

You've probably seen her laughing up a storm on Channel 7's *The Morning Shift* but behind **Rachael Oakes-Ash's** smile lie years of binge-eating and depression. In this extract from her book, *Good Girls Do Swallow*, she reveals how dieting brought her both fame and despair.

BEYOND BULIMIA

ONE WOMAN'S TALE OF RECOVERY

Minor celebrity brought me *The Caze* I had spent my life seeking. After I returned home from London and was working as a national record company publicist, I was offered a job as a radio announcer and found myself thrown into the spotlight. I loved *The Caze* that my new-found public persona received and my ego puffed out with pride.

As co-host of a nightly radio show, I was inundated with fan mail from pre-teens obsessed with Take That, Boyzone and the Spice Girls. I interviewed international rock stars in the privacy of their hotel rooms, dined with movie stars and went to opening nights. Everyone wanted a part of me — the record company representatives who

wanted me to play their song, the movie stars who wanted me to promote their film, the TV stars who wanted to be on radio, the boys in the bar who wanted to know someone famous. It was all about me and my ego loved it.

The next step after radio was television and I lapped up the added attention. My job as a television host brought with it make-up artists, stylists, cameramen, producers and publicists. I had one of each and boy, did I feel important.

But when I attained the lifestyle I had dreamt of, I was no different. Everything dieting had promised me, I had got. I had the man by my side, the glamorous clothes and the invites to parties. But unlike the 'after' shots in the weight-loss commercials, I was not smiling.

While songs were playing on the

radio, I'd run to the station fridge and devour promo pies and chocolate. I would ask live on air for pizza and five would arrive within minutes. I kept my weight down with my free gym memberships, free rollerblades and free training sessions.

I obsessed about my body on camera. Only shoot me from the left, I'd say, it's my better side.

Then I lost my radio job.

In my post-job blues, at 29, unemployed and weighing 55kg, I went to a black-tie ball with friends. An off-the-shoulder frock teased the male eyes as I strutted past. I wanted the attention but I was uncomfortable in my thin body and I drank to obliterate the heat I was attracting. I was lonely but rather than face the loneliness, I frantically searched for a toy to distract me. I found him and spent the night in his bed.

After years of being trapped in the cycle of bulimia and self-loathing, eating now brings Rachael pleasure rather than pain.



When I woke in the arms of this stranger I felt no better or worse; I felt nothing. My need to obliterate myself meant I had not used any protection the night before. I spent the next two weeks wandering like a dazed rabbit, terrified I had exposed myself to HIV.

I had a blood test in the hope that it would be negative and two weeks later it came back positive... positively pregnant. My body ballooned with anticipation. A pregnant body, another two months before an AIDS test would give me the all-clear, and a craving for food. This is how I spent my 30th birthday.

I booked in for an abortion and awoke from the anaesthetic believing I was 19, the memory of being raped, which I had long buried, back in all its graphic glory. In 1987, Rachael's best friend left her at a Sydney nightclub with a family friend who ended up raping her on the bonnet of her car.

I hid in my room with the curtains drawn, stomach cramps reminding me of the day's events. I spent days calm-

“ I had the glamorous clothes and the invites to parties. But unlike the 'after' shots in the weight-loss commercials, I was not smiling. ”

ing myself with mashed potato and ice-cream, comfort food for a child. Like my rape, I did not dare tell anyone. I was ashamed of my behaviour.

The year I turned 30 I lost the symbols by which I defined my persona. My radio gig was gone. There was no room for me in the new show. Next went the television job when my contract was not renewed. Then my boyfriend dumped me; as a result I lost my position as 'and guest' on the glamorous invitations he received.

Next I lost my sculpted body since I could no longer afford my personal trainers. Then went the designer clothes, for they no longer fit. In one year I doubled in size from eight to 16. I went from a minor B-grade celebrity

to an office temp in laddered stockings.

My home, my job, my relationships, my body and my finances were all in a mess. All my compulsive behaviours went into overdrive — my credit card went through the roof; I could not stand to be alone with myself and spent hours on the phone, tripling my phone bill; I stole my flatmate's food and gorged in the bathroom.

I had no idea who I was. The lie of my life — that I was a happy, successful, thin, fun-loving individual — became fully apparent. I tried dieting and binged instead. I tried drinking and woke up more depressed. I tried shopping and ran away in shame when my credit card was rejected. So I tried therapy in the hope that the psychologist's



Today, Rachael is back on track to a happier, healthier life.

THE FINAL PURGE

Four years after hitting rock bottom, Rachael has stopped bingeing, shaken off her crippling depression and finally learned to be happy with her body and herself. Now a size 14, she has a body she likes, a job she loves and a man she adores. "I don't kid myself that life ahead of me is all roses and no thorns," she says. "But I know I have a lot of joy and a lot of love to look forward to." Look out for the *Good Girls Do Swallow* television special on The Lifestyle Channel in October.

couch could cushion my fall.

I rolled in the depression, swam in the depression, relished, savoured and binged on the depression. I hated myself for being depressed; the hate made me more depressed and I would hate myself more.

I was angry at the world, blaming everyone else for my demise. It was my co-host's fault I lost my job; it had nothing to do with my mid-show temper tantrums. It was my flatmate's fault we had to move out; it had nothing to do with the owner wanting to sell. It was their fault I went out, got drunk, was picked up and had an abortion.

My binges became frantic. Trays of baklava, packets of almond fingers, whole roast chickens and multi-packs of Almond Magnum ice-creams from the corner store were half-gone before the front door closed behind me. I was used to the frenzy of the bulimic binge but nothing had prepared me for this. There was no desire to purge or rid myself of this food. I deserved to be fat, slothful and disgusting.

Eventually only one skirt, two tops and a pair of underpants were all that fitted me. I wore them day after day after day. I refused invitations to weddings, parties, to Christmas, to New Year celebrations. Phone calls went unreturned. I hated my friends, I loathed my family,

I abhorred my employers. I stared at thin, smiling girls and wanted them shot.

I thought of ending it all and began to plan my funeral. Fourteen kilos later, I was diagnosed with Binge Eating Disorder and reactive depression. I continued to eat my way through a course of anti-depressants.

Few things lifted the blanket of darkness at this time but therapy helped, so I increased my sessions to twice a

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week. I still held on to my depression and my binge eating. I could have slept forever, eaten forever and cried forever with a little time left over for ranting, raging, seething and eating some more.

I had been in a similar state before – in London when I was bulimic. But I had structure in my life then; I threw up or took laxatives to keep my weight down and I had a gym routine, work and a relationship, albeit a destructive one. This time I had none of that.

On my 31st birthday, I took the phone off the hook, rented two videos, bought a family block of chocolate and ordered in Thai food. I had nothing to celebrate. I was caught in a loop. I ate to forget the rent money; I ate to forget the clothes that didn't fit so I couldn't go for a job interview so I couldn't get the money to pay the rent. I ate to forget that the size of my body was preventing me going out. And so on and so on and so on.

Was there a turning point? A specific moment when I realised I had to change? It was more a series of collapses that left me with no option. I waited until all the shit had hit the fan before I chose to do anything about it. Choice meant taking responsibility and not blaming everyone else. I gained such pleasure from ranting at the world.

I fed my depression by comparing myself to others. Oh look, she's driving

a Saab; I'm not. Oh look, she's married and has a mammoth rock on her finger; I haven't. Oh look, her stomach is so flat and mine is enormous. "The world owes me," I wailed between mouthfuls.

Finally, when I no longer fitted into any of my wardrobe and had not showered for four days, I realised it was time to stop. The prospect of spending the rest of my life obsessed with my body, refusing invitations out, eating everything in

sight and crying into my pillow, combined with the realisation I had already wasted nearly 30 years obsessing about my body and not liking myself very much, meant it was time to change.

Of course, it does not have to be like that. You don't have to wait until you hit rock bottom to accept the Average Body and stop believing the Perfect Body will get you the dream life. I have an excessive nature; I live all or nothing and the black and white outlook of my life meant my road to recovery would be filled with highs and lows.

I made a commitment to myself to find a way out of this weight-obsessed madness but I did not get out of bed straightaway and I certainly did not stop over-eating. I made the commitment, then went back to bed. Two steps forward and 12 steps back – that's how I hobbled home.

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WEBWATCH

- For further information and advice about eating disorders, visit www.mirror-mirror.org.
- For advice about dieting myths, visit www.healthyweight.net.
- For help in breaking the pattern of disordered eating, visit www.geneenroth.com.