

Thinking, Weighting, Lasting —

One woman's journey to conquer what was weighing too heavily on her mind *and* her body.

By Lucinda Shanks

I was thirty-seven, over twenty stone and deeply unhappy. I was drinking and smoking heavily and the only exercise I did was the walking necessary to conduct my life. If I had to walk with anyone else, I constantly complained about their pace, as I had to waddle breathlessly behind like an injured penguin.

One day I packed what I could fit into one large suitcase, from the last thirteen years of my life, and I left London. The big moment. Of course, my life had been filled with dramatic moments, often not well thought through. I did not know then that I had severe ADHD, and so I was disproportionately comfortable with making dramatic life decisions, and no doubt will continue to be. Whether this is a strength or stupidity is less quantifiable.

Once I faced the scales and saw my weight was tipping twenty stone, I knew I not only had to cut out my husband and my unhealthy and miserable life, I had to cut my weight, now. Much as my ADHD disrupts my life by compelling me to make bad decisions, it also gives me the superpower of hyperfocus, and this was life or death.

After a few weeks I moved with my parents to the edge of the Peak District, and then lockdown began. This gave me time to focus on my health and take an online course in teaching. My new life was beginning.

Food was going to be vital. I had to be strict — it was the only way I knew would work. I counted calories, I focused on healthy options. Luckily, my love of fresh healthy food meant it was easy to build my diet around vegetables, fish and salads. I ate three meals a day, without deviation. I logged all my meals in a calorie app. I weighed lettuce. I did, however, consider this puritanical lifestyle might result in a crash.

I needed to make the diet sustainable for a long time. I realised I had eight stone to lose. It would take me at least a year. This lifestyle had to feel acceptable, not like a prison sentence. I love food. I love tasty, well-cooked healthy food. I also love sweet things, I liked to have a pudding after my dinner. I did not want to be locked into fantasies and obsessions about chocolate biscuits. To accommodate this, I calculated my calories so I could eat ice cream every day. 100g of high-end ice cream. Every day. Say what you like, but it worked.

So, my diet was simple, focus on fresh, healthy food, log calories, avoid snacks, eat ice cream.

Next, I needed to exercise. I knew this would assist my weight loss, but I was full of energy, which turned into anxiety. I joined the gym and discovered new classes, some dance, Pilates, I was bold to try anything new, but I found classes engaged my brain more than the gym. I spiralled into boredom in the gym often justifying why I should spend less time there. I'd get distracted by the TV and grind to a halt. This soon all became moot as the gym closed as lockdown began.

Remarkably for the North West in March, it was dry and quite sunny a lot of days. I downloaded the Couch to 5k programme, and I set off running, now down to around eighteen stone. It was challenging. With not much to do, I went six days a week rather than the recommended three.

I kept my pace slow, shuffling at barely more than a stagger. As the length of the sessions increased, I ran in circles around a local carpark and a small park – terrified of collapsing far from home and desperately trying to stick to the flattest areas I could find in a hilly town. I completed every session, except once when I misjudged the gradient of another local carpark. It was exhilarating, aside from the times I would catch a glimpse of my large frame rippling up and down in a shop window — I may have felt I was a gazelle, but I was definitely more hippopotamus.

I supplemented the running with yoga videos. This made me feel accomplished, as my flexibility was one of my strengths. Whilst the running burned the buzzing ADHD hyperactivity, yoga calmed it down. I loved the relaxing nature of the stretching and taking challenges. My buzzing mind benefitted from the slow and deliberate movement. I was a convert to Adriene's tribe (Adriene is a YouTube yoga phenomenon).

The final prong of my fitness journey, was learning to hike, made possible by living next to a national park, contrary to my pathological fear of mud. The local area is called Bleaklow, so expertise is required to protect your life from a slow, mist-covered and bog-infested death.

I don't know why I was so scared of mud. Maybe as metaphorically I felt dirty and a mess inside and having mud on me would highlight that outside. I had spent some of my childhood near the Peak District, and it is famous for peat bogs. This means one misstep in what appears to be a bit of mud can quickly leave you crotch-deep in a bottomless, black swamp with a very real fear you will be swallowed forever by a lurking, primeval bog monster.

Fortunately, I was the daughter of a Scout, from a family of walkers. My dad would take me on short hikes and sit on the living room floor with maps spread out and a compass and teach me the invaluable skills of navigation, how to be safe and how to know when you are beaten. A wise hiker understands when to turn back. Eventually I was brave enough to join a club and learn even more, and to walk further than I imagined.

The exercise all served to calm my mind, as well as heal my body. The high energy of running burned off my hyperactivity and stress, the yoga kept me grounded and the hiking gave me chance to be alone, reflect and commune with nature.

This all worked and in one year I had done it. I had lost eight stone. I have not kept it off. Well, I have not kept it all off. I have fluctuated up and down by around 4 stone. To stay at that lower weight, I would have to live a life of a fanatical hermit. I would have to constantly battle temptation and never miss a day of exercise. I am on the journey to get closer, though, because I feel happier, healthier and fitter when I do. My ADHD means I am compulsively driven to make reckless decisions, drink not one drink but ten, eat a whole cake. I have to battle those impulses all the time.

A lot of people are shocked at my journey, my ability to move out of my comfort zone and face a lot of challenges most people find too frightening to face when they feel big and ashamed.

How could I run in public? Well, I suppose I always thought, I might be a fat person, but I am a fat person *running*. Surely if someone is the type to scorn a person for being fat, then running is the optimum activity for them to see you engage in? *So, what, I'm fat?* But I am doing something about it. I was nervous to go to fitness classes, but I thought, I can put up with anything for an hour. If I hate it, I won't go back, or I could just leave halfway through.

My most humiliating fitness class was falling off the bike seat in my first ever spin class, feet still strapped in. Two men had to pick me up and put me back on the seat. I went back to spin, and did enjoy it. If you spend a lot of time in your own head worrying about everything, then try to imagine how much everyone else is obsessing as well. Honestly, most people are kind, and most people are not really bothered about you and your life.

Just like with the day I left all my possessions and my life behind in London, I had to learn to leave behind my negativity and pain. I found joy in the achievements of my weight loss, not just in feeling fitter and healthier, but in finding better ways to manage my mental state, in the challenges of reaching fitness goals, and in overcoming fears and pushing myself. Knowing that I have the ability to face things that I used to think were not for '(fat) people like me,' has added so much depth and happiness to my life. I just came back from a yoga retreat in India — I tried surfing. I would never have had the gall to try any of those things before, and I loved them. I promised myself I would never let my weight or negative feelings stop me from trying things, and that is probably the biggest achievement and improvement.

Am I the finished, slim, fighting machine right now? No. Am I back on the road to get there? Absolutely — because I want to live with happiness, and I know I have it in me to live the life I once thought was only a pipe dream. The weight may always creep back and haunt me; my resolve to fight back will never leave.

“I am the master of my fate,
I am the captain of my soul.”

— *William Ernest Henley*