

Title: "A lifestyle change, not a forever diet": one service user's experience of accessing a local health trainer service

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Carol Scurr accessed her local health trainer service between 2009 and 2011. She works part-time and is a wife and mother of one teenage son. In this article she tells her story of learning to manage her weight with the help of Choose 2 Lose, a group set up by health trainers in the east end of Newcastle-upon-Tyne. The Community Health Trainer Service is hosted by HealthWORKS Newcastle, which is a third sector organisation providing support for people wanting to make positive changes to maintain or improve their health. Since 2011, there have been radical changes within the health trainer team and Sarah Ritson is now assistant manager. The Choose 2 Lose group has recently been redesigned and relaunched in the west end of the city and is currently led by the HealthWORKS physical activity team, with health trainer support.

My issues with food started from a young age. I've lived in Newcastle my whole life, but my mum grew up in Ireland as one of six children. Food was scarce and they would steal from the farmer's field just so they could live. As a result, the whole family is food obsessed. Even though we didn't have much money and I was dressed in hand-me-down clothes, we ate like kings and queens. The cupboards and freezer were always full and as long as the family were well-fed, my mum was happy. She loved to feed people and I'm the same. People always say, "Oh, you're never short of a meal at Carol's house". It's just that now I try to do healthier food.

When I was younger I was so active that it didn't matter. I was captain of all the school sports teams and even got picked to play netball for the county. But after a bout of pneumonia at age 13, my fitness levels never recovered and I've since been diagnosed with a number of chronic conditions. Over the years I gained weight and tried all sorts of ways to lose it, including joining a gym, Weight Watchers and even taking diet pills. I lost about three stones before going in for surgery, but piled the weight back on afterwards. I did it all wrong, to be quite honest, and it wasn't healthy.

It was around the same time that a friend told me about the Choose 2 Lose group she'd been attending. She explained that it was about healthy eating and a healthy attitude towards your lifestyle, rather than just weight loss. Some of the other girls were actually very skinny, but their diets were shocking. The idea was that everything is okay in moderation and also introducing exercise as a way to stay healthy. We paid £1.50 a week for an instructor to deliver a fitness class and I was able to get discounted membership at the local authority gym because my husband works for the council. I've never in my adult life exercised the way I have since joining Choose 2 Lose.

When I first joined the group it was run by a health trainer called Sarah Ritson. Her personality is fabulous and you just take to her, which I think is half the battle. At the first session she gave me some forms to fill in and then went through everything the next week. It was all good, sound advice. The food diary was great because when you saw it in black-and-white, you would think, "Oh hang on, I've only had three of my five-a-day. I need another two." Or, "If I have a bit of chocolate cake, I'll have to write it down", so you didn't have any cake. You've got to be honest because you've got to do it for yourself, not to please your health trainer or anybody else.

Sarah would look at my food diary and say, "You're having too many chocolate muffins Carol. We're going to the gym." And she would come with us and put us through our paces. There were times when other health trainers delivered the sessions and sat at the back instead of taking part in the fitness class. That didn't help to motivate me at all. For me, it's important that people practice what they preach, which Sarah did. In the past, my GP told me I was overweight and gave me a little bit of information about healthy eating; nothing like the in-depth, personalised advice I received from the health trainer service. Also, you don't always see the same GP, whereas I felt I got to know Sarah on a personal level. It was great to be able to share the experience with other Choose 2 Lose members because we helped to support each other, but we also needed a qualified person there to keep us on track. Some health trainers only work with people for six weeks but I think you need longer than that to make real lifestyle changes.

In total, I lost two and a half stones and dropped three dress sizes, as well as seeing improvements in my health. Emotionally I'm different too; I'm more confident, go out more often and just feel happier in general. My husband has lost weight without trying by eating more healthily and doing boxercise with me, and my son's attitude towards food seems to have changed too. Although I no longer attend Choose 2 Lose, I've managed to maintain my weight by continuing to exercise regularly. Going to the gym is now a necessity rather than a luxury for me. The best thing about the

health trainer service was that it opened my eyes to the fact that you can eat healthily and stay active without feeling like you're on a forever diet. If I want to have fish and chips then I'll have fish and chips, but I just do some more exercise or cut back a little bit the next day. My lifestyle has changed completely and I'm determined to keep it that way.

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