

## Angela's Story

[Disclaimer] Hello. The purpose of this story is to offer Kaiser Permanente members who are considering or who have already had metabolic and bariatric surgery an opportunity to learn from one another's real experiences. Please note the contents of these stories are for informational purposes only and are not medical advice. Please consult your health care team for any questions you have related to your individual medical condition.

[Interviewer] Hi Angela! Thanks for sharing your story with us today. Please feel free to tell us a little bit about your journey with metabolic and bariatric surgery.

[Angela] Hi! Yeah, so I just want to go over a timeline, what my journey was going through Options and things like that, and then I'll go from there.

So, in February 2018, I started Options. In April, I graduated from Options and had my surgery scheduled for July 18, 2018, and at my pre-op appointment in July, it was July 6th, I left, had my bloodwork done, I was driving home, and my surgeon called me and said, "Congratulations, Angela!" And I was like, "What? I'm having surgery, right?" "No, you're pregnant." [laughs] So, I found out a couple of weeks before my surgery date that I was pregnant. So that put a damper in my getting my surgery. But 2 weeks later on July 31st, I went to have my first ultrasound and I found out that there was no heartbeat. So, I was given some options in terms of what I wanted to do, and I decided to go through a miscarriage naturally. And in August, between the 8th and the 10th, I had a miscarriage.

Needless to say, after that it was pretty devastating to me. Not so much because I lost the baby but more just like emotional, emotional for me, and I started reverting back to my old ways, and my A1C went back up to 10. So, my surgery was rescheduled but then canceled again. So now I'm on my second cancelled surgery date, and that was in October when my surgery got cancelled. Finally, March 18, 2019, I had my VSG [vertical sleeve gastrectomy] in Ontario, California. And it was 11 months after starting Options. So, I was only a month away of having to redo Options and do all that.

So, October 19, 2019, right after my VSG [vertical sleeve gastrectomy], I was in a really bad car accident and had a back injury and a shoulder injury, so

that kind of stopped my exercising and things like that, so it really put like a wrench into my weight loss that I had...not where I wanted to be at that time.

And shortly after that, a month later, I was told you need to have surgery, and so I had gallbladder surgery a month after my car accident. So that was in November 2019. Shortly after that, I got a new job, which presented new stress to my life, and then COVID started. So, it's been a crazy run.

And then August, this past August, I was almost hospitalized for a psychiatric emergency, and this past December I had back surgery. So I feel like all of those things, I just bring them up because there are points to just to show that even after bariatric surgery, life is gonna throw you curveballs and those are some curveballs that I've been thrown, and so I'm trying to work through those still after almost being 2 years out.

But I'm going to give you some pre-op things. So, in my pre-op, like, medical history, I was diagnosed with diabetes, anxiety, depression, mild sleep apnea, and high cholesterol and OCD. And post-op, currently, my diabetes is in remission, so my A1C is at 6.1. So I'm no longer on my... pre-op, I was never on any medication. I was only on a medication; I wasn't on any insulin. Post-op, my diabetes is in remission. My sleep apnea is gone; I no longer use the machine. An interesting fact is after my VSG [vertical sleeve gastrectomy], I was diagnosed with food addiction/binge eating disorder. So, I found that out after my surgery, and I still have my anxiety, depression, and OCD. But my cholesterol is down; no medication. The only medication I take is not really medication, it's just our vitamins that we have to take every day and the calcium, and I take some other things like herbs for energy and things like that. But that's my personal thing that I do.

Yeah, so I brought up the binge eating. So, I did get diagnosed with binge-eating disorder. And so, I currently still am in therapy for that and I've been working on that as well, still. A big thing that my journey is, is self-care. So prior to even having any surgery, I put myself through private counseling for 2 years just to get to the point mentally where I could even...I was terrified of medical procedures, I wouldn't even go to the doctors to take care of my diabetes. I would avoid getting my A1C checked because I couldn't even get stuck with a needle. So, I put myself through therapy prior to that and to help with my anxiety and depression, because it's just a major thing in my life that affects my day-to-day, you know, my day-to-day habits and things like that.

So, I did that, and then I also—throughout my journey when I started Options and things like that—I was also part of the codesign to help come up with all the new material for everyone else that's gonna be going through the journey at Kaiser. And so, I really feel that because it had the input of the members that you guys are going to be getting a lot of good information, things that we may or may not have heard in our classes. So, we hope that, you know, that's gonna be helpful for you on your journey.

And just some things that I wanted to bring up is that during your journey, you're gonna, like I said before, you're gonna come up with issues and curveballs are gonna be thrown. Deaths are gonna happen in your family. You might lose a job. You might gain a job and have new stresses, things like that.

So just always advocate for yourself and be prepared to come up with those... that those things are going to arise in your life and that you're going to have to deal with them because you can't go to food anymore to help deal with them, so you have to be prepared mentally. That's my main thing throughout. Even helping with the codesign is the mental health aspect of this, is be your own advocate. Know yourself best because you're the only person that you can go to, really, at the end of the day. Like, you can have people in your life that are supportive, but you are in charge of everything that you're gonna be doing on this journey, and always have an arsenal in your back pocket to help you. Because if you don't, it's easy...I had a VSG [vertical sleeve gastrectomy] surgery and I can still binge eat, let me tell you, it's possible. And you have to really just be mindful of where you're at mentally because they do not take your brain out, they take your stomach out and... you need to be in charge of your brain.

I also wanted to go over just some numbers. So, my highest weight, I was 286 pounds; mind you, I'm 5' 2". So that was my highest weight. My day of surgery, I was 239. I did not lose that weight in Options. I had lost it doing exercise and boot camp and counting things on apps on my phone and things like that.

So that was my highest weight was 286. Then the day of surgery I was 239. I think I had gained 2 pounds during Options to be quite honest. And then today, I am 196 and my lowest weight after surgery was 183. So, I've gained the COVID—what is it that they joke around—the COVID 20? Well, luckily mine hasn't been 20 but it's been like 12 [laughs]. And I'm also, like I said, in

therapy in an active, actively battling my eating disorder right now with my therapist. So that's what I'm, that's where I'm at right now. So, my goal is 155. So, I got about another 40 pounds to go.

But with my, with my car accident, like I said, I had a back injury in my L5 S-1, I had a 10 millimeter extrusion that was completely pinching my nerve all the way down my leg, so I was in constant pain. I didn't sleep a whole night for almost a year. It wasn't until the day of my surgery this past December, which was the day after, that I slept the whole night. So, I almost went a whole year with only getting 2 to 3 hours of sleep, which you know that also impacts weight loss. So, I'm actually kind of proud of myself it's only 12 pounds [laughs] and not a lot more, but that's where I'm at right now, and so, do you have any other...?

[Interviewer] Just some general questions we often hear from members considering bariatric surgery. Just in general, and you kind of already answered this, but in general, what do you wish you had known, if anything, about life after bariatric surgery before you had surgery?

[Angela] You know, for myself, I didn't have any complications. I had what was referred to me from my surgeon as the "textbook" surgery. Like, in and out in 45 minutes of the operating room, like no issues whatsoever. Aside from, I mean, you will get constipated. There is no way, I mean, no way around it. It's the most horrible thing I've experienced in my life, I think, because it's like very violating, [laughs] but yeah, you will get constipated.

You also will lose your hair, but it will stop. So, it happens around, for me, it happened around 3 months out, and they tell you all this, but you can't understand it or even grasp it until it's happening to you. So, they can—any education program you're going to be in for bariatric surgery—can spew all these facts at you and you're, like, "yeah, yeah, yeah, I get it." But you really don't understand it until it's happening to you. So, I knew I would lose my hair. But when I started losing my hair it, it freaks you out, but then it eventually stops. My skin got really, really dry. I looked like I had like, like snakeskin on my legs and I'd always put lotion on, and the hair loss will come, but it will stop.

And the one thing that I wish I had known, which wasn't brought up to me was—and I learned it in groups afterwards—was slider foods. And slider foods are foods that you can eat that you can keep eating them and you don't

get full. And some of my slider foods are like, you could eat a bag of chips still and not get full from it and continue to eat it. So, you have to really know your limits, your boundaries, your trigger foods, and all that stuff. So just keep that in mind when you're going through with this, that after a year and a half, like you can probably start eating some of those foods that you weren't eating the first year and a half, and then you notice that you can eat them and they may not make you sick and so just be cognizant of that, because that's what happened with me. But then COVID happened.

That's another thing, is that we're going through this journey and then now a pandemic is here, so that's something that none of us have ever experienced before and so having to go through that, in and of itself, is...

Mental health is a huge issue for people that haven't even ever had mental health issues before. So, just imagine if you are having mental health issues and had bariatric surgery, it's gonna, you know, come up. So just be prepared for life in general. That's pretty much that's what I wish I had known before. It was mainly the slider foods.

[Interviewer] Just to ask you some questions around some different topic areas that we often hear. In terms of nutrition, and you've talked a little bit about your journey with nutrition just recently, but if you could give someone considering bariatric surgery advice about post-surgery eating and taking vitamin and mineral supplements, kind of, what would that be?

[Angela] I have a behavioral background in my career, so I set my day up to where I kind of just do routines. So, I would wake up in the morning, I go to a spot in my kitchen and I have all my stuff right there in a little basket. I have my vitamins, my calcium supplement, and then I have other supplements that I take, and... Oh! This brings up one thing, too, after post-surgery, was my vitamin D levels got really low despite taking my minerals and vitamins, so I was put on a supplement maybe a few months ago for vitamin D. So, get all your levels checked.

So, I take my vitamin D and all those things, and I just have like, I have my protein powders right there. I try to do 1 to 2 protein shakes a day. You've got to keep your protein up. It does help keep you full and then you can snack less and things like that.

Just the vitamins and find what's best for you. Like, I'm on certain things on social media and some people swear by taking things individually and some

people like the bariatric brand vitamins. So, you have to just do what's best for you and find a routine for yourself with your vitamins and minerals.

And then, in terms of other nutrition, I prefer to use apps on my phone that I just log in what I eat and it gives you, you know, your protein that you've had for the day, your fat that you've had for the day, and I try to, I'm on 1,200 calories right now, so I stay under 1,200 calories and I go on with my day. And just make sure your protein is high because that's what does keep you full. I know they tell you, and you don't, and you, eh, whatever. But no, it's proven, like after surgery, if you eat your protein first, like it helps you to not eat the stuff you're not supposed to be eating.

[Interviewer] Another thing you talked about a lot that we know has been really important to our members, and then that sometimes folks don't always grasp, is mental health and wellness. So, I'd like to ask you a few questions, just if you could give someone advice considering bariatric surgery about how their relationship with their self or food or others might change after surgery, what would that be?

[Angela] So, even before surgery you might start having your relationships change with people because they may not be supportive of your decision. It could be for many reasons. It could be for their own reasons.

Like a lot of times people tell you, like, people project what they feel about themselves onto other people. So just take that into consideration. You know it's not uncommon, like I have friends that have had the surgery that have lost spouses because their spouses couldn't handle, you know, the weight loss and things like that. So just be prepared.

Prepare yourself as much as you can with your relationships prior because your lifestyle and your eating is gonna change. Like, I broke up with my last boyfriend because he was always upset that I wouldn't eat more at a restaurant now when we would go out, but then he wouldn't share his food either. And so, I would eat. I would buy my food and then eat a little bit of it, and he couldn't understand why I wasn't eating more, and I'm like, "They removed 80% of my stomach; that's why I'm not eating more!" You know? And so, it became a huge issue where it wasn't even fun for him to go out to eat anymore. I said, "Well, it's not fun to be with you anymore, so bye-bye."

[Laughs.]

So, things like that, you just have to be prepared for the relationships. People are going to question you, you know. Come up with a mantra that you—or just a fixed response—that you say to them, just so that, "Well, this is my new way of living, and this is what I'm doing for myself." Or whatever it needs to be.

Your relationship with yourself—I think that's your best and most important relationship to work on—is to be your own advocate like, know yourself, know that it's OK to ask for help, know that it's OK to reach out, like we're all human. There's gonna be times where you might be failing, like I have a food addiction so it's just like any other type of addiction. So, there's going to be times where I relapse or spontaneous recovery, whatever you want to call it. There's going to be times where you know you need to ask your friends for help. Like, "Hey, can you make my food for me? Because if I go in the kitchen right now, I'm gonna not do the right thing. So, can you make me something to eat?" and I've done that before. So just be sure to know yourself and know when you need to ask for help, and when you need to ask, don't be intimidated or afraid to do so. Because if you are...if you're afraid and you feel like "I got this on my own," then sometimes, you know, sometimes you need to ask for help and don't be afraid. That's my main thing.

And relationship with food in the beginning, for me it was a lot of...I was brought up...my cultural background is Italian and Mexican, so everything was love is...food is love and love is food. And so, everything was, you know, the more you eat or the more you cook for somebody, that's how much you show your love. And so for me, my relationship with food has always been, I guess, unhealthy in the sense that it was like the more I ate, the more I showed my parents and grandparents that I love them because they made it for me, and things like that. So, it was really hard. It's still hard, obviously. I have a food addiction and binge eating disorder. So, it's really hard to change your relationship with food, but it's possible.

What I do for myself is I read a lot of self-help books, both about food addiction and other ones just for mental health, and that's what helps me. But my relationship with food is it's, you know, it's that drug that's available on every corner and you don't get weird looks if you drive through a drive-thru, but the person in front of you or in back of you doesn't know that you've stopped two other places before going to that place, right?

So, it's not one of those addictions where it's illegal, right? We all need food to survive, so it's one of those, I think, is one of the hardest addictions. I mean, I

can't compare to other things because I haven't been addicted, but for myself, it's a daily battle. Just know yourself, know your relationship with yourself, and know your relationship with food, and try to change your mindset as what food is. Like, food is fuel. I try to tell myself that every day, like do I need this right now or is it something that I want? So, if I need it because I'm hungry I will eat, but I have to really pay attention to my body and actually, like, do an inventory, like, "Okay, am I really hungry right now or is it just because it looks good and I want to eat it?" So that's for myself, that's what I do, I kind of sit back and say, "Do I need to eat this right now or is it because I'm hungry and I haven't eaten it?" So that's what I think is important in terms of your relationship with others, your relationship with yourself, and your relationship with food.

[Interviewer] Some common questions we hear from members before and after are just kind of what to expect, especially from a medical perspective. So, one of the questions we often hear is around excess skin after surgery, and how folks deal with that or how it affects them. And we know that it affects people differently, so would love to hear your story about excess skin.

[Angela] Okay, awesome, so I've always been heavy. I was like, I started having weight issues, like being overweight, when I was in kindergarten and I remember because that's when my mom put me on my first diet. It was like, oh, if we went out to eat you can get a hamburger or french fries; you can't get both. And I'm like, "Okay, mom, why?"

So, I've always had extra weight on my body, and so prior to surgery I had what they call an apron. And also one thing I forgot to mention too as well: I had PCOS [polycystic ovary syndrome] and I still probably do, I just haven't been checked out. And so I have what they call the PCOS stomach, and so it's like a double stomach. So, I've always dealt with that. But for me it's...I don't have a lot of excess skin. I've lost almost 102 pounds. But now I'm like, what, at 90, 92 pounds from my highest weight. My arms aren't that bad. I mean, I don't have that extra, extra skin, but I do want to still get a tummy tuck when my BMI is safe enough. But I'm gonna do that on my own, but I don't really, I didn't have that issue really. My arms didn't really sag or anything like that.

But I do have friends that have had pretty significant, losing like two to 300 pounds and things like that. And he's a guy, so he doesn't really care. He's like, "Whatever!" But guys are different, right? It affects everybody different,



but yeah, for myself, it's just more something I want to do because I've had that issue prior to surgery, which is my stomach issue, but I didn't have that much skin left hanging or anything like that.

[Interviewer] If you could give someone advice who's considering bariatric surgery about physical activity—after surgery or what it's like before, during, after recovery—what do you wish you had known about physical activity before and after bariatric surgery?

[Angela] So, for myself, I was pretty active prior to surgery. I would, you know, considering I was considered morbidly obese, I would do 5-mile hikes. I would do all that. I did boot camps. And so, after surgery, I was really excited to get started on that and I had started. When I spoke to my surgeon, he had said that you could start exercising. Do what doesn't hurt you, you know, in terms of your incision and things like that. So, I started off walking, lifting light arm weights, and then I actually started training with a body-builder trainer. And then, for a couple of months I was exercising and things like that pretty intensely, but not to the point where I was exhausted.

Because, like I haven't mentioned it yet, but your intake of water is, it's really hard to gulp and slurp like you did before. And so, I would find myself getting winded and feeling like kind of dehydrated when I was working out, so I really had to make sure that I would work out in the evening, and throughout the day that I would keep up on my water intake. Sometimes I would supplement with like sports drinks without sugar and things like that. That was the main thing for me, but a thing that hindered my workout was getting into that car accident. So, in fact, I was just cleared yesterday by my neurosurgeon for my back to start walking. So, I did a 2-mile walk yesterday. I was so excited [laughs] that I can go walking and I just can't wait for myself to get back into a regimen of...I probably won't be able to do boot camp and things like that ever again because of my back, but just getting back into like some type of workouts that are gonna help me lose some more weight quickly.

[Interviewer] So one of the things we often hear is questions around hydration and how important that is after surgery, and kind of some important things to know in terms of how much you can drink at any time. Would love to hear your experience around that.

[Angela] So drinking is still one of the things that—and it probably will be for life—is I used to be able to gulp and you know, drink water like it was going out of

style. You can't, I can't, I'm not gonna say everybody can't, but I'm unable to gulp and drink water how I used to.

So, what I do is, it still feels like I'm gulping, but I will take a big gulp of water, but then I swallow it very, very, very slowly, because then it still feels like I'm gulping. There's been a couple of times or at the end of the day, I'm like, "I don't feel good," but it's because I hadn't drank enough during the day. You don't realize that you're not drinking, so I always carry a container with me with, you know, with some type of liquid, whether it's a sugar-free sports drink or mostly water. I try not to use the sports drinks too much because it's not the best thing to do, so I just drink a lot of water and I keep a cup with me every day. And I sip slowly all day long because you can get to the end of the day and you'll have a headache or things like that, and you don't know why. So just it's important to keep some type of liquid with you all day and sip on it.

[Interviewer] Any final thoughts you'd like to share with members who maybe are considering bariatric surgery? Or maybe who have already had it?

[Angela] The main thing for me is, don't compare your journey to others. It's really hard with social media and things like that, where you may be following other people's journeys or you may have made friends, you know during your Options classes and things like that, to where you start comparing yourself, and your weight loss compared to their weight loss.

And a lot of things that I've seen that I tried to avoid, is saying the word "only." So, I see a lot of people: "I only lost 20 pounds." "It's been only 2 weeks and I've only lost 10 pounds." And so, to me, the word "only" is very defeating. So, try to really refrain from the types of language that don't support your true efforts. And, like I said before, just life is going to throw you curveballs. So just to make sure that you advocate for yourself and that you feed your brain, so to speak. Pun intended. Don't feed your stomach, feed your brain [laughs]. Feed your brain with everything that you need. Because like I said, they don't remove any part of your brain, they remove... they physically alter your, you know, your digestive system.

So, you really just need to stay on top of what goes in and out of your brain and how you, how you deal with it. So, that's my main thing, is stay on top of your mental health, your self-care. Do things that you enjoy to take a time out. I know pre-COVID I was getting massages on a weekly basis. I haven't done that yet, but now I've turned to self-help books and things like that. So just

always put yourself first. Remember to take least 30 minutes a day just to do something for yourself, whether it's take a hot shower with no kids or animals near you or anything like that. So, just be sure to put yourself first, even if it's only for a couple of minutes a day.

[Interviewer] Thanks for sharing your story today, Angela!

[Angela] You're welcome!