

Difference Between Abstinence and A Plan of Eating Workshop: Leader's Guide

Workshop aim and objectives

Aim: To increase the Fellowship's focus on actions required for abstinence, because our **primary purpose** is both to abstain from compulsive eating and compulsive food behaviors and to carry the message of recovery through the Twelve Steps of OA to those who still suffer.

Workshop objectives include OA members:

- Understanding the difference between “abstinence” and “a plan of eating.”
- Having a clear vision of their abstinence.
- Writing the actions they need to take to make abstinence first in their life.
- Understanding what a plan of eating is and is not.
- Knowing about relevant OA resources.

Resources needed

- Pens and writing paper for attendees
- Whiteboard or VERY large writing pad to attach to wall
- Masking tape or similar
- Whiteboard marker pens in at least four colors
- Handouts for attendees
- Examples of helpful literature (see list at end).

Workshop timing

Lengthen or shorten time allocated to each section as applicable for the group attending the workshop

1. Introductions – Ten minutes
2. Importance and background – Five minutes
3. Brainstorming activity as a group – Thirty minutes
4. Personal writing on abstinence – Fifteen minutes
5. Speaker sharing: “Is my abstinence strong enough?” – Thirty minutes
6. Writing exercise: “Abstinence first without exception” – One hour (twenty minutes writing time; twenty minutes to share in smaller groups; and twenty minutes to share as whole group)
7. Open sharing: “A plan of eating . . . what it is and isn't” – Thirty minutes
8. Display the resources – Ten minutes
9. Closing

THE WORKSHOP

Why is the difference between “abstinence” and “a plan of eating” important?

The definition of abstinence is the same for all members, but the details of a plan of eating for each member may differ, depending on what compulsive food behaviors we engaged in while practicing our disease, whether overeating, under-eating, and/or purging. A plan of eating is a Tool to help OA members maintain abstinence, i.e. the act of refraining from compulsive eating and compulsive food behaviors while working towards or maintaining a healthy body weight. There are as many “plans of eating” in OA as there are members, and a plan may change over time for each member. *Dignity of Choice* has samples of some of the many plans of eating OA members use.

Background

In 1961, abstinence was first mentioned as a Tool.

In 1973, the World Service Business Conference (WSBC) delegates approved *The Tools of Recovery* pamphlet, which included abstinence as one of the Tools of OA.

By 1995, the collective OA understanding of the importance of abstinence meant that the delegates at WSBC removed abstinence as a Tool and replaced it with “a plan of eating,” leaving abstinence as OA’s primary purpose

Delegates to the 2011 WSBC approved changes to the Statement on Abstinence and Recovery, which read at the time: “Abstinence in Overeaters Anonymous is the action of refraining from compulsive eating and compulsive food behaviors while working towards or maintaining a healthy body weight. Spiritual, emotional and physical recovery is the result of living the Overeaters Anonymous Twelve-Step program.”

In 2013 at WSBC, our primary purpose was modified to say, “Our primary purpose is to abstain from compulsive eating and to carry the message of recovery through the Twelve Steps of OA to those who still suffer.”

The results of a survey of the membership in 2013 showed that there was a lack of abstinence and of working all Twelve Steps. The strategic plan theme for World Service for 2014-2016 was “Our Primary Purpose.” The goals for each of the three years following were: 2014—Increase Awareness of the Importance of Abstinence; 2015—Increase Awareness of the Necessity of Working All Twelve Steps; 2016—Increase Awareness of the Importance of Carrying the Message.

This workshop was created as part of the 2014 goal.

In 2015 at WSBC, our primary purpose was modified to say, “Our primary purpose is to abstain from compulsive eating and compulsive food behaviors and to carry the message of recovery through the Twelve Steps of OA to those who still suffer.”

In 2019, the WSBC accepted the following definitions:

1. Abstinence: The act of refraining from compulsive eating and compulsive food behaviors while working towards or maintaining a healthy body weight.
2. Recovery: Removal of the need to engage in compulsive eating behaviors.

Spiritual, emotional, and physical recovery is achieved through working and living the Overeaters Anonymous Twelve Step Program. (Business Conference Policy Manual, 1988b [amended 2019])

Brainstorming activity

Purpose of activity: for workshop attendees to recognize and share about the difference between abstinence and a plan of eating.

Instructions:

- *Invite workshop attendees to call out what they think of when they think of **abstinence**.*
- *Write these items on a whiteboard or large sheets of paper so all can see what's been mentioned.*
- *Using three colored pens (different to that already used), circle*
 - *items related to abstinence in one color,*
 - *items related to a plan of eating in another color, and*
 - *non-related items in another color.*
- *Open discussion, re: differences between abstinence and a plan of eating*

Formulate your own abstinence vision/affirmation

Pass out page 2 of handout. Ask attendees to take five minutes to reflect on and create their own abstinence vision/affirmation.

- *E.g. I am freely choosing foods and food behaviors that are non-compulsive, eating with gratitude, dignity, and grace, which results in my maintaining a healthy body weight using God's wisdom and guidance and the Twelve Steps of OA as a path for my life.*

Invite two or three attendees to share about what they wrote.

Is my abstinence strong enough?

The disease of compulsive eating is threefold: physical, emotional, and spiritual. Abstinence actions address all three aspects of the disease so that peaceful long-term recovery is possible. The result of working all Twelve Steps of Overeaters Anonymous is a spiritual awakening which changes us physically, emotionally, and spiritually.

*SPEAKER(S): Have a speaker or speakers share on their recovery using the following questions as prompts.
Pass out page 3 of handout.*

- 1) Am I working the Steps?
- 2) Do I pray and meditate?
- 3) Did I plan my food today?
- 4) Am I maintaining or working toward a healthy body weight?
- 5) Did I rely on my Higher Power to get or stay abstinent?
- 6) Do I ask for help?
- 7) Do I make OA phone calls?
- 8) Do I have an attitude of gratitude?
- 9) Do I help others?
- 10) Do I have an action plan to stay abstinent?
- 11) Do I have a sponsor? Do I sponsor?
- 12) Is what I am currently doing working for me to remain abstinent?
- 13) What activities will I NOT participate in to maintain my abstinence?

What actions do I take to “make abstinence first without exception”?

Get attendees to take fifteen minutes to write their responses to the following questions

Pass out page 4 of handout.

What are my daily prayer and meditation actions?

- E.g. Have at least one period of prayer and meditation every day.
- E.g. Talk to God about specific food items and/or personal food behaviors.

What actions do I take to live Step Ten?

- E.g. Daily commit to list personal “did well”/positive attributes.
- E.g. Daily examine where have I been resentful, selfish, dishonest, or frightened.

What actions underlie my plan of eating?

- E.g. Get input from a health care professional to establish my SPECIFIC written plan of eating.
- E.g. Specify what foods will I eat and when will I eat them.

What are my TRIGGER FOODS that if I eat a little, I will crave more?

- E.g. Maintain a written list of trigger foods.
- E.g. Do not keep trigger foods near/visible.

Do I maintain a specific written list of eating behaviors that I will participate in?

- E.g. Will have at least _____ hours between meals.
- E.g. Will always communicate with sponsor before making changes in my food plan.

Do I maintain a specific written list of eating behaviors that I will NOT participate in?

- E.g. Will not eat in car.
- E.g. Will not eat/taste/sample anything while in the cooking process.

Then:

Have workshop attendees break into small groups for twenty minutes to share about what they have identified.

Have someone from each small group take notes that can be reported back to the full group.

A plan of eating—what it is and is not

An effective plan of eating helps the member stop eating compulsively and move toward or maintain a healthy body weight. For a member to stay stopped requires more than just a plan of eating. Working the Twelve Steps and using the Tools of Recovery brings a return to sanity around food and a fuller recovery experience, both spiritually and emotionally.

Instructions:

Get attendees to think back to some of the items we discussed earlier during our brainstorming activity and, from their experience, write briefly about what a plan of eating is or does.

Pass out page 5 of handout.

Examples include:

- A Tool
- An individualized way of eating
- A calm, rational, balanced way of dealing with food
- Developed by an honest look at eating behaviors
- Eliminates personal binge/trigger foods
- Addresses the physical part of the disease
- A way of setting the food aside to clear the brain
- Defines what, when, how, where, and why we eat
- Can change over time

Instructions:

Get attendees to think back to some of the items we discussed earlier during our brainstorming activity. From their experience, write briefly about what a plan of eating IS NOT or DOES NOT DO.

Examples include:

- Our Primary Purpose
- A specific diet everyone follows
- A fast weight loss gimmick
- Doing what I can get away with
- About controlling binge foods
- The only thing required to recover
- A substitute for working the Twelve Steps
- Defines who we are

Take-home actions

- All attendees are asked to share one thing they could do before they pick up the first compulsive bite or action.
- Each suggestion is written on a whiteboard or paper sheets.
- Participants copy actions that work for them.

Resources

OA-approved resources to assist members to be abstinent and live free of compulsive food behaviors include:

Pamphlets:

- *A Commitment to Abstinence*
- *A Plan of Eating: A Tool for Living*
- *Before You Take That First Compulsive Bite, Remember...*
- *Dignity of Choice*
- *Is Food a Problem for You?*
- *Maintaining a Healthy Weight*
- *Many Symptoms, One Solution*
- *Questions and Answers*
- *Recovery Checklist*
- *The Tools of Recovery*
- *Think First*
- *Welcome Back: Suggestions for Members in Relapse and for Those Who Care*

Books:

- *Overeaters Anonymous, Third Edition*, specifically the Forewords and Appendices: "The Role of a Plan of Eating in Recovery from Compulsive Eating," "A Disease of the Mind," "A Disease of the Body," and "A Disease of the Spirit"
- *The Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions of Overeaters Anonymous, Second Edition*
- *Abstinence, Second Edition*
- "The Doctor's Opinion" from *Alcoholics Anonymous, Fourth Edition*

Free downloads at oa.org:

- *Abstinence PowerPoint workshop*
- *Strong Abstinence Checklist*
- *Abstinence Literature Resource Guide*