

Eat your way to a healthier relationship with food

Lisa Roukin tells Gillian Fitzpatrick about her life's mission to make delicious, wholesome healthy food.

Gillian Fitzpatrick

PUBLISHED

18/11/2014 | 02:30

0

COMMENTS



SHARE



Lisa Roukin

Lisa Roukin was aged 13 when she stepped onto the scales at home and discovered that she weighed 13-and-a-half stone. Although still very much a child, she had already struggled with her weight for a full six years. As a result, Lisa found herself - understandably - increasingly distressed by her size.

"I remember grasping that I was 13 - and that my weight in stone was more than my age in years," she explains to Health & Living.

"Then a day or two later, I witnessed my dad pop up on the bathroom scales. I saw the dial hit 13 stone flat, and realised that he was lighter than I was. I was a young girl; but I weighed more than my father; a grown man. It was humiliating."

Close to 25 years later, Lisa - who graduated from the esteemed Cordon Bleu cookery school in London in 2008 - has released her first book, *My Relationship With Food*.

Complete with 100 healthy, hearty recipes, it is a publication that marks a significant milestone on Lisa's food journey.

Looking back now, the London-native says that she always seemed susceptible to adding on extra pounds: she highlights the time she travelled to Cyprus at a child with her family, returning home a week later seven pounds heavier after tucking in to daily buffets.

"I was certainly a secret eater," she adds. "I had one childhood friend who was a stick-insect - she could eat whatever she wanted. I was fascinated by her."

From the age of seven, her parents would intermittently try to intervene, sending her to dieticians and specialists. "Some diets worked; some didn't," Lisa states. "I'd lose a bit of weight; I'd put it back on again." Eventually, she began to write down everything she ate.

"Then I began to eliminate food groups," she continues. "At first, it was one or two - but after a while I was cutting out a great many things. By the age of 16, I'd lost four stone. Everyone told me how amazing I looked. But all that made me think of was how terrible I must have appeared before I shed that excess weight. I began to really worry about maintaining my newly slim physique too."

The 37-year-old says it took more than a decade to unearth real self-confidence and a more stable positive body image: "I feel I had to mature as a person to really be able to, once and for all, get a proper hold on what I was eating, how much I was eating - and, more importantly, why I was eating in the first place."

To date, Lisa has worked in some of London's best-known restaurants: Mirabelle, and L'Escargot. She has also enjoyed stints at Quo Vadis, where she served as banqueting manager, and at the events department of Le Caprice. She now primarily teaches, running cookery classes and seminars for adults and children.

"Six years ago I decided to take a professional detour and re-train as a chef. I wanted to help others to eat well and be healthy. It's actually the first thing I said when I walked into my very first Cordon Bleu class. I told the teacher very matter-of-factly, 'I want to teach', which maybe was a bit of a lofty thing to come out with on day one!"

Two years ago, then Children's Minister Frances Fitzgerald released an expansive Dáil na nÓg report, *How We See It: Survey On Young People's Body Image*.

Half of the 2,000 young people questioned - who were aged between 10 and 21 - said their body image interfered with normal day-to-day activities such as swimming, or posting photos taken with friends online.

Comparing themselves with those around them and the pressure to look good for others, as well as bullying, were all found to significantly impact on body image in a negative way.

"Put simply, girls want to be thinner, boys want to be more muscular, and both genders struggle to meet these idealised standards, while their body image suffers from the failure of these attempts," concluded UCC's Dr Angela O'Connell and Dr Shirley Martin, the report's authors.

"My parents undoubtedly did their best - even though some people now recoil when I tell them of all the diets I was put on and all the professionals I saw," Lisa continues. "But I wasn't happy and I wasn't healthy; they had to do something.

"It's just that it's so challenging to address food issues - at any age. One single comment from your childhood can stay with you for a lifetime. Food is used to bribe, to celebrate, to reward, to comfort, and to forget. It's just so incredibly emotional."

Nicole Paulie is a Dublin-based psychologist and counsellor, as well as an author. "Dopamine and serotonin are two powerful chemicals that are released into the body from the gut when we eat," she explains. "So when people speak of being addicted to food, or craving food - well, there is very much a physical as well as a psychological basis to those desires."

Nicole says that eating disorders usually arise when a person feels they don't have control over chaos or change in their lives, adding that parents nevertheless can't tip-toe around the issue of an overweight child.

"It is a really delicate area admittedly," she says. "But we have to remember that this is about being healthy, and that is something that needs to be prioritised.

"Steer away from talking about appearances or being motivated by cosmetic reasons - focus instead health," Nicole advises. "Parents also need to ask their child why they're turning to food for comfort. They need to offer a lot of support in general."

Lisa describes her book - which incredibly she wrote earlier this year in less than three months - as a "self-help cookbook".

"I'm really opening myself up - and I'm hoping that what I experienced, as well as my recipes, will speak to people on a level that maybe a standard cookbook just can't," she explains.

"This is a personal story detailing a very intimate relationship. And the key to a balanced and happy life is about successfully managing relationships: with friends; with family; with colleagues, and yes, even with food."

See www.cookwithlisa.com for more information. 'My Relationship With Food' is released at the end of this month.

How to be happy with food

Nicole Paulie is a psychologist and counsellor based at ballsbridgecounselling.ie. She is also co-authored *How To Be Happy And Healthy - The Seven Natural Elements Of Mental Health*.

"We all have times here and there where we don't feel particularly great about ourselves or how we look," explains Paulie. "However, self-compassion is key to recovery."

How to be more compassionate:

Talk to yourself like a friend: When feeling low, write a letter to yourself, but phrase it as if it was being addressed to a close friend in need. You probably wouldn't tell your friend that they messed up and that everything will turn out horribly; so don't do it to yourself either.

Be mindful of self-talk: If you're used to criticising yourself constantly it becomes second nature and you won't be able to recognise when you're doing it. Check in with yourself every so often and examine the tone of voice you're using.

You are not just any one thing: Try to look at yourself as a whole. Don't focus on weaknesses, but celebrate what you're good at and what other people like about you.

Be compassionate towards others: When you're going through a tough time, you're more likely to become self-centred and think only of how things affect you. But by helping a friend or through volunteering, you're forced to consider others. And that in turn allows you to weather your storms better.