

I vividly remember going on my first diet when I was 15 years old. I don't recall what triggered the need. I wasn't exactly tall and lean but I wasn't heavy either, although my younger brother did call me "Porky" – a name that stuck through the coming years. I remember my first diet well. It was the beginning of a 15 year diet-binge, diet-binge syndrome. If I wasn't on a diet I was going on a diet next week, or after the holidays, or after the party, or after whatever social event I could find.

Over my life time I have lost the same ten kilos over and over again. Everyone laughed, "You are always on a diet."

I felt so out of control and completely powerless against this demon desire to eat. I recall many times walking around, cramming food into my mouth with tears streaming down my face. The thing I recollect most vividly is the extreme loneliness and isolation I experienced. The emotional despair and shame made me so frightened.

It was at this time in my life that I had thoughts of suicide. If I had to feel like this for the rest of my life then I didn't know if I wanted my life to go on. The depression was very confusing. At the time I believed the sense of failure that I was experiencing created the depression and it was a long time later that I was to discover it was the depression that contributed to the cycle of comfort eating and bingeing. It was a time of immense emotional confusion and extreme loneliness.

I discovered that purging was a great way to manage my weakness with food. I smugly ate whatever I wanted knowing that I could throw it all up later. I felt rather proud of myself for outsmarting my obsession. This provided very temporary relief and contributed to a whole new depth of guilt shame and despair. Fortunately, I was never very successful at vomiting so it never really provided any solution.

My situation was at its peak during the 1980s when no-one seemed to speak of eating disorders. Magazines just sang the praises of the next miracle diet that promised to transform your life. I had never heard of emotional eating or eating disorders. It never occurred to me for one second that this hideous obsession could be emotional. What I was experiencing was so intense it had to be physical - how could it be emotional? I was so ill-informed and naïve about any contributing factors to my situation.

I was in my early 30s when I finally started to question what was going on for me in a more realistic way. My first step towards recovery came by attending a course at the Council of Adult Education (CAE). It was a self development course designed to explore the effects of dieting and the implication of diets on people both emotionally and physically. I came away from the course almost speechless. I felt the course content had been designed specifically for me. My journey to recovery had begun! The course promoted the concept and benefits of life without dieting. The concept of not dieting was very scary. Never going on another diet and staying at my current weight wasn't an option. I couldn't accept myself as I was at that time.

As my life had been diet or binge, I held a belief that if I wasn't dieting that life would be one continual binge and consequently my weight would explode! The CAE course had assured me this wouldn't be the case so reluctantly I gave it a try. It was the start I needed. It allowed me to look at other ways of a managing this affliction that controlled my life and it gave it a name. I suddenly didn't feel quite so alone.

The complexities that contributed to the eating disorder were uncovered layer by layer over the years to follow. I had had 15 years of very bad habits, behaviours and beliefs and I knew there would be a lot of work involved in making the necessary changes to win this battle. At this point I was very driven – the relief that I experienced by discovering that these behaviours had been learnt and that I could learn new ones was so inspiring that I couldn't do enough to investigate how to make it all happen.

I sought out therapists and counsellors with varying degrees of success. Counselling is a very individual experience and what works for one is not necessarily going to work for another, but I found many had no idea about eating disorders. I was lucky to find some wonderful therapists that each helped in a variety of ways for differing stages of recovery. A wonderful woman worked with me on my lack of self esteem and self worth. I had never occurred

to me that I was so hard on myself, so I learnt how to be kinder to myself and how to nurture myself in helpful and rewarding ways. To feel and believe that I had a lot to offer as a person that wasn't related to how I looked was a wonderful revelation. To discover and focus on my strengths and put my "areas for improvement" into a more manageable context decreased my levels of anxiety enormously. At this point we started working on the intense feelings and cravings that I had for food and linking these desires to emotional situations that I was experiencing at that particular time. I discovered how a feeding frenzy allowed me to avoid emotional discomfort and distract me from dealing with it. The binge itself, followed by the preoccupation with shame, guilt and planning the next diet managed to distract me from avoiding my uncomfortable emotions for about 15 years. I was stunned at how obvious it all was!

Life dishes out some very stressful situations at the most unexpected times. We all have a crutch to help us through and there are times when food is my first thought, but it is a very beautiful thing to know that there are other options to coping without the consequences that binge eating brings. I learnt some lovely ways to look after myself and to cope with emotional situations. It took time and was very challenging but I had a wonderfully inspiring goal and that was to be rid of my demon!

I did some wonderful work with another lady who put me back in touch with hunger awareness. To have an awareness of the sensations of feeling comfortably full and degrees of hunger sounds so simple but to me it was a life altering experience. I had known nothing but either starvation or being so stuffed full I couldn't breathe. To reacquaint myself with being comfortably satisfied took a lot of work over many, many months. To introduce foods that I had labelled bad for over 15 years was at times frightening and liberating. I attended group therapy with eight other very beautiful women recovering from binge eating. We were all at varying stages of our journeys and I found it so very helpful to exchange thoughts, experiences and ideas with a group that had had similar experiences to mine. We all laughed a lot, we cried a lot and most of all we understood each other. The group facilitators were passionate, skilled and supportive in every way and, at times, damned tough on us.

I love to eat - I now enjoy food because of the flavours and taste sensation and social interaction that goes with it. I now scan a menu looking for something that I really feel like eating and not something that will fit in with my food obsession. Life is to be lived to the full and though it's unfortunate that I spent so much time preoccupied with food, weight, diet and body image, and that while at its peak I was an observer of life and not a participator, I feel so incredibly lucky and privileged to be where I am now. It wouldn't have been possible without all the help and support that I have had throughout this liberating journey.

Something I read recently said it all: "I've been on a diet for two weeks and all I have lost is 14 days."