Lifeline
A Meeting on the Go

Compulsions

March/April 2012
Overeaters Anonymous is a Fellowship of individuals who, through shared experience, strength and hope, are recovering from compulsive overeating. We welcome everyone who wants to stop eating compulsively. There are no dues or fees for members; we are self-supporting through our own contributions, neither soliciting nor accepting outside donations. OA is not affiliated with any public or private organization, political movement, ideology or religious doctrine; we take no position on outside issues. Our primary purpose is to abstain from compulsive overeating and to carry this message of recovery to those who still suffer.

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Moving? Let us know! Contact OA: telephone 505-891-2664, fax 505-891-4320, email info@oa.org
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I am not a scientist, but it seems my brain seeks to satisfy a certain level of compulsion. If I’m not satisfying it through one compulsion, another intensifies to meet the level. This is not a hopeless situation, though. From what little I know about the brain’s workings, habitual ways of thinking become so deeply entrenched they result in “default” thought patterns.

If that’s true, maybe compulsions are a matter of deeply entrenched default patterns that compel me toward certain ways of thinking and behaving. I can reroute these powerful pathways, but it takes plenty of work by making a conscious effort to reinforce new ways of thinking. Perhaps that’s why OA works for those who work it. Through the Steps and tools, we learn new ways of thinking that we reinforce over and over. Going to meetings and sharing experiences with others who are also trying new ways of thinking and acting outside of compulsion serve to redirect us from old, nonworking patterns. Perhaps the reason we can recover from but never be cured of compulsion is that our default pathways are like a set point. If our compulsive thinking and acting is our default and we are not constantly reinforcing the new pathways, then these pathways “reset” to default mode.

I’ve been trying to understand my compulsions for a long time. I have come across some stuff that has led me to this theory about how compulsion works. I might be wrong. But if there’s anything to it, I hope scientists studying the brain are reading this and getting together with the medical community so they can help the myriad people suffering from compulsions. (When I imagine a world where people live free of compulsion, I see a happier, saner, freer world for everyone.)

I was watching a movie yesterday about a brilliant mathematician studying for his doctorate. He said through mathematics he sees amazing things others don’t. When he looks at numbers and formulas, he sees things my brain doesn’t seem to have the capacity to detect or to communicate to me. That made me think of how amazing it is that our brains work in unique ways; some can see things in a mathematic formula and others in a lump of clay.

I wouldn’t criticize a tree for not being a flower or a man for not being a woman. (Okay, maybe I have criticized my husband for not thinking like a woman, but that underscores my point.) Expecting a tree to be a flower leads to pointless frustration. A more apt analogy would be criticizing a word-processing application for not working like a spreadsheet application. Expecting software that’s programmed to work one way to work another way will lead to frustration. The good news is I can “reprogram” my thoughts and actions by always working to reinforce new patterns of thought and behavior. I must remember who I am. Compulsion is my default. If I want to live another way, I must keep working the new ways so my brain does not reset to the default.

I have learned I am not strong enough to overcome my default patterns alone. I am powerless over food, and being active in compulsion makes my life unmanageable. I need a Higher Power and the help that power makes available through OA to live free of compulsion and the chaos that comes with it.

— Anonymous, New Jersey USA
Finding the Strength
I’m a compulsive overeater seeking recovery, one second at a time.

When I arrived at OA 12 years ago, I was in bad emotional shape. I was only a few pounds overweight, but I had read an article with OA’s 15 questions and immediately identified myself as a compulsive overeater. I’d never thought I had a problem with food, but I did think I was strange because of my thoughts and feelings. Although I ate out of plastic containers because my food didn’t fit onto a large plate, I didn’t have any idea my eating was sick. I used to eat until I got sick and had to go to the hospital, but I didn’t know that compulsive overeating was an illness. I only knew I felt inadequate when I was with other people. A lonely sufferer, I felt ashamed and fearful of everything.

I entered my first OA meeting timidly. I didn’t know anyone there; but I stayed, listened and identified with what I heard. I began buying the literature and learning about the program. Even though I was scared, I kept coming back.

Each week that I attended a meeting, I became more convinced OA was the place I’d been looking for. During the meetings I found a Higher Power who was completely different from the one I was so afraid of. This new Higher Power is a loving God who always talks to me through other OA members, a God who gives me strength and courage to overcome life’s challenges. My faith and trust in him are growing every day.

During these past 12 years, I have faced many difficult situations, like losses and illness in my family. But my sponsor, my group and other OA members are always there to love, accept and support me. I want to thank everyone who was a part of my recovery and ask for the blessing of Higher Power. May he give us strength to always come back.

— Maria, Brazil

Relieved
I didn’t think I needed OA when I went to a meeting with a friend many years ago. While I knew I was overweight, I thought, “I’m not one of them. I can handle it.”

A few years ago, I went to support another friend at an OA meeting. I went for several weeks with the same attitude I had before. However, things were getting worse for me. I was heavier. Even in the midst of my active disease, I knew something was wrong. Most people don’t have two lunches or dinners. Most people don’t race to the store to stock up for the overnight binge in front of the TV. Maybe something better exists here.

It took awhile before I admitted to being a compulsive overeater. When I did, it was a relief. I remember feeling so alone while I binged, and not enough food existed to make that go away.

Now I have friends in OA, have lost 50 pounds (23 kg) and am happier. While I’m still getting used to being “weight appropriate,” I know I never have to go back to that hell.

— L.W., Rhode Island USA

Moment of Clarity
I am one of many. I am an abstinent, compulsive overeater and bulimic. I am a clean, sober and cross-addicted member of two other Twelve-Step programs. During my early years in the other programs, I was led to OA. I came, obtained some “white knuckle” abstinence and then returned to overeating. During that initial OA experience, serious “diet mentality” plagued me. My abstinence was just another round of controlled eating followed by more binges. Although I was abstaining and involved in the other Twelve-Step programs, I simply could not give up the food. I had settled with the fact that I would be yet another cross-addicted person who found recovery for two out of three addictions, but I would forever remain a slave to food. Only a miracle could save me.

Fast-forward to June 21, 2011, and my moment of clarity. For six months I had been on a nonstop binge. I had outgrown my clothes, gained 40 pounds (18 kg) and become truly baffled. I’d never had a binge last that long. Years of controlled eating had finally failed me. I knew for sure that my yo-yo days were over; my on-off switch was broken. For the first time in my overeating career, I could envision myself several hundred pounds heavier and giving myself over to the food. The “wreckage of my present,” in the form of empty food containers, boxes and bags, surrounded me as I sat in my living room. A chilling fear silenced me, and I began to pray: “Dear God, please help me. I know I am a hopeless, compulsive overeater in desperate need of your help. I don’t care if I ever lose one inch or ounce. I am willing to live out the rest of my life in this body exactly as it is right now if you will just help me stop the bingeing and give me peace. Please, help me.”

The result was powerful and immediate. Within a few hours, I had cleaned up the empty food wrappers, showered, dressed, called a long-time OAer who’d been my sponsor the first time around, and committed myself to a food plan and 90 meetings in 90 days starting that night. By the grace of my creator and the OA Fellowship, I have remained abstinent since. The miracle I was hoping for had arrived: the gift of desperation.
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--- Anonymous, St. Louis, Missouri USA

**Breaking the Cycle**

When I came to OA in 1986, I didn’t identify with all the details people shared about life in the disease, but somehow I knew I was in the right place. I came in at a normal weight, but I had been about 20 pounds (9 kg) heavier or thinner at certain points in my disease. No matter what my weight, I was always obsessed with food and believed the number on the scale reflected my value as a person. I was lucky to hear that “thin is not well,” and I felt enough kinship to keep coming back. I realized I was a compulsive overeater or food addict, but that did not tell the whole story.

After plenty of time, meetings and program work, it became clear my compulsive overeating was just one part of an obsessive-compulsive cycle that had begun with compulsive undereating.

Along the way I adopted many bulimic and anorexic behaviors that fueled my disease. A period of compulsive overeating followed every stretch of undereating. I had to see the pattern of obsession with food, weight, exercise and body image if I was to comprehend who I was and develop abstinent eating and living that could work every day.

Hardest to understand was how undereating hurt me. Society and I—and sometimes even people in the rooms—considered undereating and thinness as almost being virtues. And I enjoyed the false sense of control undereating gave me over my food, body and life. All this made undereating a seductive aspect of the disease, which often caught me unaware.

The OA “Twelve and Twelve” says we need to look at how a defect both helps and hurts us if we are to become willing to let it go (The Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions of Overeaters Anonymous, pp. 56–57). I learned to look at how my undereating, supported by excessive exercise, my obsession with numbers on the scale and poor body image, always set me up to overeat compulsively. I began to see that undereating allowed me to overlook the real issues in my life, the common themes of all my addictive behaviors.

I became willing to eat healthy, moderate meals and snacks throughout my day, whether I felt like it or not. This is my medicine. To stop the cycle, I must avoid specific foods that lead to more food. I eat this way, one day at a time, regardless of what is happening in my life. This, along with using the tools and living in the Steps, gives me the ability to live life on life’s terms.

--- Anonymous

--- A friend told me about Overeaters Anonymous, and we decided to try it. That day changed my life. As I walked through the doors of a Twelve-Step recovery program, I “came home.” What a blessing to know I wasn’t alone. Other people thought like me, and food talked to them too. Others had this strange compulsion they could not stop, but they also talked of a solution. Work the Twelve Steps, find your Higher Power, use a sponsor, get abstinent, go to meetings and use the telephone. It was new, exciting and scary! They talked about giving up the foods that gave me trouble. Living life without junk food! I didn’t think that was possible, but plenty of evidence suggested what they said was true.

It took me eight months in program and much more compulsive eating and pain to realize these people were right. “It is much less work to abstain and stay out of the food than it is to try to regulate and control it.” “Nothing tastes as good as abstinence feels.” “God could do for me what I could not do for myself.” “You can do this!”

I saw and believed. My 15th year of abstinence has just passed—just God and I fighting this compulsion one day at a time. But I had to become abstinent first. I had to make that commitment to God and myself and take the plunge. God has helped me by going through many food problems and situations. It isn’t always easy, and it is possible to remain abstinent with God’s help, one day, moment, second at a time. It becomes a way of life. Instead of turning to food in a crisis, I turn to God. Instead of eating to numb the pain, I work the Twelve Steps with my sponsor and learn to work through tough times and tougher emotions. Instead of stuffing myself through the holidays and gaining tons of weight, I eat sensible, planned meals and enjoy the holiday itself. Instead of being fat and hating myself, I enjoy a normal body size and do many activities I could not do when I was fat.

The biggest miracle of this Twelve-Step program is my first waking thoughts are with God, not food. I wake up and say, “Good morning, God. It’s me again.” I don’t even think about food until breakfast time.

How far I’ve come because 15 years ago I decided to take the plunge, trust God and become abstinent. It is the softer, easier way. I’m so grateful today!

— Denise H., Ottumwa, Iowa USA

--- Long before my days of Overeaters Anonymous and abstinence, compulsive eating was my life. Food was my life. It occupied my every thought—how much I could have and how I could get it. Compulsive eating was so ingrained, I acted on food thoughts the second they came up. I gave not a moment’s thought to whether I wanted to eat. Well, I must be acting on food thoughts the second they came up. I gave not a moment’s thought to whether I wanted to eat. Other people thought like me, and food talked to them too. Others had this strange compulsion they could not stop, but they also talked of a solution. Work the Twelve Steps, find your Higher Power, use a sponsor, get abstinent, go to meetings and use the telephone. It was new, exciting and scary! They talked about giving up the foods that gave me trouble. Living life without junk food! I didn’t think that was possible, but plenty of evidence suggested what they said was true.

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**Taking the Plunge**

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— Denise H., Ottumwa, Iowa USA

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Since returning to OA, I’ve come up with a few simple slogans. The first one reminds me that surrender, not control, will set me free: “It’s white flag, not white knuckle.” The second one reminds me that one day at a time is great, but one minute at a time is even better: “Keep coming back . . . to the Now.” Please, God, help me remember to surrender the past, future and everything but the “Now.” When I focus on what is right in front of me, I am free, present and, without reservation, yours.

— Anonymous, St. Louis, Missouri USA

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**Breaking the Cycle**

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After plenty of time, meetings and program work, it became clear my compulsive overeating was just one part of an obsessive-compulsive cycle that had begun with compulsive undereating.
I wrote this letter to myself sometime in the past to help me stop bingeing. I would like to share it with Lifeline.

- Choose life, not food.
- Bingeing—**Stop**!
- You’re worth more.
- It doesn’t fix me—it makes me unhappy.
- It makes my life unmanageable.
- It messes up my life.
- It takes away my happiness.
- **Don’t do it**!
- Bingeing takes away from me.
- It steals from me.
- It produces sadness, fatigue and confused thinking.
- If you put rubbish in, you get rubbish out!
- Concentrate on your relationship with manageability, with your feelings.
- If you indulge, it will take away your shine.
- Concentrate on what you’re building; every time you say “no,” you grow stronger and shinier.
- Bingeing and overeating steal from you.
- They take away recovery and replace it with dis-ease.
- Work through the feelings you have now, do your food plan, call your sponsor, read some OA literature, do your morning readings, call a newcomer and pray…
- Work through the sadness and unmanageability, stay focused, get back on track by reaching out, use the OA Fellowship and be honest.
- You are a compulsive overeater.
- Go through the darkness.
- It’s not about weight.
- Realize freedom exists at the end of this difficult time.
- Go to any lengths to not binge or overeat.
- When the madness comes, read this: It gets worse.
- The **manageable** life God has given you will slip away if you choose food. Choose life!! The cravings will pass.

I can do this, one day at a time. Today I can abstain from compulsive overeating.

— Emma S., England
Ongoing Miracle

I am a grateful compulsive overeater and recovered bulimic. I have been a member of OA since November 2009 and received the gift of abstinence nine months ago. Thank God!

Before that I often visited therapy centers and did a lot of psychotherapy. I wanted to understand why I binged and purged so I could stop. It never worked! I couldn’t put together more than a few weeks of abstinence, if I was lucky!

In program I have learned that “why” is not a spiritual question. I have found that helpful and still believe it is true. Self-knowledge didn’t help me become abstinent, but I am grateful for the therapy because I have more patience with myself and a better understanding of my reactions.

Food has saved my life for some years, and that’s why I say I am a grateful compulsive overeater. For years it was my solution for dealing with reality; it numbed me and got me through painful situations. I had no other coping mechanism. I started to eat so much it was impossible to keep it in my body, so I learned to purge. I became addicted to this method of sedation, eating so much I was in pain and then getting rid of everything. It was the only way I thought I could get rid of the bad feelings. Sometimes it even felt briefly cleansing. Today I don’t have to binge and purge. Thank you, God and OA!

After I joined the program, my life changed. Abstinence didn’t happen right away, but I kept coming back, and things started to change. I attended meetings more often, began to pray (beginning and ending my days on my knees) and found the right sponsor after trying one who wasn’t right for me.

Still, I now know I relapsed because I wasn’t willing to be honest. My sponsor told me right away that sugar, flour and wheat were not working for her and it might be the same for me. I was willing to live without sugar, but without bread? No way! I kept eating flour and drinking alcohol, relapsing again and again. My situation worsened. I became depressed again.

Last November in an open AA meeting I had a realization after hearing someone say, “You need to get [expletive] rigorously honest with yourself!” (Daily OA meetings don’t exist here, so I go to open AA meetings too, and they work!). I needed to hear that, and in that language! I was about to lose the next most important thing after the food: my job.

Finally I became willing to give up sugar in any form (flour, alcohol, wheat) and to weigh and measure my food. I threw myself into the OA program and into working the Steps as if my life depended on it, and that is the case!

My life has changed so much in the last months. Today my coworkers know me as the employee who laughs often, and my boss has good things to say about me. I have a sponsor guiding me through my Ninth-Step work who is content with my efforts. So much more sanity exists in my life. Amazing moments occurred when I released old resentments because I realized the other person, just another wounded, had been sick too.

God has saved my life because he has showed me the way to OA. I am willing to go to any length for this program and my recovery. I ask God every day to show me his way for me and to relieve me of my selfishness and self-pity. This is an ongoing miracle, and I thank everybody who is part of it! Yay, God! Yay, OA!

— S., Heidelberg, Germany

Feeling Understood

When I first came into the program, I considered myself a compulsive overeater. When I started reading the OA “Twelve and Twelve” and it mentioned laxatives in Step Two (The Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions of Overeaters Anonymous, p. 10), I was surprised. I thought I was the only one who did that. I never could make myself throw up, although I had tried. I just didn’t get any relief from it. I did, however, get much relief from taking four or five strong laxatives.

I never talked to anyone about this, because taking laxatives wasn’t quite as “glamorous” as throwing up; and after all, I had already digested the food so the (caloric/fat) damage was done.

Still, I felt understood when I read Step Two and did the work in The Twelve-Step Workbook of Overeaters Anonymous. I shared the information with my sponsor, and she suggested I start identifying myself in meetings as a compulsive overeater and bulimic.

I felt funny about that. Somehow I felt unworthy of being called a bulimic because I was fat. Gradually I’ve accepted it. When I truly accept the fact that I’m also bulimic, I get a sense of relief. I’m also looking at other forms of bulimia differently now. Maybe throwing up isn’t so glamorous after all.

— Edited and reprinted from the Heart of Texas Intergroup newsletter, August 2002
Young Again

Don’t think, feel or tell. Growing up in a house with these unspoken rules, a person grows crooked and stifled. As a toddler, I learned codependent behaviors and people pleasing to maintain an uneasy alliance with my mother. I joined Al-Anon, either because of father’s drinking or family’s thinking.

Still, I had much to be grateful for. My family was close and loving, but the missing piece was a sense of safety in expressing feelings and doubts. The display of too much enthusiasm would upset my mother. My father would get angry and lash out at her with verbal or physical abuse. The vibrations of negative emotions and tension would result in people retreating to separate rooms. I retreated into my head and took long walks or bicycle rides.

It was the 1950s, and the media emphasized perfectionism. I didn’t adjust from childhood to adolescence well. I felt awkward and ugly. I had a bright mind and a good memory, but I was a klutz in gym class. No boys ever asked me out. So as a teenager, I began an insidious journey into the hell of compulsive eating.

I compared myself to classmates and wanted their attention and approval. My self-consciousness isolated me. When a certain boy didn’t talk to me, I pouted. My father would get angry and lash out. My cravings disappeared, but my weight stabilized. For years it remained at about 120 pounds (54 kg).

I found OA when a friend told me how eating disorders sometimes mask the feelings of having suffered incest. She recommended a meeting to deal with the mid-life insecurities that had brought my unresolved adolescent issues to the surface. The feelings of loneliness and wanting to fade away and die were returning.

“You get to do adolescence all over again in mid-life,” I’ve said at meetings.

Today food isn’t the issue, although I’ve never met a food I didn’t like. Stinking thinking is the issue, which is why I need meetings. My recovery from food obsession, my relationship with my Higher Power and the ability to fathom truth from illusion are my first priorities. Whenever I look elsewhere for comfort, I falter. I become depressed, ashamed, confused and suicidal. I want to weep and gnash my teeth. Food is a temporary fix.

Working the OA program is the answer. It’s not easy. Admitting the true nature of my wrongs and feeling the shame and remorse for what I’ve done to hurt others is hard. But I no longer have to hold a pity party for myself. The group’s unconditional love and acceptance have helped me grow from an angry, hurt child to a young woman of 59! Thank you!

— C.B., Cincinnati, Ohio USA

Breastfeeding was my most joyous experience. My weight stabilized. For years it remained at about 120 pounds (54 kg)

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Numeral Game

I came to program because I had finally lost my excess weight, well below my “goal weight.” Yet I still felt awful. The over-perceived solution to my problems had failed. For most of my life, I had fantasized about a day when my body would morph into something straight from the cover of a magazine. But once I reached the “right” number, I began focusing on the defects left behind. That was when I began to look for another solution.

I wrangled with Step One for many months. I felt powerful over food; after all, I had succeeded at limiting my calories to 1,500 per day for a few years (astonishing since I also exercised two or more hours per day). I was in control, or so I thought.

The “aha” moment came when I realized that inside my head, food called the shots. Okay, so I didn’t indulge all those crazy urges. But the more I white-knuckled past them, the more they tortured me. I would spend 20 minutes window shopping in the supermarket’s bakery department, proud for not putting anything in my cart. Food was all I thought about. I wasted so much time and energy counting, adding, subtracting, multiplying or dividing. The voices in my head berated me for not having, doing or being enough.

Guilt was my constant companion.

Program has taught me to love and accept myself and the world around me. I am grateful that today when I look in a mirror, I can smile instead of flinching with hatred, looking away. This is a small miracle. Now most days the hamster on the wheel running calculations in my head is quiet thanks to abstinence, working the Steps and using the tools. Even though I’m not perfect today, I am definitely good enough.

I have to thank my Higher Power, sponsor, loving OA family and OA for being gentle with me as I continue to have “aha” moments that enrich my life and bring me closer to the person I want to be. Today I barely recognize the person I used to be. What a blessing!

— Tara L., Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania USA

Head Games

I came to program because I had finally lost my excess weight, well below my “goal weight.” Yet I still felt awful. The over-perceived solution to my problems had failed. For most of my life, I had fantasized about a day when my body would morph into something straight from the cover of a magazine. But once I reached the “right” number, I began focusing on the defects left behind. That was when I began to look for another solution.

I wrangled with Step One for many months. I felt powerful over food; after all, I had succeeded at limiting my calories to 1,500 per day for a few years (astonishing since I also exercised two or more hours per day). I was in control, or so I thought.

The “aha” moment came when I realized that inside my head, food called the shots. Okay, so I didn’t indulge all those crazy urges. But the more I white-knuckled past them, the more they tortured me. I would spend 20 minutes window shopping in the supermarket’s bakery department, proud for not putting anything in my cart. Food was all I thought about. I wasted so much time and energy counting, adding, subtracting, multiplying or dividing. The voices in my head berated me for not having, doing or being enough.

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— Tara L., Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania USA
Hidden Part

I want to eat. I reach for the food, but what am I really reaching for? I am not hungry—not for food. I’m hungry for comfort, warmth and inner calm. I’m hungry to be loved and have fun. I search for what to do, how to handle my issues and situation—and I reach for the food.

But I stop myself. I write this instead. Writing—what a helpful tool! I keep my hands busy and my mind focused on the task before me. I forget the food while my Higher Power provides answers through my writing. Is that the hidden part of the tools I’d never seen? They can rescue me right now.

I knew the tools were central to the program and my recovery in a “big picture” kind of way, but now I see how they can also rescue my sanity and recovery in a moment of need. I call someone, and I don’t eat while dialing or talking. I focus on the conversation and get out of my head. I write my thoughts and release the feelings, focusing on my writing and occupying my hands. I do service in any form, which reminds me about the program. Sometimes when I’m with another OA person and doing a good deed, I feel good about myself. So, how could I eat?

I go to a meeting—no food allowed! I talk to my sponsor, who tells me what I need to hear, and the food goes away without me even realizing it.

I read the literature, occupying my hands and mind, focusing on the words of hope and courage. How could I break my abstinence while reading the Big Book, the OA “Twelve and Twelve” or Lifeline?

I follow my written food plan; it frees me from thinking about what I’ll eat. Doing so allows me to focus on more productive things, like my recovery and life. I remember what it was like before my abstinence, and I do whatever it takes to keep this beautiful gift my Higher Power has provided. I cherish my abstinence.

So, use the tools, whichever you wish. I have used them in my abstinence while reading the Big Book, the OA “Twelve and Twelve” or Lifeline. The tools are key to our recovery over time, but they also help keep us abstinent in the moment. The tools are always available. So reach for the tools instead of the food. They are always ready to come to the rescue.

— J.M.H., Miami, Florida USA

Working It Out

When I entered OA over 20 years ago, my life was out of control. I weighed just under 200 pounds (91 kg) at 5 feet 4 inches (163 cm), my blood pressure was around 170/110, and I was depressed. I had never owned more than two pairs of slacks in any one size because I never knew what size would fit me. I had low self-esteem. Every problem seemed major, even insurmountable. I was unemployed and wondered when I would work again and feel purpose and direction in my life.

I learned early in OA I ate to deny my feelings and anything could trigger my eating (anger, fear, boredom, excitement, you name it).

Yesterday a woman from my OA home meeting called. She shared about a longstanding, seemingly insurmountable problem similar to one I had encountered many years ago in OA: waking in the middle of the night and being unable to go back to sleep without eating a meal. I suggested an approach that has worked for me in handling many issues. I explained that usually the problem/obsession involves either anger or fear.

What I do first is to write a detailed description of the problem. Next I list program tools that can counter the obsession and then turn the rest over. This tends to solve the problem and/or avoid eating over it.

If the problem persists, I can read what I wrote to my sponsor or other trusted persons in my support system. This is doing a mini Fifth Step, the opposite of isolating. Keeping the problem a secret will only add to my burden and frustration.

I keep a journal or notebook of situations in which the above tools and techniques have worked for me so I can use them as a reference for similar future situations. (This writing tool has been wonderful for me, working in many different situations.)

I feel grateful to OA, and to a former sponsor who taught me this tool, for this wonderful way of life. Above all, I am grateful to my Higher Power, whom I choose to call God.

— Marc L., Philadelphia, Pennsylvania USA
Courageous and Vulnerable

I found OA after my therapy group ended, shortly after I had had a nervous breakdown, lost my cat of 19 years and mourned the first anniversary of my mother’s death.

I’m getting rid of an old illusion of self-sufficiency, replacing it with nourishment and the strength of OA’s welcoming Fellowship. I enjoy the increased phoning and email, which enrich other friendships as well. Living alone makes it easy to isolate. Paradoxically, daring to experience loneliness carries with it the seed of the remedy; feeling the hurt permits healing.

My concept of my Higher Power is harder to put into words. It is an experience rather than a being. It brings into my life balance, health, wholeness, conscience, emotional growth and recovery, and self-nurturing rather than self-punishment. My grace is “Thank you for nourishing food.”

I value my meditation for the calm and insights it brings, even to my violin playing. I’m trying more prayer, starting with spontaneous thanks to God during the day. I had abandoned prayer for years, until recently. Tradition Three sounded too good to be true: the only requirement for OA membership is a desire to stop eating compulsively. I had met the requirement!

Because I was a newcomer, the group chose to read the First Step out of the “Twelve and Twelve.” Since then, I’ve heard many OA members share their stories and say they felt at home at their first meeting. I am no different. That day gave me such hope. It was the first time I felt comfortable in my own skin. I rejoiced at hearing the promises and Twelve Traditions. I listened more closely to those words than I have since. Tradition Three sounded too good to be true: the only requirement for OA membership is a desire to stop eating compulsively. I had met the requirement!

In OA my emotions are valued and fostered, even if they scare me. I learn it’s necessary to feel them, rather than drugging myself with food, stuffing the pain out of consciousness. A goal may be to be “courageous and vulnerable.” I feel I’m a valuable person, I’m worth saving, and I have something to offer. I can be a support to others, an example and a buddy in this adventure of recovery, of learning to function without compulsive eating. She has taught me that unrealistic expectations may engender resentments.

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— Lisa K.

Living Traditions

Deadline: 3/15/12

Generally Speaking: Write about anything relating to your experience, strength and hope in OA.

Deadline: 4/15/12

Which Twelve-Step principle has most influenced your recovery? The principles are honesty, hope, faith, courage, integrity, willingness, humility, self-discipline, love, perseverance, spiritual awareness and service.

Or, what principle was the hardest to practice?

Or, what principle made the most difference in helping you overcome character defects?

Or, what principle helped most in your physical recovery, spiritual recovery or emotional recovery?

Or, how do one or more of the principles govern your life, and have your thoughts about the principles changed over time?

Deadline: 4/15/12
**Responsible Autonomy**

Autonomous—from the Greek “one who gives oneself his own law.”

Each group should be autonomous except in matters affecting other groups or OA as a whole.

**Living Traditions**

It would be difficult to point to a Tradition that is more responsible for the cohesiveness of OA and other Twelve-Step groups than Tradition Four. In the same way that each OA fellow must find his or her own plan of eating and must work the Steps for him or herself, OA groups are responsible for running their own meetings. If any two people are meeting to study and practice the OA Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions and if any fellow compulsive overeaters are welcome to attend, they constitute a meeting. (The OA Handbook for Members, Groups and Service Bodies is a helpful reference on how to run an OA meeting.)

Within those broad parameters, OA groups can conduct their meetings however they like. Of course, the other Traditions and principles inform this autonomy. An OA group might wish to include a particular religious prayer in its meeting. The group could do so, but by taking a position on an outside issue, it would not be adhering to Tradition Ten. Any member who realized this conflict would have to summon the courage to bring this to the group’s attention and ask for a group conscience to honor the Traditions and principles.

Imagine if groups were not autonomous. Imagine OA required meetings to serve refreshments or recite a specific chant. If something a meeting does affects no other groups, why should anyone worry about it or have the authority to dictate such a thing? Obviously, they shouldn’t—that would be a heap of trouble!

Tradition Four is about having the right to decide how to run a meeting, but it’s also about responsibility. It’s up to us to run our groups; that means our groups are only as strong as we make them. Like working our program, no one else can do this for us.

— Edited and reprinted from Focus on Recovery newsletter, Triad Intergroup, April 2011

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**Guaranteed**

What if I had a guarantee that everything I have been worrying about would be worked out in the most perfect way and in the best possible time? And in the future, I would be grateful for the problem and the solution? And what if I knew that all those I love are experiencing exactly what they need to become who they’re meant to be? Then I would be exactly where God wanted me to be, and I would be free to let go and enjoy my life.

That is what it is like when I turn everything over to God!

— Susan L., West Berlin, New Jersey USA

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**Side Dishes**

I have three children ages 20, 17 and 12. My youngest was born after I joined OA. Since my early 20’s, I have been a vegetarian.

The other day my two youngest children and I were talking, and my 12 year old shared a cute story from when he was in first grade. It happened at a school event that parents had been invited to attend. His teacher told him to offer me some animal crackers. He told her he couldn’t because I was a vegetarian and wouldn’t eat them. She assured him that the crackers weren’t really made from animals and it would be all right. I imagine she got a little chuckle from this interaction.

He explained to us that as a child he had thought that being a vegetarian meant you didn’t eat cookies because I never ate any! His reluctance to offer me those cookies was not what his teacher thought. We had a good laugh over that one.

— Kristi, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania USA

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**Stepping Out**

Step 3

Guaranteed

Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understood Him.

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**Tradition 4**

— Howard S., Brooklyn, New York USA

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**Insanity**

Is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results.

I must learn to eat with a food plan!

— Howard S., Brooklyn, New York USA
I was given the gift of abstinence January 1, 2005, and am maintaining a 50-pound (23-kg) weight loss by the grace of God. I have worked the OA Twelve Steps and used the tools. But when I moved to DC in March 2009, I knew I had to do something extra to keep my recovery. Service seemed like the best way.

I committed to a home group and spoke a few times. Eventually I became the intergroup rep for my home meeting. In all honesty, I didn’t want to serve, but I knew I had to do something new to maintain my abstinence amidst so much change. Most months I don’t feel like going to the intergroup meeting; but when I arrive, I am so glad I’m there. Intergroup is exciting and full of people with long-term abstinence. I feel like I grow just being in the room!

I want to stay abstinent and happy, so when I heard we needed a newsletter editor, I volunteered. Serving the Fellowship gives me great pleasure. I ask for your support and patience as I practice “progress, not perfection” and “easy does it” in this position. (This is of particular importance now because I am getting married soon and must seek balance, one day at a time.)

— Edited and reprinted from Washington DC Area Intergroup newsletter, May/June 2010

Something Extra

When I came into program in 2003, I was mad. I was only 23 years old and wanted to be out with my peers, not stuck in meetings every night! But today I know I needed to be in the rooms early so God could save me from more painful years. (This is also why I am concerned with reaching out to young people!)

I finished Step Four for the first time, and the following thoughts helped me complete it with the proper attitude. It’s like dealing with the insurance company and body shop (ironically) after a car accident. Here’s how it works.

You get in an accident, and no one is hurt, but you have a “flawed” car. You take it to the insurance adjuster, who walks around the car with a clipboard. Together you search for every nick, scratch and dent in the car. Not missing any defects is critical, but the car is not “bad” because of more nicks found. You don’t blame the car. No “fault” exists. Another car may have even caused some of the dents; it doesn’t matter. The car is not “evil.” It’s just been in an accident and needs bodywork. The dents and scratches do not need to be hidden. No shame, denial or out-of-control emotions need soothing as a result of finding the defects. It is an objective and fearless search and a complete inventory of the car’s external defects. You can’t fix the dents you don’t find, record and take responsibility for fixing.

Armed with this comprehensive list, you take the car to a body shop. They don’t look down upon the car with more dents; there is no judgment. They simply fix the dents, but only the ones you show them. Now the car is like new.

Of course some dents may go undetected. They might even rust over time. It’s a good idea to keep looking for those dents and fixing them before they get worse. This approach to completing my searching and fearless moral inventory helped me to stay positive and look forward to doing it.

— Vic, Raleigh, North Carolina USA

Lifeline Reps Make All the Difference

Lifeline began 2011 with 212 Lifeline reps worldwide. By the end of December 2011, that number had jumped to 312 reps. These reps generated an additional 399 Lifeline subscriptions above those garnered in 2010, for a total of 2,186 subscriptions in 2011.

We need more Lifeline reps!

For information on how to become a Lifeline rep, see the next page.

Lifeline magazine IS a lifeline!

Become a Lifeline Rep

A Lifeline rep shares the value of Lifeline with group members, takes subscription orders, collects the funds, and sends orders and funds to the World Service Office. It is easy and rewarding service. Reps receive bonuses for their groups for the number of subscriptions they generate. Some bonuses are a free copy of For Today, a Lifeline subscription or a $25 gift certificate. Each rep receives a packet of materials and guidelines. Lifeline reps support the recovery of Lifeline readers and support OA as a whole by helping Lifeline become self-supporting. When it is self-supporting, it strengthens other OA services because it does not draw on other funds to cover its deficits.

To become a rep, contact info@oa.org and put “Lifeline Rep” in the subject line, or call 505-891-2664, or write to Lifeline, PO Box 44020, Rio Rancho, NM 87174 USA

Made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves.

Fixing the Dents

Lifeline Reps Make All the Difference

Step 4

Stepping Out

Service With a Smile

Fixing the Dents

Something Extra

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— Vic, Raleigh, North Carolina USA
For Discussion... AND JOURNALING
Welcome to OA. Those words can change a person’s life. Consider how your life has changed from one of compulsions to one of serenity. If you are not there yet, ask yourself what is missing on your road to recovery. Write down those things and ask for help in finding solutions.

— Sara V., Bedford, Pennsylvania USA

Newcomers Corner Speaking from the Trenches

Keep Playing
My first day in the OA program was April 23, 2010. I arrived at 329 pounds (150 kg), miserable with myself. I had ankle and knee pain; lacked physical or sexual activity; and had high blood pressure, depression and digestive disorders from compulsive overeating.

For the first two months as an OA newcomer, I was “going to any lengths.” OA made me aware of my all-or-nothing thinking. I worked the program and became abstinent the day of my first meeting. My definition of abstinence is 3-1-0-1 (three healthy meals, one healthy snack, zero skipping meals, one day at a time).

Working the program became a full-time effort: attending meetings, sharing online, meeting with my sponsor, reading OA literature, using the Twelve-Step Workbook of Overeaters Anonymous, giving service, phoning and emailing OA members, seeking Higher Power’s guidance and keeping a written plan of eating. I lost 30 pounds (14 kg) after 12 weeks. I jumpstarted my daily exercise by walking and swimming.

Then life sidetracked me. I was caring for my nieces for eight weeks. House-guests and caregiving have their challenges, and I became unhappy. I wasn’t eating with purposefulness and gained six pounds (3 kg). I noticed we were eating for the wrong reasons: for fun, to avoid boredom or after a TV commercial.

“The irony of compulsive overeating is that it eliminates hunger and intensifies craving” (For Today, July 17, p. 199). My husband and I discussed with our nieces the troublesome eating issues. We needed this as much as the girls. Moderate hunger three or four times a day is a body asking for nutrition, not a sign of overeating. Craving is an unhealthy symptom of an ongoing addiction. Setting ground rules for healthy eating was a new start. We’ve had two wonderful days of abstinence, enjoyed each meal (no junk food) and have better attitudes.

We shopped for only healthy, planned food. They asked for items, but brief reminders helped. They got on the wagon with me! My 8-year-old niece, a self-proclaimed picky eater, tried new fruits for the first time and learned you can’t decide you don’t like something if you’ve never tried it. My 5-year-old niece said, “Auntie, you have to focus, fo-cus! You have to get back on your ‘healthy-ist-ness-ish’ so you can ‘keep play’ with us when you get old!” Yes, I need to keep working our OA program each and every day.

May we all live long and healthy to keep playing together when we get old!
— Ginny E., Canfield, Ohio USA
Is it a “suggestion” or a “must” that we not substitute the words “food” for “alcohol” and “compulsive over-eater” for “alcoholic” when our OA meeting has a Big Book study?

OA’s group conscience has decided we should read aloud only OA-approved literature at OA meetings. This includes OA Conference- and board-approved literature and AA conference-approved literature. Although OA has not reviewed and approved AA literature, we deem their group conscience approved its contents. When we read AA literature and change the words, neither OA nor AA has approved that literature.

At OA’s founding, members asked permission from AA to modify its Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions for use in OA. AA graciously granted that permission. Those are the only things we have the authority to change. At OA’s inception, no OA literature existed, so the Fellowship used AA’s Big Book, Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions. To better understand how the AA concepts could apply to compulsive eating, members would often change the words when reading aloud from AA literature during meetings.

Today AA World Service asks that we respect their literature and group conscience by reading their literature, such as the Big Book, as written, without changing the words. AA also asks that we read excerpts from their literature in context, which means to read it from the actual literature as printed, not from a typed sheet of paper. Of course, when we share in meetings about the passages we read, we are free to share our experience, strength and hope in our own terms related to compulsive eating. If we want to read only literature that uses terms related to food and compulsive eating, we have a wealth of OA literature from which to choose that doesn’t require changing the words.

It is also a common practice in OA meetings to change the words of OA’s Twelve Steps when reading them aloud. People replace “God” with “Higher Power” and “him” with gender-neutral terms, and they add “we” at the beginning of all the Steps. When we make those changes, we are amending the Steps. Our OA, Inc. Bylaws, Subpart B, Article XIV, Section 1 clearly spell out the amendment process. Amendments to the Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions must be adopted by two-thirds of the delegates at the World Service Business Conference, and that vote must be ratified by three-fourths of the registered Overeaters Anonymous groups responding within six months of notification, provided at least 55 percent of the registered groups have responded. Clearly, no individual member, group or OA service body can amend the Twelve Steps or Twelve Traditions by themselves because the Steps and Traditions “belong” to all of us.

One could argue Tradition Four allows each group to do what it wants, as long as it doesn’t affect other groups or OA as a whole. True, but we also have Tradition One: “Our common welfare should come first; personal recovery depends upon OA unity.” We have Tradition Two: “For our group purpose there is but one ultimate authority—

Continued on page 26
At Larry's house.

Don't worry, Dad. This, too, shall pass!

Your report card is disappointing. Your math teacher says you're inattentive and undisciplined.

Well, what others think of me is none of my business, right?

This is serious! I know, Dad. I'll work harder and take it one day at a time.

Expect a miracle! It's progress, not perfection! The best is yet to come, Dad!

<<Sigh>> I've created a monster!

A loving God as He may express Himself in our group conscience. Our leaders are but trusted servants; they do not govern.” Concept Two states, in part, “World Service Business Conference is the voice, authority and effective conscience of OA as a whole.”

If I insist upon changing the wording of OA or AA literature to suit myself, I am displaying the same selfishness and self-will that landed me in OA in the first place! As one trustee wrote, “From my vantage point and experience, there is a tendency to mold the OA program of recovery to the molds of individual members and their ways of doing things. I am reminded if my way worked, I would not be in OA or need to be. Obviously, my way did not work. So I am quite willing to work on changing me, which is a challenge, and not try to revamp OA or AA to suit me. When a physician gives me a prescription for treatment of an illness, I am well advised not to make any attempts to rewrite it.”

If I believe OA’s literature needs to be amended, I am encouraged to participate in our collective group conscience by serving as a delegate to the World Service Business Conference. Failing that, I am committed to respecting the group conscience of both OA and AA by reading the literature as it is written, from the original source, without any creative editing on my part.

Yours in service,
— Teresa K., Region Four trustee and chair of the Board of Trustees
is your best friend.

Subscribing? Give service to this meeting by

Lifeline is your best friend.

Subscribing? Give service to this meeting by

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Lifeline is your best friend.
God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can, and wisdom to know the difference.