



2 of us

SALLY SYMONDS & STEVEN ACE

Sally Symonds, 38, gave up a teaching career to become a weight-loss author and coach. Her husband, Steven Ace, 46, is a truck driver and former professional rugby league player. They live in Brisbane and, between them, have lost close to 100 kilograms.

SALLY: When we met, I was 60 kilograms, a size 10, but I had been a size 24. I'd lost 45 kilograms in 33 weeks, so I was pretty happy. Steven was *big* – about 120 kilograms. I think he was XXXL. But when I was losing weight, I got really annoyed with people whose attitude towards me changed just because my body had changed. I thought, “How can you be so superficial?” I was determined that I wasn't going to be one of those people who only judge others on how they look.

I was attracted to Steven anyway, though I have to say I was a bit dubious the first time we went out for dinner. I had steak with seafood and all the trimmings – a surf-and-turf thing – and he ordered a caesar salad. I said to him, “What are you? Gay?” He thought he was eating well but in fact a caesar salad is probably higher in fat than a steak and it doesn't fill you up.

When we started going out, he came on very strongly. He would ring me about nine times a day, which freaked me out a bit. It was impossible to ignore him. Even if I didn't answer the phone the first eight times he rang me, on the ninth time eventually I would give in. His brother had died the year before and I think he was still grieving – he was scared of losing me because he had lost his brother. If I had met him at another time, I don't think he would have behaved in the same way.

He was depressed and obviously eating and

drinking too much. He was just floundering, really. Anyway, it meant there was no game-playing – he was really honest and just wanted someone to love. He proposed after 10 weeks. He took me on a cruise on the Brisbane River and stood up in front of a crowd of people and made a speech and then went down on one knee – it was very romantic.

He joined my gym. I was happy when he decided he wanted to lose weight because he's eight years older than I am and I didn't want him to die. I supported him but not in an overly intrusive way. He likes to walk and I would say, “Yes, let's go.” We played squash together and I cooked healthy things. During our wedding preparations, he was the one dieting. He lost more weight after we got married – he's lost more than 40 kilograms. I've now lost a total of 53.5 kilograms, more than half my body weight.

Steven is still a romantic. If I've been out all day, I might come home and the house will be covered in tea lights and he will have prepared a gorgeous dinner. Or if he has to work on a Saturday morning, he will come home with a dozen roses. He used to buy me buckets of Maltesers – I've told him to stop doing that because I just have no resistance to them. Steven's weakness is ice-cream. Mine is chocolate.

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STEVEN: I met Sally in an Irish bar in Brisbane one Saturday night. She was easily the most stunning girl there, but the most important thing for me was how easy she was to talk to. I was probably in the worst physical condition I'd ever been in. I've always struggled with my weight but I was at a stage where I knew I had to do something because it was just getting out of control. I'd stopped playing football and I think I was on a path of self-destruction because of all sorts of guilt.

My brother had died of leukaemia. There were three other brothers including me and none of us had compatible bone marrow – we couldn't be donors. You probably blame yourself subconsciously, for not being able to help. I felt as if I had been in a dark room and when I met Sally, it was like switching on the light.

It was really soul-cleansing for me, to be able to talk to her about that stuff. She didn't pass comment, she just took everything in her stride. My size probably would have put a lot of people off but it didn't make any difference to her. She wasn't judgmental at all.

After that first night in the bar, I asked for her phone number and she wrote it down but when I went to ring her the next day, I realised it was one digit short. I made a lot of calls, trying different numbers, then I gave it away. The following day, I tried a few more. Then I said to myself I'd try one last time and she answered. It proves to me that what's meant

to be is meant to be.

I've gone from a bit over 120 kilograms to about 80 kilograms. It astounds my doctor. On my chart, it says "morbidly obese" but I've had the weight off for three or four years now, thanks pretty much to Sally. It wasn't like we were actually on a diet – it was just a case of exercising and being conscious of what we ate. And it really did just sort of fall off. I do feel different. Your energy levels and your whole outlook on life change. Unless you've been the "before" person, it's hard to explain.

Sally still has a magnificent appetite – she wouldn't eat much less than I do. But it's all about eating the right things. That's probably one of the most important things she has taught me. When I go shopping now, the nutrition panel is the first thing I look at.

We've been married nearly seven years. It's a wonder our relationship works because we are such different people. Sally is extremely smart and has a lot of degrees, whereas I never went to uni. She's a list person, very organised, where I'm more go-with-the-flow. Obviously, we have arguments like every couple, but she is just fantastic, the best thing that's ever happened to me.

I was watching her train at the gym one day and a bloke I didn't know came over to me and said, "You wish." I said, "Actually, mate, she's my wife." **GW**