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Bob Wilson, DTR — Wellness Gardener on the Web
Today's Dietitian
By Kate Jackson
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Meet a man who uses the wisdom gained from his personal transformation to cultivate hope in others.



To Bob Wilson, life is a garden. Weight management is all a question of what you plant and how you nourish the seeds. One look at his Web site, www.balancedweightmanagement.com, says it all. The imagery on the site is botanical: plants, leaves, and flowers. The language is equally horticultural. Wilson's sentences are peppered with words such as cultivate, nurture, roots, and seeds. He's a nutrition professional in the guise of a master gardener with a mission to help others transform their lives as he has done. His mantra is that our bodies and lives are ecosystems, and wellness is a matter of balancing all the elements in that system.

If it all sounds a little new age, it is. Wilson, a dietetic technician registered (DTR), exhorts those who browse his site to "plant the garden of your life with seeds of well-being." He revels in the lingo of new-age and self-improvement gurus. But it's new age with heart, informed by science and research, and validated by personal triumph. Wilson, now fit and healthy, was an obese young man. At the age of 19, he weighed 260 pounds and at his high point weighed 400 pounds. He lost 250 pounds and has kept it off for 32 years and has been drug- and alcohol-free for 16 years.

A DTR since 1978, Wilson works in health education at Kaiser Permanente, where he teaches the Freedom from Diets Program and codeveloped the Nondieting Being Healthy at any Size curriculum for the program. He's received Oregon's Award of Excellence in Practice and the American Dietetic Association's Award of Excellence in Practice. Not surprisingly, he began his studies in the field of botany, but he really wanted to help overweight people, so he rechanneled his energy into the nutrition field. "I have a passion for dietetics, and I got into the field because I wanted to help people

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transform their lives in the way that I had,” Wilson says. In his personal journey, he discovered a series of skills and techniques that allowed him to conquer a lifetime of bad habits and self-defeating behaviors. He’s been in dietetics at the national level working on the obesity certificate advanced training program for adults and at the community level because he understands from personal experience the challenges of people who struggle with weight issues.

When Wilson wanted to help people on a wider scale, he turned to the Internet and created a Web site informed by his personal experience and professional expertise. The site is one part nutrition science, one part support group, and one part tactical action plan that embraces body, mind, and spirit. Wilson himself is equally multifaceted. As the guiding presence of the Web site, he wears a number of hats, including nutrition expert, cheerleader, and confidante. Anyone uncomfortable with a deeply personal approach—what some might even call touchy-feely—should steer clear, but those who can appreciate gentle encouragement and aren’t opposed to cyber hugs and well-intentioned hand-holding will want to investigate his Web creation.

Early Impressions

Wilson’s early life was shaped by his weight and his weight was shaped by his early life. A difficult childhood and youth fed an emotional maelstrom. After the divorce of his dysfunctional parents, Wilson was bounced back and forth between two homes. In 1950 his mother was prescribed speed to lose weight. “It worked very well, but she was a head nurse at a hospital and became addicted to speed, other drugs, and, ultimately, to alcohol.” Those patterns of home dysfunction dramatically affected his family and turned Wilson inward. “There was a lot of distress that affected relationships in the home,” he says. “The house became a battleground as all those issues played out. I didn’t realize all that was going on, but I started to feel more and more disconnected and very shut down.” He started to use food to help him manage all the stresses in the household, but it ended up magnifying the stress. “I tried to fix the unfixable family,” he recalls, “which proved completely impossible, very demoralizing, and emotionally frustrating.”

Wilson cared for his mother, who suffered from chronic depression, alcoholism, and chemical dependency and who was in and out of hospitals, mental health institutions, and nursing homes, until her death at the age of 50. While he tended to everyone else, Wilson was unable to nurture himself. Early on, he befriended food and turned to it for comfort. In eighth grade, his weight reached 400 pounds. He noticed that as he gained weight, he became increasingly isolated from others. Cruel indifference and ridicule from other children deepened his relationship with food. “Being the fattest kid in school, being spit on, not played with, made fun of, and rejected completely made me wilt and go into a cocoon and shut down,” he recalls. He closed himself off emotionally and his self-esteem plummeted. And the more that happened, the more he overate. In both a literal and figurative sense, he didn’t fit in his world. Ultimately, he was consumed with self-hatred and courted suicide.

Taking Control

Wilson realized that he attempted to use food to cope with stress and with that knowledge became determined he could change. He realized he needed to get his own garden in balance and tend to soul and spirit.

When he was 21, Wilson began to address his weight problem and started to take control of his life. His turnaround was seemingly against all odds, since he was lacking in social supports and enmeshed in destructive behaviors. He found it surprisingly easy to learn new ways of eating, set up a food environment, and figure out enjoyable ways to be active. The emotional areas—the life balance issues—were more difficult. Those skills were far more challenging because he was exposed at an early age to dysfunctional patterns and had become a compulsive overeater. “I developed a disordered relationship with food,” he says, “and used it to fix a lot of the problems in my life.”

Wilson sought help to learn about the emotional components of overeating and the root causes of obesity. “For me, figuring out what was going on really took learning a whole new series of skills and exploring many different areas of learning to find out what the puzzle pieces were that contributed to me being shut down, withdrawn, and unhappy.” His breakthrough came, he says, when he “learned to be kind to the being who lives inside of my own skin. It really was about how to shine the light of self-care into my own life to break down my inner prison of self-hate and despair, and that was the hardest skill I ever had to learn.”

Wilson started with the easiest thing he could feel successful at. At first, it was losing weight by using a new food plan, being active, and developing a support system. He was buoyed by his success and the validation of his support network. He also sought therapy and read widely about psychology. He learned that his behavior and struggles were characteristic of adverse childhood experiences, which allowed him to come to understand himself and at the same time begin to transform those patterns through self-awareness, self-acceptance, and self-compassion. Wilson was able to synthesize this new knowledge into a new and more healthful lifestyle that’s based on self-care.

Sharing the Wealth

Armed with this knowledge and his dietetic background, Wilson has a simple yet often overlooked message. He notes in the introduction to his Web page, “It is rare to have someone tell you that you are overweight due to many different choices you make on a moment-to-moment basis. It is your environment, lifestyle and personal conditioning, genetics, and habits that keep you overweight. It’s not just diet or exercise, but all of [the] factors in your life that influence your choices.”

Consequently, Wilson uses his Web site to teach those who explore about the choices they can make and patterns they can change. It’s not by any means a typical weight-management program that focuses on food and meal plans. Although it includes that, this Web site is more about attitude. Wilson

strives to foster a truly holistic approach that emphasizes nutrition, fitness, mindfulness, joyfulness, self-care, and the nurturance of self-esteem. He encourages visitors to explore the root causes of overweight and helps them recognize self-defeating patterns. He offers essential skills for making changes that can last a lifetime along with suggestions for creating balance, incorporating pleasurable fitness activities, and conquering emotional eating.

The Web site is packed with resources not only for nutrition but also for all aspects of physical, emotional, and spiritual well-being—references to books, other Web sites, recipes. While Wilson's saga and his message are serious, the site is playful, colorful, and at times lighthearted. Wilson tries to find strategies for making the struggle against weight and the quest for balance a fun and even celebratory experience.

Some viewers might be tempted to dismiss Wilson's discussions because they're wrapped in the language of the self-help movement more often than they're cloaked in the scientific jargon more familiar to dietitians. But in doing so, they may overlook not only the inspirational value of Wilson's own triumph over misery, but also an important message that stands out in a world of flimsy quick fixes. As Wilson explains, "My story illustrates the possibility of doing 'lifestyle surgery.'" Bariatric surgery may be an appropriate and necessary option for some morbidly obese individuals, but as Wilson's experience indicates, some people are able to transform themselves in other ways. "Unless the severely obese individual addresses all of the factors that led them to being overweight," he says, "just modifying the size of their stomachs will not heal all of the hungers they have perhaps used food to fill."

— **Kate Jackson is a staff writer for *Today's Dietitian*.**

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