

Sample chapter from
The Mind over Fatter Programme

Chapter 2:
Introduction

With rare exception, babies do not come out the birth canal overweight. We are born with natural appetites, demanding food when physically hungry and refusing more when satisfied. Self-image, food and eating are not issues until we start being influenced by external pressures.

Ours is a culture obsessed by appearance, especially the weight aspect of how we look. Conversations are crammed with weight and body issues. We are obsessed by ideas about food, eating and dieting. Ironically, despite this increasing obsession of the Western world with dieting and body image and our voluminous knowledge of health and dietary requirements, we are seeing an epidemic of eating disorders and rising levels of obesity. This is not unique to adults. Sadly, more children are becoming overweight and dieting at progressively earlier ages.

My own disordered eating started in childhood and controlled me for twenty years. I was eleven when I first became ashamed of my body. An innocuous event and six little words triggered what was to become over two decades of struggle. I caught a family member's reflection in the mirror, gesticulating to a friend and mouthing: "She's going to have big boobs." While I didn't know all the implications of being big-breasted, I instinctively 'knew' that there was something wrong with me. The words 'big boobs' suddenly linked with 'well-rounded'; words which my grandfather had used to describe my body when he'd caught me eating coconut ice not long before. My internal chant became "well-rounded... big boobed...well-rounded...big boobed." It wasn't only the words 'big boobs' that did it, but the way in which they were conveyed: furtively, behind my back, definitely not something to be spoken about in the open. That was the start of my abnormal relationship with food. From that day until my early thirties, my weight fluctuated wildly.

If I wear heels I only just make 5ft. On my wedding day, I clocked in at 92 pounds, my goal weight according to one slimming club. This was almost double my thinnest

weight at age 15, when I blacked out while climbing out of a bath. Then, when my body sent me into a recovery eating frenzy, I gained 129 pounds - to reach a weight almost double my recommended weight. Thereafter, I lost and gained many kilograms, many times. I had three wardrobes - one for when I was thin, one for when I was fat and one for when I was in-between. I spent most of those years on the fat side. At our Christmas dinner the year I became very thin, we each had a place-name with a saying to describe us. I still have mine, which read: "Now you see me, now you don't!" Stuffing or starving characterized my journey through my 'fats' and 'thins'. It invited into my life indescribable frustration, pain, humiliation, guilt and shame. Short of hormone injections, jaw wiring, stomach stapling or lipo-suction, I tried practically every weight loss scheme known to (wo)man. I did the diets: some I made up and others were prescribed. I did the pills: appetite suppressants, fat burners, diuretics and laxatives, often swallowing a cocktail of them. I did the powders: a vast variety of revolting milkshakes designed to take the place of food. I did the machines: excruciating G5's that electrically contracted my muscles, and also another machine with a wide band designed apparently to wobble away my fat (or so I naïvely believed). I even had my big boobs reduced by plastic surgery. Now, with the wisdom of hindsight, when I look at pictures of those apparently big breasts, it is hard to imagine why on earth I thought they were so awful. I realise now that I had suffered a phantom fat attack, but there was no way anyone could have convinced me of this back then. My breasts were my enemy. They became symbolic of the body I thought wasn't perfect, and I wasn't going to be happy until they were changed. If only I'd had the wisdom then to see things as they really were, I would have been able to save myself all the mental anguish as well as scars that accompany surgery. The problem was that my mind was stuck, and until I freed it, I was trapped into pursuing the illusion of having a perfect body. If only I had known that how I looked on the outside didn't have to determine how I felt about myself on the inside. Nobody ever told me that. What I needed was not plastic surgery, but rather 'mind re-modelling'. But I had a long journey to travel before I would ever know that.

In the grand scheme of things, plastic surgery paled against my attempts to sculpt my body through dieting. My determination to follow diets was legendary. As a child, I would slide food under my gem squash skin, hide food in my napkin or feed it to the dog under the

table. As an adult, I only had to see the magical words ‘diet’ and ‘lose weight’ on the cover of a magazine or book for it to find its way into my shopping trolley. I snapped up and followed, sometimes more than once, those ridiculous yet much photocopied fad diets, which guarantee miraculous success. (I can’t help wondering if dieting also robs you of your brain cells). I even made up a few outlandish ‘meal plans’ myself, some of which provided only enough food to keep a parrot alive. However, not all the diets I followed were destructive or bizarre. Some of the weight loss clubs advised sensible eating regimes. I was even a lecturer at one for two years after losing 63 pounds.

Sadly, however, regardless of how sensible or unwise the eating plan, the eventual outcome stayed the same: *the weight always came back*, often with ‘interest’. Only the time it took to return varied. The more restrictive and ridiculous the diet, the faster the weight boomeranged. Overweight people are often reproached for lacking self-discipline and willpower. I strongly challenge this notion. I once went on a diet where, *for six months*, the only thing that passed my lips other than water was jelly made of diet soda and gelatin! What I was lacking was definitely not discipline, but rather self-love. Do you have any idea how much willpower and self-control it takes to stick to such a depriving, restricting and unloving regime? The number and duration of weight loss measures people the world over have suffered proves exactly how strong-willed and self-controlled they are. Isn’t it ironic that naturally slim people don’t have to exercise so-called eating discipline? They quite naturally and automatically don’t eat beyond what they need. Similarly, because alcohol isn’t my vice, I don’t need to exercise willpower in order not to drink. It simply doesn’t occur to me to control and obsess about my intake.

The reason weight comes back has nothing to do with a lack of willpower. It has everything to do with dieting being an unnatural process that the body will eventually hijack (unless you have the mindset of a person struggling with anorexia). Even the most sensible diets subjugate your body’s power to self-control, and reinforce habits of not listening to and not honoring its needs. A sensible eating plan may recommend for instance eating six carbohydrate portions per day, but your body on one day might only feel like two or three, whereas on the next it might feel like seven. I found that as long as I was relying on

something outside of myself (like a diet plan) to dictate what and when I could and could not eat, I was doomed to failure.

With the wisdom gleaned from personal experience, medical and psychological journals, I now realize that with each diet, my body was silently rebelling in an attempt to reclaim its power. Sometimes this biological battle would take six days, sometimes six weeks or six months. However, each time my body rebelled enough to overthrow my mind, I'd inevitably end up digging into all the things that didn't appear on my diet sheet. This has nothing to do with willpower or a lack thereof! It has to do with diets being unnatural and the drive to make up for past deprivations. I would cycle between diet and binge, stuff and starve. This is a seriously unloving and disconnected way of living.

I remember clearly the day in November 1991 when it dawned on me that, despite all my desperate dieting I had only succeeded in getting fatter. I was in Honolulu and going for my morning wobble around the block as punishment for stuffing my face the night before. It didn't take me long to spot an enormous gathering under a giant tree in a park. Since I did not need much of an excuse to stop jogging (it never was my favourite occupation), I headed over to find I was at an Alcoholics Anonymous convention. Here were all these courageous people standing up saying: "Hi, my name is Jack, John or Jill and I'm an alcoholic."

That's when it hit me: I was a diet-aholic. And I was not unique; this was what so many repeat-dieters have become! I belonged to a group of people who only felt safe and in control when we had some plan of what to eat, when to eat and how much to eat. Here I was on a two-year round the world trip with my husband - something most people only ever dream of doing. I was happily married. We had money in the bank and a beautiful home waiting for our return. I had a successful career to resume when we finished travelling. And yet I was still not happy. All I could focus on was the guilt I felt with every morsel that went into my mouth, how much I hated my body and what a failure I was because I apparently had "no willpower". That's where all my life's energy was focussed, and I'd never noticed it before. What a ridiculous waste of a wonderful life!

Being a diet-aholic is similar to being an alcoholic - only the obsession is with a different substance and it shows in a totally different way - weight is very visible. Just as alcoholics condemn themselves to only going through the motions of living, so too had I. Just as alcoholics believe that they are powerless against drinking, I believed I was powerless against eating, fat and food. I also believed that I couldn't trust my own body

enough to tell me what it really wanted or needed. Just as alcoholics use drink to dull their pain, I used diets to give me the illusion of happiness and of being in control. Alcohol might be addictive, but so is dieting. Every time anyone commented on how good I was looking because I had lost weight, I had a pleasure rush that hooked me. Both diet-aholics and alcoholics are living lives of quiet desperation. Instead of physically losing my house, my job and my friends through drinking, they were as good as lost because I was not able to fully appreciate them. But, what I'd really lost was my sense of self, my drive, my passion and my purpose. I realized standing in the shade of that giant tree, that this was far too high a price and that I was no longer prepared to pay it. Just as alcoholics can never touch alcohol ever again, I vowed never to diet again. I would gain back my power. I realized it was less destructive to be fat than to be constantly yo-yo dieting. Food wasn't my enemy, diets were.

I vowed to take one day at a time and to try something 'revolutionary'. Well, at the time, I thought it revolutionary but it turned out to be just forgotten wisdom buried under mountains of garbage: **I decided to listen to - and trust - my body to tell me what it needed.** I discovered I didn't have the faintest idea what physical hunger felt like. I know



that I had been eating when I was feeling mad, bad, glad, or sad, but was it for physical hunger? You've got to be joking. This new idea was scary, but it was also liberating, challenging, exciting and empowering.

For the next two weeks, now that I was allowing myself to eat what I wanted, all my body seemed to have on its mind was ICE CREAM. By now we were touring America, travelling via Baskin Robins ice-cream parlors (31 orgasmic flavors). Yes, I did gain weight and yes, I was petrified that I might never want anything but ice cream ever again. But it was almost as if my body was challenging my mind: "You *say* you are going to stop dieting forever and that you will trust me and listen to my wisdom, but, after all the punishment you have put me through, I'm not sure if I believe you! So now I'm going to test just how serious you are by sending you out day after day for something that you have deprived yourself of most of your life."

After about two weeks of this ice-cream orgy, just when panic was threatening to overwhelm me and I was seriously thinking about how much safer dieting had felt, I woke up one morning and my body said: “SPINACH”. And no, I wasn’t hallucinating, nor was I delusional. I was tempted not to listen. After all, I detested spinach! Just the word brought back memories of my convent school days where the nuns had tried in vain to convince me that the khaki goo slopped onto my plate and barely concealed with a drizzle of white sauce was edible. The napkin trick came in very handy here, as did throwing it out the window. In the light of these memories, you’ll understand that when my body had its novel spinach craving, I wasn’t exactly eager to listen. My long-suffering husband reasoned that if I’d trusted it on ice cream and it hadn’t killed me, what did I really have to lose if I tried spinach? (Aren’t men just so irritating when you can’t pick a hole in their logic?). And was I in for a surprise! Spinach wasn’t at all like I had remembered it to be - it was delicious.

My ‘spinach moment’ made me realize that I had not the faintest idea what food really tasted like. So, just as I had promised never to diet again, now I vowed to taste all foods as if I was an alien who had never seen food before. I was amazed to find that many of the less nutritious choices I’d made during binges were now too sweet, had a texture I disliked, tasted artificial or had an awful aftertaste. Being too busy wolfing down my food, I’d never realized this before. Even more amazing was the discovery that I loved nutritious foods, especially fresh fruits and vegetables (although maybe cooked differently to what was fashionable when I was a child).

Over the next four years there were times when I thought that the idea of listening to my body was crazy, days when I thought I should maybe believe the diet gurus once more and go back on the pills and powders that had hooked me for so many years. Happily, I didn’t. There were times, however, when I did succumb to a gee-whizz-marvellous-sounding diet. But each time I did, it confirmed for me that diets do not work. Just the *thought* of restricting what I could eat was enough to send me on a pizza-guzzling, chocolate-chomping, doughnut-devouring binge. Rather than persuading me *I* was the failure, I now realized that the *diets were failing me*. Going back to dieting again confirmed that listening to my body and doing what was natural was the *only* path to follow, even if it meant I was never going to lose 40 pounds in the blink of an eye.

Another important milestone on my life journey happened during our trip around America. A friend conned us into going to a nudist campground. With my body image issues, believe me when I say this would never have happened by choice. Unable to leave, I was determined to hide my bulges in the camper van for the entire four days we had paid for. However, after more of my husband's irritating logic, I eventually ventured out, wishing I had umbrella-sized hands. However, it was only then that I discovered the wonderful way the Universe works. I had *needed* to go to this camp, because it was an experience that dramatically changed my life.

Call me naïve, but I was amazed to find that the poor body I had so hated and berated most of my life was fine just the way it was. Really it was! While I wasn't anyone 'Sports Illustrated' or 'Elle' would want for their magazine cover (nor am I now), I certainly wasn't the gross, horrible thing that I saw reflected in the mirror every day. It had never occurred to me that by far the majority of bodies do not *really* look like those that we are bombarded with in the media. Naturally I had seen plenty of bodies on other beaches, but I had been so involved in hating my own, that I had only ever noticed those bodies that were young and firm. Somehow, less than perfect bodies were invisible or discounted. This selectivity had confirmed my belief: I was the ugly duckling and everyone else was a swan.

This nudist experience forced me to challenge the notion that there is only 'one shape or one size for all'. Here, where bodies were in their totally natural state without clothes to hide any part of them, I was bowled over - they simply did not look like those in any of the magazines I'd ever seen. They came in all shapes and sizes: some with generous curves, and others that were less generous, some with firm bits and others with wobbly bits. Not a *single* body - even those who were slender - looked anything like the rail-thin models featured in magazines. These were *real* people with *real* bodies.

On our second day at this nudist beach, I noticed a woman who, by Western standards, was really large. At one stage she got up to swim and I heard my (very body conscious) husband say: "There's something incredible about that woman." I had to agree. I was full of admiration for what I thought was her courage. But what she had wasn't courage. What she had was self-acceptance and self-love. You could just feel it. She was not prepared to live less of a life just because there was so much more of her. By comparison

my body was small, yet I had been filled with self-loathing and was living less of a life. I had put my life on hold until the unattainable day when my body would be perfect.

Since then, by questioning certain cultural messages about what makes a body healthy rather than beautiful, by re-evaluating my own body and then by taking a stand against what much of society dictates, I started to like myself. From weighing myself sometimes up to four times a day (and having the scale determine the quality of my life), I haven't weighed myself in over a decade.

Making the decision to never diet again, and listening to my body tell me what it needed, led me to wonder what it was that naturally slim people were doing right. My focus up to this point had been on what I thought overweight people were doing wrong, namely, overeating. (My solution had therefore always been to try and *prevent* eating without any consideration of hunger). Changing my focus made me realize that people who do not have disordered eating are able to recognize and eat when they are physically hungry, rather than eat in response to other types of hunger. There are, in fact, several kinds of hunger, and, as we shall see later, these can easily be confused with physical hunger. In my case it emerged that not only did my body have its own biological agenda rebelling against dieting, but that emotional issues also played a major role in overeating. I needed to work out what was eating me, and to feed non-body hungers in other ways. I needed to discover that saying 'No' to excess food was not the same as saying 'No' to myself. Rather, saying 'No' was a way of saying 'Yes' to myself because it gave me more of what I wanted – a happier, healthier life. This, I discovered, was the truly self-loving thing to do.

Gradually, food started to take its rightful place. *When I let go of food, it let go of me.* This process was empowering. I started feeling as if *I* was in control rather than that food was controlling me. Food became a source of pleasure rather than of pain and shame. Eating according to my body's needs left me feeling calm and relaxed and I no longer needed to devour food for fear that it would grow legs and jog off my plate. As trust in my body's 'voice' grew, I became more passionate about life, and less needy of food. Over the years my body has gradually slimmed and toned and has arrived at a weight that feels right for it. I can, however, tell you that there is no way I can fit into my wedding dress. Nor do I weigh what was once prescribed as my 'goal weight', but the proportion of body fat I carry is healthy. The really nice thing is that I have no desire ever to be that thin again. I'm healthy, I have energy and I feel at home in my own skin, even though gravity has lowered those surgiered boobs and my body will never look like the models I once aspired to.

My journey towards being ‘body-wise and natural size’ is an ever-evolving one. Only the other day I was out on my morning jog when a friend hailed me saying: “I’m glad to see someone has so much energy to use up.” I realized that something had changed when, quite spontaneously, I replied: “Actually I’m *generating* energy.” I was startled to recognize this as the truth. I used to detest exercise but now, exercising is fun. My day just doesn’t feel right without it. If I go a few days without having ‘body-fun’ (as I now like to think of it), I feel sluggish and less vibrant.

Nowadays I notice from my clothes that my body size fluctuates mildly (maybe a pound or four). However, I remind myself that the moon waxes and wanes, tides go in and out and neither nature nor my body is designed to stay 100% static. I also know that when I am experiencing difficulty food is still what I naturally turn to rather than alcohol, drugs or a host of other things. Every now and again I still find myself mixing a batch of cake mixture, or slip into ‘partying in my mouth’ (as Phil McGraw calls it). Only now I don’t get upset, feel helpless or out of control and think frantically about having to diet. I know now that it is just a reminder to do some emotional work. I no longer chastise myself for my so-called ‘lack of willpower’ (because I no longer buy into that myth). Rather, I’m careful to be extra self-nurturing and simply go back to listening to my body. I remind myself that natural eaters (those who are naturally the right size without dieting) probably also overeat at times, but that instead of turning it into a catastrophe, they ignore it and let it go away. After all, that’s what I do with alcohol.

At the same time that my weight was shedding, I qualified as a clinical psychologist taking a special interest in food and body issues. Reviewing hundreds of articles and books on ‘obesity’ (a word that still sends shivers down my spine), I discovered information that left me horrified. Horrified that questionable diets in their ever-mutating forms still exist and worse still, appear to be supported by some of the medical profession. But then I remind myself that doctors are not infallible. After all, some even recommended smoking in the 1950’s as a means to relax.

Nowadays alcohol and tobacco products carry warnings such as ‘smoking/ alcohol can damage your health’. I’m looking forward to the day when unnatural diet products also have to carry warnings that should say something like:

Warning:

Diets can damage your physical and psychological health.

Do not use these products/methods unless you would like to encourage yo-yo weight gain and eating disorders. Other side effects are feelings of deprivation, a pre-occupation with food (especially high calorie, fatty and sweet foods), and mood changes. In addition, once unnatural diets have failed you, you are likely to entertain feelings of guilt, shame, feelings of failure, a loss of self-esteem and growing percentages of body fat.

Unlike dieting, Mind over Fatter is a journey towards becoming re-connected to the wisdom we were born with. In many ways, it is similar to undertaking a pilgrimage, a journey of self-discovery and enlightenment. Its destination is your most self-loving, healthy self and to feel comfortable in your own skin.

It is not to say *your* journey will be the same as mine. We are all unique and different. That's one of the many reasons why a dictated diet plan simply cannot work for most people. It's like telling everyone they have to wear the same sizes and styles. While there are as many different stories as there are people, I have discovered that there are also many commonalities to overcome: a fear of fat and food; a belief in dieting and restriction; and making unloving choices.

From working with many clients, I have found that travelling the Mind over Fatter journey yields the greatest rewards when it is undertaken as part of a group. Insights are gained more quickly and difficulties are overcome more easily through shared experiences and as friendships and connections are forged. And, as with any journey, the view from the top of the mountain is sweeter when shared with fellow travelers. However, whether you decide to undertake your journey alone or in a group, I assure you, it is well worth the effort.

Good luck on your journey, for it is an exciting one towards understanding and respecting yourself, and taking care of your body so that it can take care of you.

With love, light (enlightenment as well as lighter minds and bodies) and laughter (yes, I hope you'll have fun along the way)

Cari Corbet-Owen

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