**The secret epidemic of eating disorders blighting the middle-aged: By a novelist who admits she’s a victim and who’s interviewed many others**

* **Officially symptoms of an eating disorder include being fixated with food:**
* **Imagine a sufferer and most people picture an anorexic teenage girl**
* **Amanda says most of us have a disordered relationship with food**

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* [e-mail](mailto:?subject=Read%20this:%20The%20secret%20epidemic%20of%20eating%20disorders%20blighting%20the%20middle-aged:%20By%20a%20novelist%20who%20admits%20she%E2%80%99s%20a%20victim%20and%20who%E2%80%99s%20interviewed%20many%20others%C2%A0&body=The%20secret%20epidemic%20of%20eating%20disorders%20blighting%20the%20middle-aged%3A%20By%20a%20novelist%20who%20admits%20she%E2%80%99s%20a%20victim%20and%20who%E2%80%99s%20interviewed%20many%20others%C2%A0%0A%0AImagine%20somebody%20with%20an%20eating%20disorder%20and%20Amanda%20Prowse%20expects%20you%20to%20picture%20an%20anorexic%20teenage%20girl%20but%20a%20lot%20of%20middle-aged%20women%20have%20an%20unhealthy%20relationship%20with%20food.%0A%0Ahttp%3A%2F%2Fwww.dailymail.co.uk%2Ffemail%2Farticle-4157580%2FThe-secret-epidemic-middle-aged-eating-disorders.html%3Fito%3Demail_share_article-top%0A%0A%0AMost%20Read%20Articles%3A%0A%0AColor%20clash%20catastrophes%2C%20accidental%20exposures%20and%20garish%20gowns...%20FEMAIL%20spotlights%20the%20stars%20suffering%20serious%20style%20disasters%20on%20the%20red%20carpet%20at%20the%2089th%20Academy%20Awards%C2%A0%0Ahttp%3A%2F%2Fwww.dailymail.co.uk%2Ffemail%2Farticle-4262498%2FFEMAIL-looks-worst-dressed-89th-Academy-Awards.html%3Fito%3Demail_share_article-top_most-read-articles%0A%0AMy%20mother%20was%20a%20cruel%20and%20horrid%20woman%3A%20It%27s%20taken%20her%20years%20to%20confront%20it%20but%20ANGELA%20LEVIN%20makes%20a%20taboo-breaking%20admission%20and%20reveals%20why%20she%20believes%20countless%20others%20suffer%20just%20like%20her%0Ahttp%3A%2F%2Fwww.dailymail.co.uk%2Ffemail%2Farticle-4262328%2FANGELA-LEVIN-mother-cruel-horrid-woman.html%3Fito%3Demail_share_article-top_most-read-articles%0A%0A%27I%20married%20a%20Botox%20doctor...%20he%20fixed%20my%20eye%20bags%20and%20then%20broke%20my%20heart%27%3A%20One%20woman%20reveals%20how%20her%20relationship%20with%20a%20top%20cosmetics%20expert%20unravelled%20just%20months%20after%20her%20wedding%0Ahttp%3A%2F%2Fwww.dailymail.co.uk%2Ffemail%2Farticle-4261864%2FMarried-Botox-doctor-eye-bags-broke-heart.html%3Fito%3Demail)

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Officially recognised symptoms of an eating disorder include being fixated with food: consumed with what you mustn’t eat and being obsessed with your weight and body shape.

Imagine a sufferer and I expect you picture an anorexic teenage girl or bulimic young woman — someone stick thin who is starving herself or a binge-eater who gorges on mountains of food before throwing it all up.

It goes without saying, of course, that this isn’t you.

But stop for a moment and read that definition again, which is the NHS description of an eating disorder. Now examine with brutal honesty the true state of your own relationship with food.

Rare is the woman who hasn’t justified an obsession with calorie counting by defining it as part of a health kick. Or cut out whole food groups in pursuit of clearer skin, a flatter stomach or smaller behind.

After all, when you put a group of women of a certain age together it’s only a matter of time before talk turns to the size of their bottoms and their latest dieting attempts.

How often have you, or a woman close to you, uttered the words ‘I’ve tried every diet going’, as though to live in perpetual denial is the most natural thing in the world.

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Or stood in a dark kitchen, secretly scoffing when there’s no one around to see, because if there are no witnesses then somehow it doesn’t count.

So no, of course you’re not bulimic or anorexic, as those are two conditions at the extreme of the eating disorder spectrum.

But can you still say that your relationship with food is entirely healthy and normal? And that you don’t feature on that spectrum at all? I know I can’t.

And I also know I am not the only woman over 40 to have had an unhealthy obsession with food pretty much all my adult life, without ever defining it as a condition.

In fact, I’d go as far as to suggest most of us have a disordered relationship with food — we’d just never admit it.

I am a yo-yo dieter. In my 20s, I was a size ten. This was achieved by living off white wine spritzers, toast and little else.

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In my 30s, after I had my son, now aged 19, I ballooned to a size 24. I piled on weight after eating for two during the pregnancy and didn’t stop after I gave birth.

Now I’m 49 and have fluctuated between the two sizes ever since. That’s decades spent on a perpetual merry-go-round of eating very little, hitting my target weight, then putting every pound back on again, without acknowledging what a wretched way to live that is.

It took several painfully honest conversations with dozens of women about their unhealthy relationships with food, during research for my new novel, to realise I’ve been unwell myself.

The Food Of Love (Lake Union Publishing) tackles some uncomfortable truths. The protagonist is a mother of an anorexic teenage girl who is herself obsessed with her daily diet.

She’s a devotee of clean eating, which fixates on the quality of food and pitches ‘goodies’, such as kale and nuts, against the so-called ‘baddies’, carbs and pasta.

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In her 30s, after she had my son, now aged 19, Amanda ballooned to a size 24. She piled on weight after eating for two during the pregnancy and didn’t stop after she gave birth (above: stock image)

To help her desperately ill daughter, this mother must face up to the fact she is herself obsessed with food and accept this has the power to damage not just her own psyche, but also that of her impressionable child.

I spoke to women of all ages for my research, but it was the language of those in my age group — in their 40s, 50s and above — that troubled me the most.

We are women at a stage of life when we should surely know better than to ruminate daily on the calories of this and the virtue of eating, or not eating, that.

I say daily, but some fear it’s far more often than that. Didn’t a study reveal a quarter of women think of food every 30 minutes? That’s the same rate some men think about sex!

A 42-year-old teacher I spoke to appeared to be supremely sensible about food. But her insistence on her family eating only healthy, home-cooked meals, along with a sugar ban for the children, was a veneer behind which she hid her own troubling eating habits.

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Now, Amanda (above) says: 'I’m 49 and have fluctuated between the two sizes ever since. That’s decades spent on a perpetual merry-go-round of eating very little, hitting my target weight, then putting every pound back on again, without acknowledging what a wretched way to live that is'

While her home was junk-free, she would secretly gorge on sugary, fatty snacks in her car after work. Like a true addict, she’d pay cash, so it wouldn’t show up on bank statements.

The deception filled her with shame and self-loathing.

Another woman, in her late 50s, said she regularly offered to nip to McDonald’s to buy a grandchild a Happy Meal as a treat.

But this was just a ruse so she could binge on fast food on the way home, where she would share a healthy meal with her family.

She was eating twice, but only being seen to eat once. She would then ‘balance it out’ by starving herself the next day.

Another woman in her 40s said she loved to cook — mainly so she could snaffle food secretly.

She’d scoff cheese, biscuits, pieces of cooked meat — whatever she could discreetly slip into her mouth. Later, at the dinner table, she would declare she wasn’t hungry and just pick at the food.

Those around her would say ‘Oh, you eat like a little bird’ and she’d take that as praise, bolstering her self-esteem.

I know I’m no better. Countless times, I’ve loudly declared I’m dieting — that I won’t be fat for much longer because I’m ‘being good’ — only to sneakily scoff six slices of buttered toast in between meals.

I don’t have any daughters, but do have a young niece. Since speaking to so many women about their obsessive eating habits, I’ve realised the responsibility every woman in her 40s and 50s has towards girls like her.

Our relationship with food sets the tone for theirs.

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I’ve gone through the fridge like a locust, eating its contents so fast I didn’t actually taste it. Friends admit they do the same.

That kind of bingeing usually happens just when we’ve reached our target weight and can afford to fill our faces.

But suggest that this is bulimic behaviour and we’d be dismissive, as we don’t purge afterwards, and it’s not a daily occurrence.

We say things such as ‘I was naughty last night’ or admit to ‘sinning’ when eating something our latest diet bans. I’m sorry, ladies, but that is the language of someone with an eating disorder.

Like most of us, my mother, now aged 70, has always admired the slimmer form. Growing up, I often heard her describe other women in terms of their size: ‘Oh, she’s beautiful, really skinny’, she’d say, or ‘such a lovely girl, and so tiny’.

Never skinny, or tiny myself, and despite being deeply loved by my mother — an enviably slim woman — I’m certain such comments played their part in my unhealthy obsession with strict diets I can’t sustain.

Only now, aged 49, have I finally seen the light.

I see my attitude to food for what it is: an unhealthy and destructive eating disorder that could keep me overweight — I’m currently a size 18 — for the rest of my life if I don’t release myself from its clutches.

So, I’m trying something new. Instead of dieting, I simply aim to make good choices when it comes to what I eat and to hell with who’s watching. Food is no longer to be viewed as the enemy. I walk every day and eat a little less.

And for the first time ever, I don’t feel in a permanent state of panic that the chocolate cake in front of me is the last I’ll ever allow myself to eat — so instead of enjoying just a slice, I’d better eat the lot.

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Amanda spoke to women of all ages for her research and says those in her age group - in their 40s, 50s and above — troubled her the most. She says: 'We are women at a stage of life when we should surely know better than to ruminate daily on the calories of this and the virtue of eating, or not eating, that'

Every meal I enjoy no longer feels like something I should feel guilty about afterwards. This means I’m no longer trapped in an endless cycle of starvation followed by gluttony, then starvation again.

This simple change in attitude has seen me lose two stone in five months, without it ever feeling like the result of self-punishment.

But don’t they say that the first step towards solving any problem is to admit you have one?

And surely the more women who start facing their food demons with a bit more honesty, the better chance we have of beating them.

Do you fear you’re in denial about an eating disorder? Are your eating habits unhealthy? Email femailreaders@dailymail.co.uk

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