



We all apply labels to ourselves, but often it's the wrong ones that stick. Maybe it's time to pull them off and reveal the *real* you...

WORDS: SALLY BROWN

The clever one', 'the naughty one', 'the quiet one' – we can't escape being labelled as we grow up. Labels are a form of shorthand – an easy way for parents, teachers and friends to convey information about us – and although many are harmless, some can have a powerful influence over our whole lives.

Psychologists have shown, for instance, that once labelled 'disruptive', a child's behaviour will go downhill as they try to live up to it. Similarly, a childhood label that relates to our size or eating habits could still be affecting us years down the line. 'Grow up with a reputation for being "the big eater" in your family and, even as an adult, you could find it hard to turn down second helpings,' says psychotherapist Rachel Shattock Dawson (www.therapyonthames.co.uk).

Sometimes the labels that hold the most power over us are those we've given ourselves. 'We all compare ourselves to other people and when we feel we don't match up to them, we can create a negative

label for ourselves as a way of explaining it,' says Rachel. 'Maybe you didn't make the school netball team, so labelled yourself "useless at sport", or perhaps your best friend was slimmer than you, so you decided you were destined always to be "the chubby one".'

Even if a label isn't accurate, when we hear it often enough – whether spoken out loud by someone else or simply in our own heads – it influences the way we feel about ourselves. 'Once a label like "lazy" or "no willpower" is firmly entrenched, it can be very undermining for your confidence, leaving you feeling there's no point in even trying to slim,' says counsellor Gladeana McMahon (www.gladeanamcmahon.com).

The truth is, labels don't have to become self-fulfilling prophecies. If you're holding you back from achieving your weight-loss goals, then pulling them off and swapping them for positive labels you're proud to wear could make all the difference. Maybe it's time to rethink who you are – and discover the person you know you can be!



OLD YOU There's no doubt that food is linked with emotions and can become our default response to stress, boredom, anger, sadness or disappointment (especially if we were soothed with sweet treats as a child). The trouble is, using food to manage your mood comes with a major drawback – weight gain – which in the long run leaves us feeling even worse about ourselves. No matter how long you've lived with the label of 'comfort eater', with a bit of effort you can find new, more helpful ways to manage your emotions, says Rachel. 'Becoming aware of a habit and the negative impact it has on your life is the first step to change.'

NEW YOU Do what big companies do when they need to rebrand – make a vision board that instantly captures your new approach to life, says life coach Dr Nicola Bunting, author of *Who Do You Want to*

Be? (Piatkus, £14.99). 'Take a large piece of white card and stick on snaps of you looking slimmer if you have them, plus inspirational images of the healthy foods you'll eat and your new strategies (such as going for a walk, doing yoga) for managing your moods,' says Nicola. 'Decorate it with brightly coloured, uplifting phrases or words that sum up your goal, then hang it in your kitchen as a daily reminder of your new, healthy lifestyle.'

OLD YOU 'Sometimes we give ourselves a label as a defence mechanism or to make people like us – for example, if we feel embarrassed about being overweight we may become "the bubbly one" to distract attention from our size,' says Gladeana. 'Often, we prefer people to think we're happy being big rather than that we've tried and failed at weight loss.' If you're naturally the life and soul of the party, then that's great! However, if keeping up the 'big and jolly' persona is just hiding a desire to be slim, it's time to be more honest with yourself and – like comedians Dawn French and Ruth Jones – admit you'd be happier with a healthier body weight.

NEW YOU Finding the confidence to relax and be yourself is a big self-esteem booster which will help you keep weight off long term. And the best way to convince yourself that something is true is to amass evidence, says Rachel. 'Try taking more of a back seat next time you're out and see what happens. It's unlikely people will notice – they certainly won't think badly of you – and you'll start to realise that people will like you even if you're no longer the "jolly one".'



OLD YOU The 'always on a diet' label can be a hard one to remove if you've lived with it for years. And the trouble is, you end up sabotaging your chances of success by telling yourself (even if it's just a little voice in the back of your mind) that you won't stick to your slimming long term, or that you'll put all the weight back on. The thing to remember is that you didn't 'fail' at dieting – the 'diet' failed you!

NEW YOU The key is to banish the word 'diet' from your vocabulary entirely and instead start thinking of yourself as eating healthily for life. Keep a diary of positive actions, says Gladeana. 'Every time you make a healthier choice – like going for a walk at lunchtime instead of sitting at your desk, or making great Food Optimising decisions – write it down. It's all too easy for everyday triumphs to go unnoticed. Recording them in a special notebook will not only help to reinforce your new image, you can also give yourself an instant confidence boost whenever you need it by simply reading them over.'



OLD YOU If the mere memory of cross-country at school still sends shivers down your spine, it's easy to assume that exercise is just not your thing. But the 'no good at games' label can be misleading – or just plain wrong. Maybe you lacked confidence, didn't grow up in a sporty family, or simply didn't click with your games teachers; whatever the reason, it doesn't mean you won't now love Zumba, yoga, hiking, cycling, swimming or generally living an active life. And missing out on Body Magic means you're missing out on a calorie-burning mood boost that can help you reach target.

NEW YOU Start thinking of yourself as a fit and active person and you're likely to behave like one, according to research by Professor Ellen Langer from Harvard University. She took a group of hotel cleaners and told half of them that their job was strenuous and physically demanding. After four weeks, the half that believed they were active had lost on average two pounds

in weight and lowered their blood pressure, while the other half remained the same. 'So instead of thinking, "I'll get fit once I've lost some weight", start telling yourself, "I love being fit and active",' says Rachel. 'You've been telling yourself "I'm no good at games" over and over for years, so it makes sense that you need to repeat your new positive label to help it stick!'

OLD YOU When friends and family label you 'ditsy' they usually mean it in a very affectionate way. The trouble with even light-hearted labels, however, is that they're one-dimensional, whereas people are multi-dimensional. 'They don't describe the whole person and put one aspect of your personality in the spotlight,' says Nicola. 'Labels are fixed, but as people, we are constantly changing and adapting to new habits, environments and people around us – even if we don't notice it.' And thinking you're ditsy can hold you back from taking responsibility for your life, or from tackling new challenges such as sticking to a healthy eating plan.

NEW YOU Remind yourself of all the changes you've made since you started Food Optimising – do you regularly plan weekly menus, shop for the ingredients and make time to cook delicious, balanced meals? Have you found new ways to calm yourself when you're under pressure? Then it's time to update your image! If you need a little help, ask two supportive members of your Slimming World group to name your good points. 'You may be amazed to discover that other people's image of you is totally different to your own,' says Gladeana. It could be a real eye-opener – and provide inspiration for exciting new 'labels' to wear. Whatever you've believed about yourself in the past, it's who you are now that really counts!