

# How to talk to the patient about obesity

Zeev N. Kain<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> University of California C Irvine Health Department of Anesthesiology & Perioperative Care, Orange, CA, USA.

Kain ZN. How to talk to the patient about obesity. MedicalExpress (São Paulo, online). 2017 Dec;4(6):M170607

**Received for Publication** on October 26, 2017; **First review** on November 6, 2017; **Accepted for publication** on December 8, 2017; **Online on** December 22, 2017

**E-mail:** drzeevkain@gmail.com

Talking about obesity can be a challenge for doctors. It is known that obesity is a great cause of mortality, worldwide. It leads to diabetes, a most deadly illness, and other conditions that can cause death. However, it also affects self-esteem and how people see themselves in the mirror. It can cause eating disorders and eventually become a very dangerous problem that could end in tragedy. Few patients, indeed few laypeople realize how deadly diabetes can be. Doctors should keep this in mind.

Because obesity damages perception, how people view and feel about themselves, it is often hard for doctors to hit the right *tact*. And tact is a doctor's best friend, most especially when talking to obese patients. It is important to make sure the person feels in friendly hands. Some doctors can be brash and tell the patient that they're obese in the worst possible way, even using, perish the thought, the dreaded "fat" word.

It is important to use the correct language, and to talk to the patient gently and in the right way to make sure he doesn't feel offended. Talking about the risks of overweight can be a very good way of making them understand the dangers of their dietary habits. The reasons behind obesity can vary, but it is important that the person understand the meaning of it all.

To talk about obesity is a great a challenge, same as talking about other life-threatening diseases, because people react in different ways when life is at stake. The doctor has to evaluate the patient's demeanor prior to getting into the subject: it is essential to know how and when to tell them. It is important not to shatter the self-esteem of the person and at the same time, to give them hope for a change and thereby save their lives.

Some patients may object that they're not obese; a good idea might be to show them a graph or some

other visual element on how to measure weight and its dangers. And never forget that very obese people might have a history of bullying and abuse. Often enough you, doctor, will be facing a patient in tears, and it will fall to you, doctor, the task of consoling them in the most professional, yet heartwarming way. This does not come naturally to most people. When it happens, you should have thought about it in advance and learnt how to deal with it. I shall get back to this further down

Calling in extra help might be important when talking about obesity as a whole. A physician can be very good at diagnosing but very bad when dealing with feelings. Always consider referring the patient to a psychologist to help them boost their confidence and self-esteem; this might be a good idea, but also requires tact. Some people mistrust psychologists. So, you, the doctor, should approach the "psychologist" theme with caution.

A nutritional expert may also be useful to aid the patient in the process of losing weight while helping them stay in a good mood and encouraging them to become a better version of themselves. Compared to "psychologist", "nutritionist" tends to be an easier theme.

Tackling the problem of obesity is a great challenge, which is why people have to be informed. Teaching the patient about the dangers of their weight might actually encourage them to change their dietary habits.

As I have noted above, professional tact and a compassionate attitude when talking about such a sensitive topic can be a challenge: this is why it is recommended that some physicians should take classes on psychology to learn how to deal with such a difficult topic. It is far better to be prepared to talk about a patient about obesity instead of waiting, unprepared, for the coming of the perfect storm of a patient's rage outside the door because you offended him/her by using the dreadful "fat" word.

DOI: 10.5935/MedicalExpress.2017.06.07

All in all, the patient-doctor relationship<sup>1</sup> is very important. That's why it is pivotal for you, doctor, to build up trust with your patient, so patient can muster the will to tell you what's wrong; at the same time, you, doctor, can talk to your patient more freely about how life-threatening overweight can be.

It may seem a simple-to-talk-about topic, but be very wary! Even in these days when "everything" can be said, many doctors are shy and bashful about it. It is important to

address it in the best way possible. Be friendly, never try to intimidate or scare them, and make sure you educate them.

In summary, obesity is a difficult subject, but a necessary one. The right note is not easy to hit, but hit it you must. There is a best way to talk to the patient about it. Make it your mission to master the technique

## ■ REFERENCE

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