

Your (coordinator/s) and the committee have been working long and hard to get everything ready to recognize your winners, to honor the alumni KOPS with the beautiful circle of light and to welcome new KOPS as they graduate this year. If you are not among these, you can be next year! I encourage each and every one of you to take on the president's Million Pounds Challenge. If we all lose just ten pounds this year, the total weight loss for all TOPS members will be over one million pounds. With that in the headlines, we won't need a spokesperson like Oprah or Marie. Folks will be flocking to our meetings to find out what we're doing to be so successful. Can you imagine how surprised they will be when they hear that we aren't taking any magic pills or potions, we are actually drinking our water and picking up our exercise a bit and eating SENSIBLY?

There is a great program in the April/May TOPS News to get you on the way and stickers you can order to help record your progress.

Now let me tell you a story today as I sometimes like to do. This story has taken a whole new meaning to me in the past several months.

There was an old farmer whose donkey fell into an empty well. The farmer was old and the donkey was too. The farmer knew he didn't have enough strength to pull the donkey out of the deep hole. So he reasoned to himself, "This donkey is old. I am too. I can't get him out of this mess. It is better for the donkey and for me if I just bury him here in this hole. He's had a good life and served me well, but I can't do anything with him now.

It is better to bury him and put him out of his misery." So the farmer grabbed a shovel and started throwing in dirt.

The dirt felt like raindrops on the donkey's face, only it was messy and it hurt a little. He wondered what was going on. He was already bumped and bruised from the fall. His body ached and he felt tired. Everything around him looked dark. He couldn't make sense of what was happening to him. He felt scared and alone. "What more could go wrong?" the donkey thought to himself. That's when the second pile of dirt hit him. It seemed to come out of nowhere — and this time it hurt. "Why is this happening to me?" the donkey groaned. He was angry and confused.

The farmer could hear the donkey's cries from below. The donkey cried louder and louder with each pile of dirt he threw. And then the cries stopped.

The farmer felt relieved. He didn't want the donkey to suffer and was glad he was no longer in pain. "This is for the best," the farmer reasoned. He continued to fill up the hole.

The donkey stopped groaning for a moment. "All this complaining isn't getting me anywhere," the donkey reasoned. "I'm still in this mess and it is only getting worse. I need to do something different so that I can get out."

So the donkey thought, "I can't do anything about the dirt being thrown at me, but I can change my attitude. I don't have to let others put me down — or steal my hope. I do have a choice." The donkey decided to shake off the dirt and not let it affect him.

Something amazing happened. When he shook off the dirt, it no longer affected him the same way. The dirt fell down around him.

He used the dirt to STEP UP and GET UP on top of it. In that moment, the donkey made Three Critical Choices.

1. He chose to STOP letting others influence him and took back control of his life.
2. He chose to SHAKE OFF any hurt feelings — negativity, discouragement or feeling overwhelmed — that kept him from moving ahead.
3. He chose to STEP UP to the challenge, confront what was happening, and push past the obstacles facing him.

STOP. SHAKE OFF. STEP UP. He did it over and over again. With every step he got stronger and more determined. The more dirt he shook off, the better he got at not letting it affect him. The struggle built his confidence.

"I can do this," the donkey thought. "I can do this as long as I don't give up."

The farmer couldn't believe his eyes. Instead of being dead, the donkey was very much alive. With every pile of dirt he was getting closer and closer to the surface. The farmer mistook his silence as a sign he had given up. The farmer had underestimated the donkey.

If the donkey had just stood there and done nothing, he would have surely died.

The donkey refused to let a negative circumstance determine his outlook on life. He did not allow his feelings to influence his mood or steal his joy. He walked out of that hole one step at a time. The very thing that hurt him actually helped him get free. By not giving up, the donkey overcame a hopeless situation.

The donkey left the struggle stronger and more confident, with a hopeful attitude toward the future and a different perspective on pain.

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How many times have you felt helpless and hopeless?

Believe me, I did in January when I found out that I have this disease. CANCER.....just the thought of that word associated with me, with my body, put me in a panic.

As I talked with my doctors and with another friend who is a doctor, the nurses in my family and other friends who are survivors', I can see that there is hope, that I can live a full and healthy life by following their instructions and taking the treatments. I will always have this lymphoma but I know it's treatable and I can shake it off and step up in this phase of my life.

The same goes with our TOPS journey. When we feel as if we are at the bottom of that well and that the dirt is being thrown on us, we can be assured that our fellow members are there to encourage and support us, to help us to shake the dirt off. We have the valuable tools that TOPS provides to us to give us more motivation to take that extra step and to give that extra shake to get ourselves out of that well and on track again.

Life can throw a lot of dirt on us. Negative people can throw dirt by their critical comments. Negative circumstances can make us feel like we are being buried alive. It is easy to get discouraged when life doesn't go as we've planned. Sometimes the struggles we face can cause us to lose hope.

- Do you feel like there is "dirt" being thrown at you?
- Are you confused? Are you asking, "Why is this happening?"
- Do you feel like, "Life is not fair?"
- Have you lost hope that things will ever change?

Don't let negative circumstances or people give you a negative mindset. You do not have to STAY discouraged.

You can make a choice to have a good attitude despite what is happening around you. You can choose to never give up.

How do we rise above our circumstances? By making the same Three Critical Choices the donkey did . . .

1. We need to STOP allowing negative circumstances or people to get us down and take back control of our lives.
2. We need to SHAKE OFF our hurt feelings in order to move forward. We cannot allow our feelings to influence our mood or steal our joy.
3. We need to take one STEP at a time, one obstacle at a time. We need to give it time.

Someone once said, "The definition of insanity is to continue doing the same thing over and over again and expect different results." If we stay stuck in a negative situation and don't do anything differently to change it, we will never be free. Simply hoping things will get better **is not enough**. We need to make the choice to change.

Don't let a negative circumstance give you a negative outlook on life. SHAKE it off and set yourself FREE. Don't stay stuck in your pain. You can overcome any obstacle you face. Nothing is hopeless. Never give up the fight.

A part of not giving up and keeping things positive can start in our chapters. You'll remember that last year I talked about the three things that members find most important to them in their chapters and you will hear me as well as your coordinator and area captains talk about those same three things as we work hard to help make our chapters the best they can be.

It has been proven that our members value the private weigh-in and accountability that is provided weekly in your chapters and most chapters do a great job in meeting that need.

Many chapters do provide time for members to discuss the issues affecting them in their personal weight loss journey.

However, we find that many chapters are falling down when it comes to providing the reliable programing. Many are using things gleaned from the internet or from super market tabloids as reliable programing. Many of you love, love, love the doctors who have their own tv shows but believe me, you have to take that advice with a grain of salt. Many of them tout the methods recommended by the people who pay them the most to be on their shows.

TOPS website provides not only hundreds of programs that have been written and reviewed by experts who are not influence by anything except their desire to keep us leading healthy lifestyles, to learn to have an eating plan that we can live with for the long haul, not something that gives us a quick fix then when we go back to our usual eating that weight comes piling right back on.

There is actually a calendar in the leaders section that lists recommended programs for each week. Programs that build upon each other, are easy to present and have information that we need to know. Each program on that calendar has a link that you can click on and bring up the actual program, print it out and there you go.

In the member section, you have access to programs that you can print out and use if you are asked to do a program at your chapter. You will be amazed at the variety that you will find. If you prefer to look at print material rather than the internet, you can't go wrong with the "TOPS News" magazine, the "My Day One" new member guide or the "Real Life" guide.

As in the past, I am challenging each chapter to end the year with every member having a net loss and every KOPS ending the year in leeway. Those chapters will receive a special certificate and recognition on stage. I anticipate having many such chapters at 2018 SRDs since we all are striving to be a part of that Million Pounds Lost challenge.

And I do plan to be at your events in 2018. I am told that after two rounds of chemo, the main mass in my abdomen has been reduced by over half and the other smaller masses accordingly. I feel fine other than being REALLY tired for several days following the treatments. The reason I can't travel is because the treatments reduce my immune system capabilities and I can more easily pick up a cold, the flu and such more easily.

I would take this minute to thank you all so very much for all the cards and notes, I have a shoe box full! And for honoring my request not to have this put on the internet. You guys rock! I love you all and wish each and every one of you much success on your TOPS journeys. So just continue to shake it off and step up and you'll be fine!

Thank you so much for your kind attention and I hope to see you in person next year.