

Weighty issue as deaf-blind count calories

EXCLUSIVE
By CATRIONA STEWART

DEAFBLIND people are being given help to fight the battle of the bulge with a specially-tailored diet class.

Specialists Counterweight have teamed up with charity Deafblind Scotland to offer healthy eating sessions to people who struggle with their weight.

Charity bosses say deaf-blind people face a constant battle with their health due to a variety of hurdles - from being unable to read food labels to the challenges of cooking.

Initiatives officer Drena O'Malley said: "We can easily cook most of our own food and make healthy choices. We can go shopping regularly and we choose healthy things.

"We can do that. They can't. Blind people cook using audio signals but deaf-blind people can't do that. Cooking is an absolute chore to deafblind people and is often the first thing to go.

"Deafblind people eat a lot of takeaway food. If I was unable to get out of my house easily and if I was unable to cook then I would too.

"I have seen deafblind people live on sandwiches from the age of 35 and now they are 70.

"Exercise is difficult to access and deafblind people lead a sedentary lifestyle, meaning they are above average of the population prone to being overweight or obese."



Guide communicator Rosalyn Doyle explains the information to service user Clark Steven

Now six deafblind members meet once a week to take part in an hour-long Counterweight class, learning about healthy food choices.

The challenges to running the class are considerable, however.

Two of the members communicate using deafblind manual, a type of sign language. Two use clear speech, which means they can hear voices talking directly to them as long as there is no background noise.

One uses clear speech - but in Hindi. And the sixth member uses BSL but must have her interpreter sitting an exact distance in front of her or she cannot see.

Drena added: "We have overcome the communications barrier with great difficulty.

"I make sure the members

sit in exactly the same places each week. It has also been very important to use exactly the same phrases each week so that there are fewer things to remember.

"The guide communicators take away the notes they will be using the next week so they can study them in advance.

"It's just a cacophony of noise if everyone is answering all at once so we have a rule that only one person may speak.

"And I am there to give everyone a break because you simply cannot sign for that length of time and retain the quality of communication needed.

"We know it's making a difference because we hear back that our deafblind members are using their precious guide communicator time to ask about food labels and nu-

trition. They are taking it all in and making healthier choices."

One member making much healthier choices is Eliza Smith, who says she was a size 24 just eight weeks ago and now she can fit into a size 18 dress.

Eliza, who is due to marry her boyfriend Clark next year, says she is really enjoying all at once so we have a rule that only one person may speak.

The 68-year-old said: "It has been good so far. I want to lose a lot of weight and I've been learning about food, what I'm not supposed to eat and what I'm allowed to eat.

"I also do exercise every day for half an hour in my chair. I never miss it.

"Clark is also taking part but I have to tell him off sometimes as he does the wrong things - last week he made a steak pie, which is bad."

Eliza, who has been a Deafblind Scotland member for 25 years, lost her hearing to German Measles at the age of two and her sight began to fail when she was 44.

She said she "cried a lot" when she learned doctors could do nothing to help her vision but manages day-to-day with help from Clark, who is also deafblind, and her guide communicators.

CHRISTINE Fry is also having great success with the Counterweight programme.

The 55-year-old said: "It's been very good getting more information about food. I've learned a lot.

"I found it really helpful in the class when we were shown plastic food so we know what

size of portion we should be eating. For example, I used to hate spinach but now I know that it is full of iron, I'm happy to eat it. My diet has really changed."

Louise McCombie, director of Counterweight, said working with the charity has been a challenge - but she is hearing positive responses from those taking part.

She said: "We've worked really closely with Deafblind Scotland and taken their guidance on everything we do.

"One of the first challenges was taking our manuals - Counterweight provides a lot of information and written materials - and cutting them down to a more appropriate format without losing the central message of the programme.

"It's been quite challenging for the people involved but it



Service user Eliza Smith, right, learns about healthy eating through guide communicator Elaine Doherty.

Pictures: Nick Ponty

has been a great experience.

"With any weight management programme there is a 50 per cent drop out rate but we have not had anyone drop out of our programme. I think that speaks for itself."

The scheme has been so successful there is a waiting list of 18 and Deafblind bosses hope to secure funding for a second course.

This first 12-week course has been supported by Network Rail.

A spokesman for Network Rail said: "When Deafblind Scotland asked us to sponsor Counterweight through Deafblind Scotland, we didn't hesitate.

"Network Rail realises the real challenges brought on by sensory impairment and is working with Deafblind Scotland to alleviate some of these difficulties."



It's the moment of truth for Christine Fry as guide communicator Jacqui Harvey takes the measurement

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