, isolation, defensive, shame, fear

hormones: adrenaline, cortisol

Social safety/Soothe

Content, safe, loved, fulfilled, peaceful or otherwise part of a tribe

Neurotransmitters: oxytocin, endorphins, serotonin

Achieve

Drive, excitement, pleasure, vitality, 'buzz', focused

Neurotransmitter: dopamine

Fight or Flight

The flight or fight response is a series of actions designed to help you survive, to either fight danger or run away from it. Adrenaline helps to improve our eyesight and hearing, our thinking becomes more focused and our lung capacity improves. Blood supply to the stomach is reduced and sent to the muscles, our heartrate and blood pressure increase.

When the body is experiencing stress, anger or anxiety this leads our muscles to contract or tense automatically. If stress persists or becomes chronic, then the muscles can be in a more or less constant state of tension. This system is extremely important for our survival, however, *our brain cannot tell the difference between a life-threatening situation and ordinary day-to-day stress*. To make things more difficult, all human brains have an inbuilt negativity bias. This is where the mind tends to remember negative events over positive ones. This is thought to have evolved much like the fight or flight response, to keep us safe from danger.

How might this be related to eating difficulties post-surgery?

Many people experience some difficulties eating after bariatric surgery. For example, vomiting after a meal, noticing a feeling of food being stuck in their chest, feeling overly restricted by surgery or anxious about eating. This can be a frustrating, anxious and stressful experience which may lead to a vicious cycle of feeling more anxious, more tense and more restricted a meal times.

In this situation, it may be that the fight or flight response is being triggered during meal times, which is leading to increased muscle tension, making it difficult to eat. If you clench or tighten your hands and arms you can experience how much more difficult it is to move freely or with ease. The fight or flight response also makes it harder to digest our food.

Some common signs of flight or flight response:

- Muscle tension
- Very sensitive to sounds, smells, texture, sight or taste of food
- Feelings of anxiety, frustration, anger, embarrassment or shame
- Breathing more quickly
- Thoughts racing through your mind
- Thoughts focused on the stressful situation e.g. 'I'm going to be sick'; 'What if I never eat normally again?'
- Butterflies in the stomach



What can I do about it?

The first step is understanding the fight or flight system and noticing when you are experiencing it. You might find it helpful to acknowledge its presence by giving it a name 'Here's the fight or flight response' or any label you like! The act of acknowledging or labelling it, can help to reduce its intensity over time.

Soothe (Rest and Digest) System

The soothe system (also known as the rest and digest response) plays an important role in helping to maintain both physical and psychological health by helping the body to calm after stress. It helps to balance out the effects of the fight or flight response by lowering blood pressure, slowing down breathing, relaxing muscles and sending blood to the stomach and intestines to improve digestion.

It isn't possible to get rid of the fight or flight response because it is an important part of our survival. However, it is possible to learn how to switch off the response when you are not in danger and how to turn on the sooth system.

Breathing exercises can helps you to stimulate the body's soothe & relaxation system.

Mindful Breathing Exercise:

- Sit or lie in a comfortable position.
- Bring your attention to the movement of your breath. You may wish to place your hand on your belly to help you feel the movement of your breath.
- Imagine that you have a balloon in your belly. As you breathe in, imagine the balloon inflating. As you breathe out, imagine it the balloon deflating.
- Continue to stay present with each breath. Noticing the rising and falling of each breath.
- You may notice that your mind starts to wander. That's okay, that is just want the mind does. You can silently label it 'thinking' and return your attention back to your breath.
- You may also notice feelings, emotions or physical sensations. That's okay too. It's okay to allow whatever is here to be here. You can silently label them as 'feelings' and return your attention back to your breath.
- Stay with the breath for as long as you need to.

For more information on the topics discussed here please speak with a member of the bariatric team. You may also find the leaflet on Mindfulness & Mindful Eating helpful.

Further Information

We endeavour to provide an excellent service at all times, but should you have any concerns please, in the first instance, raise these with the Matron, Senior Nurse or Manager on duty. If they cannot resolve your concern, please contact our Patient Experience Team on 01932 723553 or email asp-tr.patient.advice@nhs.net. If you remain concerned, the team can also advise upon how to make a formal complaint.

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