



sharing knowledge



## Weight issues? Fix your head first



***Carrie Sanderson, MFHT, explains how training in hypnotherapy helped her to lose weight***

I used to struggle with my weight and it wasn't because I was particularly overweight; I wanted to lose the extra two stone I put on when I went to university. For ten years I tried different methods, but I loved food and it seemed I would never be able to reach my target weight. That was until I discovered my brain.

In 2007, I quit my marketing job and trained as a personal trainer and sports massage therapist. When I was on the course I learnt about exercise and nutrition, how to lose weight, build up strength, and so forth. At the same time, I managed to lose weight whilst training for the Bristol half-marathon.

However, disaster struck and I sustained a serious knee injury after completing the race, which meant that I couldn't walk without experiencing pain, let alone run. I was also stressed with trying to start my new career in the fitness industry. I felt down and, out of habit, I turned to food for comfort. I put back on the weight I had lost during my half-marathon training, if not more. I started seeing a nutritionist to sort out my eating habits, and although I did learn some useful information from her, it didn't seem to tackle the real issue.

Things started to change for me in 2009 when I was training to be a solution-focused hypnotherapist and I started to learn about the brain. When our lecturer explained the workings of the brain, in particular in relation to stress and weight gain, it was as if he was talking about me specifically.

### **Understanding my brain**

In my experience, weight loss is individual; what works for one person may not work for the next. What is not individual is how the brain works.

The brain can simply be seen as having two parts in the subconscious: a top part, the intellectual brain; and a bottom part, the primitive (emotional) brain.

### *The primitive brain*

The primitive part of the brain has been there ever since we lived in caves and it is the part that houses our fight/flight/freeze response. Its function is to ensure our survival. The primitive brain is negative and obsessional. It stores templates of how we survived in dangerous situations (e.g. running away from a hungry bear), and refers back to them to tell us how we should respond in similar current situations. Nowadays, although we are less likely to run into that bear, when we are overwhelmed by stress, the primitive part of the brain will think we're in some sort of danger and will take over, often responding with anger, anxiety and/or depression. It can make us freeze on the spot or avoid certain situations (e.g. presenting at a meeting). On a physical level, we may suffer from irritable bowel syndrome (IBS) or migraines, for example. It can also encourage us to turn to food for comfort.

### *The intellectual brain*


The intellectual part of the brain is what humans have and animals don't – the ability to think rationally and be innovative, for instance. Contrary to the primitive brain, it is positive and forward-looking. When we operate from this part our lives tend to run smoothly, we accept how things are and we get on with it. We are in control and we can cope with what life throws at us. Here we choose how we feel and we focus on what we want, not what we don't want. We make good, rational decisions and a proper assessment of any given situation.

### *Stress*

When the amount of stress in our lives increases, we often begin to feel less in control. Take the following example: we have a pile of washing that we put in a wash basket to sort out one day, but the more we put in without sorting first, the higher the pile gets. Then it just takes one extra item on top of the pile and it all topples over. When stress has reached a peak and 'topples over', our primitive brain thinks we're in danger and will step in. We lose intellectual control.



In order to stop the pile from getting too high in the first place, we need to sort out our wash basket. Part of our sleep consists of rapid eye movement (REM) sleep, which is our natural mechanism for sorting out what is in our wash basket, such as stress. However, if there is too much to sort out, our brains can't handle it and will stop the sorting process before reaching the bottom of the pile. We then wake up in the morning with an unsorted pile left in the basket.



We can also help this sorting process along by going into a state of relaxation. This replicates the REM pattern and can help us get through the whole pile. We're back on top of things, making good decisions – we are in our intellectual brain – and this is when we can start to sort out the three main areas of our lives: jobs, relationships and the way we feel about ourselves.

### *Jobs*

What is meant by jobs isn't just your typical 9 to 5 job; it could also be your job as a mother, father, daughter, son, sibling, grandparent, etc. It is whatever you view your job to be.

### *Relationships*

There are different types of relationships including the relationship you have with your life partner, your family, your friends and your colleagues, for example.

### *The way you feel about yourself*

The third area is the way you feel about yourself; how you think of yourself, and whether these are positive or negative thoughts.

These three areas are interrelated, and when there is an imbalance in one area, that can quickly have a negative influence on another area. For instance, when you're feeling down, this can have an impact on your relationship with your partner or your friends. Likewise, it can affect your job in that you may not perform as well or be as motivated.

Once I understood the importance of getting those three areas right, I knew I had to make changes. Big changes can be daunting, so I started small and I focused on finding solutions. Above all, control is a constant, so when you take control of one thing, you often find you can take control of the next thing that is similar in size and so forth. Before you know it, you have turned your life around.

In my own life, I had got to a point where I knew my massage and hypnotherapy business wasn't making enough money for me to live off. I'd been thinking about getting a part-time job but the prospect of looking for work, especially in a recession, made me feel demotivated.

I needed to do something though because I was getting worried about money, so I asked myself what one small thing I could do to get me closer to finding a part-time job. I decided to update my Facebook status that day to ask my friends in Bristol if they knew of any jobs going and to please contact me if they did. Little did I know that a few weeks later, a friend of mine would get in touch after having seen my status, and I ended up with the perfect part-time job.

In the area of relationships, I focused on improving my relationship with my partner. As I was working in a part-time job and seeing clients in the evenings, we realised we were not spending much time together. We talked about it and decided that every

Thursday night we would have a 'date' night. We both knew we had to keep that evening free for just the two of us, either to go to the cinema or have dinner at the table so we could talk. This one small change made a world of difference to our relationship.

When I looked at how I felt about myself, I could see that I was overly critical and would set myself very high standards to reach. Whenever I didn't meet my standards I would tell myself off or I would be angry with myself. My thoughts around me were very negative. But I knew I couldn't change overnight from 'why can't I ever do anything right?' to 'I am amazing at everything I do'. My brain wouldn't buy it. I had to make small changes, so I started with just being more kind to myself, such as thinking, 'I am OK and I am doing my best right now'. I made sure I rewarded myself for the little achievements as well as the big ones. I still do this, and in fact, when I finish writing this article, I will reward myself by buying a favourite magazine.

### **Tackling the weight issue**

Nicola Griffiths, clinical hypnotherapist and trustee for the Association for Solution Focused Hypnotherapy (AfSFH), says that 'a solution-focused approach to life can bring about real change in diet. I use the following example: imagine you touch a stinging nettle, you get an irritating rash. You put cream on the rash and it will go away, but if you touch the stinging nettle again, the rash comes back and so the circle continues. Weight can frequently be a symptom of the problem, e.g. it's the rash, not the nettle. If you deal with the nettle then the rash won't appear. People focus on losing weight and therein lies the problem – the more you focus on the

problem, the bigger it gets. Using solution-focused hypnotherapy, clients quickly come to realise that if they start making subtle positive changes in their lives, the diet starts to take care of itself as you start taking control of life.'

As I was taking control of the three areas, I started to take control of my eating habits, such as snacking in the evening. My intellectual brain knew this wasn't necessary any more. I stopped obsessing over losing weight and desperately wanting to be slim.

When I was taking control of my eating habits, I found the following tools and techniques helpful:

#### **Relaxation**

- When a client comes to see me for solution-focused hypnotherapy I always give them a free relaxation CD, which is to start the process of sorting out the aforementioned wash basket. I listened to a CD every night, which helped me



sleep better too. Studies have shown that lack of sleep contributes to weight gain, so getting plenty is essential.

- I made sure that I took at least ten minutes each day to do something for me; something that I enjoyed doing and didn't involve food. I would choose one of my favourite pastimes, such as reading a good book, enjoying a hot bubble bath, or working on a creative project.

### **Visualisation and goals**

- Every day I would close my eyes and visualise what I wanted to look like. I would make it as clear as possible in my head and I remembered to feel good while I was doing so. Feeling good reinforces the picture in your head and makes it more powerful. I changed my thoughts from 'I don't want to be fat' – where you're still focusing on 'fat' – to 'I want to be slim' and ultimately to 'I am slim'.
- I had very specific goals: the measurements I wanted; an approximate weight; and fitting back into my old jeans. Every month I would weigh myself and take measurements and note down my progress. I found that if I did it too often I would hardly notice the gradual changes. Once every month gave me enough time to see those changes. Ed Ley, owner of Absolute Health Gym in Bristol, agrees with goal-setting: 'Where do you want to be in three months' time; where do you want to be in six months' time; what do you actually want; what are you going to look like, etc. The more vividly you picture this, the more you want it and the far more likely you are to actually get there'.

### **Four eating principles**

- I slightly adapted the Four Golden Rules outlined by Paul McKenna (2007, pp. 41-55):

1. Only eat when you're hungry

If you eat when you're not hungry, your body stores the excess as fat.

2. Eat what you want

When I stopped 'censoring' foods, I actually found I would often go for the healthy option and having a treat occasionally was enjoyable and I didn't feel guilty about it.

3. Eat slowly and be mindful of every bite

This way you taste the food you eat, and I found some 'treats' weren't very tasty at all! When you eat slowly you tend to eat less because you give your body time to register when it's full. Too often we're distracted by the TV, radio or newspaper when we're eating, and the risk is that we eat more than we have room for, thus storing the excess as fat.

4. Stop eating when you think you're full

This is important. When you think you're full, stop; but if you feel hungry again after ten minutes, refer back to the first and third principle above. Also I made sure I wasn't so stuffed that I couldn't move. I had to learn again what 'comfortably full' was.

### Awareness

- Be aware when you are being active, and know and feel it's contributing to your weight loss; even if it's just taking the stairs instead of the lift – the fact is you're moving your body and that is important.

### Accepting yourself as you are right now

- This was one of the hardest things to do. I used to think 'when I am slim, I will be happy' or 'when I have lost weight, I can finally do this and that'. I noticed thinking in this way got me nowhere. When I accepted myself as the shape and size that I was, I actually found a lot of peace. I started to think more positively about myself and looked at what I had already achieved and patted myself on the back for it, no matter how small that achievement was. I began with a part of my body I liked most (e.g. my eyes), accepted it and as such built up towards accepting my whole body. Remember to be kind to yourself.

Losing weight does require work, but for me it was easy work once I understood my brain and took control of my life in terms of jobs, relationships and the way I felt about myself. This in turn helped me take control of my eating habits, and the tools and techniques above ensured I stayed focused on my goals. My results are in the table below. Focus on solutions, not problems, and you'll reach your goals.

	August 2009	February 2011
Weight	69.5 kg	60.2 kg
Waist	31 in	27.5 in
Abdomen	37.5 in	31 in
Hips	41.5 in	39 in
Dress Size (UK)	12-14	10

### References and Further Reading

Griffin J & Tyrrell I (2006). *Human Givens: A new approach to emotional health and clear thinking (reprint)*. HG Publishing, Chalvington.

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