

Case Study #4 – Exploring Expectations Dialogue

One of the most challenging issues can be a client's obsession with the weight scale. The following is what you may hear from a client in this case:

Client: *I'm happy that I have lost 70 lb in the past year and a half but I'm still not under the 160 lb mark on my scale. I just can't seem to get under that number. It's so frustrating! I weigh myself at least once every day. I weigh 162 lb, then 163 lb, then 162 lb again. It's so upsetting! This has been going on for five months already. I need to get below 160 lb! Why isn't it happening? I keep eating less and get no results. I'm miserable and I just don't know what else to do.*

The client has accomplished a very significant feat. They have lost weight and have maintained the loss. Of course, you can have discussions about weight plateaus, changes in metabolic rate and energy requirements and our body's resistance to weight loss. You will definitely want to acknowledge that keeping off lost weight takes as much effort as losing weight. The client should be commended for maintaining a healthy lifestyle. However, these discussions won't change the fact that the client has a specific weight goal and can't seem to celebrate the progress they have made. They are coming to you feeling frustrated and discouraged. This is an opportunity to discuss 'expectations'. Suggest that together you and the client explore the reasons that may help explain why it is so important for the client to reach the 160 lb mark on the scale. Help them to see the benefit of having more flexibility with their expectations and thinking. Here are some questions or statements that could start such a conversation:

How did weighing less than 160 lb become the specific weight goal for you? Tell me what you (or the person who assigned this goal for you) feel would be different if you weighed less than 160 lb? What specifically would change if you weighed 159 lb next week instead of 162 lb? What do you feel would be wrong or what would be the problem if your weight stayed a couple of pounds above 160 lb?

Ask the client to consider if these expectations seem accurate and realistic. Suggest that weight management requires self-compassion. Help them adjust their thinking regarding their weight. Point out that our bodies are designed to resist weight loss, no matter what a person does. Introduce the concept of 'best weight' – 'a weight range that your body will settle on for all kinds of physical reasons, that you can maintain by living the healthiest lifestyle you can truly enjoy'. (Sharma & Freedhoff) Explain that having a specific, perhaps unachievable weight goal in mind can lead to discouragement, self-blame, a loss of motivation and unhealthy weight management behaviours. Invite the client to describe any and all positive changes that they have experienced in their health and their life since losing 70 lb. Pose the following questions: Would you consider any of these results as an accomplishment? - How would you feel if you could maintain these results despite weighing more than 160lb.? - If you still feel more comfortable having a weight goal, visualize how you would feel if you had a flexible range for your goal – say 159 to 162lb. - Are there other positive, non-weight goals that you could focus on?

In other words, encourage the client to adjust their expectation from a specific and potentially unachievable number on the scale to results based on their improved physical and mental well-being.