

Don't Go There

How my weight became the one taboo subject between us

By Paula Derrow

A few months ago my husband and I slept in separate beds, the first time in our two-year marriage. (Sleep isn't exactly the right word, since I didn't get much of it.) The cause: a spat about my weight, never an easy subject, and less easy lately because I had gained more than 15 pounds since we'd gotten hitched.

Earlier in the evening, I'd been complaining to him about a nutritionist who had recommended I forgo wheat, dairy and carbs of any kind. Me, I'm a carbs girl—I've never met a plate of pasta I didn't like. "I'm not sure I can do this," I told Randy, as we sat at the bar of a local restaurant and I picked at my semiwilted salad, dressing on the side, croutons moved to his plate. "I think it makes more sense for me to

just eat less of everything and exercise more, don't you think?" I was expecting support, but instead my husband said this: "Well, clearly what you've been doing hasn't been working for you."

Ouch! His words brought to mind an encounter I once had with a trainer who was trying to sell me on his all-jump-roping-all-the-time plan. When I expressed skepticism, he looked me up and down and said snarkily, "Clearly, what you've been doing hasn't been working for you." My eyes stung then, as they did again at the bar.

Didn't my husband realize how hard I struggled with my weight, the willpower it took for me to keep on with my (admittedly slow) runs each week? Unlike him, I had never been a skinny kid. From age 13 on, I rode the dieting roller coaster, bingeing my way up to a size 14, back down to an 8, then up again, often in the span of a few months.

It wasn't until my twenties that a doctor's harsh words ("Keep going this way and you'll end up with high blood pressure and heart disease") sent me scurrying to the gym for the first time ever. Much

to my surprise, I discovered that I liked exercising and, even better, seeing the muscles develop in my biceps and calves. In all, I lost 35 pounds over the course of a year, then maintained my new svelte state for a decade before my slowly, slowly creeping weight gain garnered the jibe from the jump-roping trainer.

And then, from my husband.

When I met Randy, I was what most people would call a tad chubby, especially compared with his chiseled body. Yet he was plainly attracted to me: a curvy girl, but one who was strong enough to swim with him in the ocean and join him on long bike rides and hikes. My weight didn't seem to matter, but I stepped up my workouts and skipped desserts—and even pasta—in preparation for our wedding day. When I walked down the aisle, I was 15 pounds thinner than I had been on the day we met.

Which brings me to that night at the bar. Evidently, my husband was all too aware that I had put that weight back on, and then some. Now here I was, the waistband of my jeans cutting into my skin, an uncomfortable sensation that filled me with shame—and concern that my husband would stop loving me or, at least, stop wanting me.

Instead of confessing my fears, I let him have it ("How dare you say that," and so on). When I finished, he got up from the bar stool to take a walk. Back home, I went to bed, expecting my usually sweet mate to follow before long, ready to make amends. Not this time. Instead, he took himself to the guest room.

"I need some space," he said. "And I don't want to talk about your weight again—not whether you're losing or gaining, not whether you look fit or less fit, not what you should eat, nothing! Whatever I say is wrong, so I won't say anything anymore."

Wow. A subject that was totally off-limits, just like my favorite foods. Banning any topic didn't feel healthy to me, but I couldn't disagree with my husband entirely: Talking about my weight or my workouts or what I had eaten that day never seemed to lead to anything good. Whenever I had spent a few days dieting and then had asked Randy how I looked, he would inevitably reply, "Darlin', I love you, but you look the same to me." In other words, he wouldn't lie. Obviously I was putting him in an untenable position: He could tell me I looked thinner, even if I didn't, or he could tell the truth and risk my wrath.

That night, tossing and turning alone in our bed, I came to a decision. I decided to shut up about my weight, not least because I was determined to prove to my mad-

deningly slender spouse that I was capable of slimming down, with no help from him.

The next morning, I got on the scale, something I'd been avoiding. The verdict: 161, the most I'd weighed in years and 25 pounds too many on my 5-foot-3 frame. I set my mouth in a thin line, took a deep breath and realized that, yes, it *was* time to do things differently.

Instead of slogging through slow runs, I began walking our hilly road every day, picking up my pace week by

week. As the weather got warmer, I added swims at the local lake; sometimes Randy joined me for these, the two of us stroking through the velvety water. Meanwhile I concocted giant salads to go with our dinners and even laid off ice cream. As the weeks passed, my weight kept dipping: 158, 154, 151. It was tough not to share these victories with my husband, but in truth, he could see I was making progress.

Then one day, as I was about to dive in for our swim, I noticed Randy gazing at me appreciatively. "You're looking buff, baby," he enthused, pulling me toward him for a kiss. Instead of asking, "Really? Do you think so?" I smiled and said, "Thanks, honey. I'm feeling good too."

It's taken a while, but I'm finally learning that when it comes to my body, I don't need anyone's approval but my own. And when I do slip up and let my husband know what the scale reads, he gives me a mock stern look and says, "I thought we weren't going to talk about that." Then we both laugh and move on to more interesting subjects. ●

I couldn't disagree with my husband entirely: Talking about my weight, my workouts or what I had eaten that day never seemed to lead to anything good.