

MIND MATTERS

9 years ago I went to the Dublin Weight Management Service and began my journey with weight loss. For context I started then at 160kgs. At my very first appointment I spent over 2 hours with the psychologist and I remember her telling me the team would not be in a position to help me fully as the few appointments that they offered would not be enough. I had poured my soul out to her, and I was very angry that she said they would not really be able to do anything to help me. In hindsight it was the beginning of my journey to recovery and to finding therapy. I went on to do the year of appointments and lost a stone but still no major changes except I began seeing a therapist. I went to that particular therapist for about 10 months and she made

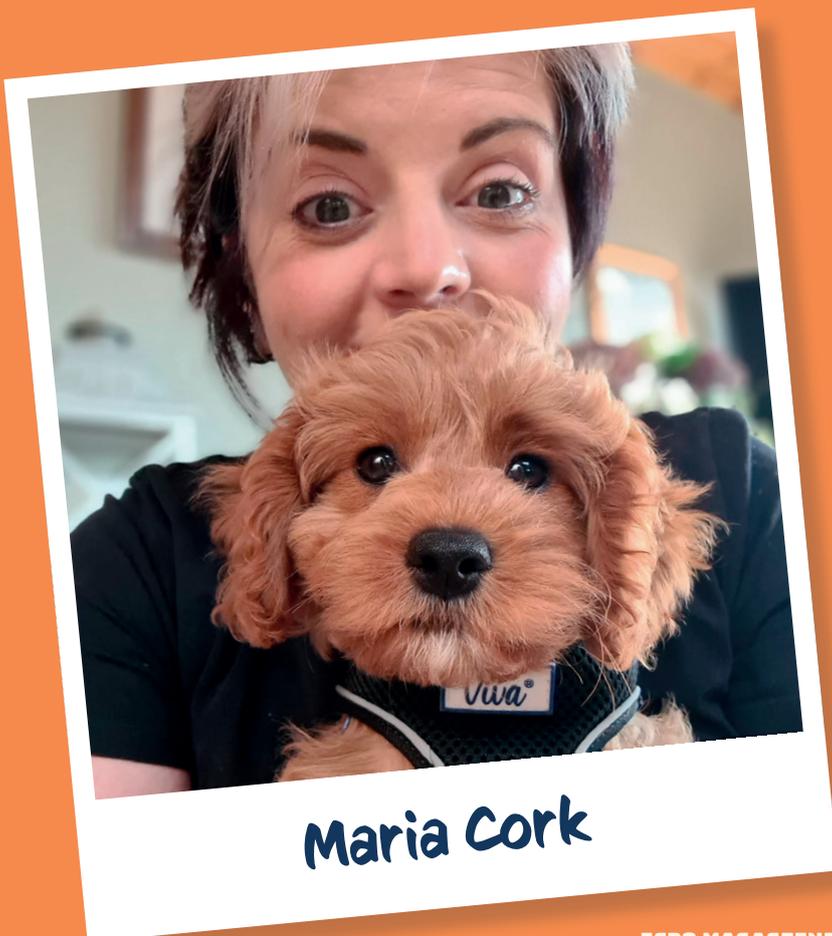
a big impact on me initially however once I started to feel better, I believed I was cured and didn't need it anymore.

After waiting 7 years for surgery, in October 2014 after discovering my insurance would cover the procedure, I had gastric sleeve surgery privately with Colm O'Boyle in Cork. Unable to wait any longer as I was slowly but surely eating myself to death. I had surgery at 154kgs and got as low as 94kgs within 2 years. This was done through surgery and insane amounts of exercise. During these 2 years my eating disorder changed from overeating to restricting and bulimia and my selective eating disorder (now known as avoidant/restrictive food intake disorder (ARFID))

continued on in the background. From the outside I was loving life in my new body but internally I was torturing myself to be thin – over exercising 2/3 hours a day in the gym and purging halfway through meals so people around me wouldn't notice I couldn't eat became my normal. At this point I would like to tell people that surgery saved my life, and I won't ever regret having it done as I was eating myself to death, but what I didn't know was that for surgery to work long term you have to make sure your mental health is looked after and it should be your number one priority.

2 years after surgery everything changed again. I ate very little for the first two years and was sick frequently after eating. Due to this I started to look for foods that would melt so that I could eat...I just wanted to eat and chocolate was what worked for me. I had seriously hurt my back at the gym and wanted the comfort I knew I'd get from chocolate. Life got progressively worse from that point on. I started to pile back on weight and my anxiety depression and generally poor mental health became unbearable. In July 2017 I had gotten to such a bad place again including my weight being back at 135kgs, I tried to borrow the money to have my sleeve revised to a gastric bypass done with Colm O'Boyle again but it didn't work out.

In March 2018 it was said to me by my coach that I needed to get help. My food was a mess, I was



Maria Cork

working 18-20 hrs a day and my mental health was at rock bottom. I went to see a counsellor and by my 2nd visit she told me, she believed that I used to food to deal with my mental health. She recommended that I go to residential treatment for food addiction/eating disorder and it was the best chance I had at getting my life back properly. At this point I would have done anything not to feel how I was feeling.

In June 2018 I went into Talbot Grove (now The Grove) residential treatment for 30 days. It was the hardest thing I ever did, even harder than surgery but I can honestly say it has saved my life. It is an addiction centre and uses the 12 step programme as it's basis for treatment of the disease of eating disorders. I now identify as a compulsive overeater, bulimic and co-dependent. I have chosen to treat sugar like an alcoholic treats alcohol and I do not consume it.

Following my 30 days I did 2 years of group therapy twice a week (one with a specific focus on food), one to one counselling once a week and attended 2 fellowship meetings a week. The global pandemic then hit, and my supports were put in jeopardy but thankfully for Zoom I have continued to do 1 group therapy session a week and I do my one to one every fortnight.

Through all this therapy I have learned how to deal with my emotions and not use food/people/work/exercise to escape my problems. I am on a journey that helps me to accept me as I am and teaches me how to deal with life without harming myself through food. It has been very tough and sometimes going to therapy was

the last thing I wanted to do but I would not be where I am today only for it. I lost all my weight again after treatment getting back down to 94kgs but truth be told the pandemic has been rough and I'm up another 10kg but today I am ok with that, and I don't beat myself up about it. I accept I am where I am for today, and I have to work from there.

The reason I'm telling you all this is I have lived with obesity my entire life, I had surgery and initially it worked, at that time it saved my life, but now that I know more and have a better understanding I know I am wired differently. I will find a way to eat whether I have surgery or not. I do not have a healthy relationship with food and surgery won't stop that only me taking control of my life will. I know many people talk about how important it is to be mentally prepared for the surgery and I really thought I was. For anyone still preparing make sure you do the counselling even if you hate it and make sure you realise your relationship with food has to change in order for surgery to be truly successful, in my opinion. And for those that decide surgery is not for them know that working on your mental health through therapy will have such a positive impact on your life and your health that it is most certainly worth a try.

I know I have tried everything over the years and therapy is the one thing that has truly worked in



"My one to one counselling was like talking to my best friend for an hour every week would highly recommend it

- Catherine O'Sullivan ICPO

the long term. I'm going to leave it at that as I have my therapy session in a few minutes and it's the most important part of my week and can't be missed.

One last thought, therapy has made me a better version of myself. It has allowed me to become the person I was always meant to be but couldn't as I hid behind all the food and weight. Today I have a loving partner, a healthy and happy relationship with my family and a career that I love and that is all because I have put in the effort, time and money into going to therapy and it has been worth it moment of it.

Maria, Cork.

Useful Links:

psychotherapycouncil.ie
addictioncounsellors.ie
thegrove.ie
overeatersanonymous.ie
bodywhys.ie