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COMPUTER THAT SAYS 'NO' TELLS BOY HOW TO SLIM

Friday October 26, 2007

Nick Fagge

An obese teenager has lost four stone in a world first – thanks to a computer that says “no” every time he tries to overeat.

Laurence Willshire, 16, uses a computer called a mandometer which weighs his meals and monitors his eating.

The computer chides Laurence if he eats too quickly and questions him when he eats too much.

If Laurence – who used to weigh 21 stone – picks up one fork-full too many, the computer asks him: “Are you still hungry?”

He said: “I used to eat very fast. I could eat a very large meal in about three minutes. Now I take about 16 minutes.

“The treatment has given me so much confidence. I feel very good about myself now.”

Laurence, of Horfield, Bristol, is one of 120 volunteers in the first trial of its kind by the Childhood Obesity Clinic at the Bristol Royal Hospital for Children.

The mandometer is connected to a set of scales with a plate which the patient fills with food to a pre-determined level.

The computer then records and stores the weight loss from the plate as Laurence eats and tells him when he is eating more than he should. It also tells him when he is eating too quickly and when he can have his next mouthful.

Laurence, who towers above his friends at 6ft 7in, now weighs just over 17st and is well on the way to his target weight of 15st 5lb.

He began to put on weight aged eight and was bullied at school. He turned to comfort eating, but this just piled on more pounds.

In his early teenage years, Laurence used to eat a whole packets of biscuits, entire multipacks of crisps or dozens of pieces of jam on toast in one go.

Worried parents Lydia, 47, and Roy, 48, who have three children, tried to halt his bingeing but to no avail.

If they ate a healthy meal together, Laurence would sneak down in the middle of the night and gorge himself.

At his peak, Laurence, then 15, had a 60-inch chest, 52in waist and weighed over 21st.

Worried mum Lydia, a classroom assistant, and Roy, a council worker, struggled to find clothes to fit him.

Their GP diagnosed clinical obesity and referred Laurence to the Childhood Obesity Clinic at the Bristol Royal Hospital for Children.

He was put on a tough exercise regime and last November joined the mandometer study. Within a month, Laurence's weight was down to 19st 10lb and last month he reached 17st 7lb.

His mum Lydia said: “He is a different person. He's confident, he's going out, and he's got a great sense of humour. I don't think we've ever really known him until now and it's brilliant.”

Laurence said: “I'm enjoying life so much more now. I enjoy walking around town with my friends, which is something I wasn't fit enough to do before.”

The mandometer – from the Swedish “mando”, meaning “I eat” – was intended to make anorexics eat faster.

But it was modified to tackle obesity as tests showed slowing down eating could help obese children shed weight. According to trends, a quarter of all British children will be clinically obese by 2050.

Earlier this week, Dawn Primarolo, the Government's Public Health Minister, was accused of backing out of a pledge to halve the rates by 2010.



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