

## Till weight-loss do us part

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*When the wife goes from obese to shapely, equations change in a relationship. TOI-Crest finds out how the kilos tilt the balance.*

Everyone loves a good makeover. It's why Cinderella mothered a whole industry of cosmetic improvement. People want a better version of themselves, so they join gyms, buy fashionable clothes, get expensive haircuts, hair transplants and botox. For most, cosmetic change is incremental. It's betterment by degree; a progression from average-looking to good, and good to better-looking. But there's a section for whom transformation is precipitate and radical, where physical and its attendant psychological alteration is so thorough, it's quite literally like being born again. For people who undergo bariatric or weight-loss surgery, the real measure of physical change is its corollary of social transfiguration.

Preeti Paul (name changed), a 28-year-old in Chennai, led a passive lifestyle as a homemaker for eight years. A genetic condition caused the kilos to accrue. "My husband lost interest in me," says Paul. "Love or attraction in the days of courtship had evaporated completely by the fourth year, when I weighed 130 kilos. My husband routinely came home late from work; his interests lay elsewhere. The few occasions he and I were in a room

together, he barely looked at me, as if repulsed by my body. We hadn't had sex in six years and I had reconciled myself to a lonely life. " The more she suffered, the more she ate, and it created a cycle of self-loathing, depression and weight gain.

Paul, who had so far kept her family in the dark about her misery, told them last year that she was opting for bariatric surgery. Other conventional methods of weight-loss had failed her. By Indian standards, a person with a Body Mass Index BMI of 37.5 and above (roughly 40 kg over one's ideal body weight), with no obesity-related disorder, is eligible for this surgery as are those with a BMI of 32.5 and over, but with an existing obesity-related problem.

After the surgery, it took Paul six months, a punishing diet and rigorous exercise to notch 70 kg on the scales. She is now half her previous size, and the new regimen has radically changed her appearance. All too predictably, the husband did a volte-face. He paid her more attention, plied her with gifts that included a holiday to Lakshadweep. "The equation has changed; it's as if my cloak of invisibility has lifted," Paul says wryly. "But I haven't forgotten his previous neglect. I continue to be married to him only because divorce is anathema to me. But my new self has given me new self-esteem. I now have a job as an administrative assistance at a bank. I earn my own money, make my own decisions, and yes, occasionally return home late from work. While I don't ordinarily subscribe to vengeance, after nearly a decade of loneliness, I'm going to give back a bit of what I got. "

While bariatric surgeons and psychologists prepare patients for a new lifestyle and reformed relationships post-surgery, Dr Ramen Goel, bariatric and metabolic surgeon in Mumbai, warns couples that surgery is no fix for a broken marriage. In fact, while he has seen marriages growing stronger after surgery (weight loss leads to a heightened sex drive, among other effects), there has also been evidence of new friction. "Sometimes, when a patient gains self-esteem and confidence, he/she may not tolerate the partner's previous indiscretions," Dr Goel says. "Their refusal to play doormat may widen pre-existing rifts. In another scenario, weight loss in one spouse can also cause insecurity in the other. They may resent their partner's widening social network, and new social calendar. In some cases, it is the husband who pushes the wife to surgery, because he wants arm-candy, but later can't handle the change. "

In a certain case of misguided pride, a husband wanted to parade his newly reduced wife like a trophy horse. So he bought her an expensive wardrobe and threw frequent parties to show her off. "Where once, he was loath to be seen with her he now never left her side," reported a witness. But a few months down, when she couldn't adhere to the strict post-operative discipline and started to gain weight again, the husband returned to his old ways, leaving the wife to grapple with a complex stew of rejection and desperation.

"In India, women suffer the social consequences of obesity far more than men. It's not surprising that more women (over 65 per cent) turn up for bariatric surgery, "Families

provide the crucial support system necessary to enable the physical and emotional transition of patients. For these people, life starts out differently, it changes drastically during obesity, and it changes again post-surgery. "

Changing interpersonal relationships are not only evident between spouses. "The most marked changes occur among siblings, particularly when one is morbidly obese and the other isn't. When one becomes slimmer after surgery, the family dynamics change. The sibling who might have earlier been the centre of attention has to now cede that privilege to the other, and this could lead to jealousy, acrimony, and tension. " In some cases, people have been known to sabotage their sibling's weight loss by urging them to eat more or disrupting their exercise schedules.

This is why all good bariatric surgeons and psychologists who work with them, recommend heartfelt communication between patients and family, where both parties are frank about their changing, and often confusing emotions. After all, one is developing a new relationship with the self, as much as with others.

Meghna Shreshta, a 33-year-old branch manager for a cosmetics clinic in Delhi, learnt to tell her friends apart after her makeover. A few years back, she had been turned away from every vacancy in her line because she weighed 112 kg and didn't subscribe to industry standards. Her husband was a philanderer and her slim friends from college kept a safe distance from her.

"They wouldn't want me to go with them to pubs or restaurant, " she says. Originally from Mumbai, Shreshta moved to Delhi because she considered it more hospitable to the obese. In Delhi, she made friends with people who were built like her, meeting one while shopping for XXX clothes. "Obese people suffer the same kind of mood swings and depression. We gelled well together, " she says, adding that they'd socialise in dark, thinly-populated places like parks and movie halls. Shreshta's divorce and subsequent emotional and financial constraints finally compelled her to take the surgical plunge in 2010. "All of a sudden, people's perspectives changed, " she says. "They are friendlier. I've started to date. All in all, I have more choices than I ever did.

Interestingly, my slim friends have started inviting me out now, when earlier, I was the one calling them. But some things haven't changed... I still prefer my old friends. "