



WEIGHT LOSS FOR BUSY PHYSICIANS

— with Katrina Ubell, MD —

Katrina Ubell: Hi there my friend, welcome back to the podcast. How are you today? I'm doing awesome. I had planned to record this podcast a couple of days from now and then I was ready early. Love that. I was getting it done and hoping the dogs are quiet. If they're not, that's what editing is for, we will do it. Telling you what, summertime, summertime, so gorgeous. I have been thoroughly enjoying this beautiful weather and I hope you have too. It's actually even been super hot here in Wisconsin which I am not mad about because, you know what, when it's so cold sometimes it's nice for it to actually be a nice, hot summer too.

We have been enjoying it. My kids are learning to play golf. I am learning to play golf which is a whole other story. My whole life I've been like, "Listen, if I have four hours on a beautiful day, I'm not gonna spend it on a golf course." Now I'm like, "You know what? Golfing can be kind of cool." What's the difference? Only my thinking about it.

I actually am learning how to play, and I've just decided that's always fun and I don't keep score, and I'm just having a good time. I promised myself that if I'm not having fun, and I'm doing it wrong, and I have to figure out a way to have fun, and that's what I've been doing, so we've been having good time as a family, getting out there and doing that as well.

Okay, so today we're going to talk about whether life at goal weight is really better than life being overweight, because that's what we all really believe. We really do think that we're going to be happier at goal weight. I used to 100% think that I would definitely be happier once I was thinner. I would look at thinner women than me and I truly believed in my core that they were happier. Even if they had other massive issues going on I'm like, "Yeah, but they're not, they're not overweight, they don't struggle with their food." It's so funny how we just will attach onto these ideas and then continually prove them true for ourselves.

This is really somebody to think about, are you happier at goal weight? Is life really better once you've gotten that weight off? There is more to this question than just a yes or no answer. I think the next question to ask is, are you happier as an attending physician than you were maybe when you decided to go to medical school and college, or when you were a student or in your training? I think we'd all agree that some things are better and some things are worse, which is just basically code for what I always teach you, which is that life is 50-50, 50% positive emotions and 50% negative.

Here's the thing, most of us physicians, we finish our training, we expect to have this huge high, this huge relief, this huge surge of accomplishment, and sometimes it never comes, or if it does come, it's fleeting. You're definitely proud of yourself, it's really a big thing, and then you're like, "Well, what now? Okay, now what's the next thing?" It's finishing your training, it's finishing medical school, it's even getting into medical school. You think if I could just get in, I would be so, so happy. Then you are for like a day or two, or maybe a little longer, but then you're like, "Oh my God, now I have to go to medical school", and you're right back where you started again.

Here's the thing, if you're not very happy when you start your medical training, then what you tend to do is tell yourself that you'll be happier when you get through this hard time. It's that constant postponing of your happiness like, "I just need to get through this crappy period and then I'll be happier. I just need to get through my intern year, then I'll be happier." Sometimes it's even like, "I just need to get through this one months rotation, then it's gonna get better. Everything is always gonna get better."

Then you get there to that point and you feel fulfilled, you might be a little happier for a short time but it's just so fleeting. After, when the fleetingness has resulted and that fulfillment is gone, we're back to feeling unhappy again, but worse, we're often unhappy plus without hope which is really just worse than being just unhappy. If you're unhappy, you're unhappy. If you're unhappy without hope, now that unhappiness feels even worse. There's often like an emptiness that accompanies that. A lot of people will describe that they accomplished something really, really big, and then it's just like, "Wait, that's it? I thought it was gonna be better than that."

I think that this definitely shows up in so many other areas of our lives, and non-medical people's lives as well. A big one is having a baby, especially if infertility is involved. You decide you want the baby, you're trying, it's not working, you have to go through all these treatments to have the baby. I mean you just want a baby so badly, and in your mind you're just envisioning how great it's going to be to be pregnant and to have a baby. You got pregnant and you're super happy, but then of course also, for sure, our brain immediately goes to, what could be going wrong, and worry and all of that stuff.

Sometimes we feel sick, like feel super bad. We're like, "Oh, I know I really wanted this, but gosh, I feel really sorry for myself." For some of us we have the baby and we're like, "This is really hard. I mean, I know everyone said it's hard, but like, I mean, this is really actually really legit hard. And now I've got to figure out how to, how to have a baby and live my life, and work, and do all the things that I do." It's like you're fulfilled, you're happy of the baby, of course you're so happy you have this child, but oh my gosh, there are so much more in happiness that's been created because of having that baby.

It's so often that you hear about celebrities who struggle with substance abuse, mental health issues, people who are so beloved. Really celebrities who are so important in the lives of so many people and they've done all these amazing things, but they are unhappy when they started, and so they achieved these accomplishments. They have the number one movie or a hit record or whatever it is, and then it's fleeting, then next week someone else has the number one record or the box office topping movie. Now what? Now they're back to where they were. They're back to their unhappiness again.

There's actually been some research on professors, and they took professors who were granted tenure and professors who were not granted tenure. It turns out that five years later, they're of equal happiness. Even though when they were aiming for getting tenure, working toward tenure, they really, really thought that they would be happier if they just got tenure. This is considered to be something so amazing, such an amazing achievement, but they're really not happier.

Overall, this kind of situation has been coined the arrival fallacy. Tal Ben-Shahar is the positive psychologist who's credited with this term, and he describes it as this illusion that once we make it and once we attain our goal or reach our destination, we'll reach lasting happiness. Those are his words. This illusion that once we make it, once we attain our goal or reach our destination, we will reach lasting happiness.

This plays out in so many areas. We think that when we finally get to attending life, we'll reach that lasting happiness. When we don't, then we think it's because we don't have the marriage yet, or we don't have the baby, or the family, or the house, or the car, or the debt paid off, and then that doesn't do it either. Then we just have to lose the weight, but then goal weight doesn't create long lasting fulfillment either, it's just this perpetual treadmill that we get on thinking like, "Oh, it's just this other thing that I'm lacking. Once I handle that, then I can finally feel the way I think that I should feel."

Overall, this is antithetical to the American dream though, because the American dream mindset is if you work hard and achieve success, then you'll be happy. That's the whole reason why some of our parents really pushed us to succeed, and put us in activities, and paid for lessons, and all kinds of things that they did for us in order for us to succeed. Some of us, we didn't have that, we didn't have that support in the outside but we pushed ourselves from within, it's this internal drive. We did all of that because we thought it would make us happy. Our parents want us to be happy, we want to be happy.

As an adult, when you've accomplished so much, you're a doctor, you clearly have succeeded, why aren't you happy? At that point, it's really easy to believe that something is wrong with you or that you're broken, something legit is going wrong here, like why can't I ever be satisfied. What happens is when we envision what life will be like when we achieve the big goal that we've set, what we do is we overestimate the joy and the other positive emotions that we'll experience. We'll dream about what it'll be like to be thin, or we'll dream about what it'll be like to be that attending, or achieve whatever goal it is that we want, or we think like, "Oh my gosh, the debt is gonna be paid off."

We really think that there's going to be just this massive, immense amount of joy and other positive emotions that will just last and last and last. This is actually called an affective forecasting, which means that it's our ability to predict how certain events will feel. You might remember when I've taught you before, is that the only reason you want anything in your life is because of how you think it will make you feel. Of course you're going to want to get to goal weight when your brain has envisioned this Utopian existence of what it's going to be like to be someone who's in size 4 jeans or something like that.

Research shows that we're pretty good at knowing what will make us happy and unhappy like that distinction. Overall, we're pretty terrible at estimating the duration and the intensity of the effect whether it's happiness or unhappiness, positive emotions and negative emotions. This is why I think it's so fascinating. We think that the good emotions are going to last way longer than they actually do, they don't last as long as we expect them to, but we do expect for the negative emotions, the unhappiness to last for a really long time, or we're so afraid that it might last for a really long time.

What we do is we buffer away those negative emotion experiences because we were like, "Ew, I don't want that for a long time, I want that to go away right away." That's where overeating, and for some, over drinking comes in as well. Interesting, right? We really are pretty terrible at estimating how long and how intense the emotions are going to be whether it's positive or negative.

We also tend to do something called focalism, which means that we tend to fixate on the upside, only on the good that will come. I think that happens for a lot of us as we become attendings. You always have this idea, it's going to be so great, and I won't have to answer to anybody else, and I won't have to do it their way, and I'm going to be able to do it the way I want to, and I'm not going to have to have in-house call, and I won't have to answer all the pages all the time because I'll have someone else on first call, or whatever it is. You just think it's going to be so great.

Then you become an attending, and those things are great, but now you realize you're actually the one in charge and the buck stops with you. There's a lot of responsibility that comes with that job. This seems so trivial, but I remember learning how to get cerumen out of kids' ears, there's lots of different ways that we can do it, but mostly using a little curette to pull it out, and this is generally on little infants and toddlers who are not holding still so they have to be held down very, very tightly so you can do it safely, number one. Number two, see what you're doing actually get that stuff out. Of course, the kids are not on board, not loving it almost all the time.

As a resident, I would do my best but I know I had my attending there, if I couldn't get the wax out then I just let them do it. No big deal. I remember being in practices this first couple of months and just thinking like, "Well, it's just me." Could I have asked one of my partners to help me? Of course I could have, but I was like, "No, like you have to figure out how to do this. It's your job now." Of course my skill level just skyrocketed because the buck stopped with me and I had to figure it out. We don't think about that, we're like, "No, it's gonna be amazing, everything's gonna be great."

We think the same way with weight loss. We're finally going to get to wear that size four, but here's the part we don't think about. Staying in that size four means that you have to actually feel your emotions instead of eating to neutralize them, or drinking to neutralize them. That's the buy-in. We're like, "Oh, crap, I don't know. That doesn't sound so great." Especially we think that when we don't know how to feel our emotions, now that idea of feeling all my emotions sounds amazing to me even though it means some pain because it means so much freedom from all the pain that was created around my food issues that I had.

Here's what's something that's interesting to think about, it's kind of crazy. Research shows that

having goals makes us happier, but achieving those goals doesn't. Let me repeat that, having goals makes us happier, but achieving those goals doesn't. Of course, the question is why is that? The answer is because of our thoughts, always. When we are excited about achieving something, when we have a goal that we are working hard towards, and we are thinking about how it's going to be when we get there, we think different thoughts than we do once we've achieved it.

Often once we get there and we've achieved it, we're like, "Yeah, that was great" and we celebrate for a short time, and we feel that sense of success and fulfillment, and then we're goalless, lacking goals and we need those goals to give us something else to think excited thoughts about. It's so important to have those goals, that's why we wanted nothing more in life than to be a doctor, and then a few years into attending life, and we totally downplay being a doctor, we don't think it's that big of a deal anymore.

I told you guys before, my coach, Brooke, will say, "Listen, if I was a doctor, I would just walk around all day long and tell everybody, 'Listen, I'm a doctor.'" And I'm like, you really wouldn't though. None of us do that, right? Because once we've achieved the goal, it just isn't as big of a deal to us anymore. It's the goal that brings us all that happiness, and pride, and all the good emotions that come from that.

What I know for sure does create positive emotion and fulfillment in life though is growth and contribution. Growth includes setting goals as well as challenging ourselves, learning new things, working hard to figure something out, and developing new skills. The list goes on and on, all the different ways you can grow yourself. Now growth, in and of itself, can be uncomfortable, it can be very uncomfortable at times. When you are continually growing overall, you are always setting goals and you're going to experience more positive emotion because of that.

This is why it's so worth it to lose the weight. People will say like, "What's the point? I mean, do I really even need to lose this?" My answer is no. You don't have to lose it at all, but it is a really great opportunity to grow yourself as a human being. Taking away the long-term health issues and all of that, let's just assume that that's not an issue at all, it's such a fabulous opportunity for you to grow as a human being. I cannot even express to you enough how my clients who have completed all this work or continue to do all of this work, how much they just sing the praises of how great they feel because of all this work that they're doing, that most of the time they never thought they could work through or they never thought there was a solution.

The freedom that they feel, how much their lives have improved, that's that overall lasting and long-lasting fulfillment, that's what we're really wanting. Challenging yourself because it's something that you want to do for growth is a great reason to lose weight, but not thinking, "Okay, well, when I get there, then life is definitely gonna be better. Then I can finally love myself. Then I can finally have a positive opinion of myself. Then I can finally feel comfortable with intimacy with my spouse." None of that has anything to do with it. All of that is your brain and that is what we work on in my coaching program.

The other part is contribution. In contribution, that's meaningful relationships, mentoring opportunities, possibly philanthropy or giving in another way. When you think about contribution,

like how do you contribute, it could just be with relationships maybe with your children, or your nieces and nephews, or friends' children. It could be in meaningful relationships that you have with friends, or a spouse, or siblings, or other family members. I think a wonderful way that you can take advantage of an opportunity to contribute is by taking on a medical student, or a resident, or a fellow to work with you. All of us had that opportunity.

I always think of that when I'm in the hospital and they ask if a resident or student can come in, most of the time I say yes because listen, someone allowed me to learn from them. Like, "Yeah, okay, sure. Yeah, you can come in. I understand, you have to learn, it's part of this process." Maybe not from the patient's standpoint, but from the teaching attending standpoint, that's a wonderful opportunity to contribute in whatever way you can make it work for yourself. Other people have different philanthropic organizations, or charities, or other foundations that they like to support and give back in another way. All of those things create long-lasting positive emotion, they create that fulfillment that you want.

To sum up the answer, is life better at goal weight? It's 50-50, always. Life's always going to be 50-50. The reason to lose the weight is because of the growth that can come from that, and possibly even contribution. Many, many clients who've lost weight, made incredible changes and difference in their lives, they're now helping their patients lose weight, they're helping friends and family lose weight. They are really contributing in another way, and that's available to you as well.

I can't wait to see you next week, it's going to be awesome. Talk to you very, very soon. Have a great week. Bye-bye.