



Learn to eat less

It might seem easier said than done, but if you retrain your brain big portions will be a thing of the past, says Gillian Riley

The first time I followed a diet I was in my 20s. I signed up with a weight-loss clinic and lost weight steadily. For the first time in my life I wasn't overeating; I was eating just enough healthy food, and not a bite more. Then, after four or five weeks, I went out one evening and ate, among other things, a huge slice of cheesecake. My next weigh-in at the clinic showed a gain of 11lb and the head nurse gave me a telling-off. I felt humiliated, and I didn't try to diet again for almost 10 years.

I bet many would-be dieters can identify with this. The head nurse has many guises – maybe a parent or partner who pleads with us to eat less. But worst of all is the head nurse we carry around in our own heads, admonishing us, 'Don't eat that!'

Remember, the head nurse's approach didn't actually work for me, and I bet it doesn't for you, either. Regarding any food as 'forbidden' or 'bad' actually makes it more difficult to eat less because it creates rebelliousness and often obsession with the foods in question. We feel deprived if we don't overeat and ashamed if we do.

Almost everyone who is overweight (and even some who aren't!) is overeating. It's a tall order to cut the habit out completely, but by learning what's going on in your brain, you can train yourself to do it less.

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

The idea that food is addictive is still controversial. However, as reported in the journal *Science*, addiction works through our brain circuits responsible for learning about rewards, and one of our most important rewards is food. Brain messengers called dopamine neurons are triggered any time we expect a food 'reward', creating an urge to eat. These 'fire' again, together with other feel-good chemicals such as endorphins, as we munch our way through a couple of chocolate éclairs.

All this activity is created in the mid-brain, the part that makes us impulsive and irrational. We can't reason with ourselves because the mid-brain is unable to picture future outcomes – which is why we don't pay much attention to how awful we'll feel after a binge. We automatically fall into familiar patterns of behaviour, unable to make any significant changes.

These patterns of behaviour stay with us, triggering our addictive desire to eat in response to a situation, simply because we ate in a similar scenario in the past. For example, your eating trigger could be feeling bored or unhappy. Or it could be arriving home from work, or getting into an argument with someone, or spending an evening alone in front of the TV. Such associations with food could have been established at any stage of your life, including during childhood.

The bad news is that it's impossible to instantly erase these food associations. But you can gradually learn to change them and – due to the miraculous ability of your brain to remodel itself – reduce your desire to overeat. To do that, a different area in the brain needs to be activated: part of the frontal cortex, just behind your forehead. This is the area of your brain responsible for making choices.

The solution is to strengthen access to your frontal cortex and your choices through repetition and focused thought – especially while you are feeling tempted to overeat. You will find you have far greater, sustainable control over your eating. See below to find out how you can train your brain and keep overeating at bay.

By inviting a sense of choice into your thinking about food, many things can change. I know this myself because it worked for me and I'm sure it can for you too. **healthy**

● *Gillian Riley is the author of Eating Less: Say Goodbye to Overeating (Vermilion, £7.99). Visit www.eatingless.com.*

5 WAYS TO CURB CRAVINGS

Nutritional therapist Susannah Lawson advises:

- Eat regular meals and snacks so you don't start craving unsuitable foods.
- Choose wholegrains instead of refined foods – these contain more fibre and nutrients that help you to feel fuller for longer. See page 114 for some great recipes.
- Eat some protein with each meal and snack – this will also help keep you feeling fuller and more energised.
- Supplement with 200mcg of chromium each day – this may help to regulate your blood sugar, meaning you're less likely to get hunger pangs or cravings.
- Quit caffeine – it destabilises blood sugar, which can encourage craving. Opt for green tea – it contains some caffeine but is also believed to suppress the appetite.



PHOTOGRAPH: NATO WELTON. ADDITIONAL PHOTOGRAPH: STOCKFOOD. STYLIST: KATE FRENCH. MODEL: YASMIN GREEN AT MODEL PLAN. HAIR & MAKE-UP: FRAYAL ANNEEL

TRAIN YOUR BRAIN

1 IDENTIFY YOUR ADDICTIVE DESIRE

Research at the University of California has shown that simply naming a feeling lessens the strength of the mid-brain, while increasing activity in the frontal cortex. So, acknowledge your desire to overeat. For example, recognise that this is why you crave chocolate after a meal, and not because your body needs it.

2 KNOW YOU'VE GOT FREEDOM OF CHOICE

Research from the Institute of Neurology at University College London shows that people don't use their choice-making brain area when they follow instructions or set routines. So when you take advice, be it from health professionals, magazines or diet books, bear in mind you are not obliged to follow it to the letter.

3 CONSIDER THE OUTCOME

You use the front of your brain when you think about outcomes beyond the immediate pleasure of eating. So when you're reaching into the freezer for an ice cream, you could say, 'I choose to eat this even though I don't need it.' Or you could say, 'I choose not to eat this ice cream and feel proud of myself for resisting the urge.'

4 CHOOSE ONLY FOR NOW

Maybe you overeat because you feel it's your last chance as you'll be on that diet tomorrow! Or perhaps you've sworn never to touch takeaways ever again. This destroys your sense of choice. So take each day as it comes – you'll find it much easier to pass on something tempting if you give yourself the option of having some tomorrow.