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Extreme BODIES

Very few women are body confident, but for some, their image conscious obsession becomes so all-consuming that they push themselves to life-threatening extremes.

Emirates Woman investigates...

WRITTEN BY *Aoife Stuart Madge*

A recent survey suggests that over 86 per cent of women are dissatisfied with their bodies. For some, this body dissatisfaction is manageable, but for others it can become a dangerous obsession.

“Some people put a lot of value in their appearance without it ever being a problem for them; but what is a lifestyle choice for some can turn into an obsession and a terrible disorder for others,” says Kathryn Hansen, author of *Brain Over Binge*. An obsession with body image can trigger any number of disorders such as anorexia or bulimia, exercise addiction and binge eating. Hansen adds: “Females are more susceptible than men to this kind of condition because they are more likely to diet and obsess about their bodies.”

Here, our experts reveal the psychological impact of three major body-image related conditions, and three *Emirates Woman* readers share their inspiring stories about how they overcame their own body demons...

Bulimia

Clarita De Quiroz, 29, a musician based in Dubai, recently recovered from a 15-year battle with bulimia. “At 13, I became a vegetarian and dropped from a size 10 to a size 6. My family all talked about my weight loss as a really positive thing, telling me how great I looked. Suddenly, I was getting loads of attention,” says Clarita.

Clarita recalls how she immediately started looking for ways in which she could maintain her new body. “The only way I could control what I was eating was to purge it. So I started sticking my fingers down my throat and making myself sick after meals. I felt disgusting after eating. I hated feeling full and hated having anything in my stomach. After I had made myself sick, I felt so satisfied; it was like a reward.”

By the time Clarita reached her 20s, her disorder worsened. “Making myself sick wasn’t enough anymore, so I started taking up to 25 laxatives a day,” she says. “I’d starve myself for three days then I’d binge on a burger and chips before throwing it up again.”

This is a destructive but common cycle, says Hansen. “In those who develop bulimia, a strong survival response to food deprivation leads to binge eating and then to a habitual cycle of binge eating and purging.”

Dubai-based health psychologist Dr Melanie Schlatter explains: “Bulimia follows a psychological pattern: the person is taking on too much in their life, whether it is overwhelming emotions, demands or responsibilities. This creates anxiety, so the person binges to the point of vomiting or discomfort then tries to get rid of that pain by getting rid of the food. The problem is they then feel empty again, and so the cycle continues.” ➤

Clarita's disease eventually got too hard to hide from her family. "My hair was thinning, my skin was dry and flaky, and my face was really gaunt. I looked grey, old and haggard. My personality started to change, too. I was constantly losing my temper and snapping."

Eating disorder specialist Dr Ira Sacker says: "Underlying all eating disorders is usually an unhappy individual who does not feel good enough about themselves. What starts as a diet or a food issue rapidly becomes an emotional problem. As the illness intensifies, one sees mood swings, isolation, fatigue and loss of hair."

Despite Clarita's friends and family trying to intervene, she kept denying there was a problem. "I was lying to everyone and I felt disgusted with myself about my dirty little secret," she says. "I was always inventing new ways to cover up my bulimia, like showering in the evenings so the sound of the water would hide the sound of me being sick."

Dr Sacker says it's common for people to cover up their illness. "Most patients deny they have a problem; it makes them feel like they are in control."

It wasn't until Clarita moved to Dubai in 2007 that she finally managed to get a handle on the disease by educating herself about fitness and nutrition. "I started seeing a personal trainer three times a week, which completely changed my body. I also started seeing a nutritionist who taught me that I can eat a lot of food without putting on weight. I also learned that I need to eat regularly to keep my metabolism up. I felt so healthy and so clean and I didn't want to ruin that, so eventually I stopped feeling the need to purge myself."

Dr Schlatter notes: "People can begin to break free from an eating disorder by first recognising and accepting that they have a problem and need help. Then they can learn the skills to help regulate affect so that they no longer need the behaviours to help them cope in life."

Overeating

Carolyn Kendall, 50, a policewoman from the UK, tipped the scales at 159kg after years of bingeing and comfort eating. "I struggled with my weight throughout my adult life, and after having children I was consistently overweight," says Carolyn. "On a typical day, I'd snack on biscuits, crumpets, cakes and doughnuts. When I got home, if I'd had a bad day, I'd have a whole packet of filled pasta in a creamy sauce, along with garlic bread, followed by a sponge pudding for dessert. Then I'd eat another packet of biscuits while I was watching TV in the evening."

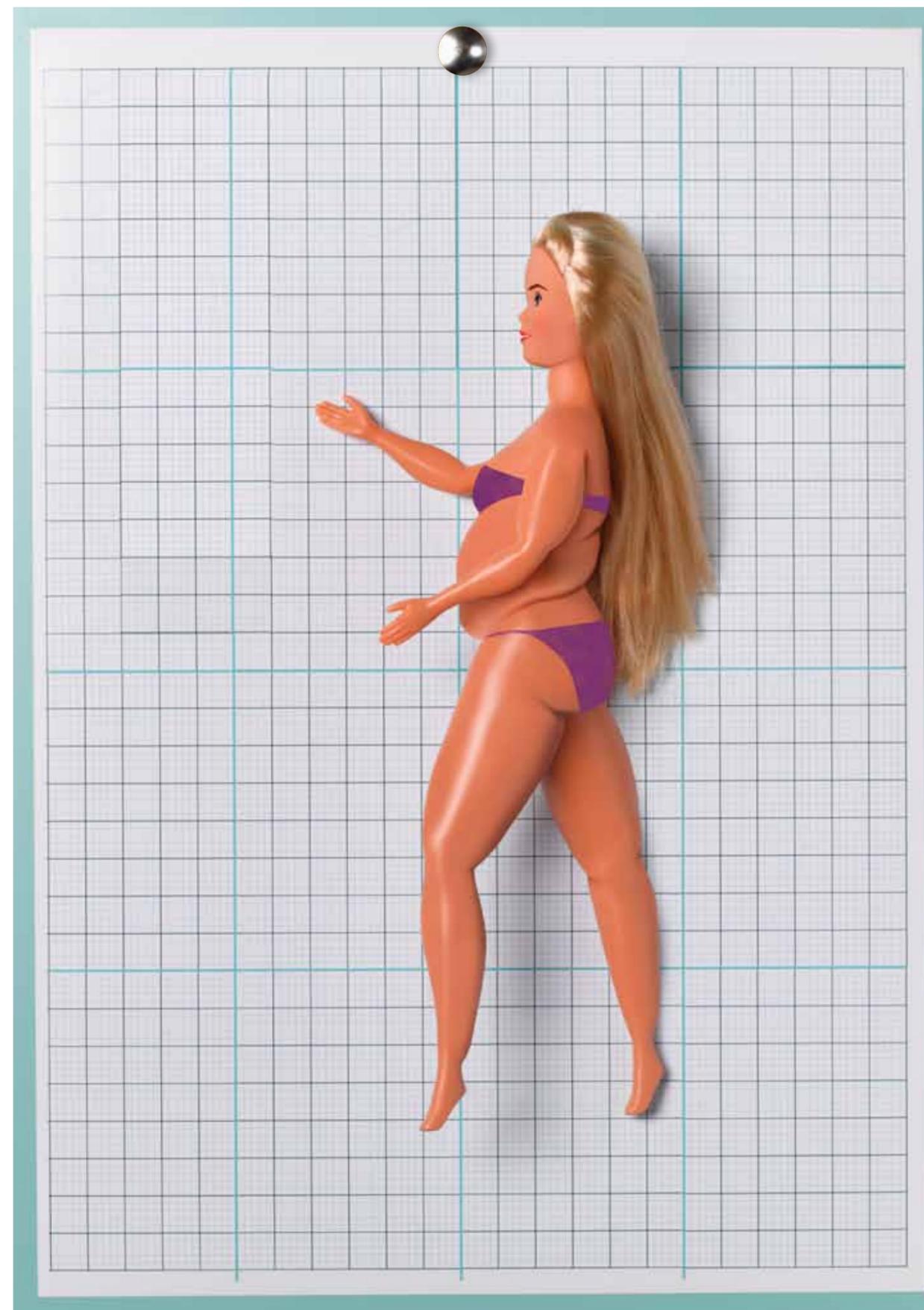
Gillian Riley, author of *Eating Less: Say Goodbye To Overeating*, says rewarding yourself with food in this way is a common mistake. "Overeating, especially sugar, activates the reward centres in the brain, which bring us the familiar sense of pleasure, satisfaction and comfort, and so we automatically turn to rewarding food whenever we feel upset. However, we only experience the reward while we are eating; afterwards we still have the problem we started with, plus some amount of regret about the overeating."

And, warns Trent Hughes, this kind of compulsive eating is extremely difficult to overcome. "Food is the most difficult addiction you can have, because you cannot remove food from your life."

Carolyn says she first attempted to curb her overeating through yo-yo dieting. "If my weight went up too much, I'd go on a diet and lose 25 or 30kg, but I'd always put it back on. Every time I got down to a size 20, I rewarded myself with food, and I went back around the cycle again. Carolyn's weight continued to creep up, and, by the age of 49, she weighed 159kg. "I was finding even basic everyday tasks like tying my shoelaces impossible, because I couldn't bend down far enough."

Marty Lerner, PhD, clinical psychologist and CEO of Milestones Programs Treatment For Eating Disorders (milestonesprogram.org) says the key to overcoming food addiction is not in dieting but in examining the ways you are abusing food. "Breaking the pattern begins with defining the problem, breaking the habit, finding the proper help and addressing your relationship with food," he says.

For Carolyn, this meant signing up for a meal-replacement programme called Lighter Life. "Part of the programme involved therapy in which I examined why I had abused food over the years," she says. "Over the next 10 months, I looked at my issues around food. I looked at how food had become the centre of my world. I used food either to compensate or to celebrate. I lost 89kg and, for the first time, I've kept it off. It's been a whole change about the way I look at food and the place that food has in my life." ➤



Exercise Addiction

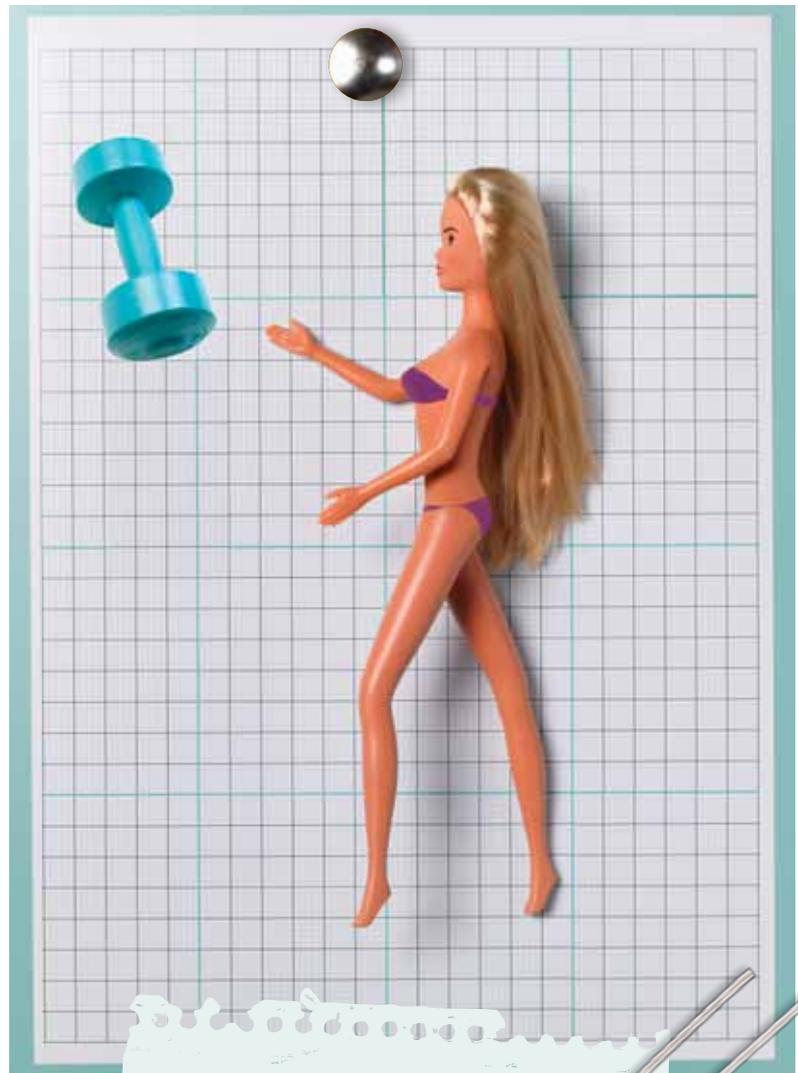
Claudia Charlton, 37, a personal trainer in Dubai, admits she took her weight training to obsessive levels. "I first started training when I was struggling to lose weight after my first baby. I was 32 and felt so bad about the way I looked that I hired a personal trainer. Months on, I had lost 8kg. Eventually, I got so interested in exercise that I studied to become a personal trainer myself. At first, watching the changes in my own body was really empowering. Then I started to look in health and fitness magazines and I really liked the way the women looked. Most of them were competing in body-building competitions, so I decided to try it."

Dr Schlatter says comparisons with other women can often be a trigger for exercise obsession. "A person starts exercising, enjoys the feeling, realises that they are looking better and feeling better, and they start to get compliments. Then they might do more to push themselves in order to look even better; they may start comparing themselves to magazine models or competing with fellow gym-goers. Eventually, exercise becomes a fixation, to the detriment of their entire quality of life."

Claudia now admits that training for her first competition took over her entire life. "I trained six days a week, and did cardio on top of that. I never missed a session. I measured my food to the nearest gram and only ate lean protein, leafy green vegetables and eggs. My social life was non-existent because I was so focused on the competition. I was starving and very tired after months of really hard training."

Jenni Trent Hughes, a spokesperson for Positive Image, a new UK-based campaign designed to promote positive body image among women (timetolookbeyondthefmirror.co.uk), says that one of the traps women fall into is thinking that they can find happiness through this kind of dramatic body change. "If you go around thinking that there's something in your physical appearance that's preventing you from having the kind of life that you want, and that by altering that your life will be OK, you're on a hiding to nothing because there'll always come a point when you realise that there's still a problem."

Claudia knows only too well that changing your body alone cannot make you happy. "The big journey for me was the realisation that I can treat the symptoms by exercising and dieting, but often you need to get to the cause of why you have a poor body image. Otherwise, you'll just go round and round in cycles," she says. "After my first competition, I didn't feel any happier in myself. Ultimately, I realised that being leaner or thinner is not going to bring you happiness. You have to work on your own self-worth – only then can it become a positive thing rather than a destructive path." She adds: "Now, rather than focusing on how I look, I focus on how I feel. I can for the first time in my life say that I have a healthy relationship with food and that I have a healthy body image." ■



WHY BAD BODY IMAGE IS KILLING US

- According to the World Health Organization, an estimated 605 people die from eating disorders every year.
- Obesity caused by overeating is responsible for around 300,000 deaths per year.
- While there are currently no statistics on the number of people affected by exercise addiction, the condition is more likely to occur in women over 25.

GET HELP!

- For help with overeating, contact Overeaters Anonymous, oaindubai.net
- For help with an eating disorder, contact Dr Roghy McCarthy, drmccarthypsychologyclinic.com
- For help with general food and body issues, contact Dr Melanie Schlatter, healthpsychuae.com