

I have never had much willpower when it comes to things we are all not supposed to do. In the past I have smoked (excessively), drunk (not quite as excessively) and I have scoffed plate after plate of delicious food. I have given up smoking and reduced my drinking, but food is my guilty, most pleasurable secret. My problem is that once I have started eating, I find it almost impossible to stop. I can polish off bagfuls of sweets, mounds of cheese and tubs of ice cream. Then I march the dog up and down hills for hours in order to feel good about myself again. My lack of willpower with food is ruining my life.

So I feel nervous about meeting Gillian Riley, though I should be looking forward to it. I am desperate to lose weight (right now I'm a size 14) and I think she, a counsellor and seminar leader who has been helping people control their food intake for 20 years, could help. I feel as if I've been dieting (South Beach, Montignac, Atkins) for ever. I have lost weight, put it back on and lost it again.

Gillian is going to teach me how to stop overeating and enjoy my life again. I hope. I hope she will help me find the willpower to maintain a long-term healthy eating plan. I have read her book, *Beating Overeating*, and identified with it strongly: I *am* that person who beats myself up when I've eaten things I think I shouldn't. I'm convinced that her way of achieving a healthy lifestyle and junking diets for ever has to be the only way forward in my life.

Unfortunately, when she arrives at my house it's full of birthday cake. Gillian seems unconcerned. 'It doesn't really matter,' she says. She explains to me how free will is the basis for achieving willpower.

'You have to exercise choice,' she says. 'All diets tell you what you can and can't eat, so when someone is trying to lose weight they live in a state of denial. This works for a while. They lose weight but the problem is they can't keep the weight off. They end up in a state of rebellion and go back to overeating. Does this sound familiar?'

I nod.

Gillian suggests that, instead of telling myself what I can and can't eat, I should ►

Yes, you can eat the cream cake, but you choose not to. Today...



## DO YOU HAVE THE POWER TO RESIST?

*Lucy Cavendish hates sticking to DIET and exercise plans. Can she learn WILLPOWER in four weeks?*

Photograph by ANDREW WOFFINDEN

accept that I have true freedom of choice. 'Tell yourself that you can eat anything, and as much of it as you like.'

'Pardon?' I say.

'Yes,' she says, nodding her head sagely.

She then asks me to think about the consequences of overeating. 'If you were at a dinner party and you'd had your main course and were deciding whether or not to have another plate of food, what would be the consequences of having the extra plate?'

'I'd put on weight!' I squeak.

'Don't make it about weight,' she says.

At first I am not sure what she is talking about, but then I start to think of how horrible it feels when I have eaten too much. I feel sluggish, overtired, grumpy. I spend the rest of the day or evening berating myself for how much food I've eaten.

'OK,' says Gillian when I tell her this, 'you have to remember that when it comes to making your choice. You can eat the next bowl of food – nothing is stopping you – but if you do, you will feel all these things. Then you can make your decision.'

Gillian asks me what type of food I like. I tell her I love cheese, but as I am constantly dieting I rarely eat it. I tell her I especially love risotto and that I feel resentful I no longer have great big bowls of it.

'You can have bowls of it,' she says, 'but just remember how that would make you feel. Then you can make your choice.'

OK, I'm getting the point here. We agree that, as my first task, I will aim to focus on making choices rather than getting stuck in a cycle of dieting denial.

The next day I think about what Gillian has told me and I feel euphoric. I go around talking to the crisps and cake. 'I want to eat you,' I tell them. 'I am free to eat you, but I am choosing not to.'

But then something flashes up in my head. I really *can* eat the cake, can't I? I look at it. Will I feel dreadful if I have a slice? I decide I probably won't. I cut myself a slice and eat it. It is delicious and I don't feel one shred of guilt. But by dinner time I am locked in the bathroom so I don't eat any more. The cake has become my dinner. By the end of the week, I seem to have circumvented the whole process. My

pro-choice stance means that I am eating everything I want and then not eating meals. I snack on cheese and biscuits. I eat cream cakes. I become convinced that a life without cream sauces, wine and full-fat cheese is not worth living. I tell Gillian this the next time we talk. 'Ah,' she says. She then tells me I'm a food addict.

'You crave food, and when you eat it you want more. That's how food addiction works.' She says that there are certain foods that are more addictive than others. 'Anything that has processed sugar, wheat, salt and fats is addictive,' she says. 'This is why people love cake and crisps. Once they have tasted them, they want more.'

She suggests that I recognise and accept this feeling. 'You have to make friends with food addiction,' she says. 'You have to stop being frightened of it. Let's say you've eaten your meal. You are no longer hungry, but something in you is telling you to keep eating. What you need to do is stop, recognise that feeling and understand what it is about.'

She suggests that I do two things: plan my meals so that I know what I am having to eat and can therefore anticipate when I will be hit by my addiction, and think about the nutritional balance of my food.

'Most people think they eat healthily but they don't. Our modern way of eating has got out of control. We eat heavily processed food that is highly addictive and of little nutritional value.' She suggests I try to become more aware of the nutritional value – such as vitamins, fibre, essential amino acids – of my food and also identify my urges to gorge on addictive food.

Over the next week, I try to do this. I stare at a buttered crumpet, recognising I desire it, but then I think about how eating it will make me feel guilty and how little nutritional benefit I will get. Sometimes I eat the crumpet. Other times I do not.

I find myself analysing my entire diet. I decide to make some changes; eat more

fish, vegetables, pulses. I try to recognise when I am hit by a desire to overeat. I notice that it often happens when I'm tired.

Gillian and I continue to talk and I begin to realise that our conversations are more about the health consequences of this lifestyle choice rather than weight loss.

'It takes time to grasp this in a practical way,' she says. 'But it should become a natural way of living. Your willpower should, eventually, become second nature to you.'

It sounds like such a relief, I almost burst into tears. I decide I must view it as I do work or housework. If I am motivated enough to find work and sit and do it and then clean the floors, I must possess the ability to walk away from a slice of cake.

A few weeks on, I can't say I have totally mastered the willpower trick. I have tried to change my mental pattern about food,

*I go around talking to the CRISPS and CAKE. 'I want to eat you,' I tell them. 'I am free to EAT you, but I am CHOOSING not to'*

but I still have a block about pleasure and food. For me they are intricately woven. If I go out for dinner, I still want risotto, sticky toffee pudding and cheese and biscuits, and when I turn them down it doesn't feel like a lifestyle choice, it just feels painful.

I ask myself why I am bothering. Why don't I just eat the cheese and enjoy it?

But I remember what Gillian has told me. I *can* eat the cheese. Today I can. Maybe tomorrow I won't. Maybe I am getting the hang of this after all.

I lost 4lbs in the week after I met Gillian. I shouldn't tell you that because, as Gillian says, I won't keep weight off until I embrace a new way of thinking, which includes focusing on my lifestyle, not my bathroom scales. This is what I tell her: I'm trying. I really am. But 4lbs is 4lbs, isn't it? ■

*Lost and Found by Lucy Cavendish (Penguin £6.99) is out now. For details of Gillian Riley's books and seminars, visit [eatingless.com](http://eatingless.com)*