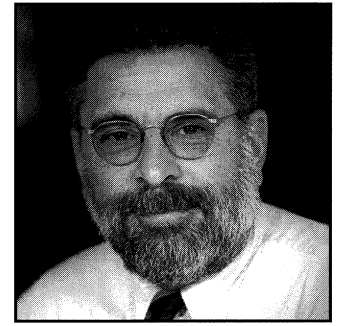


Bears & Health

Bears, Obesity and Surgery



Lawrence D. Mass, M.D., is a co-founder of Gay Men's Health Crisis in New York City and the author/editor of four books, including, most recently, *We Must Love One Another Or Die: The Life and Legacies of Larry Kramer* (St. Martin's Press). You may address questions or comments to Dr. Mass via our mailing address or Email address.

Last year I met this hot bear. He's really a chub, or was a chub, but as most of us in bearland know, there's a lot of overlap (cough) between those two identities. (In fact, the bear movement is actually an offshoot of Girth and Mirth.) So the hot bear-chub, on learning that I'm a physician, began telling me about his situation. He'd just made the decision to have bypass surgery for obesity. And the next time I ran into him, at the Bear Cave, he'd had the surgery, lost weight and seemed to be doing well. Turns out he is not the only bear/chub opting for this radical treatment. Though I've no idea how common the practice is among bears, I did get the following letter from my my fellow bear, David Keepnews, telling of his recent experience, which he has most generously agreed to share with you.

"This summer, I underwent gastric bypass surgery – an increasingly popular surgical approach to treating morbid obesity. My weight had gotten up to a point where it was starting to affect my health – sleep apnea, high cholesterol, borderline hypertension, gastric reflux, knee and back pain – and put me at major risk for worse, especially considering a really bad family history of heart disease. I also didn't like how I felt, was tired of getting stuck in chairs with armrests, and, truth be told, didn't like how I looked at that weight. In the world of weight loss surgery, I was considered a "lightweight" – 5' 7" and 280 lbs, or a Body Mass Index of about 44. I sure didn't (and don't) feel like a lightweight. I know that talking about weight and weight loss can be controversial among bears. For a lot of heavier men, hearing someone talk about weight loss can sound like the same old

attitude that judges us and puts people down based on weight and assumes that everyone wants to be thin. Clearly, weight loss relates to ongoing issues about self-acceptance, although I think as more of us pass into solid middle age and beyond, the health problems associated with obesity take on more prominence. At least I know they did for me.

Among men that I know, I've really had no negative reactions when I've told people about the surgery. A lot are interested in hearing about it and why I did it. When I am on AOL, I include in my webpage a mention of the fact that I had gastric bypass surgery. I've heard from a few people who are considering surgery or who know people who have had it. But again, really no negative reactions. (Some have joked that I will no longer be a bear – but let's not get into the "What is a bear?" debate.) While deciding on surgery, I wrestled with a lot of things – was I giving in to social expectations and standards about weight and appearance? Was I taking the easy way out (surgery vs. diet and exercise—which had offered very temporary solutions in the past)? (Trust me—there was not a lot about the surgery I'd call "easy"). The health issues are crucially important, and probably tipped the balance for me in terms of my decision. And it is easiest, in discussing my decision with people, to emphasize those. It is harder to say, "I was sick and tired of being so fat." The truth is, all of the above were (and are) accurate.

Having surgery was a big decision for me, and I took a long time to make up my mind to do it, after giving it a lot of thought and doing a lot of research. I know you don't have space in your col-

umn for a lengthy discussion of criteria for the surgery (generally, a BMI of 40 or above, or significant obesity-related illnesses and a BMI of 35 or above), cost (not cheap – but many health plans will cover it if they are convinced that it is medically necessary) the different types of surgery, potential risks, etc.

There are risks, of course – some of them are the same as for any surgery, and some are specific to weight loss surgery. And I did suffer one complication a few weeks after surgery – a pulmonary embolism (blood clot to my lung). So I think it's important to take the risks into account (and to realize they don't all just apply to other people) and to balance them with the benefits. I am not a "zealot" about the surgery. I know it was the right decision for me, but I think everyone has to make decisions for themselves based on their own circumstances.

One thing to do for anyone who is interested is to check out some of the resources on the Web. Two sites I found helpful are www.obesityhelp.com and www.asbs.org (the website for the American Society of Bariatric Surgeons). There are a number of e-mail lists devoted to obesity surgery. There is one e-mail group for gay men and Lesbians – predominantly Lesbians, but with a smattering of gay men as well."

David Keepnews is a nurse, attorney and health policy consultant currently living in the Boston area (and relocating soon to Seattle). He can be reached at dkeepnews@aol.com