

THE END OF DENIAL

You Can't Change Somebody Else, But You Can Let Professionals Try

by Anna Hanks

In medical lingo, the term intervention usually means taking someone to task about their alcohol or drug addiction. It isn't a term you hear often in the context of morbid obesity. This past fall I manhandled my four-hundred-pound father into a diet center in Durham, NC, as the result of what could only be called an intervention. It was like sending him to the Betty Ford Center except that his drug of choice was food. My father is the patriarch of a large family, a family in which eating is the central social event. When we eat out, he's always at the head of the table, orders rounds of appetizers for everyone, and picks up the check. While this might sound lovely to you, remember that many alcoholics are great to party with—until they become a menace to themselves and others.

Milton Hanks had a lot of good times at the table over the years, but just getting to the table was becoming harder and harder for him. Thanks to a host of medical problems, he could no longer feel his feet. He couldn't walk more than a few steps without the aid of an aluminum walker or a steady shoulder. He was taking a dozen medications and his doctor described him as "medically fragile." At home he used a recliner with a power assist to get him to his feet. Had his Southwest Airlines flight been full, he would have had to purchase tickets for two seats.

Over the years, we had all tried to get dad to help himself. I took him to water aerobics at the local YMCA and later to Weight Watchers meetings. Other family members and scores of doctors had also made attempts, but it all came to naught until his best friend's wife died early this summer, and his best friend decided that he wasn't going to lose anyone else. Bob Prejean decided that it was time to do something. He wasn't interested in what we had attempted in the past. He wanted a solution, he wanted one now, and he had a lot of free time to invest in making this happen.

After much investigation, the only real contender to treat my father was the Structure House in Durham, NC. It was the only place willing to take a four-hundred-pound man who could barely stand, yet didn't think he had a problem. (They also said that even at his size, he wouldn't feel out of place.)

The clinic not only deals with the physical aspects of obesity but also with psychological issues involving food. Which is important, because in observing my father repeat the pattern seen in the deterioration and decline of my diabetic grandmother, I thought that there must be something more going on than his love of fried seafood.

Structure House recommended a month's stay, but said that many people stay much longer. I decided we'd both go, as I knew there was no chance at all of getting him to remain there alone.

We decided to present it to him on his sixty-sixth birthday as a wonderful surprise at his party in Houston. While I knew he'd see through the ruse, I thought a little spin wouldn't hurt. As he unwrapped the large beach towel that covered the brochure, I told him what was up.

"You and I have reservations at this place—starting next Sunday." With my family all sitting around the table, everyone oohed and aahed over the glossy brochure—everyone except dad.

The next morning, he argued over breakfast, listing all the reasons why the idea of us going to this place wouldn't work. He said things like, "It's too late for me to change...I'm supposed to be fat, it's in my genes...They can't do anything for me." But his need for help was underscored when in trying to get up from the

breakfast table it took him several tries to get to his feet and maintain his balance.

Dad continued to argue for the next three days. As we loaded his electric wheelchair and all his medications into the Suburban, he wheeled, "If I promise to lose two pounds a week, do I still have to go?" In intervention terminology, this is called negotiating, and it got him nowhere. His pleas were ignored. He had a problem that we were determined he was going to address. By the time we got to Baton Rouge, it was, "I'll give it a week—can you let me off with a week?" By the time we hit Tennessee, he was saying that he would be ready to leave the diet center in two weeks, no matter what. He then started saying that he was going to go because of me, because of my weight problem. I figured whatever reasoning worked for him would work for me, and I continued to drive toward Durham, weight-loss capital of the country, pursuing destiny at sixty-five miles per hour.

For much of the trip, he was on his cell phone, calling friends and family to tell them he'd be "out of pocket" for a few weeks, because his daughter was making him go to a fat farm. His tone left no doubt about what he thought of the idea. Just as often, I had Bob Prejean on my cell phone, providing encouragement from his home in Boone, NC. Later we picked him up in Asheville, NC, for the final leg of the trip.

When the three of us pulled into the diet center, dad wasn't happy to be there. Despite my best efforts to get him out of the truck to see the facilities where he'd be spending the next month, he scowled and sent me in with his Visa card to register.

He glowered at everyone. He also refused to acknowledge he had a problem—even while weighing in at four hundred one pounds on his six-foot, five-inch frame. After an exercise class one night, when we came back to our apartment, he said, "Except for you and a couple of the other ladies, these people really are fat." He didn't seem to realize that he was one of the biggest people at Structure House.

While we were there, it was confirmed that my father was a master of denial. I found out that he was first diagnosed as diabetic in 1953—something that was news to my mother. "He never told me," she said, when I asked her. When later I asked dad if he had told mom about his diagnosis before they got married in 1961, he said, "I'm sure I did." But when pressed further, he said, "I don't remember... you know how mom is."

It turns out his original diagnosis as a diabetic had been made when he reached three hundred pounds at age fifteen, and he had to start taking oral medication for the disease. Following that diagnosis, he lost seventy pounds and was taken off medication. At that point, he didn't consider himself diabetic anymore, as diet and exercise managed the condition. He didn't tell anyone about his diagnosis until he went back on oral medication for his diabetes nearly fifteen years ago. That's when he told my mother, along with everyone else. He's only been taking insulin intravenously for about two years.

Perhaps even more worrisome, when asked if he'd ever had a heart attack, his response was, "Well, I don't think so...not really...well, I've never been hospitalized." This is not the answer most healthy people would give.

Dad told everyone—clinic staff included—that we were there for my weight problem. While Chanel certainly doesn't make anything in my size except shoes, at five-feet, four-inches I've never gotten anywhere close to two hundred pounds and the owner of my gym knows me on sight.

During our first week, I wondered if I had

INTERVENTION RESOURCES

As far as my research shows, there isn't anything like the Structure House program in Austin, and possibly no where else in the country. The program isn't cheap. Structure House rates range from \$2,750 for a week to \$8,650 for a month, with an extra fee for the optional diabetes program. My dad and I were fortunate that he was able to pay for the treatment upfront, without worrying about the cost. That isn't the case with everyone. Fellow patient Jackie and her husband Ron told me they took out a loan to pay for her treatment.


Insurance may offer limited reimbursement for individual psychotherapy sessions and laboratory services, but full reimbursement is not likely except in cases of severe medical necessity, according to the Structure House. The expenses may be tax deductible if medical expenses are greater than a certain percentage of one's income, but talk to an accountant for professional

advice about that.

Gerard Musante said Structure House is engaged in discussions with a major insurance company about the possibility of coverage for program fees, but nothing is definite.

For information about Structure House, call 1-800-553-0052, e-mail info@structurehouse.com or visit the web site at www.structurehouse.com.

For help with interventions, call Addiction Intervention Resources Inc. at 1-800-561-8158 or visit www.addictionintervention.com.

In Austin, counselor Ann McIntosh, MA, LCSW, is a specialist in eating disorders and obesity treatment. She is willing to work with families who need an intervention. Call McIntosh at 512-327-0400 or visit www.annmcintosh.com. 

—Anna Hanks

done the right thing by bringing my father to this clinic. He complained about the low-fat, low-calorie diet, saying, "I'm feeling as weak as branch water." He was restricted to sixteen hundred to nineteen hundred calories a day and his blood sugar had dropped to alarming lows. Luckily, daily visits to the nurse and a substantial reduction in his insulin put that straight. This was a good thing for me as well. When his blood sugar stabilized somewhat near the end of the first week, he stopped being openly hostile to me. He also stopped calling his buddies to complain about the "garbage" he was being fed.

This reduction in hostility was a great relief to me. Being around someone who is angry all the time is wearing on body and soul. Never mind that I was eating twelve hundred calories a day, to show him that I wasn't asking him to do anything I wasn't willing to do.

A day at Structure House started with breakfast at 8am and continued with a full schedule of classes on nutrition, psychological issues involving eating, cooking lessons, water-exercise classes, menu planning for home, and more until 6pm. Every moment of the day was scheduled, and all meals were eaten family-style in the dining room. Soon after dinner, my father dropped off to sleep, like most of the other participants.

The basic idea of Structure House is that you plan what you are going to eat at each meal, perhaps a week in advance, and then you stick to that plan. By virtue of being at Structure House, you've acknowledged that your body cannot handle unplanned eating.

For the first week you eat three meals a day with the same people. You go to exercise and nutrition classes with the same people, and you all go to group therapy together. Our group bonded tightly, in a way that Structure House considered highly unusual.

Our group included Jackie, a woman also there because of family pressure. Like my dad, Jackie used a wheelchair or electric scooter to get around. Her husband Ron helped her by opening doors and generally acting as would a personal assistant for someone with a disability—much the same as I was doing for my dad.

In the middle of the program, I went away for a long weekend mental-health sabbatical, and my mother came in to be with my father.

While I was gone, his attitude changed. When I returned, he stopped fighting me so much and began to talk positively. Frankly, I don't know what happened.

Perhaps the change stemmed from hearing the Structure House founder, Gerard Musante, PhD, a clinical psychologist, talk about "using food" and telling my father that someone who claims he just likes to eat but has serious health problems is like someone who is drunk when telling you that they just like the taste of wine.

Of course, the change in my father's attitude could have been due to the improvement in the way he felt. After a few weeks at Structure House, he regained a sensation in his feet for the first time in years. One morning he recounted with glee that during the night he had been cold—and had just sat up and gotten the blanket off the foot of his bed without even thinking about it. That's something that most of us do all the time, but this newfound ease of movement was a major personal victory for him.

After the allotted four weeks and losing some thirteen pounds at Structure House, my father was released on his own recognition on October 10. Once we got him back home we bought him a digital food scale and some dietetic cookbooks. In the following two weeks he lost an additional ten pounds, and had even gotten into a pair of size fifty-six britches he said he "hadn't been into in a year." (When we went to Structure House, he was wearing a size sixty-two.)

He took the initiative and bought a digital scale to weigh himself at home. So far things are peachy. He was still losing about half a pound a day and as of October 26, he was down to three hundred seventy-seven pounds.

"Well, it was a good experience," he said after he was back home in Houston—a far cry from his attitude when we were driving to Durham. He also claimed that his attitude had changed the second day we were there, after he'd met everyone in our group, had gotten to know them, and saw that everyone was there for the same reason, to lose weight.

I think that finding this peer group may have been responsible for his initial reduction in hostility, but I still don't understand what happened when I was gone for the weekend and he moved from ambivalence to acceptance.

Feeling has continued to return to his feet. In fact, on a fishing trip to Lake LBJ, he said that he experienced a pain in his foot that hadn't been there in ten years. He said he even got his now less-swollen feet into a pair of Topsiders that he hadn't worn since the late nineteen-nineties.

Of course, in the interest of revisionist history, he now says that he was okay with the idea the whole time, and that he knew it would be good for him. I don't know if he'll ever buy into Musante's idea that "It's just food." But I hope we are working in that direction. After a lifetime of dinners with him, I hope he'll finally stop pressing me to have dessert. But now that I know he's been a diabetic since the dawn of rock 'n' roll, I can understand why he would want me to eat what he can't.

We were very lucky that this intervention worked as well as it did. Even at Structure House, interventions for weight loss are fairly new and they get only a handful of such participants each year. And they are challenging clients.

"An intervention with this problem is somewhat more difficult than an intervention with drugs or alcohol," Musante said.

Robert Poznanovich, president of Addiction Intervention Resources, and himself a former Structure House client who also is in recovery from drug and alcohol addiction, said, "Over-eating addictions are even more difficult than other addictions, because you have to eat."

There are different ways to measure the effectiveness of an intervention, but just initiating it is a success according to Musante and Poznanovich.


"The first step is for families to overcome denial," Poznanovich said, and to deal with the "big pink elephant in the living room."

Musante said that after leaving Structure House, clients usually view the intervention as an indication of a family and friends' love.

Even when the intervention seems to have no initial effect, Musante said, "the seed is there." Getting a person to come to Structure House for treatment, even if it's not right away or is years down the road, means the intervention was a success, Musante said: "If the person goes, it worked."

And success can be measured in more than pounds lost, Musante said. Other indicators include lowered cholesterol, decreased joint pain, increased mobility, and a better quality of life.

For anyone contemplating intervening on behalf of a friend or loved one with a weight problem, Musante thinks it's best to get professional help in convincing them to undergo treatment. As for my father's situation, if I'd had any idea I could have called someone for help I would have done so gladly. I never thought to do so. I had never heard of someone addressing a family problem this way. As a result, I didn't have professional help and the project was enormously stressful for me, both in the weeks leading up to confronting my father and being at the Structure House with him. Even at the end of the third week he was pressing me to let him leave. I don't think I realized how much stress I'd been under until six weeks after we left Structure House. I came home and simply collapsed.

By November 3, dad had lost another nine pounds and was down to three hundred sixty-eight. While he's still got a long way to go, he's making progress and we're all hoping he sticks with the program. The rest is up to him. 

Anna Hanks lost ten pounds walking the walk with her father at Structure House. Since her low-fat time there, and through no effort of her own, she now feels physically terrible after eating Krispy Kreme doughnuts or drinking whole milk—proof that no good deed goes unpunished.