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Memorial Hermann doctor turns personal weight loss struggles into a career helping others

By **Lindsay Peyton**, *Correspondent*
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Gift Article





Sameer Murali, an associate professor of surgery with McGovern Medical School at UTHealth Houston and obesity medicine specialist at Memorial Hermann, struggled with weight loss since childhood. Then he made a career out of helping others facing the same challenges. He knows that a holistic, multi-pronged approach is important. He was hired recently from California to be part of a new Memorial Hermann/UTHealth program that looks at all aspects of weight loss. Thursday, April 28, 2022, in Houston.

When Dr. Sameer Murali meets patients for the first time, he asks, “Why do you want to lose weight? Why is this important to you — right now?”

“The answer is the most revealing thing,” he said.

That’s how Murali learns what challenges he will face — and how he can best assist — on his patient’s journey to better health.

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Murali, 42, serves as an obesity medicine specialist at Memorial Hermann and associate professor of surgery with McGovern Medical School at UTHealth Houston.

When patients have a vague reason for weight loss, like being healthier or living longer, he urges them to get more precise: Why do you want to live longer? What do you want to be able to do with this body?

“You need a clear vision of why you’re doing this,” he said.

For instance, a patient was driven by wanting to run with his child. “The moment I heard that, I knew I wasn’t going to have any problem,” Murali said.

He considers himself a guide and weight loss to be a “hero’s journey,” a narrative by Joseph Campbell about heading out on an adventure and returning home transformed.

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Spending time getting to know the patient is the key to finding a happily ever after, Murali said.

That's why his first appointment with patients is an hourlong consultation. Topics include health history, mental health, anxieties, nutrition and peer support.

"We travel through the universe of elements that could cause weight gain," he said. "I'm going to treat your weight gain the same way as if you had a fever."

Just like a fever can be caused by tuberculosis, COVID, malaria or leukemia, weight gain has a myriad of possible underlying causes.

And in that first session, Murali admits, "The person in the group who benefits the most is me. It's what I wish my doctor had done for me."

He often tells patients, “Whatever your struggle, I believe it has a very deep root. That’s what my story has revealed to me.”

Murali knows firsthand about weight loss, because he’s struggled with it since childhood.

When he shares his own story, patients often tell him they are relieved to be treated by someone who understands. “It gives them hope and courage.”

Cycle of shame

Murali’s parents immigrated from India in the 1970s, and Murali was born in Oklahoma.

His father worked in oil and gas, and his career took the family first to Dubai, United Arab Emirates, and then to Holland. They moved to Houston, settling in Katy, when Murali was in fourth grade.

From the get-go, he said he felt like he didn’t belong. While abroad, he identified as an American. But for standardized tests back in the U.S., he was asked to bubble in a different ethnicity. Other students teased him relentlessly, he said.

“I had a sense of rejection,” Murali said. “That continued throughout my early years.”

Eating became a coping mechanism.

“I can’t say when it happened or how, but food was something that gave me comfort, especially sweets,” he said.

Murali began to gain weight. His pediatrician asked him to lower the figure on the scale but never outlined how.

By the time he was in junior high, he was one of the largest kids in the class. He said he developed a sense of guilt and shame, which became a cycle.

WEIGHT LOSS SUCCESS: Working from home spurred a Houston teacher’s 25-pound weight loss

“You try to self-soothe with the one thing that’s making it worse,” Murali said. “And it gets worse and worse.”

His only respite involved going to India to visit his grandparents. “When we would go, I would lose weight,” he said.

In India, he ate home-cooked meals three times a day. There were no snacks, and nothing was processed. He walked everywhere and learned yoga from his grandfather.

But after two months, he would come home and start gaining back the weight he’d lost. In the U.S., there was access to junk food, including chocolate milk and pastries.

Murali said that experience taught him an important lesson: environment shapes health. He continues to see this today, as certain neighborhoods lack access to healthy foods.

“Your ZIP code matters more than your genetic code in this country,” he said.

Practicing obesity medicine

Murali’s peak weight of 220 pounds was while he was in his 20s. Unhealthy habits from childhood, including not being athletic, contributed to weight gain in college.

And as he entered medicine and eventually his residency, he saw the effect of anxiety and stress on his weight. “It’s a perfect hurricane, not even just a storm,” he said.

Two key experiences changed everything, he said.

The first was a year abroad in India on a scholarship to study music. He started going to a gym, walked everywhere, found a dietitian and ate fresh food.

Murali dropped about 35 pounds, and his relationship to food had changed.

The second, and most important, he said, was finding something that provided significant meaning and purpose crucial to losing weight. He was studying medicine and saw the correlation between

obesity and disease.

But medical school training lacked the connection. “We had no nutrition module at all. Zero,” he said. “Weight was treated as a behavioral problem, not a medical problem.”

He decided to audit nutrition classes.

During his internal medicine residency, he saw a young man with a significant weight problem facing diabetes, heart failure and hypertension.

“I remember refilling his medications and feeling like, ‘This is useless,’” Murali said. “I’m supposed to be the guy who is helping him, but I don’t have the tools.”

Not long after, he would dedicate his career to promoting health through weight loss.

Murali studied social determinants of health. He took a deep dive into diabetes and understanding insulin resistance, specifically focusing on the prevalence of the condition in South Asian immigrants.

He gave a series of talks about insulin resistance — and considered becoming an endocrinologist but found a better fit in obesity medicine.

He had practiced the specialty since 2011 in California, working alongside bariatric surgeons.

Then, in October, Murali moved to Houston — bringing his holistic approach back home.

COVID's call to arms

“Obesity is health care’s climate change,” Murali said. “Like climate change, we keep ignoring this problem, and obesity is a problem that is going to get worse. Like climate change, everyone points the fingers at someone else.”

The biggest finger gets pointed at the person struggling, Murali added.

“It’s as if you’re the problem and you’re somehow defective,” he said. “It’s a stigma that continues today.”

The pandemic offered him the opportunity to study the risks obesity poses to health, working with infectious disease epidemiologist Dr. Sara Tartof.

In 2020, their team produced, “Obesity and mortality among patients diagnosed with COVID-19: results from an integrated health care organization” in the journal, Annals of Internal Medicine, which concluded that “obesity plays a profound role in risk for death from COVID-19.” The patients in the study were from Kaiser Permanente Southern California, an integrated health care organization.

In fact, Murali said the risk was more significant from obesity than many other comorbidities. Individuals with a BMI of 40 or above were two to four times more likely to die from COVID-19.

DIABETES AND COVID-19: Over half of Houstonians who died of COVID-19 had diabetes

“When I saw that data, I realized this is the smoking gun,” Murali said.

Treating obesity was absolutely necessary from a medical perspective, he explained.

“COVID to me was like something you can’t unsee,” he said. “It was like a call to arms. I can’t describe it in any other way.”

A new home in Houston

Murali’s search for innovation led him back home.

On a trip to visit his parents in Houston, he connected with Kyle Price, a senior vice president with Memorial Hermann Health System.

Memorial Hermann already had NewStart, a surgical weight-loss program.

“But surgery is just one aspect,” said Price, who oversees Memorial Hermann products and ensures the system has the right physicians in place and the right programs at its locations. “How do we build a program that looks at all aspects?”

WEIGHT LOSS SURGERY: Here’s why bariatric surgeries have increased during the pandemic

He wanted to create a comprehensive program for all other routes to weight loss, one that assessed medical conditions, social determinants and emotional health.

He is now working with UTHealth’s Dr. Deborah Horn, medical director for the UT Center of Obesity Medicine and Metabolic Performance, and a team of specialists to create a new program. There are dietitians, exercise physiologists and even anthropologists on board.

“When you meet Dr. Horn, you can just feel her passion,” Price said. “I was looking for someone who had the same passion. You had to at least match it.”

Murali had that electricity, Price said.

“That’s our guy,” he said. “We need to get him on the team. He would bring knowledge and expertise.”

Price said he hopes to introduce the model in January.

“How do we change the trajectory of people’s health? There’s so much opportunity out there,” he said.

In the meantime, Murali is working at the clinical level — to build a new weight management practice within UTHealth and Memorial Hermann.

Murali began seeing patients in November — and already has a full schedule.

“It’s our responsibility to lead and create a vision for the future,” he said. “There are very effective treatments that can help people. We have more medications and surgery for obesity now.”

He added, “These tools are vital. Not because they fix something, but they are a vehicle for our patients to be better participants in their own self-care.”

Peyton is a freelance writer based in Houston.

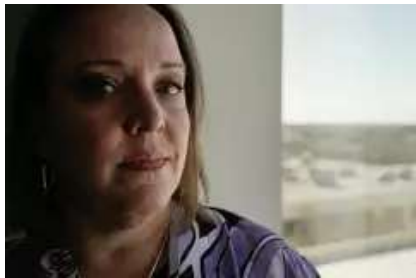
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Lindsay Peyton is ReNew Houston's Transformation columnist.



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