

DO THE CUFFS MATCH THE COLLAR?

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Confession time... for years, I felt like a fraud on the platform. Here I was going around telling people *“you can be what you want to be, you can reach your goals, you can climb your highest mountain if you’ll only do it one step at a time!”* Blah, blah, blah. All the while, I couldn’t control the amount of food I was putting into my mouth.

Eating disorders notwithstanding, I felt like the messenger didn’t match the message. *The collars didn’t match the cuffs.* I had ballooned to 305 pounds and was on 22 pills per day and over 100 units of insulin twice a day. I was looking squarely at a heart attack or a stroke and my doctors gave me less than a year for it to happen. And here I was telling people if they could dream it they could achieve it.

As the poster boy for every weight loss program that ever existed, I proved that just dreaming it wouldn’t make it so. My shero, Pat Vivo, CSP, CPAE came up to me in Charlotte, NC at the National Speakers Association Eastern Winter Workshop in January of 2003, put her arm around me, kissed me and told me *“Mike, you look like hell!”* Another great motivational speech from someone who cared about me.

Little did Pat know, I was scheduled to have a bariatric by-pass, commonly known as a stomach staple, just 30 days later. I told her *“you won’t recognize me the next time you see me.”* Unfortunately for me, I never saw Pat again as she died later in the year, but her words rang through to me. I knew I had reached the end of my rope. Desperate ills require desperate cures.

I asked my surgeon, *“why is it that normal people sit down, eat, get full, get up and walk away while I eat until I pass out or simply run out of food.”* He answered me rather cleverly, *“we have a medical term for people like you: YOU’RE SCREWED UP!”*

I responded that I had friends that had already offered me that same advice, and I didn’t have to give them a lot of money. *“No, seriously,”* he went on.

“You didn’t have a prayer. Your genes were stacked against you. The message just doesn’t get from your stomach to your brain.”

“I have the proof,” he went on. “Both my wife (who was also a surgeon) and I have both had this surgery. We have two children- ages ten and ten and one-half. The ten year old is our biological child and weighs 320 pounds. The 10 ½ year old adopted child weighs 70 pounds. They eat off the same table in the same home at the same time with food made out of the same pot. Our biological child had the deck stacked against him.”

Within a year, I had lost 130 pounds and my world had changed completely as a result of having the surgery. My wife affectionately says, *“You cheated.”* To which I respond, *“and your point is?”*

Today, I’m off all medication and now wear my kid’s size 34 underwear, which drives them nuts.

I now feel a lot more honest about my message to my audiences. No, I’m not a big proponent of this drastic surgery for obese people. No I’m not on some soapbox saying you’ve got to make these kinds of changes in your life. No, I’m not like some former smoker or alcoholic who wants to reform the world. I’m just a guy who couldn’t do this by himself- I had to have help. Therein lay the real message. Don’t be afraid to get help with whatever is ailing you in your life. It’s not a sign of weakness- it’s a sign of strength to seek out help when nothing else is working for you.

Today, the cuffs match the collar. The message and the messenger both seem to be a better match than they’ve ever been. Yes, I still kid about being Lebanese and Catholic and being one of 11 children and having a big nose and all that stuff I still have. Why not? That stuff is who I am; no need to deny it.

Probably the most profound thing I’ve learned in my 30+ years on the platform is that the more vulnerable you are with your audiences the more open they will be to you. The more you open yourself up to them, the more they will be receptive to you. No, don’t use the platform for therapy. But don’t use it as a mask either. Be yourself and they’ll learn to love you for your honesty.

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Championship of Public Speaking for Toastmasters International in 1978. He is the only living speaker in the world to hold the earned Certified Speaking Professional (CSP) designation from the National Speakers Association, the World Championship of Public Speaking from Toastmasters and to be a member of the Speakers Hall of Fame for both the National Speakers Association and Toastmasters International. To reach Michael, call toll free 1-800-356-0567 or visit his web site at <http://www.aunline.com>

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