

BRIDGING THE GAP

A newsletter for medical professionals

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Behavioral Health Emerges as a Key Concern Among Bariatric Surgery Healthcare Professionals

Behavioral health was the theme of many of the presentations at the 21st Annual Meeting of the [American Society for Bariatric Surgery \(ASBS\)](#) held June 12-18, 2004. This year's meeting marks the first time so many behavioral health professionals supporting bariatric surgery met in a centralized location. At least ten presentations discussed the role of psychology and/or assessment in patient evaluations, including a workshop sponsored by Pearson.

In the presentations focusing on preoperative psychological/ psychosocial evaluations, three general premises presented a common thread.

First, published research to date provides neither predictors of successful outcomes, nor a clear understanding of the pre- and post-op psychosocial interventions that work for successful outcomes.

Second, there is general consensus that psychosocial evaluations provide value and are conducted for several purposes:

- to determine psychological suitability for surgery,
- to better understand the patient in order to learn how the patient will likely react following surgery. This understanding is useful to prepare the patient for the post-operative challenges that person will likely face, and
- to prepare the medical staff in order to anticipate and prepare for the patient's likely reactions in the months following surgery.

Finally, testing is a valuable element of the psychological evaluation for the objective data it provides. Objective data is essential for a number of reasons, including:

- to overcome the challenges presented in the clinical interview where patients are highly motivated to present themselves in the best possible light
- to overcome the healthcare professionals' tendencies to pass judgment based upon the patient's appearance, odors, breathing, etc.
- to support the evaluation in court, if necessary.

Some surgeons question the value of a presurgical psychological/psychosocial evaluation, citing the present lack of research literature to support it as a predictor of outcomes. However, it appears most bariatric surgery programs believe such evaluations provide value to the team. A group of psychologists and physicians from Virginia conducted a survey of bariatric surgery programs across the country to determine their present practices concerning psychosocial evaluation. 188 surveys were mailed out and 81 surveys were returned. Of those 81 programs, 88% require psychosocial evaluation regardless of insurance requirements.

Research studies continue, new data will be forthcoming, and a subgroup of behavioral health professionals within ASBS has organized to develop guidelines for psychological/ psychosocial evaluations of bariatric surgical candidates. Meanwhile, psychologists who provide such evaluations for bariatric surgeons continue to provide valuable education and tools to help these patients meet the challenges they face as they work to integrate lifelong lifestyle changes into their daily routines.

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