

Q & A with Melissa Villar, MS, RD, LDN, bariatric dietitian

We will regularly feature a Q & A with people who work at Emerson.



In her role as bariatric dietitian, Melissa conducts initial, preoperative, and postoperative assessments for all patients who are seeking weight loss surgery, either gastric band or gastric bypass. The assessments include fielding questions from patients via e-mail and phone in order to continuously aid in their weight loss success. Melissa also helps represent the program at monthly information and support groups. Additionally, she acts as an insurance liaison for patients who have met the program requirements and are awaiting authorization for bariatric surgery.

Q: What is your educational background? I attended Johnson & Wales University where I received an associate's degree in culinary arts, in addition to a bachelor's degree in culinary nutrition. Upon graduation, I decided to pursue a path in the health care field, so I entered the combined master's of science and dietetic internship program offered at Simmons College. After completing the internship, I sat for a test administered by the American Dietetic Association so that I could become a registered dietitian.

Q: How did you become a bariatric dietitian? Prior to working at Emerson, I was a consultant for a number of nursing homes and had truly begun to miss the development and fostering of practitioner/patient relationships in individual counseling settings. When I saw this job opportunity, I immediately thought it would be an ideal fit since I could work one-on-one with patients to help them change their behaviors and develop a healthier routine.

Q: What is your favorite part of the job? I love every part of my job, so it's really hard to pick a favorite. If I had to choose, I'd say when patients come into my office and tell me how much better they feel and how much more energy they have as a result of the surgical

intervention in conjunction with eating healthier. Hearing about patients accomplishing various goals and being able to be active with their friends and family is very fulfilling. Patients are thrilled with large and small victories—anything from being able to bend over and tie their shoelaces to being able to hike for miles. It is truly inspirational to see how patients transform pre- and postoperatively.

Q: Describe an average day. I see patients in a variety of stages in their weight loss journey; some may be only two weeks out from their surgery, while others may be 18 months out or a preoperative follow-up. Besides seeing patients at their appointments, I also receive various e-mails and phone calls throughout the day from patients, ranging in topics from recipe requests to supplemental questions. Being involved in multiple facets of nutrition throughout the course of the day definitely keeps me on my toes.

Q: Does your job require significant medical knowledge? Yes. During initial consultations, patients often have a number of questions about both of the weight loss surgeries that we offer at Emerson. Therefore, it is imperative that I have a thorough understanding of the gastric banding and gastric bypass procedures. Additionally, questions regarding nutritional intake, excess skin, and hair loss (among other topics) arise at various stages of patients' weight loss journey, and it is important that I answer these inquiries competently.

Q: Does this job require professional certification and do you have to do anything to keep your credentials? In order to be a bariatric dietitian, you first and foremost must hold valid accreditation with the American Dietetic Association and then maintain that credential through continuing education hours. Additionally, it is vital to have had and continue to have sensitivity training and to complete core competencies as required.

Q: What is your biggest challenge in your role? The field is an ever-changing

one and I find it difficult to stay on top of all the cutting-edge research. I'd be elated if only there were more hours in the day so that I could read all of the journal articles and also tend to my patients.

Q: How does your position fit in with the overall mission of Emerson Hospital? Our patient population includes people from all walks of life, and every patient is treated kindly and as a unique individual. Everyone's struggle with weight is different, and we ensure that we utilize a personalized approach. Additionally, I know that part of Emerson's mission is to provide high-quality health care to patients in the hospital's service area; our program reaches out to patients in need in surrounding and outlying areas through information sessions and physician outreach.

April is Occupational Therapy Month

Did you know that Emerson employs 12 occupational therapists (OTs)?

Occupational therapy began in the 1700s as mental health workers noted that purposeful and meaningful activities were beneficial to the well-being of their patients. Today's occupational therapists have expertise in task analysis—the act of breaking down an activity into its physical, emotional, or cognitive components in order to focus treatments on the elements of the task that are limiting the patient's success. OTs specifically focus on activities of daily living, which include bathing, dressing, and home-making tasks. These activities encourage people with physical and/or cognitive impairments to regain safety and independence in self-care, work, and leisure. All of Emerson's occupational therapists are accessible with a physician's referral.

At the **acute care level**, one of Emerson's OTs becomes involved when a patient's physical or cognitive capabilities has been compromised by illness or

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