

The Midults – Annabel Rivkin and Emilie McKeeKan

Q: Dear A&E, one of my best friends is obese and has been for some time. Our circle of girlfriends – who by the way, are not body fascists, definitely not working out the whole time, and each have comfortable, middle-aged figures – have very gently tried to encourage her to get healthy in the past. She says she knows she will soon be walking with a stick (at 52!) and prone to much worse if she doesn't get this sorted, but nothing has changed. We don't feel we can tackle her head-on, but this is now serious. How can we stand by and watch her destroy herself? – Desperate

Dear Desperate, it seems insane but our advice will ultimately be: yes, Desperate, you do have to stand back and watch your friend destroy herself if that's what she decides to do. In the end she is the only one who can make the change. But before you turn the page in helpless disgust, we are not saying there's nothing you can do it's just that right now you are powerless to help her and she feels powerless against her huge task. Let us explain.

She will know all the facts. She will know all about diet and exercise. She may well have secretly devoured every diet book out there. She will probably have googled liposuction and gastric-band surgery; she will have hovered over her GP's number.

But she will feel like she has a mountain to climb. She will be standing at the bottom, looking at the apparently insurmountable top, thinking both 'How did I get here?' and, 'How do I get there?' If she says she knows she's soon to be walking with a stick then she's fully aware. As with any addiction, you can plead or bargain but until something clicks in her head there is nothing anyone can do. All nagging will do is shame her, which will make her retreat into the fridge.

Put your cards on the table. Say it once very clearly. Do not use phrases like 'you should lose weight', but rather, 'We are worried about you because you matter so much to us.' Remind her of her value to you. And then say 'We won't hassle you again because it doesn't make you feel good and it doesn't make us feel good.'

In this mini presentation, give her the details of a local Overeaters Anonymous group. Lots of women of all different shapes and sizes who have difficult relationships with food and their bodies attend these meetings. Group therapy is a wonder for these sorts of problems because it's all about connection and identification at a time when the person feels very disconnected and alienated from the world around them.

The Telegraph's own Bryony Gordon set up Mental Health Mates, where meet-ups take place in parks; see if there are any in your area. Also find a list of therapists – ask around; go to welldoing.org, a website dedicated to matching people with therapists, or Mind – so that she can start to tackle her feelings. **She's probably eating because of more than hunger - alcoholics don't drink because they're thirsty.** Food and feelings are inextricably linked.

So, remember that your friendship is not about her weight. Carry on being her friend having a lovely time with her and having a laugh. That said, you could meet for a walk rather than for coffee and coke or a pub lunch. She's going to need a total lifestyle change. The switch has to flip for her and it can be joyfully empowering but you do not have access to that switch. Only she does. When Emilie finally decided to stop drinking, it wasn't because people were saying, 'You are drinking too much' (which they were). It was because she suddenly knew that she didn't want to feel that way anymore.

They say recovery begins with the feet – walking to an OA meeting; walking to the park; walking to therapy. It's amazing how momentum can build if she can just take those first small steps. Just let her know that you will be beside her. . . .