



Confessions of a compulsive eater: How secret bingeing on crisps and Jaffa cakes ended in a fight with bulimia

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More than one million women in Britain have eating disorders - anorexia, bulimia, and compulsive eating - and I am one of them. I am a binge eater and sometime bulimic and I have been for 25 years. Aged 34, I now weigh more than 15 stone - the biggest I have ever been.

When I look back, I realise I have always had a strange relationship with food. I seem to have always acted as if it were shameful. Even when I was a child, I never liked eating in public.

When my parents took me to restaurants I used to read a book, while they were eating. And I had odd requests for food. I used to ask my father to cook me beefburgers for breakfast, and he did.

But I was thin until I was ten years old. I remember the turning point very clearly, like a key turning in a lock.

After years of rowing, my parents finally decided to get divorced. I can still see the spring morning that it happened and my father's suitcase, sitting in the hall.

After that, every day, I would come home from school to an empty house as my mother was out at work. I would go to the kitchen and take six pieces of bread, slather them with butter, and sit down in front of the TV and gorge.

And so I went, within three months of the time that my father left, from being a slender child to being - as I put it - 'The Blob'. From then on, my body was an object of hate.

I've always liked to eat secretly, as if it is dirty. And as I have got older, the amounts of food I eat secretly have become bigger. Sometimes I get up and I see the wreckage of the night before - the chocolate wrappers, crisp packets and half-finished cakes - and I hide it, as if it hasn't happened.

Usually, when I write about diets - and I write about diets quite often - I write about them jokingly and laughingly. Hey, I giggle. I'm fat!

But in the last six months something has happened that has really scared me.

I have begun to vomit after the binges. I go to the bathroom, and stick my fingers down my throat, and throw up, and then I will often eat some more.



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Food for thought: At 15 stone and after two and a half decades of self-loathing, Tanya Gold has finally turned a corner and learned to love the girl inside

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Or, if I have a binge at night and there is chocolate left over, I will wake up at dawn and go and scoff it down, still half asleep. I regularly find Jaffa Cakes, or even a rogue mini-roll, in my bed, and I know this is the road to bulimia. No. This is bulimia.

What is an eating disorder? I think it is a disease that gets between you and your own eyes. It distorts your perception of yourself. How else can you explain anorexia and the sight of a six stone woman insisting that she's fat?

I recently went to my mother's house and opened the trunk where she keeps all the photographs. I have never liked to be photographed, but I looked at pictures of myself when I was younger.

I had always thought I was fat when I was a teenager but as I looked at them I realised I wasn't, not really. I was a slightly chubby, lovely-looking girl. But I could never see it.

You don't see yourself as you really are. You see yourself as a monster. And because you feel you are a monster, you eat to suppress the feelings of self-hatred. And so the monster grows; it is a self-fulfilling disease.

So I ate and I ate, waiting for the girl in the mirror to become the monster that she thought she was.

And, I have recently realised, sitting in a bed stained with chocolate, that my eating disorder is beginning to mirror, almost exactly, the pattern of alcoholism. It gets worse as time goes on.

I feel absolutely disgusted by myself. And the more disgusted I feel by my body, the more I eat. I look awful. I am so bloated, with dark shadows under my eyes, and spots. I ooze exhaustion.

I've tried everything to lose weight and I've often been successful. But it always comes back, and worse.

In my first year at university I decided to lose two stone. I went to the gym every day and lived on oranges and tea. And then one day I looked down at the scales and saw that I was under ten stone, although I felt no different.

I realise now that when the scales spun to ten stone, I simply thought: 'Now it's time to put all the weight back on again'.

I have been to the Mayr Clinic in Austria, where I lived on sheep's yogurt and stale bread, and to a Detox Centre in Portugal where I lived on vegetable juice for ten days.

But losing weight was always a prelude to putting on more weight. Because I didn't really want to be slim. I wanted to be the monster in the mirror.



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I was always very pessimistic about my prognosis. I think that is part of the disease. You think that being fat is your fate. There's no stopping it. Fighting it is pointless.

My sister once said to me, while I was going through a stage of eating no fats: 'Why don't you just put a bit of butter on your bread, Tanya?' And I actually burst into tears because I just didn't know how to eat normally.

But when I began to vomit regularly, I think something clicked in my mind. I realised I didn't actually want this. I don't want to be an adult woman who throws up her guts after every meal. I have friends with chronic eating disorders and it destroys their lives.

I think somewhere deep inside of me I was ready to be helped. I knew I couldn't do it on my own. And I knew that no diet could save me. It was a psychological problem, and it needed a psychological solution. And that was when a friend told me about Ursula James.

Ursula James is Britain's most eminent and successful clinical hypnosis practitioner. The friend told me that she has just written a self-help book called *You Can Think Yourself Thin* but she also sees private clients for £220 an hour.

The book promises an effortless and sustainable weight loss, based on dealing with the underlying reasons why you eat. Was it possible? I had been to Austria to lose weight, I figured, so the least I could do was get a bus into London to find out.

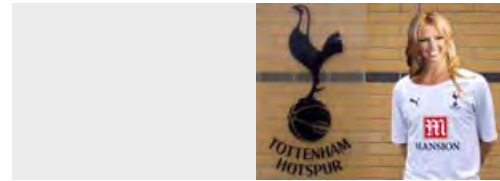
So I go to see Ursula. I walk to the door of a very tidy mews house, near Paddington Station. And this incredibly slim, groomed woman with an animated face answers the door. 'Hello,' she says. 'It's so nice to meet you.'

She takes me into a small room with two chairs facing each other. It smells wonderful. She closes the curtains and sits down, and in a very soothing, quiet voice, she asks me: 'Why are you here?' And I say: 'I cannot stop eating. And it's getting worse. I have been vomiting.'

She asks me if I know why I do it. And I say I do know. I am obviously not eating to fill



Girl, interrupted: At just 12 years old Tanya was already unhappy with her figure



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myself; I am eating because I am sad. I am lonely. I am eating my feelings. I am eating myself. And like all addictive behaviours, it spirals out of control. One minute you are a depressed 11-year-old, the next minute you weigh the same as a small car.

'You can't tell me anything about it because I know all about it. I know more about it than you do. The only thing I don't know about it is what to do about it.'

She asks me what I *think* I should do about it. And I say: 'I think I should stop eating sugar. Because once I start, I can't stop.' I cannot binge on protein or vegetables - can anyone? And she says: 'OK. Let's get you off sugar.'

She tells me she is going to put some headphones on me, so I will be able to hear her more clearly.

She isn't very specific about what she is going to do. She just says she is going to make some suggestions to me. I have always thought I am un-hypnotisable; when someone tells me to do something, I always do the opposite.

Ursula tells me to recline my chair, close my eyes and count down slowly from one hundred in my head. I close my eyes and obey. I start to feel sleepy as I count down and sometimes I can't even remember what number I am on. 86? 85? 84?

Ursula speaks to me, and the things she says are quite banal. 'You will be more positive,' she says. 'You will notice all the things you are doing right. You will feel lighter and will notice opportunities. You will take back control. And you will start to like yourself more.'

With my eyes closed all I can see is blackness, a black canvas. But then a picture begins to form in the blackness. The picture is me, as I was when I was 11 years old. I am about 4ft 10in, a little bit round with shiny hair, buck teeth and a moon face.

I remember this person very clearly, and I want to touch her. I want my 34-year-old self to go down and start speaking to her.

And I do. I float down to her, as if I am in a sort of bubble. And I stare at her. I don't know if she is aware that I am there, but I can see her. And I start to cry. I can feel myself starting to cry very, very softly - just little tears leaking down my cheeks.

I am still counting. And then another image forms. Something happened to me the day my father walked out. I have always known it.

I have always hated myself for his leaving - felt it was my fault - and eaten the hate. And now, he appears - my father, as he was 25 years ago; my father at 40. And I can see him.

He can't see my 34-year-old self, but he can see the girl I was. I know this sounds crazy, but he puts his arm round her, and hugs her. He says: 'It's OK. Everything's OK. I love you.'

I'm crying more now. 'The girl who ate,' says Ursula. 'Forgive her. She tried her best.'

And I want to stay here, with the father and the child. But then Ursula says that I am going to count to ten slowly and open my eyes and I do, and I can feel the tears leaking down my cheeks and I feel very, tired, and, as she says, somehow lighter. Something, I feel, has shifted, deep inside.

So I say goodbye to Ursula, and walk out the door. It took me five days to stop eating sugar, the lover who shared my bed.

I feel grief-struck at first: lonely, tired, irritable, weepy. As if someone I love has left me.

That was six weeks ago, and I haven't binged, and I haven't vomited. Now I feel calmer and more adult, as if I have a choice about what I put into my mouth. I am not at the mercy of the voice that says, 'gorge'. I've lost ten pounds, but I don't really feel this matters.

Because I feel completely differently about food. I am less excited by it. It's just something to feed my body with. It's becoming boring. And I'm trying to walk back into my real body, and to become part of it. To see it for what it is, to examine, to touch it, and to love it. To know it for what it is, so the girl in the mirror isn't a monster anymore.

• **You Can Think Yourself Thin is out now www.ursulajames.com**



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