



ARE YOU Semirexic?

Constant calorie counting. Beating yourself up for an afternoon cake fix. Sound familiar? It is to Rosie Green. Why do we do it, she asks »

do not consider myself to be suffering, or to have ever suffered, from an eating disorder, but here are some of the things I have done in the quest to stay slim.

- Refused to drink a Coke someone paid good money for because it was full fat, rather than diet.
- Spent 10 minutes every day of my working life trying to work out the least fattening option for lunch.
- Thrown perfectly good food in the bin, so I wouldn't pick at it later.
- Got food out of bin and eaten the bit that wasn't contaminated with the other rubbish.
- 'Helped' my body throw up after a particularly indulgent night of Pimm's and barbecue meats. Ostensibly to stop room-spin, but part of me was glad to be rid of the six sausages.

Written down, it looks shocking, but I know I am not alone. Bridget Jones' constant calorie count chimed with an entire generation and I reckon, like her, at least 50% of the women I know keep a running total in their heads of food consumed that day. Worrying about how your body looks, whether your jeans are too tight or your arms too flabby, can ruin whole days and cast a blanket of grey over the sunniest skies. As can berating yourself constantly for lack of control when you succumb to office fairy cakes or the kids' teatime sausages.

This background hum of body insecurity, the endless dissatisfaction that you are not slim enough and the consequent agonising over what you have and haven't eaten is being coined 'semirexia'. Not as life-destroying as an eating disorder, but still very much a negative force in a lot of women's lives.

And semirexia, it seems, is on the rise. James Lamper, a health psychologist who runs eating-disorder clinics in London, believes 'the majority of women now have some concerns around eating and body image'. Nutritionist Vicki Edgson is also worried about what she sees as 'women's increasingly obsessional behaviour around food and how it affects their body shape'. Research last year by the University of the West of England found 30% of women would trade at least a year of their life to achieve their ideal body. Shocking, maybe, but understandable to a lot of us.

So how does semirexia manifest itself? Lamper lists some of the behaviour that he sees as going outside the boundaries of 'normal' – things like checking every nutritional label on the food you buy, counting calories daily and weighing yourself more than weekly. Signs that you are suffering more seriously include panicking in a restaurant when choosing food, judging how good or bad each meal has been and then berating yourself when a

food rule has been broken. Oh, and planning how you will compensate for being 'bad' by either restricting food or over-exercising the next day. Only the most well-adjusted of us will not find something to identify with on that list. Who hasn't said, 'No biscuit for me, I had a prawn balti with extra naan last night', or sweated on the treadmill until the calorie counter hit 170 to counteract the Cadbury's Flake you couldn't resist?

It may seem comical, but it's really not funny. Certainly not when you consider that there is a real risk that this hum of body anxiety could turn into an ear-piercing screech, before spiralling into an eating disorder. But when is that tipping point reached? 'Anorexia is a most serious depressive disease,' says Edgson. 'I define it as when eating is way beyond your control and the thought of food takes over all other things.' Lamper assesses the degree of the disorder by how much it affects the quality of day-to-day life. For example, does it determine whether or not you accept a dinner invitation or what you wear?

The causes of semirexia are complex. Easy answers to its proliferation are our culture's ever-growing obsession with celebrity (we've all felt that funny mix of admiration/self-loathing after seeing Cameron Diaz in her hot pants). Or perhaps it's the advertising industry's increasing reliance on the airbrush. Maybe it's even our own 'alpha-woman' pursuit of self-improvement? These factors undoubtedly play a part but, for a lot of women, Lamper thinks it's more deep-rooted than just wanting to look good in a bikini. 'Often the issue is not the food itself, but the emotions that sit behind the eating habits,' he says. He suggests semirexia often occurs as a reaction to your childhood, stemming from a family member's relationship with food or constant talk of dieting and focus on body image within the house.

This theory is supported by Florence, 28, a PR executive, from Brighton, who is on a constant mission to lose 10lb. She talks about her mother, who made her and her sisters very aware of 'good' and 'bad' foods. 'We were conscious that eating certain foods would make you "fat",' she says. 'And, as a result, I think about the outcome of every bite.'

Other causes are suppressing painful emotions, trying to attract attention or, most often, wanting to gain control over a situation. Ever aimed to recover from being dumped by getting a new haircut and a more streamlined body? (Subtext: I'll take back the power by making myself slim and desirable.)

The irony of this is that under-eating or obsessive eating is counterproductive and can often make you pile on the pounds, rather than lose them. 'If you restrict food, it has a chemical effect, influencing the signals of hunger and fullness,' says Lamper. 'So you over-eat, beat yourself up, then soothe yourself by eating more food.' It'll also make you less good at your job as, according to >>

*Who hasn't said,
"No biscuit for me,
I had a prawn balti
with extra naan
last night"*

Edgson, 'when you are not taking in enough protein, the brain is not able to fire up the neurotransmitters it needs for concentration'. And finally – and this will come as no surprise to those of us who have lived with hunger pangs – it can make you angry. A study by the scientist Ancel Keys in Minnesota showed that reducing men's calorie intake made them more obsessive, depressive and prone to mood swings.

Surely there must be a middle ground – a situation that falls somewhere between being perma-hungry and relinquishing all control and locusting our way though every crisp, cupcake and carbonara in our path?

The experts say it's all about changing our mindset, to focus on 'nourishing' ourselves with good food, rather than denying ourselves the 'bad', and to stop over-thinking it, because by doing that we get into the binge-starve-binge cycle and make the situation worse. Edgson talks about 'back-ending' – this is her term for people who 'starve themselves during the day, then lose control in the evening, eating so much, so quickly, they don't know when they are full'.

'I will often be "good" all day,' says Lou, a 39-year-old account manager, from York. 'A banana for breakfast and soup (no bread) for lunch. Then, by the time I'm home after work, I'm so hungry, I'll inhale three crumpets and two pieces of toast while cooking dinner. I know this is counterproductive – I have probably had a whole meal's worth of calories before I even sit down to eat my actual evening meal.'

Edgson is also dismissive of the 'low fat' foods and diet drinks ('basically water mixed with chemicals and addictive sweeteners') that all semirexics are familiar with to try to stave off the hunger pangs. 'The route to a healthy body lies not in them, but in food that comes as nature intended – fruit, vegetables, salads,' she says.

It makes sense. I spent a decade in that cycle of blowout then denial, of drinking Diet Coke to fill me up and eating cereal for lunch, wrestling with the background noise of saddlebag angst and calorie consumption. It didn't control my life, but I can see now it was far too big a factor in it.

The irony is, I now weigh the same, but with a quarter of the angst. There's still a semirexic lurking inside somewhere. I still 'run off' a big blowout and



A NATION OF SEMIREXICS?

Research last year by the University of the West of England found that...

93% of women reported that they had negative thoughts about their appearance during the last week.

79% said they would like to lose weight, despite the fact that 78% of women were in the 'healthy' weight range.

46% of women have been bullied or ridiculed because of their appearance.

30% of women would trade at least a year of their life to achieve their ideal body shape.

13% of women were willing to trade £5,000 of their annual salary for their dream body.

I still eat healthily all day then succumb to excessive crisps after a drink, but I've sworn off the diet drinks and stopped crucifying myself for not being a size 8.

And what was it that changed such an ingrained perspective? Motherhood.

I had to give up control of my body and front up to the fact my weird eating habits could affect my babies.

Now, I look back and wish I hadn't wasted so much time berating myself. We need to put an end to all this self-flagellation, if only for the next generation. 'I want to set a good example to my daughter,' says my friend, Simone, who admits to a complicated relationship with food. 'When you look at the terrifying outcome of anorexia, it makes you realise the throwaway comments about the size of your bottom or whether you've been "good" or "bad" in relation to food are deeply damaging.'

The charity The Succeed Foundation, which promotes wellbeing and tackles negative body image, delivers the alarming statistic that the average age a girl first starts dieting is seven. Let's hope the 2012 Olympics, showcasing strong women's bodies, and TV schedules full of made-from-scratch comfort cooking can finally convince us to switch our aesthetic ideal from skinny to healthy, and to focus on nourishing our bodies – not despairing of them. ■

TELL US WHAT YOU THINK:

Do you have a semirexic relationship with food? Email us at: red@redmagazine.co.uk, or Tweet us: @redmagdaily