

DIET

"Food is the most widely used antidepressant on the planet."
- DR GEORGE BLAIR-WEST





SABOTAGE

Hunger often has little to do with the reason we eat – especially when weight is an issue. Dr George Blair-West, medical doctor, psychiatrist, author and authority on the link between eating habits and obesity, explains why the key to keeping off the extra kilos permanently is understanding the role that food plays in our everyday lives.

Are you doomed to weight-loss failure?

Rachel bravely continued to speak through her tears. It was only her third group therapy session and she'd never spoken to anyone about the secret eating shame that saw her weight soar to a morbidly obese 140kg, giving her high blood pressure and type 2 diabetes at the youthful age of 27.

"After eating chocolate and chips I'll drive through KFC and get even more rubbish. Then I'll go home and eat dinner because my family will wonder what I've been eating if I don't. I eat when I'm stressed, but then I eat to celebrate when things are going well," she says.

Gently, Dr George Blair-West asks

Rachel how her family handled foods as she was growing up.

"We only had junk food when we went to a relative's place or to a party or social function. At home, we were never ever allowed to have them. Now when I'm eating these foods, it's like I'm having my own little party."

Rachel's is a common story. For many of us, food represents the most pleasure we can have in public – an ongoing love affair that can mean more than personal relationships, self-respect and the desire to live a long and healthy life. It can be our most reliable source of comfort and the one reward we can always count ►

on in times of celebration – available, generally affordable and gratifying.

But the downside is its impact on our health – weight gain fast-tracking us into type 2 diabetes, often with accompanying self-esteem and depression issues, making it doubly hard to shed kilos, control blood glucose levels and stave off complications such as impaired sight and heart, plus circulatory and kidney disease.

The fact that 80 per cent of dieters regain all their weight lost, plus more, underlines the seductive power of food and its ability to override that inner voice warning us of the impact overindulgence will have on our appearance and life expectancy.

If it were just a question of hunger



IT'S AN ADDICTION

We form deep attachments to food early in life. That's OK, until health or weight problems mean we can no longer eat what we like. We may begin to change our diet, but we often find it impossible to stick with it. The reality is, we'll fight to an early death rather than give up the food we love. This is self-sabotage – if we force ourselves to give up foods without dealing with our emotional attachment to them, we won't achieve long-term weight loss and good diabetes control.

the problem would be easily solved, but that's seldom the real issue. Like many of us, Rachel uses the excuse of fuelling her body to turn eating into a form of legally-sanctioned substance abuse with long-term health implications as serious as those caused by smoking, alcohol and drugs.

Rachel sought help because all her efforts at weight loss had failed. Her emotional dependence on food meant dieting was as challenging as an alcoholic giving up the bottle.

Dr George Blair-West believes food is the most widely used antidepressant on the planet – and it's only through understanding and coping with our deep-seated attachment to it we can turn eating problems around. ►

“The reality is, we'll fight to the death – an early death – rather than give up the food we love.”

WHY FOOD IS SO SEDUCTIVE

From very early on we learn to view food as more than a source of fuel. Within moments of birth we find the heady combination of food, warmth and love at our mother's breast an experience that goes way beyond a simple act of physical sustenance. Add to this the many entertaining, special and emotional moments all through life that revolve around eating – it's a mood enhancer, it rewards and comforts, it reinforces joy as we celebrate, and it represents warmth and security as we get together for familiar rituals.

FOOD FOR REWARD Perhaps you were taken out for pizza after an exam triumph, given chocolates in gratitude for an act of kindness, or some cake for running errands?

FOOD FOR COMFORT How often is the pain of a toddler tantrum, scraped knee or broken toy soothed by a biscuit, soft drink or ice-cream?

FOOD FOR CELEBRATION The iconic birthday cake is the symbol of being loved, valued and cherished by those around us. It's also designed to hold the candles that celebrate the number of years we've been alive as much as it is to feed us.

FOOD FOR VENERATION Christmas, Rosh Hoshannah, Buddha month – every culture makes food a pivotal part of its religious festivities to the point where – as with Easter eggs at Easter time – the sacred element may be steamrolled by an overriding fixation with food and fun.



What is your approach to

Do you have an unhealthy attitude towards eating? Our quick quiz can help



HOW TO USE THIS QUIZ

Firstly, you need to be honest with yourself. If you lie even a little when ticking the boxes, then you will find it harder to achieve your weight-loss goals. Once you've answered all the questions, count up the A, B and C boxes you ticked, then see how you went in the **How did you go?** column (far right). Now you know your weight-loss starting point.

1. How often do you diet?

- a) Constantly. I never shed weight
- b) On and off. The kilos always go back on again
- c) Never. My healthy eating plan means I don't need to

2. What does food mean to you?

- a) The world
- b) A guilty pleasure
- c) A delicious way to fuel myself

3. Do you ever feel your eating is out of control?

- a) Frequently
- b) From time to time
- c) Never

4. How do you try to lose weight?

- a) I starve myself and cut out treats
- b) I just eat less of my usual foods
- c) I eat a well-balanced diet that includes my favourite foods

5. How much discipline do you need to lose weight?

- a) Every fibre of my being
- b) A little. I struggle when I'm hungry
- c) None, because I don't feel deprived

6. How long does your weight-loss regimen last?

- a) Until I'm offered chocolate or chips
- b) Until I've dropped the kilos, then it's back to normal eating
- c) I'm not really on one – sensible eating keeps my weight down

The take-home message

– it's time to take action!

Don't give up everything you love

Do not waste your time starting a weight-loss plan that requires you to give up those foods that you have a deep emotional attachment to – the foods that you love to eat. As soon as you do this you will trigger a slow burning rebellion that will ultimately lead to you sabotaging your diet.

With diabetes you need to be very careful. It is much safer to eat a little of your favourite foods in a planned

way and then modify your diabetes treatment accordingly, than to try to deny yourself your favourite foods until you find you are in a feeding frenzy with them.

Learn the game you're playing with yourself

The first task for you is to develop a 'fascinated intrigue' with the games that your mind plays to keep your favourite foods in your diet. Everyone does this differently – but most

people have a clear game they play with food. So, what is your game? And exactly how do you set things up to allow yourself to overeat or to allow yourself to self-sabotage your healthy eating plans?

Get to know who you really are

Before you even think about dieting again, take some time to get to know yourself – you will not be able to successfully lose weight if you do not know exactly how you sabotage yourself. Make a list of the reasons you believe you eat, apart from necessity, and review your answers honestly.

weight control?

pinpoint the problem areas

7. What does dieting mean to you?

- a) Deprivation and depression
- b) Reining myself in for a while but then letting go
- c) Nothing. I have always enjoyed food without excess

8. When anticipating a social outing, do you think about the food as much as the festivities?

- a) Absolutely – it's the highlight of the whole event!
- b) Not really – but I do look forward to the food that's there
- c) No – it's just one aspect of the whole event

9. How do you cope in a party situation when trying to lose weight?

- a) I end up dumping the diet and stuffing myself
- b) I overeat, but start afresh the next morning
- c) I eat as much as I should eat, then leave the rest

10. How do you feel about weight loss?

- a) It's an impossible goal achievable only through self-denial
- b) It's an ongoing battle
- c) A return to everyday eating after a change of pace

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr George Blair-West MBBS FRANZCP LOPATS is a medical doctor, a psychiatrist specialising in the psychotherapy of weight loss, and the author of the ground-breaking *Weight Loss for Food Lovers: Understanding the Psychology and Sabotage of Weight Loss*. He recently presented his work at the 2006 International Congress on Obesity. For more information, visit www.weightlossforfoodlovers.com.

Dr Blair-West says ...

"Like most people, I love food and use it for more than fuel for my body. It was only after a cholesterol problem forced me to improve my diet and lose some kilos that I learnt how dieting sets us up to fail. I shed 10 per cent of my body weight over nine months, then went on a four-week family holiday and put it all back on. I soon realised I was tackling weight-loss from the standpoint of a medical doctor and setting myself up to fail. But when I used my psychotherapy principles – helping people make long-term changes – things got better. I began to enjoy my food *and* keep weight off! ■

HOW DID YOU GO?

Mostly A's

You're an expert self-saboteur of your weight loss plans! Your attitude to food is one of feast or famine – you're either eating for Australia or starving yourself to try and lose weight. Your next diet will probably go the way of the rest unless you start to look at how to approach this from a very different psychological position. Self-discipline isn't the answer – it will only make things worse.

Mostly B's

This is a very common, very normal position for someone who is grappling with their weight. Encouragingly you are not completely out of control but could become a capable self-saboteur if you are not careful!

Mostly C's

Congratulations – you take pleasure in eating, but know when you've had enough. The fact that you don't need to diet and are not troubled by hunger and cravings means you are likely to have a balanced intake of food you enjoy without losing your boundaries.

Next issue

Through the articles in our *Diet Sabotage* series we are going to learn how to sabotage the saboteur within many of us. In the next issue, we will look in detail at the research into how and why we tend to sabotage our healthy eating plans, and you will learn more of the steps to turn your health (and your waistline) around for the better.