Taken Too Soon: Obesity Kills

March 19, 2013 By Kate Ferguson

I got the bad news via a frantic phone call. My younger brother, Tony, collapsed in a highway rest stop bathroom and couldn't be revived. He perished from a massive heart attack that was, no doubt, aggravated by years of unaddressed obesity.

Tony missed his 50th birthday by just four days. He was about 6-feet, 3 inches tall and had to weigh a little over 300 pounds. Tony never really knew his weight. He refused to go to the doctor. He didn't like hearing that he was too heavy and he avoided conversations that focused on anything having to do with his weight problem.

Unfortunately, there are many people who are like my brother. Many, like him, carry their weight like a burden, unwilling to ask for help and preferring to remain in denial. When I think about Tony, I remember so many things about him. His great sense of humor; his ready smile; his hysterical one-liners; his love of sports and his sweet and gentle nature. But there was a shadow over all of these wonderful qualities. We were concerned about his health and the weight he carried that threatened him being around to share all those qualities he had with us.

As the editor of a health magazine, I've read extensively about the dangers of obesity. Almost every day that passes some new piece of information crosses my desk about this condition. When I read these things, my mind would fix on Tony. The thing is, obesity is so much more than how many extra pounds someone is carrying.

It's been said that obesity, like depression, is a response to someone's inner pain. In general, I tend to agree with this assessment. Any addiction, whether it's to food or some other substance, can be a way of self-medicating. On the surface, my brother was a very happy person. But, at times, I knew he was in pain and unhappy with a lot in his life.

Like many other people, Tony had his ups and downs and stretches where life's disappointments had hit hard enough for him to stagger from the pain. Not that my brother didn't talk. He did. Occasionally, he'd tell us about things that really bothered him, which made me wonder sometimes about the things he didn't share.

When we think about Tony, it's with a sense of sorrow that he didn't get more time. We think he would have been able to beat his obesity problem. He'd done it before on more than one occasion. But sometimes ridding ourselves of pain simply takes more time.

In my brother's case, he was on the threshold of starting a whole new life. Things were looking up for him, but he'd run out of time. Obesity had taken a toll on his body in ways he'd never expected. In the last few weeks of his life, Tony had adopted a whole new outlook. He'd joined the Y and started

swimming and making changes to his diet.

If only he’d just had a little more time.

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