



LUKENOTES

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CASE STUDY

"Father Bob" • Body Image

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Father Bob is a 40-year-old associate pastor in a large, active suburban parish. He is a soft-spoken man with a gentle sense of humor. An accomplished musician, he accompanies the choir as requested. He is bilingual and is involved in the ministry with new immigrant families. He seems well liked and is occasionally a dinner guest of parish families. His pastor is an older, leaner man who is an avid golfer. Fr. Bob frequently compares himself to his pastor and feels he never measures up. When not wearing a collar, Fr. Bob wears the same pair of oversized pants and shirt, with his high school leather jacket and a baseball cap.

Fr. Bob feels terrible about his physical appearance. He currently weighs 200 pounds and is 5'10" tall. Body size has been a sensitive topic for him for many years. When he was 14, his mother consulted their physician about weight loss, and he recommended increased exercise. Fr. Bob joined the track team where he excelled in the shot put, medaling in his junior and senior years and enjoying some respect from coaches and peers. Fr. Bob's father was an outstanding high school football player and is a lean, fit person currently in his 70s. Father Bob's body is more like his mother's family, often described affectionately as "stocky." Four years ago, he lost 50 pounds over the course of two years with the help of Weight Watchers and rigorous walking. This was quite an accomplishment since he had carried much of this extra weight since his youth. Fr. Bob is unaware that he has been an inspiration and role model for some of the overweight parishioners. Currently, although he is overweight, he has no outstanding health problems.

Body Image

Fr. Bob suffers from a poor body image - negative thoughts about his body that erode his self-esteem and self-confidence. Body image is the way we see ourselves, including our perceptions and beliefs about our physical appearance. When we look in the mirror, we often see something entirely different from what others see when they look at us. People with poor body images see themselves as ugly and do not comprehend that others may admire or even envy their looks. Body image is intertwined with self-esteem, self-confidence and self-respect. Developing a body image usually occurs early in life.

Many people today suffer from poor body image. People who think poorly of themselves and their bodies tend to develop anxieties or feel limited in their careers and relationships even

though they may be talented and successful. In group settings, these people tend to feel inferior and shun attention or avoid interacting with others, resulting in isolation which can intensify feelings of worthlessness, incompetence and defeat.

Though poor body image may develop into an eating or anxiety disorder, it is of concern even when these conditions are not present. Individuals who have suffered from eating disorders, find the last and most entrenched symptom to overcome is body image distortion.

Assessing Body Image

When Fr. Bob consulted a nutritionist to assist him with weight loss, she helped him to learn about body image. She asked him to answer these questions to assess his relationship with his body: *Do you avoid mirrors or spend excessive time in front of them? Are you putting considerable time or money into covering up bodily flaws? Are you frequently comparing your body to others'? Are you avoiding social or recreational activities or family visits because you are afraid others will criticize your body or view it negatively? Do you weigh yourself several times a day? Are you unable to accept compliments about your appearance?*

When Fr. Bob answered yes to a few of these questions, he realized that he suffers from a poor body image.

Toward a Gentler Relationship

Although Fr. Bob is overweight by body mass index standards, he also must acknowledge that he is much healthier now than he was before he lost weight four years ago. To his credit he has kept the weight off, making him more the exception than the norm, which usually involves significant regain. Moreover, Fr. Bob needs to realize that his self-esteem has not improved with a major loss of weight. He needs to learn to feel good about himself as a person so that he can have more positive self-regard and can act more positively toward his body.

His nutritionist suggested the following means to adopt a healthier mindset about himself and his body:

- Instead of picking yourself apart when you look in the mirror, identify something you like. Take time to appreciate all the ways your body has served you. Work on changing the negative thoughts you have about your body. Thoughts about your body are based on core beliefs about yourself shaped by your past, societal messages and interactions with people. Identify the negative self-talk and replace negative thoughts with positive, affirming ones. Practice being less critical of yourself and others.
- List your positive qualities (I am...) and reflect on them often.
- Learn to dress more appropriately when not wearing his collar.
- Plan to spend time with people who are supportive, affirming and encouraging, not judgmental and critical. Tell your friends how they can support you during stressful times and show them the same support they have given you.
- Tune out the societal messages of perfection in body image. Resist being pulled into the commercial realm of expensive cosmetic products and procedures in an effort to achieve

body perfection. The marketing of these products and procedures preys on our anxieties, vulnerability, and shame.

- Set realistic health and fitness goals, and pursue them.

Father Bob may want to lose more weight to avoid the potential for chronic diseases as he ages, but should set a modest goal, perhaps a 10% weight loss (20 pounds), over the next six months. This loss should be followed by a period of weight maintenance. He also should consult his physician before doing so. In addition, Fr. Bob will benefit by utilizing the suggestions from his nutritionist and nurturing a positive sense of himself at any size.

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