

# No more bingeing, no more dieting

**Losing weight is just a matter of curing a food addiction? Sounds unlikely, but if it works... Millie Jenkins signed up for 'Eating Less'.**

When *Time Out* asked readers what they really wanted, in a Christmas survey, a third of the women who replied said "to be thinner".

But if there is one thing you are guaranteed not to get at this time of year, it's a washboard stomach. I am sure all those wishful thinking women in the *Time Out* survey know that. They probably also know that 95 per cent of people who lose weight on diets later put it all, and often more, back on again. However, that still won't stop them making the same old resolutions in the vain hope that things can only get flatter and firmer in the New Year.

But what if the merry-go-round of seasonal bingeing and dieting could be avoided? Gillian Riley, an addiction counsellor based in North London, runs a course called *Eating Less*. She is best known for her book on smoking, *How To Stop Smoking and Stay Stopped For Good*, which has sold 40,000 copies. I went to see her three months ago about smoking and haven't had a cigarette since.

So I signed up for *Eating Less*, hoping that she could work the same magic on my thighs that she has done on my lungs.

"*Eating Less*" sounded like a sensible, but until now impossible, goal. Recently, when cooking an elaborately low-fat, low-glycaemic, combined (no protein and carbohydrate together) meal, my boyfriend asked, "Why don't you eat normal food, but just eat less of it?"

What a stupid question, I thought. Eating less of a normal meal is a lot harder than eating a lot of some weird concoction that doesn't qualify as real food.

The course, Gillian Riley stresses, is not for people with severe eating disorders. It is for people who have simply had enough of "yo-yoing" in and out, locked into a vicious circle of stuffing and dieting. Often

they are just bored to death with worrying about food the whole time. "They may be overweight, or not," says Riley. "What they have in common is an addictive relationship with food - that's too much about pleasure and not enough about health and nutrition." Her definition of an addictive eater includes a slim person who eats only a Mars bar or a bag of crisps for lunch. "It's about how to eat less without feeling you're losing out on something," she says.

The course was to run for five weeks, with each session lasting two-and-a-half hours. And that was just the beginning of the process. Everyone in it is female, and we range from skinny to large. I suspect we all have the same question on our lips: "Exactly how long will getting thin take, please?"

A long time, says Riley: "It's no quick-fix solution. There will be no sudden shedding of pounds."

This process is about changing the way you think about food.

"People often blame overeating on hormones, genes and metabolism, and although biochemical factors are involved, the driving force is addiction in the mind," she says. The course, and the book she is currently writing, are based on a cognitive therapy technique. The aim is to look at thoughts and beliefs about food, unravel the mind's addictive impulses, and retrain it to have a more healthy, balanced relationship with food.

This she believes, is very difficult if losing weight is your only goal.

"When your eating choices are related to how you look, it clouds the real issues."

She advises throwing out the scales and finding other, more valid reasons for eating less - such as reducing the risk of heart disease and cancer, living longer, having more energy and feeling more in control. "The irony of making health your priority," she points out, "is that the healthy body is a leaner body."

But, she adds: "It's a myth that is you eat masses of pasta, rice and wholegrains, you're OK. Eating too much of anything is bad for you. Even being even half a stone overweight increases the risk of degenera-

tive diseases."

It is also important to realise that diets cannot work, for basic psychological reasons: "On any diet, you are always in a state of either compliance or rebellion. The more you comply, by sticking to the diet, the more it sets you up to rebel." So the more you tell yourself you "can't" or "aren't allowed to" eat something, the more likely you are to feel desperately deprived, and end up eating it. "After years of dieting, you tend to have deep problems with deprivation," she says.

The result is that most of us have an "addictive desire" that has been reinforced countless times.

"Addiction is difficult to talk about," says Riley. "It sounds so judgemental. And with food, people assume you mean severe disorders. I think addiction is a matter of degree."

But what is an "addictive desire", as opposed to valid hunger? "Addictive eating," she says, "is eating anything other than what is needed to stay in good health."

This makes my heart sink. Surely all we "need" is a handful of nuts and berries? If so, I'd rather die young and plump than old and thin. Whatever happened to pleasure?

"It's fine to get pleasure out of eating," she assures me, "but eating also needs to be about supporting your body's health." This is about making gradual, sensible changes.

The key is to stop feeling deprived: to have a "free" attitude towards food, with no rules and regulations. This is a psychological trick which I found worked for smoking. The more you tell yourself you

really can smoke if you want to, instead of saying you absolutely can't, the less desperate you feel.

Most of us on the course found this idea of "freedom" hard to get our heads round. After all, if you really can eat anything you want, you will, won't you?

The funny thing is, you don't. I thought life would become one long trolley dash. It hasn't.

Riley offers a technique to use at every meal, which helps you to stop and think about the urge to overeat. She encourages you to look at all the excuses you give yourself.

Her theory is not about being perfect, so it's not like a diet, where you fall off and that's that. A few weeks on, I don't know whether I weigh less (I threw my scales out) and I don't feel any thinner. But I am eating healthier food and less of it. What I like most is the idea of never going on a diet again.

The difficult thing about her technique is that it's subtle, psychological stuff. It takes a lot of thinking. But thinking is the key. Riley says it is amazing how little research has been done into the psychological side of addictive eating.

"Any research tends to be funded by pharmaceutical companies who stand to make profits on the sale of products," she points out. "It's as if the mind doesn't exist - or if it does, it's of no consequence."

There may be less money to be made using the power of thought, she says, but it is a lot more effective than any pills, quick-fix diet books or plastic surgery.

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