

# ‘Losing weight gave me the courage to hope’

Laura Forbes was 23 when she was struck by an rare virus that left her in a wheelchair. At such a terrible time, she joined Weight Watchers and discovered that losing weight could change her life



Seven years ago, my life was just beginning. I was 23, had a job that I loved in a travel agency, and was thinking about buying my first house. I loved travelling and spent the weekends clubbing with my friends or shopping with my sisters.

Then one day, in October 2002, I got a headache. It was intense, like a migraine, although I knew it was something more. The pain came back the next day, and the next. The

doctor told me they were tension headaches caused by stress and looking at a computer screen all day. But the headaches didn't stop and things got worse frighteningly fast. Within days I found it impossible to walk in a straight line. Whenever I tried, I'd automatically veer to the right, and I started seeing double. One morning, I woke up to find that my voice was high-pitched and squeaky, no matter how hard I tried to speak normally. I was terrified. I had no idea what was happening to me. The doctors diagnosed labyrinthitis, an inner ear infection, and sent me home.

But I deteriorated rapidly and a few weeks later, I couldn't stand up without falling over. Luckily I was still living at home in Glasgow so Mum and Dad were there to help me. They had to lift me down the stairs because I'd lost all sense of balance. I was also nauseous and

## Laura Forbes

Age: 30  
 Height: 5ft 5in  
 Start weight: 11st 7lb  
 Weight now: 9st 5lb  
**WEIGHT LOST: 2ST 2LB**  
 Clothes size before: 14-16  
 Clothes size now: 10-12  
 Meeting: Johnstone, Renfrewshire  
 Leader: Lynn Harper

August 2008

'On holiday with my mum in Majorca'



August 2008

'This was taken on holiday in Gran Canaria. My friend Pauline and I had a great time partying'

TOP, £12, size 8-20, F&F at Tesco (0800 505555). Jeans, Laura's own. NECKLACE, £3.99, H&M (020 7323 2211). Earrings, Laura's own



DRESS, £18, size 8-20, F&F at Tesco (0800 505555). Shoes, earrings and tights, all Laura's own

disorientated. It was so scary – I kept asking myself, ‘What’s going on?’

My mum was so worried that she called a doctor out to the house. He took one look at me and said: ‘That’s not labyrinthitis.’ I was rushed into hospital and kept overnight. The next day, I was transferred to the neurology department at the Southern General Hospital in Glasgow. Over the next three months, I was poked and prodded and had to undergo many tests, including a painful lumbar puncture. I was tested for a brain tumour, all the medical disorders they could think of, and even HIV. As I had terrible tremors in my arms and shook all the time, I was also tested for Parkinson’s disease. But all the tests were inconclusive and the doctors were stumped.

I began to despair. I’d been in this state for so long, I felt that even if they did diagnose my illness and give it a name, it wouldn’t change anything. Of course, I was grateful to be alive, but I wished more than anything for someone to wave a magic wand and make me better.

*‘I’m determined to be as independent as I can be. Things I assumed I’d never be able to do, I’ve done; I’ve got my own place and even went to Las Vegas for my 30th’*

‘Maybe tomorrow,’ I thought each night, ‘I’ll wake up and be able to do things again.’ Days passed slowly in the hospital. Music agitated me and my pupils constantly darted about so I couldn’t watch TV or read. I desperately wanted to leave. When my family and friends came to visit me, I’d beg them to take me home.

Finally, after four months in the hospital, the results of a PET scan showed something. The stem of my brain was enlarged and swollen. The doctors called it Post Viral Cerebellar Syndrome – the cerebellum is just above the brain stem and a virus had caused it to swell up.

I had the diagnosis, but didn’t feel any sense of relief. None of the countless medications I’d tried did anything to alleviate the symptoms



Top, Laura's own. NECKLACE, £2.99, H&M (020 7323 2211). Ring and watch, both Laura's own

of the virus. There have only been two cases of the disease as serious as mine anywhere in the world, so there is no proven treatment, but I was told I could try physio and speech therapy. I was moved to a rehabilitation ward and, initially, I improved fast. My voice, which had been so slurry that hardly anyone could understand me, became clearer, and I progressed from being unable to sit up by myself to being able to walk with a Zimmer frame. Each step was dramatic progress and I felt encouraged.

But after these improvements, my progress plateaued. I stopped getting better and felt utterly depressed. I wanted to be normal; I hated living in a world of wheelchairs, carers and panic buttons. I’d been so independent and now I couldn’t do anything – walk, eat or shower – without help. Most people on my ward were elderly and I felt isolated. My tremors were so bad that I was unable to hold a spoon and feed myself, but because I was being ‘rehabilitated’, the staff couldn’t feed me. I grew skeletal and hit an all-time low.

But I was still strong. I was – I am – determined to get better. I was offered antidepressants but refused them. I knew I could get better without them. I will be the same as I used to be one day, despite being told otherwise. I’ve already come so far.

Eventually, seven months after I was admitted and when the hospital could do no more for me, I was discharged. Now I needed to adjust to life in a wheelchair. My mind has

never been affected by my illness, but people look at me and assume it has. They speak to the person with me instead of me. When my mum pushes me into a room, people ask her: ‘How’s Laura?’ At first it made me want to scream, ‘I’m here, talk to me,’ but I’m used to it now. Recently, I was at the airport with my sister Tina and the security guard asked Tina, ‘Can she walk through the scanner?’ Tina replied, ‘Why don’t you ask her yourself?’

I moved back home with my parents when I first came out of hospital, but after two months I realised I needed my own place and some independence. I moved into my current flat and I love it – carers come four times a day and I can wheel myself around the rest of the time. It’s just a normal rented flat, which I’ve had to have adapted – the doors are wider and the surfaces and light switches are lower so I can get to them from the wheelchair.

My weight was very low when I left hospital, around 8st, because I hadn’t been able to feed myself. It took about a year for me to get back to a healthy weight. But after that, I began overeating. I had a psychological hang-up about eating, so when

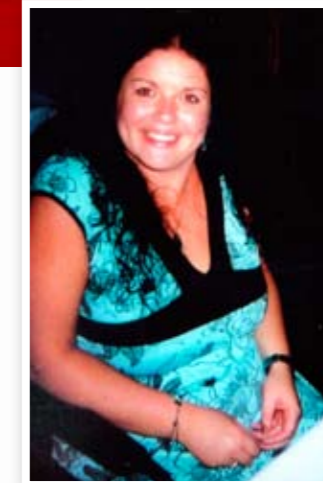
August 2008

‘My sister, Tina, is visiting me in hospital here – and I’m not looking very happy!’



August 2008

‘In my wheelchair – and the pounds are starting to pile on’



July 2008

‘Getting back on my feet again’

August 2008

‘This is just before I started Weight Watchers and my weight has reached 11st 7lb’





DRESS, £18, size 8-20, F&F at Tesco (0800 505555). Jeans; shoes, Laura's own. Jewellery, as before



August 2008

'Here I'm celebrating my 30th birthday in Las Vegas with my friend Helen and Tina. We took a helicopter ride over the Grand Canyon and ate at a revolving restaurant!'



I focused on feeding myself, I would shake, but if I was mindlessly eating and focusing on something else, like TV, I could eat easily. I began

finishing share-size bags of crisps and dips by myself.

Within two years, I'd put on 2st and began to feel out of breath just wheeling myself across the room. I knew I had to nip it in the bud and lose weight. I'd heard about Weight Watchers from my friend, Margaret-Ann, who had lost 2st. She looked so fantastic it inspired me to join. My mum drives me to my meeting each week – and although I go in by myself, I'm working on getting her signed up too!

Losing weight can be difficult when you're in a wheelchair. Exercise-wise, I can't incorporate tips like walking up the stairs at work or getting off the bus one stop early. But

I go to the gym twice a week and I can use most of the machines except for the treadmill or ski machine. My carers know all about the **Discover Plan** and help me track **POINTS** values, because I still can't write. But I was determined to lose weight and lost just over 2st, reaching my goal in May 2009. It took me 18 months to get there, but I made it.



Laura with her mum, Margaret

Losing weight was life-changing for me – it gave me back my motivation. When there's so much in my life that I can't control, it gave me confidence and encouragement to see that there is one thing I have the power to change. I'm determined to be as independent as I can be. Things that I assumed I'd never be able to do again, I've done; I've got my own place and even went to Las Vegas for my 30th birthday. It may be true that I won't walk unaided again, but I need to believe it's possible. Losing weight has given me the courage to hope. 