

BAZAAR

AT WORK

An appetite for change

Meticulous calorie counting was once the preserve of Florence Gillet's strict eating habits, but now she has a liberated relationship with food as a certified eating psychology coach. Bazaar Junior speaks to the mother of two on why we need to rethink the link between weight and health, and how she instills body positivity values both at home and in her work...

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Photography by AASIYA JAGADEESH

Five years ago, Florence Gillet would have gingerly questioned the cake we had brought to her home on the day of our shoot. "I would have asked you about every ingredient," she says, pretending to pedantically examine the frosting-topped slice. "I would have politely accepted it and put it away," she admits. Instead, she got a spoon and swung into it with free gusto. From once taking protein shakes with her to Thailand on a girls trip, purposely eschewing unpredictable and unsafe street food, to relapsing in restaurants and having pizza only to mentally berate herself afterwards for "ruining all her efforts," Florence has a new-found and unrestrained joy for food.

She was locked in diet mode for over a decade, mitigating weight gain and chronic acne control by following faddy diets purported by the media. To the outside world though, she was thin but not dangerously skinny. Florence moved from her native Belgium to London at the age of 25 with her then fiancé, noting that "change can be a catalyst for an

eating disorder". It started off innocently when she got wind of the five-a-day fruit and vegetable campaign, conveniently in tune with the need to "maintain my weight for my wedding dress". It was the perfect storm: she had time to run around London's parks and reduce her food intake but then eat "a burger and dessert on the weekend in a social setting, so I could get away with it because people didn't notice what I was doing."

Fast forward to having two children, she spent a period of time not worrying about how she looked, until they were two and three and another change provoked a relapse which saw her cut out essential nutrients and restrict once more.

In Dubai, Florence was working in luxury PR against a cultural narrative that she read as "I always need to look good, never tired and have a manicure," at all times.

The turning point was an afternoon at McDonald's with her children — whom she never restricted — when she threw the towel in. ➤

Shirt, Dhs1,200; Trousers, Dhs675
both Weekend by Maxmara.
Slides, Dhs1,930, Santoni.
Jewellery, Florence's own



“I thought, I don’t want to scavenge for a salad without a particular dressing anymore. I was so hungry. So I sat down with my kids and had a burger — my daughter turned to me and said, ‘Mummy are you eating like us?’” It was a defining moment for Florence who right there, knew her children were cognisant of what she was doing. “I was afraid my daughter saw this as what it means to be a woman — controlling, counting and planning — I had an internal freak out.”

In 2015, Florence sought the help of a therapist to “help untangle the ball of elastic bands” in her head and her heart. She outwardly lambasts the “zero scientific value” she had acquired from naturopaths and functional medicine doctors in the past. Through her recovery she also had a body image coach and a nutritionist who specialised in the eating disorder field, as well as a cognitive behaviour therapy coach.

Fast-forward to today, her sun-filled office, situated on the ground floor with its own separate entrance to the rest of her custom-designed home in The Lakes, Dubai, has rafts of books on the foibles of dieting. They are what she gorged on while she was enrolled as a distant learning student at the Institute for the Psychology of Eating, based in Colorado, ahead of becoming a certified eating psychology coach where she is now building up her own business, seeing it grow through local workshops and community gatherings as well as one-on-one private sessions. Beyond Body Image — a platform that seeks to reverse the cultural shortcomings of what has historically been perceived as bodily perfection, offers a new and diverse view of beauty and health at any size.

Despite still being in the infancy of her practice, Florence has become the figurehead for reversing the wrongs we’ve internalised when it comes to our oftentimes warped relationship between the body and food.

As a parent and expert on the subject, she now gives talks to other parents in a seminal move to assuage the damaging effects the culture can have on children. “I go to schools and give talks on how to bring up your children in a body positive environment. A lot of the times it’s always done with the best intention but parents don’t know they are passing their own issues down to their children. You cannot give food freedom unless you too, are free,” she says. Florence also hosts workshops outside of schools with nutritionists who weigh in on the biological effects chronic dieting can have on your mental and physical wellbeing.

Her children are now eight and nine-years-old. As much as they can grasp the premise of what a complicated relationship with food looks like, Florence hasn’t laid her past on thick. Instead, she circles the topic with positive associations: “We define food in the house in a specific way by telling them they can have ‘fun’ foods on a daily basis,” — something most parents don’t do, which she says, “develops the restricting and bingeing mentality. We want to raise competent eaters who are able to

choose balanced meals while listening to their hunger and fullness cues.” The non-judgmental aspect of food freedom is also applied to playground politics: “We discuss what it feels like if you are name-called at school for being fat and why you’re no different a person if you have abs one year and another you don’t.”

At home, there are clear divisions between work and family time, mainly due to the configuration of her private-entrance office space. When the lines do blur, it’s more challenging. “I’m strict about doing as much work as I can during school time. When the children come home it’s a break for me but as I grow a community and host support groups, I’ll have to set more boundaries as they’ll have to be after work in the evenings,” she adds.

A few weeks ago, Florence’s old stash of fashion-focused magazines made a guest appearance on her Instagram. She lambasted their toxic discourse, weighing in on how redundant and unrealistic their curve-minimising advice was — despite worshipping this information in the past.

Now, being in a glossy magazine herself, was it at all triggering for her? Did it make her feel she had to conform to the desired form she had looked up to in the past?

“No. I feel I am bringing in a new voice. I don’t need to be in environments where body positivity and neutrality is accepted. I need to go into the environments where there is still work to be done in the cultural mindset,” she asserts.

Outside of Florence’s office are blown up black and white family portraits with her husband and her first born when he was a mere few months old. They portray a picture of such bliss, but was there something hidden behind that full wattage smile? “Actually, it was one of the happiest, best years of my life. I remember not feeling any shame that I was trying to get into clothes that weren’t fitting,” she says.

Now, she is equally if not more at peace. Between now and then she has confronted a lot of darkness and is happily living in and leading the light for many others. ■

WORDS OF WISDOM

1 Aim for progress, not perfection. Perfection can drive us into a procrastination vortex. As a recovering perfectionist, I had to challenge myself to face the fear of failure and do it anyway.

2 There is no such thing as having too many books. I love how books can bring us into an imaginary world, but also help us understand ourselves better, or to stand in someone else’s shoes.

3 Stay critical. Media literacy is super important, especially if you work in the health and wellbeing field. There is a lot of pseudoscience out there. Learning to go back to the source of information and truly understand where data comes from, how it was collected, by whom and why, is really crucial.

4 I am a believer in continuous education, not just professionally, but also personally. I think learning something new is always a source of joy and satisfaction.

OFFICE ESSENTIALS
Florence’s day isn’t complete without...



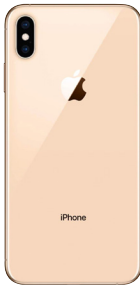
Cushion, Dhs350, Tribe



Venice Beach artwork, Dhs150, Drawdeck.com



Ban.do monthly planner, Dhs189, Virgin Megastore



iPhone Xs 64GB, Dhs4,258, Apple



Water bottle, Dhs175, Revolve

Blazer, Dhs11,320;
Trousers, Dhs4,060, both
Brunello Cucinelli.
Loafers, Dhs3,190, Santoni.
Top and jewellery, Florence’s own.
Prices approximate.
Styling: Chole Boshier. Hair and
make-up: Angélique Turner.
Visit: Beyondbodyimage.com

