

SUDDENLY SKINNY, SEXY AND CONFUSED

Depression, fear, shame, isolation – dramatic weight loss isn't as simple as it sounds. Five women talk frankly about life as a thin person

REPORT Kerry Potter PHOTOGRAPHS Ian Harrison



From left: Sarah Walkins, Louise Mann, Lizzie Lee, Donna Reynolds and Carol Locking

The first thing you notice about Lizzie Lee is her skin. Her face is so luminous, so flawless, you want to touch it to check she's a real person, not an airbrushed cosmetics ad. Combined with the shaggy blonde bob, vast toothy smile, gregarious chatter and lithe figure, and you have a 38-year-old who, more likely than not, will be the most attractive woman in any room she enters. "I'm always being complimented," she grins. "I had to walk through the factory at work yesterday and one of the men said, 'You realise you're making everyone's day walking through here.' I love the attention and make the most of it."

It hasn't always been so. The first thing you used to notice about Lizzie Lee was her size. That tends to happen when you weigh 19 stone. It all began 14 years ago, when she didn't get round to losing the baby weight after having her son. Then her partner left her. She was forced to work long hours to make ends meet and would spend her evenings, exhausted, on the sofa, eating chocolate. Then her father was struck down by a prolonged terminal illness, and Lizzie spent her weekends driving hundreds of miles from her Hampshire home to his hospice in the North, surviving on service station burgers and chips. Then at the age of 34 and 19 stone, she took drastic action.

She'd seen a TV show about gastric surgery and had money to spare, having recently sold her flat to move in with her future husband. One short month later, Lizzie had a gastric bypass at a Streamline Surgical private clinic, paying £9,700 for an operation that would help her to lose 9 stone. It all happened very quickly. "If I want something, I want it now. I'm impulsive. I had put my heart and soul into diets before and I thought this was the easy option." Was it? "No," she says, quietly.

Obesity levels among British adults currently stand at 26 per cent, up from about 1 per cent in the Sixties, according to Department of Health figures. Of those who are actively trying to do something about it, an increasing number of the most overweight are pinning their hopes on bariatric surgery. The two most common operations are gastric banding, which reduces the size of the stomach by placing a band around it, and the gastric bypass, which involves creating a small pouch within the stomach, to which food is rerouted. The end result of both procedures is the stomach becomes fuller from smaller quantities of food. Obesity surgery was first recommended in the UK by NICE (National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence) in 2002 as a last resort for the morbidly obese if all other weight-loss methods had failed. The *British Medical Journal* this year reported a tenfold increase in operations since then, but the

Lizzie Lee, right and, below, before her 9-stone weight loss



figures are still tiny: of the one million people who currently meet the criteria for surgery, only 3,600 received it on the NHS last year. There simply isn't the capacity to meet the demand – although proponents argue that conducting bariatric surgery on a morbidly obese person now will save the NHS money in the long run, because that person is then less likely to suffer obesity-related illnesses such as diabetes, heart disease and high blood pressure.

For those fortunate enough to get surgery on the NHS or who have the money to pay for it privately, like Lizzie, those post-op months are a euphoric time as the weight melts away – 5, 6, 7 stone in the first six months is standard. It makes for a dramatic transformation. You get slim, you live happily ever after. At least, that's how it's supposed to end, but of course nothing in life is that simple. Losing weight is just the prologue; learning to live as a slim person is the crux of the story. As the physical journey ends, the psychological one begins.

Lizzie describes standing in the supermarket in tears. "I felt bereft. That enjoyment from



'I felt bereft. Food was my crutch – and it had been taken away'

SARAH WEARS DRESS: MAXIMARA; LOUISE WEARS DRESS: ISSA; LIZZIE WEARS DRESS: ISSA; DENA WEARS DRESS: LA PETITE S*****; CAROL WEARS DRESS: DAW BIRCHETT; MACKENZIE: ALL AT FENWICK (020-7629 998); HAIR BY NINA PITCH; MAKEUP BY SHARON VEE AT CAROL HAVES MANAGEMENT



Dena Ryness now, and, below, before losing over 6 stone



'Women are competitive with each other. They felt threatened by it'

shopping, from the rituals of buying, cooking and eating food was gone. It was a horrible feeling. Food was my crutch and it had been taken away. At first you can only have liquids and things like mashed potato until your stomach adjusts. It was a couple of years before I could have chicken again and even now I can barely eat steak or bread. I can only eat small quantities – I can never finish a starter *and* a main course at a restaurant."

As the pounds peeled away, so did her female friends. "Post-op I started getting fewer and fewer calls. I still keep asking a really good friend of mine about meeting up, but it's been over a year now. She knew me at my biggest and she's big too. I think she just doesn't want to see me slim, so she fobs me off. I'd probably feel the same if I were in her situation."

Ashamed by what she feels is the stigma attached to weight-loss surgery, Lizzie has only told a handful of friends about her operation, maintaining to most people that she did it through diet and exercise. "I don't want people to judge. I don't want people to think I've

cheated. I feel a failure about it – I didn't do it of my own accord." She's yet to tell her mother.

Four years on from her surgery, Lizzie is now attending Weight Watchers. "I want to lose about half a stone," she says ruefully. "I got married 18 months ago and I was slimmer then than I am now. I thought surgery would be it. I thought it would be a magic wand, but it is possible to cheat a bypass. I eat lots of crisps. I graze." She weighs herself every morning; so frequently is she in the vicinity of her scales that her husband Mike leaves Post-it messages on them for her.

Bariatric surgeon Shaw Somers is an NHS consultant who also works privately at Streamline Surgical. He was Lizzie Lee's surgeon, and has carried out operations on more than 2,000 patients in the past 12 years. His team offers rigorous pre and post-op counselling to every patient. "Once the initial weight-loss celebration period is over, there is the 'Now what?' thing," he says. "For some patients it's scary. They think, 'I've lost the old me I've grown to be comfortable with and now I have to cope with a different me.' The problem with surgery is that it does work a bit like magic at first, and some patients expect it to continue to do so."

Somers has seen many cases where a patient who over-eats due to an addictive nature replaces that addiction for another, such as alcohol or gambling. And he reports one third of patients in stable relationships see their partnership disintegrate post-surgery. "A common scenario is the husband realises he doesn't like his newly confident wife who likes to go out and enjoy herself. He preferred her when she sat at home and did the cooking."

Professor David Haslam, a member of ESCO (Experts in Severe and Complex Obesity), says that while the vast majority of people who have obesity surgery enjoy a far healthier, happier life, there is an increased suicide rate among bariatric patients. "This happens when the wrong people are having surgery without the appropriate steps [such as counselling] in place. If they think their life is s*** because they're fat and they lose weight and realise their life is s*** for other reasons, it can tip them over the edge."

Sarah Watkins is someone else who knows the story doesn't end when you buy your first pair of skinny jeans. Today, this softly spoken 29-year-old nurse from Leigh, Lancashire, weighs about 9 stone and is a size 8. She is tanned, toned and pretty, but there's something about the way she stoops slightly when she stands and hold her hands protectively across her torso that suggests a woman not at ease with her body. But perhaps that body has taken a bit of getting used to. Just two years ago, Sarah was 6 stone heavier than she is today. Towards the end of her third pregnancy (after having two sons of her own, she acted as a

surrogate mother), she suffered agonising gallstones, due, she believes, to a diet that saw days when she'd eat a 1kg bar of chocolate. A few days after giving birth, she dusted down her scales and tentatively stepped on.

"I was 16 stone. I just stood there thinking, 'How have I got to this point? It was like a switch going on – I had to do something about it. I opened the fridge and the cupboards and threw out every single piece of fatty food.'"

And so began a weight-loss regime that would see her lose 6 stone in nine months. She ate three healthy meals and two snacks per day, joined a gym and went five times a week, and began drinking two bottles of Skinny Water a day. The low-calorie drink contains chromium, a trace mineral claimed to help suppress the appetite and reduce sugar cravings.

Once she hit her weight-loss target, Sarah enjoyed a family holiday in Mexico, wearing bikinis for the first time, and a celebratory girls' night out, surrounded by friends telling her how fantastic she looked. And then? The comedown began. She says, "It's like your new body isn't your body. It's not been your body for such a long time – I was a teenager last time I was this size. I thought if I was slim the world would be some kind of fairy tale. But losing weight brought a whole new set of problems."

Like many people who've achieved dramatic weight loss, Sarah was surprised to find her body blighted by flaps of excess skin. "I was left with a belly like a paper bag. And I'd always had a good bust, but afterwards I had these pockets of wrinkled skin that fell out of my bra whenever I lent forward. I thought, 'I've lost all this weight and I resemble an 80-year-old woman. I thought I'd feel sexier but I felt hideous. I felt more depressed at that point than I did when I was fat. I seriously thought about putting the weight back on.'"

Her GP was sympathetic, referring her to an NHS surgeon who told her she qualified for breast implants because of the amount of weight she'd lost. It wasn't a decision she took lightly. "I've always been anti-cosmetic surgery and hated the idea of being mutilated like that." After much consideration, she went ahead with the surgery. The tummy flap has stayed though. "I've got firm abs under all the wrinkled skin. But it's a reminder of how I used to be – it stops me putting weight back on."

Sarah marvels – and despairs – at the power that comes with slimmest. "It's awful really – you are invisible when you're big, even though there's more of you. When I'm at work, there are a couple of male doctors who always offer me a tea and make an effort to talk now. I think, well, you never made me a drink when I was big. It upsets me because I'm still the same person inside. It hurts to think that people don't want to know you as a person; they're just interested in the packaging. If you are slim, people think better of you."

Carol Lucking, who lost 5 stone, below and right



Louise Kean, who lost 7 stone, above and right



A sentiment that is echoed by Louise Kean, a 35-year-old published novelist and head of a London film production agency. She recalls bumping into an old work acquaintance at a party, shortly after she lost 7 stone. "He said, 'Sorry, I don't think we've met.' And I said, 'We have. It's Louise Kean. I've lost a bit of weight.' He shouted, 'WHAT? No way!' He called over one of his colleagues to gawp at me, saying, 'Look, it's Louise Kean. Remember how she used to look? Well, look at her now.' I went home and cried my eyes out. I thought, that's still me you're slagging off."

Louise lost 7 stone in her late twenties, a time when many of her friends were settling down with partners, but her own love life was severely lacking, a situation she attributes to her weight. It took her 18 months of daily 6am runs and evening gym visits to slim down from 18 stone to 11, a size 24 to a size 10-12. Her delight at reaching her goal was tempered by what she found when she got there.

"I went into a bit of a shell to lose all this weight, then I came out the other side and found the world treats you differently. You

suddenly realise that men are checking women out all the time. I'd never felt that before and it made me paranoid. I felt too much attention on me; I felt too obvious."

She addressed this by having her long, blonde mane of hair, her pride and joy, hacked into a short bowl cut. "I felt too conspicuous. I'm not saying I was any rare beauty but I looked OK – and compared to the amount of attention I used to get, it felt excessive. If someone was going to like me, I wanted them to like me for me, like they did when I was bigger. I wanted to bring the focus back to my personality, my sense of humour, my intelligence, because I've always been confident about that stuff."

In the six years since her initial weight loss, Louise's size has fluctuated. She's currently a size 14-16. "The ups and downs of your weight become open to public debate. I hate the fact people think I still can't control my weight. When I was at my slimmest, I wouldn't even eat a tiny piece of cheese and I was addicted to exercise. I don't want a joyless life. I like to eat nice things, I like wine. Now I know what

SUDDENLY THIN

Sarah Watkins, who lost 6 stone, below and left



I'm doing – it's fine. I've thought so much about it over the years. I'm at peace with it now."

There is all the help in the world to lose weight. There is less help to address how to live your life, and to adjust to the changes, afterwards. When asked if they missed anything about being big, every woman I interviewed talked wistfully about the days when they could eat what they liked without feeling guilty. After extreme weight loss comes eternal vigilance, a fact that Carol Lucking, 41, a businesswoman from St Annes-on-Sea, Lancashire, and Dena Ryness, 33, a Manchester-based nutritionist, have learnt. Carol decided to lose weight after reeling in horror at being approached by a recruiter for

the local ladies' rugby team. She did the lemon detox plan, which meant replacing her evening meal with a potion made from Madal Bal Natural Tree Syrup, fizzy water, fresh lemon juice and cayenne pepper. She dropped almost 5 stone, and is now a neat size 10, down from a size 20 three years ago. The mother-of-two describes herself as "far happier, more creative and more confident" since losing weight, but at the back of her mind lurks a little voice, asking, "What if...?" "I have this irrational fear that one morning I'll wake up and go, 'Oh God, where has that stone come from?'" she says. "The weight I lost follows me around like a stalker."

Dena used to be a size 18 but after losing 6½ stone, she's now a size 8. Always a chubby child, she took action in her early twenties after being forced to pay £400 for a bespoke dress to wear to a friend's wedding because she couldn't find anything that fitted her on the high street. Over a four-year period, she took up kickboxing, ran marathons and overhauled her eating habits – and as a result, her career. Fascinated by the changes to her body, she gave up her City job as a marketing

director to retrain as nutritionist and set up Beautiful Active Nourished, a low-calorie bakery and patisserie. "The bottom line is I want to stay fit and slim so I have to stay disciplined," she says firmly. "If I'm not disciplined, I will gain a bit of weight and I'll have to be happy with that. There is a trade-off – you can't have everything."

She's been known to go running on Christmas morning so she can then eat what she wants during the day. "I think I am less fun now I'm slim," she says. "I hardly drink now, for example, because I'd rather have the calories in food. If I occasionally say, 'I fancy a G&T', everyone around me gets really over-excited and encourages me to have one."

She's experienced problems with friendships. "People started telling me I was looking too thin and that I exercised too much. Women are competitive with each other – it's as simple as that. They felt threatened by it."

As weight falls away, new muscles, contours and cheekbones come into focus, but so, it seems, do all manner of unforeseen issues, problems and regrets. These women say they are more confident; they can attract men more easily; they can play on the climbing frame with their children; they can walk down the street without someone hurling abuse at them; they are not suffering from crippling back pain. To a large degree, it is a no-brainer – it is better, in so many ways, to be thin than fat. Yet the personal psychology of becoming slim and the changing dynamics it brings to the slimmer's relationships with those around them should not be underestimated.

And this is against a backdrop of increasing numbers attempting this transformative journey. Dr Somers says, "Weight loss surgery started off as an offshoot for me; now it makes up the majority of my work. People come to us feeling we're their last hope. They grasp at surgery thinking it'll take them from where they are now to being happier. They don't really understand that the thing that's going to make them happy is not the weight loss per se; it's adjusting to an entirely different life." ■

'It's like your new body isn't your body. I was a teenager last time I was this size'