

## 4 Body + Soul

## Is the gastric mind band the

A three-day intensive hypnotherapy treatment promises dramatic weight loss. Sarah Vine lies back and tries out the £1,650 'operation'

It was the psychotherapist Susie Orbach who famously said that fat is a feminist issue, and she was right. But it's also a psychological issue. All the overeaters I know, including me, do it for emotional reasons. We love food, and food loves us back, or at least it does until it leaves us sobbing in front of the bedroom mirror.

Few people over-consume calories because they are physically hungry; they do it because they are sad, bored, stressed, lonely. Any number of reasons, really, but most of them in the head. Everything in our culture conditions us to think of food as synonymous with pleasure, from the afternoon "treat" on a dull day at work, to the dessert tray on a date night (or, in my case, the cheese trolley).

This is the true reason so many diet and exercise regimens don't work in the long term: they are a physical solution to a psychological problem. Of course, if you eat moderate quantities of healthy food and exercise regularly you will not generally become fat. But many people struggle with this. They can get the weight off if they really try, but once they resume their normal patterns of behaviour, it all piles back on again.

For a diet to really work, you need to break the pattern of behaviour that led to the weight gain and, to do that, you have to get to the bottom of what caused the behaviour. The fat is just a symptom of something more deep-seated, a blubbery cushion of protection against the world. In other words, if you want to shrink, first you must get yourself shrunk.

This, at least, is what Martin and Marion Shirran believe. Both qualified hypnotherapists, Martin also studied cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) at the University of Birmingham. Together, they have developed a radical new weight-loss treatment based on an intensive combination of hypnosis and CBT; they call it the gastric mind band. As the name suggests, there is some surgery involved, but not in the traditional sense of the word.

For the past three years they have been treating patients at their clinic in Spain and the results, so far, have been impressive (a 78 per cent success rate so far, Marion tells me). They have brought the treatment (it costs £1,650) to the UK and invited me to try it. At first glance, Mr and Mrs Shirran make an unlikely couple. She is tall, pale and softly spoken; he is stocky, tanned and business-like. Good cop, bad cop; Jack and Mrs Sprat. But it soon becomes apparent that they have a close partnership. Theirs is a tight ship, and they have a clear agenda: to revolutionise my relationship with food, and to banish my weight worries for ever.

In truth, they are not the first to have tried. I have undergone hypnotherapy a few times in my life, always for weight loss, with varying degrees of success. My first attempt was with Paul McKenna, TV's Mr Hypnosis. It worked to start with, but the re-conditioning didn't quite stick. My second attempt was with Susan Hepburn, who

seemed to work much better.

Unlike McKenna, whose technique relied solely on neurolinguistic programming (a fancy term for hypnotherapy), Hepburn also undertook a fair amount of the talking therapy with me. Before she even so much as dimmed the lights, we had struck up an extremely productive conversation about the ins and outs of my relationship with food, delving into significant aspects of my past. After an emotional hour or so, she had built up a detailed picture of the sorts of triggers likely to ignite my desire for empty calories and she then tailored my hypnosis session accordingly. And, broadly speaking, it worked. Hepburn is the woman I credit with helping me to stabilise my weight. I am by no means as trim as I should be, but at least I have found a level I can maintain.

Trouble is, there can be no denying that I am still overweight. And mine is not good fat, either; it's bad fat, the stuff that sits on your stomach and clogs up the arteries. I am, in the language of scare statistics, a walking health time bomb. I would dearly like to shed that last stone and a half, and keep it off. One last push, and I'll float away like the Nimble girl. That's the plan.

The Shirran programme takes place over three days. Each session involves a mixture of CBT, hypnosis and general common sense educational stuff about nutrition. At the end of the course I am to undergo my "operation", a hypnosis session during which Marion will guide me through the process of having a gastric band fitted. The idea is to fool my subconscious into thinking that my stomach is no larger than a golf ball. This, along with other elements of the treatment, should result in a gradual taming of my appetite, which, in turn, should lead to slow but solid weight loss.

I start with Marion, who asks a million questions about myself: when did I first start putting on weight, what do I like to eat, when do I overeat, how much do I drink, and so on. Throughout our interview she takes copious notes, sipping constantly from a bottle of water by her side. She seems a little distant at first, but I soon realise that she is simply concentrat-

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## Can you really think yourself thin?

Hypnotherapist to the stars Susan Hepburn suggests that we follow these five steps:

1 It is paramount to eat slowly. Your stomach gets the message to the brain to say you're full. Through self hypnosis you can change your behaviour. You should really feel hungry when you sit down to a meal. Don't weigh yourself; use a favourite

pair of jeans as a barometer of your shape. Keep a food diary, recording your emotions as well as what you eat, at what times. And remember alcohol is empty calories.

2 Find a picture of yourself when you were slim and make sure it's one that you like. If you haven't got one, find a picture in a magazine of someone whose size you would like to be. This is not about being like someone else, it's about being like yourself, so find someone who genuinely represents your body type, whether that's curvy or straight up and down. Then superimpose your head on their body and photocopy it. Your visualisation tool is a physical thing. Keep it accessible.

