

LEARNING CURVES



KATE WEARS TUNIC BY KINGAN JONES, TIGHTS FROM STORM, NECKLACE BY KAREN WALKER. AMANDA WEARS DRESS BY JULIETTE HOGAN, RING FROM DIVA, BRACELETS FROM DIVA AND DOTTI



Shortland Street
star Amanda and
screen husband
Ben Mitchell in a
scene from the show

Amanda Billing and her sister Kate want to educate women about eating disorders

It's hard not to scrutinise every bit of your body when you're flashed onto TV screens every weeknight at 7pm.

And Amanda Billing, who plays *Shortland Street*'s Dr Sarah Potts, isn't afraid to admit she's happy the stroppy doctor's ditched the emergency room and those baggy scrubs for a GP job and more "va-va-voom" clothes. But she's not happy that, on meeting her, some fans feel entitled to comment on the physical differences between herself and her character. "One guy told me, 'Oh, you're thinner in real life! On TV you look quite plump.' Why would you say that to someone?" she says.

Amanda has accepted that TV adds 5kg. "The contrary bit of me thinks, 'So what? Big deal! Don't give in to the pressure!' I try not to care because I've seen people get obsessed with losing weight so they'll look skinnier on TV. I understand the motivation – hey, I did it too when I first started on the show and part of me wants to do it again sometimes. But a bigger part of me

thinks, 'Don't bother. It'll end in tears.'"

Amanda (33) and her sister Kate (40) are speaking out about the pressures on women to diet and the reasons to cherish what nature gave you in support of the Eating Difficulties Education Network's Love Your Body campaign.

For Kate, a management consultant and coach, it has been a turtle's pace journey towards accepting her body as it is. For a decade from the age of 19, Kate swung from one regime to another. She tried diets, over-exercising, restricting certain foods, bodybuilding and even resorted to making herself vomit.

"I saw my body as the enemy, or at least something to be controlled and made bigger or smaller," she confesses. "You think, 'Nah, of course I don't have a problem.' You just do it."

"But one Easter Weekend I was in the bathroom throwing up and the word 'bulimia' popped into my head. I realised, 'Oh my God, I have a problem. And I can't stop.' It had become my life to worry, 'What am I eating next? How much do I weigh?'"

SHORTY STAR: ‘WHY I DON’T

Sisters Kate and Amanda share a close bond



DIET'

12 October 2009

AMANDA'S BRACELET: DOTTI. KATE'S BRACELET: DOTTI. TOP: CYBELL. JEANS: DECUBA. VEST: DOTTI. NECKLACE: NATIVE AGENT. SLIP: DECUBA. RING: DOTTI.



The siblings say that as they get older, they feel better about their bodies

Kate realised that her bulimia was a coping mechanism for emotional turmoil. "If I made myself feel uncomfortable and disgusting physically, I didn't have to think about how I felt emotionally. Some people cut themselves, some force food down their throats, some exercise until they fall over, some abuse drugs or alcohol. Others throw up."

That lightbulb moment was the start of a two-year recovery to "get back to me". She says, "It's a painful journey but, crikey dick, it's worth the effort."

Kate has now been free of bulimia for 10 years. "Though I wouldn't say I wake up and go, 'Christ, you're beautiful,' every day!" she smiles.

"That doesn't happen to me either!" interjects Amanda. Kate laughs and continues, "I have a happier, healthier, more peaceful relationship with my body now." She bats away talk of the courage it takes to speak out about a subject that's still somewhat taboo. "People put a label on you, but I'm not that person anymore."

Although Amanda had an inkling that her sister was unwell, Kate kept the problem quiet until she was well on her way to recovery.

"I'm so proud of Kate," Amanda says, smiling at the sister with whom she shares a very close bond. "For her strength, her intelligence and her honesty with herself."

Amanda, who's never suffered from an eating disorder herself, wants to raise awareness of issues at the less severe end of the disordered-eating spectrum, such as the yo-yo dieting





► POWER PANTS

Kate and Amanda are flaunting funky Kiwi-made Thunderpants and you can too! As part of EDEN's Love Your Body campaign, these knickers and camisoles in a special Love Your Body design are on sale at www.thunderpants.co.nz. They'll also be available at The Body Shop from 19 October to 2 November. A portion of sales will go to EDEN's prevention and early intervention services. To contact EDEN, phone (09) 378 9039 or visit www.eden.org.nz

and body dissatisfaction that affect millions of women's lives and can lead to more serious issues.

Unlike Shorty's Sarah, who is reluctantly shunning chocolate cake on a strict eating regime, Amanda can't stick to a diet. But now she sees that as a good thing.

"I've always found the idea of dieting distasteful," she admits. "I see people who are obsessed – actually obsessed – with food, exercise and themselves."

The actress makes a distinction between people who love sport and fitness and those who over-exercise because they're obsessed with how they look. "It's about the enjoyment and the purpose behind the behaviour. There's more to life than counting calories, people!"

To keep obsessive thoughts and self-monitoring in perspective, Amanda shuns scales – "I'd ban them if I could!" – and tries to look holistically at her body. "I wear things that accentuate the parts I like – boobs, waist, bum, shoulders."

She accepts the bits she doesn't like as much. "I've got hips now and my belly's a bit softer. I feel more womanly, and I like that."

Amanda, who used to cover up her body in her earlier years, now has the confidence to wear low-cut and clingy clothes. "Think Sophia Loren!" she laughs.

But she thinks less about the way her body looks and more about what it can do. "My body's my friend. When I'm kind and



'There's more to life than counting calories, people!'

generous to it, when I listen to it and give it what it needs, then my relationship with my body gets better. I'm enjoying being in my skin more and more, the older I get."

Kate concurs. "This vessel for my life has been cranking around for 40 years now and I want it to keep going for at least another 40."

So why is Kate telling her story?

"Well," she explains, "you never know whose life you can touch. It's easy to point the finger at society, but the most powerful thing anyone can do is take responsibility for themselves."

There's a big difference, Kate adds, between blaming yourself and accepting that you have the power to determine how you feel about your body. "If you think you may have an eating disorder, pick up the phone, call a friend, contact EDEN. Get support. As Einstein said, 'You can't solve a problem with the same consciousness that created it.'"

Amanda jumps in to point out that

they don't just want to reach people with eating disorders. "It's about awareness of yourself, and of the messages about what your body should look like." So what, ideally, would she like to happen?

"For women – and men, too – to ask themselves about their attitude to their body. For people who are dieting to ask themselves how necessary it is. Who are you being 'thin enough' for? Is this what you want to spend your whole life doing?"

Stop seeing yourself as a neverending renovation project, say Kate and Amanda. That doesn't mean stuffing yourself with chocolate biscuits – it means listening to your body and eating intuitively, starting when hungry and stopping when full.

"It's not about, 'Was I skinnier or am I fat?' It's about being present, making peace with our bodies and not worrying so much," says Kate.

Amanda nods. "Really, I'd just like us to give ourselves a break."

Sarah Lang

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