

A new dietary course focuses on the amount you eat, rather than how much you weigh.

Catherine O'Brien reports

Don't get hooked on food

Tucked at the back of Pamela Taylor's kitchen cupboard is a small packet of Minstrel sweets. "I bought them last week because I like to treat myself to chocolate occasionally," she says. "Two months ago, I couldn't have left them there, but I no longer have that compulsion to eat them all instantly."

Pamela, 45, has been a yo-yo dieter for more than 10 years. She is not obese; her weight has fluctuated between nine and 11 stone. But, despite regularly attending slimming clubs, she has never been able to maintain the happy medium. "The trouble with something like Weightwatchers is that it addresses the how, but not the why," she says. "It gave me lots of rules to follow, but never explained the fundamental problem of why I ate too much."

In September, Pamela tried a different approach. She signed up for a five-week course called Eating Less. "It has made me realise that I don't have an enormous weight problem, but I do have an eating problem. I was always thinking about food; I constantly measured my days by what and when I would be able to eat. It is early days, but I can sense the shift in my thought process and I am no longer grazing from the fridge all night."

Eating Less has been devised by Gillian Riley, an addiction counsellor best known for her Full Stop method of giving up smoking. Her book *How to Stop Smoking and Stay Stopped for Good* is widely recommended by health professionals and she has now published the hand-book that goes with her Eating Less course.

According to Gillian, the common bond between many smokers and people who eat too much is that they are hampered by a psychological addiction. "Addiction to food is very difficult to talk about, because people assume that I am treating people with serious eating disorders. But I'm not.

Addiction is a matter of degree," she says.

"The majority of my clients come simply because they know they think about food too much. They know that, at times there is a compulsive quality to their eating." Some of her clients are obese, but many are just a stone or two overweight. Gillian tells them all the same thing, that their problem is not one of "weight" but of "overeating".

"It may sound like playing with words, but there is a difference. Being overweight is the effect; overeating is the cause. If you are an addictive eater, the more you concentrate on trying to lose weight, the more difficult it becomes to control your overeating."

Anyone who has dieted knows the pattern. "For me, dieting was always a six-month cycle," says Pamela, who works for a children's charity. "I would follow the rules, lose the weight and enjoy the compliments - and then break the rules and go back to where I started."

Gillian calls it the compliance and rebellion syndrome. "Many people are afraid that if they can overeat, they will. So they impose restrictions for as long as they can, and then rebel. After years of dieting, many of us have deep problems with deprivation."

The key to her Eating Less technique is to free up your attitude to food, eliminate the rules and to stop making weight loss your only goal.

"The more you tell yourself you can have that sticky pudding, the less you want it," says Sarah Walker, a 37-year-old marketing executive, who did the course in January.

"I've stopped obsessing about what I eat. When I take a client out to lunch now, I am no longer distracted by whether or not to have the last chocolate. I've grasped the clear link between food and my self-esteem, without the cloud of dieting. And I have gone from a size 16 to a size 14 without any of the angst."

Tackling the relation-

ship between food and self-esteem is a fundamental tenet of Gillian's method. She draws the vital distinction between feeling good because of the way you look, and feeling good because you know you are in control of what you eat.

The first offers what she calls "false" self-esteem, because it will always be dependent on your concerns about what other people think of you; the second provides the real thing. "Genuine self-esteem comes from inside you," she says. "To achieve it, you have to make your self-esteem more important to you than losing weight."

It is a subtle, psychological shift and it can take some time to sink in. "I do like to lose weight and to hear people telling me I look slim," says Pamela. "I think we gain self-esteem from the way others perceive us. But what Gillian is saying is that that must not be our primary motivation. I know that I feel better in the morning for choosing not to eat bread and cheese before going to bed. The important thing is that I am not forbidding myself, I am making the choice."

"I have also found it rather pleasant to face hunger again. Many diets sell on the line that you won't ever 'feel hungry'. But, actually being hungry is a bit like wanting sex; it's a pleasant sensation."

A fear of natural hunger is a common feature of addictive overeating. "People who overeat can find it very hard to identify natural hunger," says Gillian. "And having to wait until they are really hungry before they do eat can be just too alarming. One of my clients was astonished when I suggested that she set a time of an hour before eating again after a meal. She had never gone that long without food."

"Learning to eat less has to be a gradual process. If you have been overeating for 20 years, then you are not going to change that overnight. But just because it will take time, it doesn't mean it won't get done.

What I don't offer is the false hope of an instant fix, because we all know that they don't work."

Gillian advises everyone to start by throwing out the bathroom scales and begin thinking of the nutritional value of food, rather than its calorific content. She suggests that you make no changes to your daily routines.

"Dieters often try to distract themselves from food by arranging a hectic social schedule. But you have to face up to temptation to make the big transformation. I say the same to smokers who might avoid seeing their smoking friends when they are trying to give up. You are going to have to face them eventually and the sooner you do it and succeed, the faster you will raise your self-esteem."

GILLIAN'S technique does require time, effort and a mental leap. But it is also intelligent and well thought through; it comes as no surprise to learn that it is based on personal experience. She admits that when she first tried to tailor her "stopping smoking" method to the problem of overeating, she struggled to make it work.

"You can cut the smoking out of your life, but with eating we have to make very complex choices about what and how we eat. We also have to accept that we can never completely eradicate our addictive relationship with food. What we can do is learn to control it for much of the time."

Gillian shows me a picture taken seven years ago. She was size 16; now she is size 12. It is, I tell her, the jump millions of women want to make. "The funny thing is that I tend to play that down now," she says. "Yes, I am more comfortable with my size. But much more important is that I am comfortable with myself."