

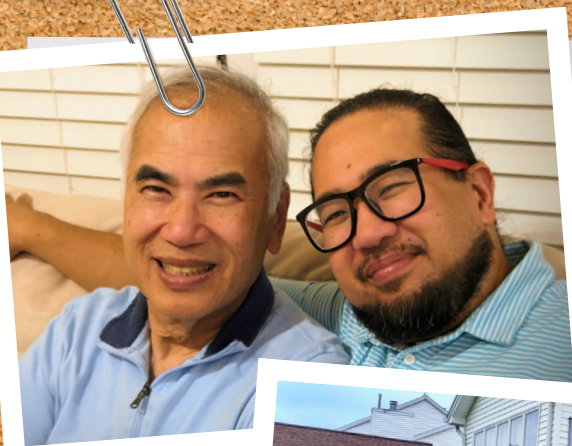


OAC  
Community

# Perspectives

A Father and Son's Take on Weight and Health

by Anh-Vu Pham and Dang Tuan Pham, MD



Meet Vu and Dr. Pham — a dynamic father-son duo who are making waves in the fight for obesity care within the Obesity Action Coalition (OAC). Vu is not only a dedicated member of the OAC National Board of Directors, but he also brings a personal touch as someone who has experienced the challenges of obesity firsthand. On the other side is Dr. Pham, a skilled bariatric surgeon who treats patients with obesity daily. Together, they are a health-focused superhero team, showing us that tackling weight and health isn't just a job — it's a shared journey that can bring families closer and inspire real change.

We sat down with Vu and Dr. Pham to learn more about their story, filled with ups, downs and a lot of heartfelt moments. Here's a glimpse into what they shared.

**Q: As father and son, how has your shared journey with obesity strengthened your bond and mutual understanding? How has it influenced your approach to managing weight and health, both personally and professionally?**

**Dr. Pham:** It all started out as a pure business relationship — Vu was hired as an office manager at my bariatric surgery practice because of his qualifications and background.

**Vu:** Absolutely! I wanted to work at work, and reserved family time for family. We quickly realized that health and weight management were just as important around our own dinner table and in our everyday interactions. It felt natural to talk about what we were eating, plan physical activities for my children and I to do with their grandparents, and even candidly share weight management struggles.

**Dr. P:** We've had lots of late work sessions that started as business talks and turned into thinking about what we've learned from taking care of patients. It shifted how we see things, moving away from just surgery or food control and more towards supporting people in their lifelong journey to get better.

“ We quickly realized that health and weight management were just as important around our own dinner table and in our everyday interactions. ”



This means celebrating their successes as well as helping them overcome bumps in the road. I've learned so much from Vu. We can talk freely and candidly share ideas at a very down-to-earth level, which helps me see my job in a more personal, humanized way.

**Vu:** I've learned so much from my dad about the science behind managing weight and health, but our relationship also gave me the chance to learn how to talk conversationally about the subject with someone knowledgeable whom I respected. It seems silly now that I waited until my adult life to take his offer to talk health seriously. Imagine growing up with Michael Jordan and turning down the chance to shoot hoops on the driveway with him!

**Q:** Both of you emphasize the importance of a whole person approach and communities of support in the weight-loss journey. Can you elaborate on this?

**Vu:** Despite what some believe, we didn't get into this situation (having obesity) on our own. So, how unfair is it that some think we have to get out on our own? Human beings are social in nature, and being able to take this journey alongside like-minded people who get our struggles and know our triumphs makes it much easier.

**Dr. P:** We learned quickly that many of our patients have difficulty reaching their goals because they're on their own, dealing with guilt caused by societal bias and weight-shaming. So, with help from resources provided by the OAC and the American Society for Metabolic and Bariatric Surgery (ASMBS), we embarked on a journey to debunk some of the myths about obesity. It's not just about eating too much. We're all about looking at the whole person — mind, body and spirit — and helping them get better.

**Dr. P:** This new way of looking at obesity, combined with a community that doesn't judge or shame people, helps patients feel less stressed about crash "dieting" to fit in with society. Instead, they can focus on taking steps to find inner peace and happiness in a healthier body. Instead of forcing a treatment solution or "quick fix" for their short-term goals, we provide ongoing support and companionship through their lifelong weight management journey.

# Get Connected to OAC Today!



The OAC knows that the journey with weight can be challenging, but we also know that great things happen when we learn, connect and engage.

Sign up to stay connected to our mission, the latest news, events, ways to get involved, information, and all things OAC!



## Let's Connect!

[ObesityAction.org/get-connected](https://ObesityAction.org/get-connected)




**Vu:** Dr. Pham always listens to his patients, and he insisted that our staff and I also do the same. One thing we realized when we were listening to patients talk at support groups or hearing them share their greatest achievements at patient celebrations was that it was seldom about that number on the scale! What was important was getting off diabetes medication, being able to run with grandchildren, dancing at their daughter's wedding, and living LIFE again! This made it easy for us to focus on whole health, with weight management being a part of the whole picture.

**Q:** In your experience, why do you think men are generally less likely than women to address their weight and health? How can we encourage more men to be proactive with their well-being?

**Dr. Pham:** The majority (more than 80%) of the patients we see are female and have self-referred. The few male patients usually have a higher body mass index and are much sicker. They often deny their condition, believing in the "higher" muscular content of their bodies. Many men are too proud to seek help, believing that they can do it on their own.

**Vu:** I can't speak for all the men on the planet, of course, but as a man myself, I didn't acknowledge that I had weight and health issues until long after I should have. I believe culture and media play a role in this. How many TV shows and cartoons did I grow up watching that featured stereotypes about body shapes, where the dad had extra weight and the mom was stick thin? I could name dozens! It seemed like the social norm for "guys" was to be huskier, and no one questioned it. It was considered rude to talk about weight and health, so we didn't talk about it. That's slowly changing, but not fast enough. I think one thing that will help men take a proactive approach to their health is to normalize talking about health in a way that doesn't invoke feelings of shame and guilt.

“Many men are too proud to seek help, believing that they can do it on their own.”



**Q:** The two of you have likely witnessed a generational shift in attitudes about obesity, weight and health. How do you perceive these differences between your generations? What positive changes have you observed, and what challenges still exist?

**Dr. Pham:** Younger generations are seen as more impatient and ambitious, with a focus on body image and a desire for instant rewards. In contrast, the older generation is more concerned with long-term health improvement. On the other hand, the younger generation is generally more accepting of differences in gender and race, while obesity remains one of the last areas of segregation. The older generation is less tolerant and more critical in all three aspects. As Vu and I work together, we find ourselves balancing these perspectives and overcoming our initial biases to become better individuals, contributing to the community's overall health and happiness.

**Vu:** It's interesting to think that at one point in history, having obesity was seen as a sign of success, indicating one had extra resources to eat beyond necessity. Times change. They can change for good, and they can change faster with guidance and community involvement. We are starting to see more men taking their health seriously at an earlier age. We are starting to see more people recognize obesity as a disease and not a symptom of a lifestyle choice. We are starting to see the media slow down on using obesity as the butt of their jokes. These changes are beginning, but they aren't happening quickly enough. The real challenge is to shift the world's perspectives on weight and health. It will happen. Just like younger generations can't understand why anyone would smoke cigarettes, I hope that with each generation, we become a little more evolved in our way of thinking.



**Q:** Throughout your respective journeys, you have both emphasized that it's not just about the weight you lose but the life you gain. Can you share some specific ways in which achieving a healthier weight has positively impacted your life or your patients' lives?

**Vu:** Non-Scale Victories! I love these. We gather and share these achievements from the attendees at our support groups at the start of every meeting. I have so many that I think back on fondly, to the point where I could probably write an entire article listing them all! Some of my favorites include stories of parents finally getting a full hug from their child, with their fingers able to reach each other around their back; individuals progressing from needing a wheelchair to being the "fast walker" in the family, prompting everyone to ask them to slow down; and people starting dance classes to share an anniversary dance with their spouse. There are so many examples!

And for myself, living healthier has allowed me to spend more time with my children — biking, walking, and simply being more active. This past weekend, at a Splash Day event with our cub scouts, I ran and dove onto a lawn water slide! I definitely wouldn't have felt comfortable doing that when I wasn't as healthy. Watching my dad take care of himself gives me the assurance that he'll be there for my children to enjoy for as long as possible!

## Do You Want to Share Your Story?

Whether you have a story about navigating obesity, facing weight stigma, or inspiring others, your voice is important. Visit the OAC's story project at [WeightoftheWorld.com](http://WeightoftheWorld.com) to share yours today. Not sure what to say? Consider one of our question prompts to guide you.

If you would like your story to be featured in a future issue of *Weight Matters Magazine*, please email [membership@obesityaction.org](mailto:membership@obesityaction.org).



**Vu getting OAC  
Community  
Member of the  
Year Award**

**Dr. Pham:** In the beginning, we noticed that patients initially came to see us for weight-loss. However, through personalized discussions, we've learned that each patient has a unique story and set of aspirations. These aspirations include being able to bend over and tie their shoelaces, walking without experiencing knee or hip pain, or simply not being short of breath anymore. Despite their varying goals, they all share a common desire to lead a better life.

One of our patients once showed us a picture of herself completing a marathon — a lifelong dream she achieved after losing some weight. Another patient sent us a picture of a colorful butterfly with the caption, "Before, I was an unhappy, slow and ugly caterpillar. Liberated from my shell, I have transformed into a free-spirited, soaring butterfly."

**Vu:** There's one I absolutely have to share — one of my favorites. We had a patient whose turning point was being publicly asked to get off a roller coaster because she could not fit into the harness safely. This happened after waiting in a long line, and everyone saw her being removed. A year after her surgery, we organized a patient outing to the same theme park. She had her moment of validation as she got back on that roller coaster, seated right next to her surgeon, Dr. Pham, and had the best roller coaster ride of her life. I remember watching her hugging my dad afterwards and thinking, "This is why we do it. Not for the weight lost but for the life gained!"





# ABOUT THE OBESITY ACTION COALITION (OAC)

The Obesity Action Coalition (OAC) is a National non-profit organization dedicated to giving a voice to individuals affected by obesity and helping them along their journey toward better health. Our core focuses are to elevate the conversation of weight and its impact on health, improve access to obesity care, provide science-based education on obesity and its treatments, and fight to eliminate weight bias and discrimination.



VIBRANT COMMUNITY



NATIONAL AWARENESS CAMPAIGNS



ANNUAL CONVENTION



ADVOCACY



PUBLIC EDUCATION

## LEARN, CONNECT, ENGAGE

The OAC knows that the journey with weight can be challenging but we also know that great things happen when we learn, connect and engage. That is why the OAC Community exists. Our Community is designed to provide quality education, ongoing support programs, an opportunity to connect, and a place to take action on important issues.

### Through the OAC Community, you can get access to:

- Weight & Health Education • Community Blogs
  - Community Discussion Forum
  - Ongoing Support • Meaningful Connections
- AND MUCH MORE**



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