

## COGNITIVE BEHAVIOURAL THERAPY THE BACKGROUND

RACHEL, 27, runs an advertising business in Brighton. In January 2007 she visited MONICA BLACK, a London-based hypnotherapist who uses cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT), for six sessions to deal with her weight issues

**Rachel** I put on weight when I moved to London after university. I had no friends there, and my relationships from

**s usually** university quickly fell apart. Within two years I had gone from size 8 to verging

**nothing** on a 16. I was living alone, feeling increasingly depressed. I started missing work deadlines, and my boss told me I had not fulfilled my potential. One day a friend popped round on Saturday afternoon and found me in my pyjamas, crying. She recommended Monica. I'd hit rock bottom and had nowhere else to go.

**Monica** Rachel said she was depressed because she was overweight. I suspected the weight was a by-product of other things and she was using food to comfort herself. Ethically, however, I can't treat people for what I feel they need to be

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reated for, until they recognise that themselves. I decided to use cognitive behavioural therapy with her. CBT is about becoming aware of your behaviour and the triggers that cause it. Rachel swore she had a healthy shopping basket, so I asked her to keep a food diary.

**Rachel** I liked the idea of CBT; I have a busy life and it sounded practical. The food diary surprised me. My shopping basket was healthy, but I was going to the pub a few nights a week and having another bottle of wine and chips with people from work. Then I went home and had a massive bowl of pasta and opened a bottle of wine. I'd think, 'I'll take half the pasta for lunch tomorrow,' but I never did. I was so consumed with stress at work, I didn't realise how much I was eating.

**Monica** In our next sessions she became increasingly aware. She said, 'I see - I am working long hours, I am unhappy, I am eating chips - that's why I am overweight.' She also revealed a fear of failure.

**Rachel** We talked about why I needed to prove myself at work. I told Monica my parents always said, 'She's pretty but we don't expect much of her.' Also, my mother was in an abusive relationship and told me, 'Always put your face on and don't show the world what is going on.' So I was ambitious, but unable to tell anyone I was struggling. I started work at 8am and left at 9pm and didn't stop for lunch. If my boss gave me more work, I never told her I couldn't cope.

**Monica** She recognised that work was the basis of most of her issues. Now she needed to recognise what stressed her at work, then avoid the feeling that triggered her overeating. I explained how our autonomic nervous system is the same as the one we had as cavemen. Our stress levels shot up when we had to fight the sabre-tooth tiger or run away. When stress hormones and adrenaline levels rise, our hearts beat faster and we breathe shallowly, so we get less

oxygen in our system. It was fine then because stress levels came back down. Today they can remain raised 24/7. It was important Rachel understood it wasn't her fault that her system couldn't cope.

**Rachel** Monica taught me a relaxation technique to do when I spotted a trigger. The worst was when I arrived home and felt lonely. Normally I would open a bottle of wine and drink it really fast while I cooked or did more work. She told me I had to leave the light off, sit down and shut my eyes, and empty my head for five minutes. I had to breathe deeply and focus on making the evening calm. If I felt lonely, I should ring someone.

**Monica** I taught Rachel to put one hand on her tummy and one on her chest and to pick a colour. She had to imagine a balloon that colour inside her. When she took a breath in she had to concentrate on seeing that balloon being inflated, and then deflated when she breathed out. The idea is to stop the brain

focusing on outside influences like work. After ten times you feel relaxed.  
**Rachel** Monica taught me another exercise in that first session. She told

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**It was wonderful seeing an epiphany moment**



me to think of three occasions when I felt confident about myself. I thought of a job interview, a presentation, and a fab party when I was slimmer. She told me to remember how I felt and to squeeze the skin between my thumb and finger as I did it. She said, 'Now if you feel low, I want you to squeeze that spot.' It worked.

**Monica** This is called an 'anchor' and top athletes use it. It can be effective on depression. The sooner a patient feels that they can snap out of their depression by recalling a happier situation, the quicker therapy is going to work.

**Rachel** There was another exercise to help me sleep. Normally, I would lie in bed thinking about a deadline. Monica taught me to say the word 'blank' over and over until I saw a black screen in my head. Then I had to count back from 30. By ten I was asleep. Not all of Monica's techniques helped, though. She told me to take a break at lunchtime, but when I got out a book at work it was frowned on. I told her and she said, 'The fact that they undervalue your health is not good.'

**Monica** By the end of our six sessions, Rachel had lost ten pounds. During the last session, she mentioned she had decided to look for a new job and had seen one that was commission-based. Suddenly she said, 'That's like working for myself, isn't it?' It was wonderful seeing this epiphany moment. She said, 'I could open my own business, couldn't I?'

**Rachel** I saw how my job was affecting my life, and decided to set up my own business back home in Brighton. At one point Monica asked if I had feelings for anyone. I said there was just one person, back in Brighton, but he was divorced with kids. She said, 'You are already closing off something that could be wonderful.' She was right.

**that** We are in a relationship now and it's going really well. I realised that a lot of things that happened in my life were to do with my own choices.

**Monica** Once people are back in control they stop dwelling on the past. The only way to solve a problem is to let it go.

**Rachel** I never would have changed my life like this if I hadn't met Monica. I have now lost two stone and I take care of myself. The business is going really well. I met another woman starting a business in Brighton and we meet every morning to run by the sea and talk. I get low sometimes, but I recognise it and take care of myself emotionally. ◊