

Don't take your *diet* too far

As a New Year dawns, many of us are thinking about **cutting calories** to achieve the body of our dreams. Claire Calvey, who battled bulimia for 14 years, shares her story from the opposite end of the scale



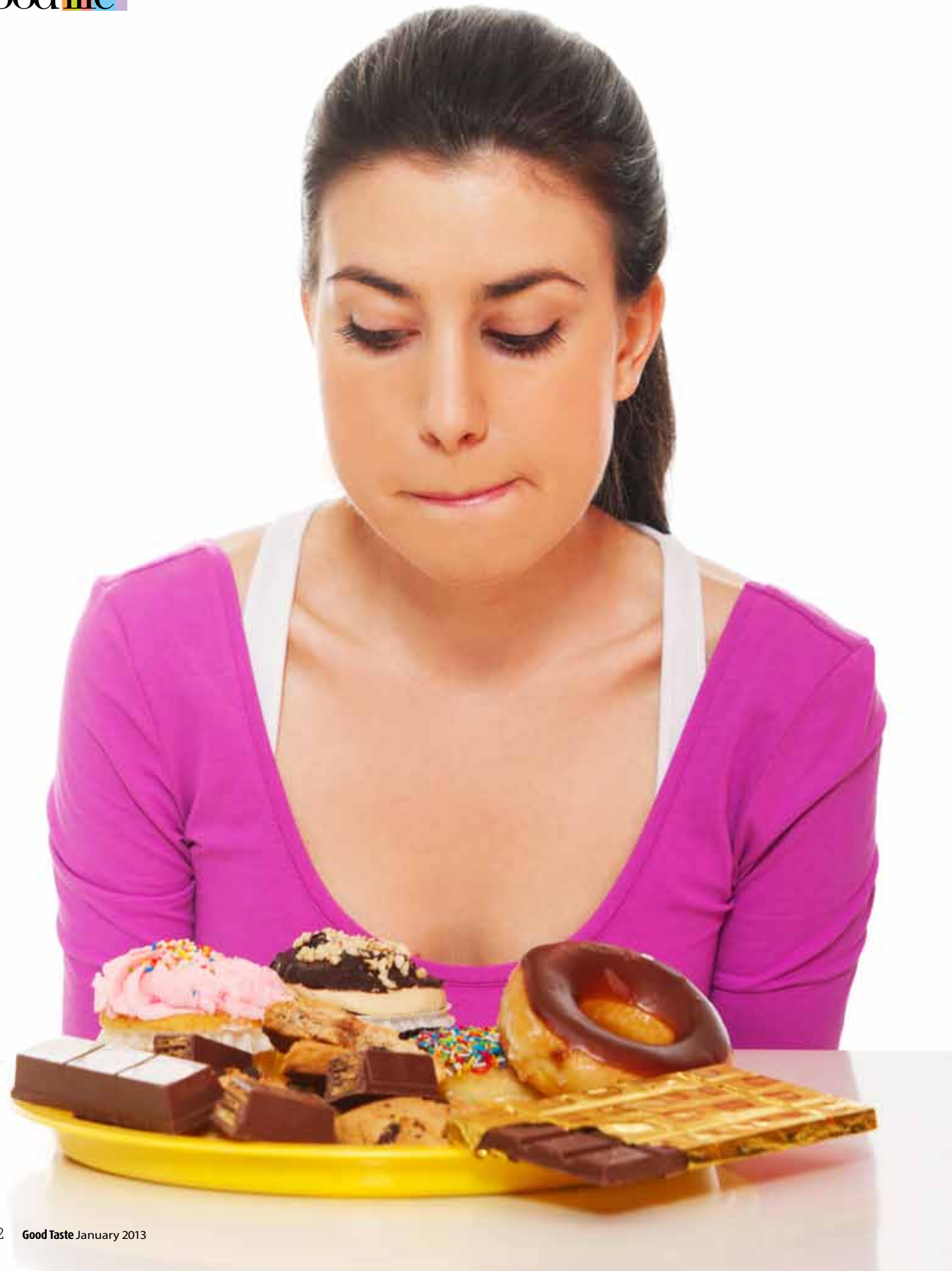
It was December 31 on the eve of the millennium, and as I gathered with my family and friends to welcome in the New Year, I made the same silent resolution that I'd been making for years: "Please let this be the year I kick bulimia." As the corks popped and streamers flew, I ran a nervous hand over my swollen belly where my first child was gently cooking and thought: "What damage have I done to you already?" But by January 2, bulimia nervosa had yanked me backwards into its degrading cycle of bingeing, vomiting and starving, and I feared for myself and my unborn child.

Most of us worry about our weight to some extent. In a world obsessed with outward appearance, it's hard not to. But for a growing number of both women and men, weight represents far more than just a number on the scales: it's an enemy, an obsession that, left untreated, can have devastating consequences, both psychologically and physically.

For me the problems started when I gained weight at puberty, and by the time I was 14 I hated the way I looked. The all-girls school I attended served as a hot-house for eating disorders; the corridors echoed with whispers of Sarah losing a stone by

throwing-up after every meal, or Carol starving herself all day then eating just a bowl of cornflakes before she went to bed. These skinny girls swept past, revered and envied by the plump and the plain.

I resolved to become like them. I remember with clarity the first time I sneaked into the bathroom after my evening meal, sliding the lock across, tying back my hair and ushering in what was to be a 14-year battle with food and weight. I had no way of knowing on that night that this 'quick fix' solution to lose a few extra pounds would become something that would cost me so much more. ►



It is now widely accepted that eating disorders are a response to a sense of powerlessness. Clare Smart, a counsellor at LifeWorks, a counselling and development centre in Dubai (counsellingdubai.com), agrees: "People with an eating disorder often say that it is the only way they feel that they can stay in control of their life." Certainly, I felt powerless in my own life at 14. Being the youngest of five children by 10 years meant that my every thought, deed, exam result, was scrutinised by my family. I felt suffocated, and losing weight became the one thing in my life that I could completely own.

The slow dwindling of my weight over weeks and months was seductive. I could see a direct cause and effect played out on my own body. I felt deliciously in control as the pounds fell away. The sad irony was that, as my eating disorder progressed, it was controlling me.

When self-induced vomiting ceased to have the dramatic weight-loss impact it initially had, I resorted to strict calorie control, resulting in a diet that consisted of 150 calories a day. My limbs emaciated and took on a blue hue, my mind dulled. I was permanently cold. My room became an ambivalent shrine to diet books, recipe books and pages of starving models ripped from *Vogue* magazine. My shoulders sharpened and developed a soft fluff in an effort to keep warm, and on a 'good' day I could feel my spine if I pushed my hand on my stomach hard enough.

By the time I got to the point of spitting out my saliva rather than swallowing it, my parents had the good sense to haul me off to a psychiatrist who insisted I be admitted to an inpatient programme immediately.

This all sounds pretty extreme doesn't it? Even as I type this now I'm thinking: "How on earth did I get to that point?", but according to B-eat, the UK-based eating disorders association, there are 1.6 million eating disorder sufferers in the UK, a figure that is most certainly conservative by virtue of the fact that many sufferers may take years to seek help, if they ever do at all.

Statistically women are more likely to develop an eating disorder than a man, although the amount of young males presenting symptoms has rocketed over the past decade or so. And, although most female sufferers are generally between adolescence and mid-to-late twenties, they have been known to appear in girls

as young as six and as old as women in their seventies.

What exactly are eating disorders?

"Eating disorders are a group of conditions characterised by a person's abnormal eating habits and extreme emotions, attitudes and behaviours surrounding food. They are caused by a combination of factors – biological, psychological and environmental – that lead you to feel unable to cope with things," says Smart. They comprise anorexia, bulimia and binge-eating disorder (BED).

Anorexia nervosa involves tight restrictions to food intake and is characterised by extreme weight-loss, as well as a host of other physical and psychological symptoms. Anorectics obsess about eating and food, but go to enormous lengths to avoid both.

Anorexia nervosa can start out as a simple desire to lose a few pounds, but, unlike the average dieter who reaches their target weight then gratefully stops, the anorectic is spurred on by the positive comments, sense of control and achievement from the weight loss, and continues to lose weight.

"ON A 'GOOD' DAY I COULD FEEL MY SPINE IF I PUSHED MY HAND ON MY STOMACH HARD ENOUGH"

Jeannie, a 35 year-old Canadian, started dieting at 15 following a comment about her weight from her ballet teacher. "I went on a diet and lost 10 pounds pretty quickly," she tells. "Everyone told me how great I looked, so I figured I'd lose 10 more. After six months I had lost more than 30 pounds and was too ill to go to school but, even then, I wanted to lose more. I was never thin enough."

It took five years in and out of treatment programmes for Jenny to make a full recovery and today she is a happy and healthy mother to a beautiful little girl. Shaking her head she says, "You know the craziest thing? When I look back at myself at 15, I wasn't even fat. That teacher's

thoughtless comment cost me five years of my life."

It's important to remember that eating disorders are rarely about food or weight. For many women, the 'having it all' world we live in today can be an intimidating place to inhabit. Anorexia offers a safe place to hide. The loss of feminine curves, breasts and periods is like a retreat into childhood, where expectations are low and personal goals can be broken down into the achievable bite-sized units of pounds and ounces.

In her memoir *The Art of Starvation*, writer Sheila MacLeod says of her anorexia, "The inescapable fact is that I didn't want to be a woman, although I was unaware of this at the time... the miracle of anorexia is that this wish can be fulfilled: one does not have to become a woman, even in the biological sense."

Bulimia nervosa is harder to identify than anorexia, as the sufferer can range from being overweight to underweight, although most often appears to the world as completely normal. Bulimics may also engage in long periods of self-starvation, but will sporadically and chaotically overeat and purge, either through self-induced vomiting, the use of laxatives or extreme

exercise – often a combination of all three.

Smart points out, "It is usually more difficult for others to recognise bulimia as the weight changes are less dramatic than in anorexia; as a result it can persist for many years undetected. People with bulimia become reliant on controlling food and eating as a way of coping with unpleasant emotions and feelings."

Unlike anorexia, bulimia doesn't always have the constant 'reward' of a downward spiralling weight, and the bulimic may suffer from very low morale much of the time as she struggles to keep control of her appetite. I used to call my bulimia 'failed anorexia'.

Binge-eating disorder (BED) is by far the most common eating disorder, and is characterised by compulsive over-eating – much like bulimia – but without the purging afterwards. Sufferers with BED tend to be overweight or even obese. ►





Signs and symptoms to watch out for if you suspect you or someone you know has an eating disorder:

1. Wearing baggy clothes to hide weight loss.
2. Hair loss.
3. Secretive eating or hoarding of food.
4. Red or callused knuckles as a result of rubbing against the back of the throat.
5. Teeth problems.
6. Changes in eating schedule to avoid eating with others.
7. Being tired all the time.
8. Feeling cold all the time.
9. Obsessive calorie counting and rigidity over food.
10. Obsessive about cooking for others, but rarely eating anything themselves.

Contact

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Colin, 39, has battled BED for most of his life. "My parents gave me food in lieu of affection," he says matter of factly. "There was no such thing as portion control or child portions at dinner, and instead of warm hugs I was given cake." When did he first realise his eating was out of control? "When I was 14; my mother cooked two fruit cakes and left them to cool while she went to the shops. I ate them both. I couldn't stop myself. I knew I was going to be in trouble, but I ate on auto pilot, totally out of control."

Colin attends counselling sessions to deal with his eating habits, but admits that he will probably struggle for life: "My brain is hard-wired to equate food with comfort. That is a difficult thing to change."

How serious are eating disorders?

All three conditions have serious health risks if left untreated. Anorexia has the highest mortality rate of any psychiatric illnesses – either through health complications resulting from prolonged starvation or suicide.

With bulimia, constant vomiting can disturb the delicate balance of the minerals potassium and sodium, which can have a debilitating effect on the body, not to

mention on blood sugar levels. Teeth are also affected by the constant washing of stomach acid over the teeth – often the family dentist is the first person to detect the condition.

As for BED, the impact of obesity on the body runs the high risk of heart disease, high blood pressure and diabetes.

Eating disorders in the UAE

Unfortunately, there is no national organisation for eating disorders in the UAE, but help can be found in specialist departments in most of the major hospitals.

Sabina Christenson, a psychologist who also works at LifeWorks says, "While inpatient treatment sadly does not exist in the UAE, there are many qualified psychologists now working in the area and support groups are run at LifeWorks on a regular basis."

Organisations such as B-eat are also a fantastic resource since they provide online support groups for those who

are unwilling to join a physical group.

While my friends spent the summer of 1990 celebrating their exam results, going to festivals and falling in love, I was being force-fed, analysed and weighed three times a week. Unfortunately the treatment was unsuccessful. Like any addiction, unwillingness to change impedes recovery.

However, three months after my failed New Year's resolution, I gave birth to my daughter and, for reasons I will never fully understand, my 14-year battle with bulimia ended. Perhaps my daughter filled a gap that I had been trying to fill with food for years, perhaps all the years of therapy had subconsciously rubbed off, or perhaps I was

just tired of the constant struggle – physical and mental – that my eating disorder caused me.

What would I tell someone who was concerned about themselves or a loved one?

Get help immediately; I feel very strongly that I could have avoided 14 years of health risks, under-achieving and low self-esteem if it had been caught within the first few months. ❀

