To the Teen Young Person

Do you have a problem with food, eating behaviors, or body image?

There is a solution...

If you're reading this, you may already think so. Asking yourself the following questions can help you see how food issues affect your life:

1. Do your eating habits change depending on your feelings?
2. Are you unhappy or frustrated with your eating habits or body size, or with your attempts to control them?
3. Do you sometimes feel you can't stop eating even though you want to?
4. Do you often eat more (or less) than most people do at a meal or throughout the day?
5. Do you eat large amounts of food even when you're not physically hungry?
6. Do you eat normally in front of others, but eat excessively, or avoid eating, when you're alone?
7. Do you spend a lot of time thinking about your body size?
8. Do you try to control your body size by fasting, purging, using laxatives, or exercising for long hours?
9. Do thoughts of food and your body image take up too much of your time and energy?
10. Do your eating habits, body size, or feelings of shame about how you look limit your social life?
11. Do you avoid physical activities because of how you feel about your body?
12. Do you sometimes sneak food or steal money to buy it?
13. Do you lie about how much you eat or don't eat?
14. Have you been told that you really ought to eat more (or less)?
15. Do you wish people wouldn't comment about your body size or eating habits?

If your answer to many any of these questions is yes, you're not alone. Many, including young people, including the young, suffer from the disease of compulsive (out-of-control) eating, whether they are. The symptoms range from an overeatering, to a bulimica, or an anorexica. Whether you call the problem an eating disorder or a disease, the good news is that there is a solution.

Overeaters Anonymous is a Fellowship of individuals of all ages who support each other in overcoming compulsive eating by working OA's Twelve Steps of recovery.

Most of us, no matter how hard we tried, could not control our eating behaviors. In OA, we found people who understood us and gave us the help we needed through the Twelve Steps of OA. We stopped our compulsive food behaviors, lost or gained weight as needed, took action to restore our health, and learned to maintain a healthy life and weight and life. We find that, so long as we practice the Twelve Steps, we seldom have any desire to return to our former eating behaviors.

OA is not a diet club. The only requirement for membership is a desire to stop eating compulsively. We don’t weigh you members. We don’t charge dues or fees. We don’t track attendance. We don’t tell you what you should or should not eat. In OA, we help each other make responsible choices, not only about our food (such as which foods and the amounts to eat), and how we behave with food (such as when and where to eat), but also about other aspects of our lives. Sometimes we need to talk more about what is eating us than about affects how and what we are eating.

OA's Twelve Steps have helped thousands of people of all ages find new, healthy ways of dealing with food and life. The Twelve Steps can help you free yourself from the prison of food obsession,
just as they have helped the young people who wrote the following stories.

Ashley

I’m Ashley G., and I’m a compulsive eater and food addict. I entered OA as a young person at 22.

Since the age of 10 or 11, I had gained 8 to 10 pounds (3.6–4.5 kg) a year. My weight steadily increased to my top weight of 250 pounds (113 kg) by age 20. This means that, had I not been able to stop, I may have weighed well over 350 to 400 pounds (136–181 kg) by age 30! Some of my earliest memories of compulsive overeating include eating all of my and my brother’s holiday candy within two or three days of receiving it. I also recall eating fast food two to three times a week, generally after evening activities. Compulsive eating affected me physically because I experienced more and more weight gain and pain and fatigue related to my chronic illnesses.

My food addiction caused me emotional anguish. When I ate, I medicated my feelings. When I did feel, I felt anxious, depressed, worthless, and self-loathing. I thought of myself as rejected, marginalized, and condemned. I remained ungrateful and worried excessively. My life was insane and unmanageable. Furthermore, this disease robbed me spiritually. I “prayed” to the food and for the food. It was my Higher Power. I had little concept of spirituality.

I came to OA after my junior year of college. It was the first time I identified with other compulsive overeaters. During my first year of abstinence from compulsive overeating, I became employed in my career field, mended old relationships and started new ones, dated for the first time, and learned to have fun. I was happy, joyous, and free without food! I experienced love and serenity.

In my second year of abstinence—with the love, care, and support of God, my sponsor, and the OA Fellowship—I endured and persevered through a significant trauma. I have multiple chronic illnesses, which I have had since my teenage years. An incapacitating flare-up resulted in my disability at age 25. I lost my ability to be gainfully employed; my income; my ability to care for myself physically; my independence; my new happy, joyous, and free life I had developed in OA; and my safe, secure, planned future. I became severely depressed and plummeted into fear, anger, and self-pity. I was stripped down to my core; I was bent and stretched to a breaking point. But I did not overeat! I knew and believed that returning to my former compulsive eating ways would only compound my already hard, messy, seemingly hopeless circumstances.

Connecting was a solution for maintaining abstinence. My sponsor suggested two phone meetings a week and three recovery calls a day. Her suggestions were the lifeline I needed to remain abstinent and manage the depression.

As a result, I became restored at age 26. I gained the ability to sustain abstinence year after year; to serve and lead; to work part-time and volunteer with children; to have fun with family and friends; to play the piano and tap dance; to be in a relationship; to have peace, be grateful, and experience freedom; to love and be loved; and also to turn my will and my life over to the care of my loving God in exchange for the power to carry out his will.

I am currently 30, maintaining nearly six years of back-to-back abstinence and a 100-pound (45-kg) weight loss. I eat five weighed-and-measured meals a day with nothing in between and abstain from binge foods. I write and text my plan of eating to my sponsor daily.

As I journey through my sixth year of abstinence, I am no longer gaining excessive weight brought on by compulsive eating and food addiction. Instead, I am gaining a life beyond my wildest dreams brought on by abstaining one day at a time and practicing the Principles.
Nadine

I come from a normal, functional family, although my parents are divorced. I have always been a high achiever and never had an eating problem growing up. However, when I started high school, I began to feel inferior and tried hard to get people to like and respect me. I became conscious of my figure and the figures of girls around me, and I decided my stomach needed to be flatter. After a friend shared her diet, I stuck to a rigid routine of diet and exercise for six months. I lost considerable weight and stopped menstruating.

My parents and friends began to notice I was too thin, and my parents took me to a dietician, who advised me to include certain foods in my diet. I did and gained 7 pounds (3 kg), which made me distressed and unhappy. My parents suggested I see a psychologist, who diagnosed me with anorexia.

Anorexia made me feel in control and gave me a sense of power. It distinguished me from others and made me feel special in my diseased mind. It also got me the attention I craved, resulting in my unwillingness to get better. During a year of therapy, I became more ill and began purging when I ate a little more than I would have liked.

At the beginning of eleventh grade, I directed and produced a school play and became “too busy” to eat. My weight dropped to 77 pounds (35 kg), and my parents hospitalized me, despite my numerous pleadings. I was admitted just before my 17th birthday and was terrified of gaining weight, so I attempted to run away but was caught. Medical staff told me I would be locked up if I did not cooperate, but my father didn’t want that, so he removed me from the hospital. We pleaded with my mother to take me back into her home, and she agreed on the grounds I come with her to work every day so she could make sure I was eating and refraining from purging.

In October, while at my mother’s work, I began binging. My inability to control my eating was my worst nightmare. Despite numerous attempts to stop, my binging got worse, and I began to gain weight. I became more depressed and struggled to complete my schoolwork because all I could do when I came home was eat. My mother would often get angry because I had eaten all the food in the house; she began locking the cupboards and freezer. But I still had access to food because I drove to supermarkets daily to buy binge foods. I isolated myself and refused to attend social gatherings because I was ashamed of the way I looked.

In August of my matriculation year, I had a minor car accident. At that moment, I decided life was no longer worth living, so I overdosed on pills. My mother rushed me to the hospital, and the doctors pumped my stomach. While lying there, I realized I had to choose whether I wanted to live or die. Something told me I wanted to live, and my disease was standing in the way of my happiness. I became willing to do anything to get well.

My mother heard about OA through a colleague and believed OA might help me. As soon as the hospital discharged me, I attended my first OA meeting. What I found there was unlike anything I had ever seen before. Here were people who understood me and were willing to accept me no matter what. They told me I would recover from compulsive overeating, as long as I was willing to work the program to the best of my ability and follow its suggestions. I learned I have a fatal disease, and while I am not to blame for having the disease, I am responsible for taking simple, daily actions to bring about my recovery.

The program does not just focus on my eating problems, but provides me with guidelines on how
to cope with life without compulsive eating or starving myself. It teaches me I have things to do “just for today,” and I need to rely on a power greater than myself for direction. Through practicing the program and using its tools, I have been able to refrain from bingeing and return to a healthy weight. I can now participate in life instead of running away. I have a renewed enthusiasm and zest for life that I never thought I could have.

So many miraculous things are happening to me. I have many friends who accept and love me as I am, and I enjoy going out and socializing with them. I am in a wonderful, loving relationship and am even able to study a challenging degree at my university. I no longer suffer continuous depression and embarrassment about who I am.

I am grateful to this wonderful program for saving my life. I encourage anyone who has an eating disorder, be it anorexia, bulimia, or overeating, to try OA.

It really works, if you work it!

Tara

I am 19 years old and approaching one year of abstinence from purging. I came into OA at 15, around the time I first figured out how to purge. (I only came because my parents were longtimers, and I grew up around the program.) Unfortunately, I was not ready for the message at that time. I did not want to get better, but I was a people pleaser (one of my many character defects).

My lowest weight was 103 pounds (47 kg), and with my body type, it looked more like 83 pounds (38 kg). But I believed I was a monster. I was dating a boy who was over 200 pounds (91 kg), and I believed I was as big, if not bigger, than he.

Like any OA member, I was crazy with food. It inhabited all my thoughts, and I was unable to be a real person. My parents took me to a psychiatrist, who told me I was bipolar. I may have seemed bipolar, but only because I never dealt with what I was feeling. Besides being bulimic, I was anorexic and an exercise bulimic, overexerciser and compulsive overeater. Lucky me—I got the entire package deal! It was not until later that I realized this was a gift.

My parents knew I was bulimic, but I tried as hard as I could to make sure they never heard me. If they were near the bathroom, I would go into my room, turn my music up as loud as I could, take out one of the trash bags I stored under my bed and purge in my trash can. While they slept, I would sneak the trash bag full of vomit out to the dump.

As if eating five times as many calories as I should and then purging were not enough, to make sure I burned off all the calories I would also bike 10 miles (16 km) until I was ready to pass out.

Today, I am the youngest person at the OA groups I attend. I tend to forget my age in these rooms because, unlike most people in the world, the people in the rooms understand and accept me. I no longer feel the need to go to parties and stuff my face with junk food like everyone else. It is a difficult concept to explain, but I choose not to eat many kinds of food. I'm sure they would taste great, but I never feel well afterwards, and insane thoughts fill my head again.

I would not be where I am today without OA, OA members, and my Higher Power. The best advice I have is to keep coming back and take it one day at a time. As clichéd as those phrases have become, they are true. One day at a time, my Higher Power takes care of me, as long as I let Him.
Joe

When I was born, I couldn’t eat. This worried my parents because I began losing weight instead of gaining it. They took me to a doctor who, after examining me, told them that my stomach was not yet developed.

My folks took me home and fed me with a teaspoon until finally, their our ordeal was finally over; and I could eat on my own. Naturally, my ability to eat pleased my mom and dad very much. In fact, they were so happy, they continued to encourage me to eat.

And eat I did. I ate until I was fat. I hated being fat, so I ate to feel better. I didn’t have any friends, and people made fun of me, so I ate because of that too. I ate because of anything—or nothing.

When I started school, things got worse. I was just “fat” before; now people said I was both “fat and ugly.” It was terrible being fat, but I had never thought about being ugly.

The older I got, the worse things got. I felt as though I was living in a nightmare. Even my own family said bad things about me.

When I was in the second grade, three of my cousins came to live with us. Whenever I tried to play or do something with them and my sister, they said, “You’re too fat to do this,” or “Hey, Fatty, stay down there and help lift things up to me. That way if you fall the big boom won’t be so loud.”

I tried to ignore their remarks like that, but they hurt. It didn’t seem fair that I was fat, and all my relatives—my mother, father, sister, cousins, uncles, aunts—were thin. I was the only fat one in the family.

I came to Overeaters Anonymous when I was not quite 13, weighing 151 pounds (68 kg). I had tried many diets, but none of them helped me keep any weight off. I was a wreck physically and in every other way. Here I was, a boy not yet in his teens, wearing the same size pants as my father. There were rips in all my shirts because I kept growing out of them.

I was scared when I walked in the door of my first OA meeting. Then, when I sat down, I thought everyone was weird. Now, after all the meetings I’ve gone to and all the help I’ve gotten, I know that if everyone at the first meeting was weird, then I was too, because I’m just like them; I have the same disease.

But now, I don’t think these people are weird at all. I think they are sweet, and with the help of OA, I changed. From a kid with no friends, I became one with many friends. My nickname changed, too, from “Fatty” to “Baggy Pants” at first—and then to “Slim.” I love every minute of these nicknames.

Caroline

My name is Caroline. I’m 21 years old, and I joined OA nine years ago, when I was 11. I found out about OA because my mom is involved, and I still remember her finally saying yes to my first meeting.

I was always the child who constantly asked for dessert, hid my candy-eating from my parents, snuck food into my room, ate all of the snacks in my friends’ pantries, etc. Then, one day my mom and I were talking, and I said something to the effect of “I could stop eating sweets whenever I
want to. I just don’t want to.” So, she made me put my money where my mouth was and offered a challenge: to not eat sweets for an unspecified number of days or weeks—until she announced that the “sweets fast” had ended. I asked every single day whether it was over, and when it was over, you better believe I ate a ridiculous amount of sugar. About a year later, I finally realized what she was talking about. I had a problem, I couldn’t stop when I wanted to, and I needed help.

I want to start my story sharing about the rewards of OA, because a lot of the young person–relevant part of my story is not necessarily full of gratitude. It’s hard to be young in OA! And much of my story has nothing to do with my age, so what I’m sharing is not necessarily the full picture of my experience in recovery.

So, what do I love about OA? What gifts has it given me? Oh goodness, I could write a book. First of all: Freedom! Freedom from myself, freedom from my fears, freedom from the ball and chain that was food, freedom from other people’s opinions … the list goes on and on. Second: Gratitude, Gratitude for this overeating problem, gratitude for unlikely friendships, gratitude for getting to hear others’ experiences without their advice, gratitude for the freedom I have received, and gratitude for a Higher Power who is by my side. Another gift OA has given me is a toolbox full of resources: people, phrases, prayers, slogans, exercises, workbooks, and books to help me through everything. From feeling like eating that slice of cake on my birthday, to wanting to punch my brother, to crying in the bathroom stall of my high school, I can use the OA Tools in every situation. If you keep coming back, you’ll see what I mean.

I have used many Tools over the years, including reading the Big Book, which I downloaded onto my phone and could not recommend more! I was on a road trip once without any recovery friends, and I felt uncomfortable making a phone call in that circumstance, but I did send texts to my sponsor and read story after story in the Big Book to stay abstinent on the trip. I also use the Tool of writing a lot; diaries, worry journals, or even word-vomiting all of my daily plans and current feelings to my sponsor are tools that have helped me grow in my recovery and keep me abstinent.

I also have a food plan, which has been revised as needed, and I commit my food to my sponsor early in the day when I’m able. Being a young person without a stable schedule can make it hard to have a routine for my eating, so when things are stressful, or I have no idea what is coming in my day (or who is feeding me), that flexibility with my sponsor is so important to me and my recovery.

What is easy about being young in OA? I can make friends in a new meeting easily because everyone wants to talk to me! Also, I get to listen with extreme gratitude to my fellow members’ long leads because I was spared many of the hardships that come with being in the grip of food obsession for decades. I also get some amazing opportunities to speak at different events because of my more uncommon perspective, which is so rewarding.

Being young in OA also opens the door to a whole new demographic of compulsive eaters still suffering that OA alone can’t always reach: young people. When I got to college, I decided that I would answer honestly whenever someone asked me “Why don’t you eat sweets?” Within the first month of classes, I brought someone new to an OA meeting. And that one person getting help was encouragement to me to continue answering that question honestly, because I want to share that hope with other compulsive overeaters who are still suffering. I want to work Step Twelve. It’s incredible what kind of impact I make just because I have a compulsive overeating problem. Who knew?

In many ways, being young in OA is only a big deal if you choose to make it one. Just as everyone
in the meeting has life experiences relevant to mine, I have life experiences relevant to theirs, and
connecting with what is shared in meetings is never a challenge for me. Using Q-TIP is helpful for
me, because if I choose to Quit Taking It Personally, I will have a more pleasant experience.

Being young in OA is also a wonderful and special platform I have used to help both my peers who
are suffering from compulsive overeating and my fellow OA members who are concerned about
their children. I work my program in a very similar way as most others: learning as I go, attending
business meetings, having a food plan, working the Steps, and going to meetings. I have been able
to benefit from the wisdom of older members, to help break down barriers between older and
younger members, and most importantly, to find recovery. I’m so grateful to have skipped over the
hardships that come with being a suffering compulsive overeater as an adult, and God willing, one
day at a time, I will continue to be a grateful recovering compulsive overeater.

Alice

When I came to OA, I was 25 years old and very resentful at life for bringing me there so
young. I envied members who had arrived when they were 40 to 50 years old because they
had way more time than me to eat my trigger foods—those foods I’m addicted to and can’t
stop eating after I start. How could I stop eating them at 25? It was too soon! What about
when I get married? Could I seriously have a wedding without the cake I had dreamed about
for years? What was the point of getting married at all then? And what about kids? Could I
be a good mother without baking cookies? Won’t my children love someone else’s mom
who bakes more than me? And, most of all, how will I handle parties with people my own
age, where I used to eat a lot to feel comfortable and have something to talk about with them?
Food was part of my identity. What would be left of me without it?

Reluctantly, I kept coming back to meetings anyway and making phone calls to other members,
as had been suggested to me. Those people had something magical, greater than me, even if I
couldn’t put my finger on it, and a part of me wanted it, even if the other part was fighting hard
to resist the program. Then, one day, a calm voice inside of me made me realize that there would
never be enough of my trigger foods in the whole world to satiate the pit in my stomach. So why
not start abstaining right now? It was as good as any other moment. I took a sponsor, bought
some literature, and started working the Steps of OA with her.

Today I’m 29, and I recently celebrated three years of abstinence. I feel lucky to have found
OA so early because I get to grow up in this beautiful program with great Spiritual Principles
and have stopped damaging my body in time. I finally found a blueprint for living that I
thought everybody had but me. I’m not missing out on life; I’m fully living it. I don’t go to
parties just for the food anymore. I don’t try to be someone else to fit into a group of people.
I have real friends and deep, meaningful relationships. I don’t have to lie to my friends be-
cause they understand me. I’m less and less ashamed of who I am and of my weaknesses.
I’m starting to feel like I’m part of the human race and tenderly laugh at my shortcomings.
I’m even learning that I have good qualities and something to contribute to this life. My
confidence is being built, one day at a time.

Food is back in its place: fuel for my body. It’s not my god, my best friend, or my lover anymore.
Hope is back in my life because I know I don’t have to go through anything alone. I have the
Fellowship of OA, a sponsor, and a Higher Power to guide my steps and support me. I don’t
worry about my wedding cake anymore. I want to get married for love and life partnership now.
And I believe that, thanks to this program, I’ll be a loving mom, with a thousand other ways than
food to show it. I get way more from OA than I could have imagined, and for that, I am forever
grateful to have been brought to program so young.

Bryan

I am Bryan V., currently 26 years old with two and a half years in Overeaters Anonymous and very grateful to have found OA.

I heard about OA when I was 22, when I could not walk the mile it took to get to class or walk around campus from class to class. My daily life of living on negative calories, eating one and a half meals a day, and compulsively running 5 to 10 miles (8–16 km) a day had taken a huge toll on my body: I had a body mass index of 17, I’d experienced sudden cardiac arrest, and I had developed stress fractures and arthritis from the knees down. My physical exhaustion also included involvement in seven student organizations (and having positions of responsibility in five), being a full-time student, and working in biological research on campus. I was an anorexic and exercise addict who placed everyone else’s priorities above my own because it gave me excuses to neglect meals.

When my body forced me to stop, I withdrew from classes, quit exercising, and dropped out of some of my clubs.

This was also when I started binge eating. In my head, it seemed like the only way I could gain weight to survive my anorexia. Fortunately, someone at my school’s student health office who was a recovering member of OA suggested I would benefit from OA and invited me to attend meetings. I didn’t enter a meeting, though, until two years later. I didn’t think Overeaters Anonymous would work for me. In fact, when I entered OA, I believed my food binges were the only thing keeping me alive and that OA would leave me defenseless against my anorexia.

I came into OA adamant that I was not a compulsive overeater. I thought I just had to find a way to feel okay about being at a normal weight. I truly had no clue at the time that I was addicted to certain foods or that I used food to cope with life. I didn’t realize that I had already tried to stop eating sugar when I was 18 and be gluten free at 23, and I couldn’t do either one for even a day. Nor had I connected my heart problems to my BMI or realized that I was at risk of developing diabetes and following in the footsteps of my grandfather who died of it.

Once I recognized that food has always been my solution and grasped the spiritual significance of this, I saw that I could no longer let my decisions be powered by my anorexic food phobias and an obsessive list of “don’ts.”

Today, I do not have the luxury of using compulsive overeating to save myself from anorexia, and I can’t use anorexia to fix my compulsive overeating. I’ve also accepted that there are foods I just cannot eat because of my family’s history with diabetes, and I see how high-calorie, easy-to-eat foods had allowed me to live a fast-paced life that threatened my health and gave me excuses to miss meals. Now, my abstinence means that I don’t get quick fixes; the solution requires my effort and attention and will take time. My action plan is about planning meals, preparing healthy food, and making sure I have that food with me.

In OA, I’ve found family in people whom I never would have expected. Before OA, I never accepted others because I could never accept myself. I made decisions about them and what I imagined they thought of me and immediately rejected them. I tried to play to what I thought others wanted from me and hid behind the lies that I created to gain acceptance.
The disease of being compulsively unhealthy with food is cunning, baffling, powerful, and patient, and it can hit anyone, regardless of age, and make them powerless. I am fortunate to have had experiences that led me quickly to desperation. I truly do not know how my God got through my fog of diseased judgment.

Because of OA, I have been able to keep my first full-time job for over two years now. I was hired three months after I entered OA, and without stability in my eating, I would not have been able to keep up with the physical demands of my work. Before OA, I had never expected to live past 25. Now, with over two years of abstinence, I have grown and become teachable. I sponsor others and am humbled to be of service. Amongst other things, I am grateful to be a recovering compulsive overeater, living in freedom.

Olivia

OA saved my life—or maybe I should say OA is saving my life, one miraculous day at a time. I will celebrate my 21st birthday in May. This is a birthday I never thought I’d see because I’d pushed the self-destruct button for most of my teenage years. A family member introduced me to OA meetings and the Fellowship when I was 11. My early moments in OA planted a seed that has finally started to bloom.

During my youth, I knew I had a disease—just knowing that is unusual. Most of my OA family says I’m lucky to have found recovery at such a young age. But let me tell you, nothing spoils a binge like OA! I never went to diet and calorie clubs because I knew they were a waste of time and money. OA had the answers. The Twelve Steps could, if I was willing, rescue me from death by food.

Nevertheless, I carried on with secret eating and morning-to-midnight binges, feeling consumed and almost possessed by thoughts of food. I was a sugar junkie. I often tell my home group that the only time I’d break into a run was for a “fix.”

I’d purge by vomiting and using laxatives, with varying frequency. Then, around March of last year, I discovered the pain and brutality of anorexia. I am a complete, qualified addict. I had to check off the whole list of compulsive eating behaviors and be sick of my own reflection in the toilet bowl before I was ready to take the First Step.

I’m now on Step Four, attempting to write my first “searching and fearless moral inventory” of myself. It’s hard work, and believe it or not, I’ve racked up plenty of pain, resentment, shame, and fear in my illness.

What does all this equal? Gratitude! I am grateful for my life today, for being able to stand up in the morning, and for being part of a program that can love and support me back to sanity. I make no bones about it: I was insane without OA. My bond with my Higher Power becomes stronger every day I stay abstinent, don’t beat myself up, and let Higher Power run my life.

I often felt like I was born without life’s instruction manual. It would fascinate me to see others get it right while I got it so wrong. Now I have found the instruction manual; I just had to work it because I’m worth it, of course! We are the lucky ones; we have a Twelve Step program of recovery.

Jamielee

I’m Jamielee, a compulsive overeater. I have been in OA a little over three years, and I recently...
celebrated two years of abstinence from bingeing, white flour, and sugar and from sweets and other foods that I ate compulsively.

I came into OA when I turned 16 because I was sick and tired of hating my body and letting food control my life. I had tried a few diets that inflamed my eating disorder and led me to gain weight. I motivated myself to go on diets by reinforcing my poor self-image. I told myself I was worthless because I was overweight, but I would have a perfect life when I got skinny. I bought clothes that were in my “perfect size” to motivate myself to exercise, and I restricted my food to make up for bingeing. So I lost weight despite my overwhelming urge to eat.

When I obsessed about my body and weight, I was very selfish. For instance, all I thought about when going to a relative’s house was how to look good enough so people would tell me I had lost weight. I had always felt like an outsider, like I was worth less than other people around me, but I thought if I could become skinny I would far exceed those around me.

Food consumed all my thoughts and actions. I see now that compulsive eating gave me temporary comfort, but it was always followed by more headache as my eating worsened. As each binge passed, I required more food to produce a similar effect. I would binge on one partially frozen sugar product—binge food while microwaving another flour product to hide in my room for later. I wrote oaths to swear off food. I listened to tape recordings of myself saying not to binge, and then binged anyway. I watched television episodes about weight loss and binged right afterward. I asked my family to stop me if they saw me start eating after a certain hour, but I just waited until they fell asleep and then binged. I obviously did not have a sane relationship with food.

Today, my life is tremendously different in the best way. I see the uniqueness in others and myself, and I accept rather than condemn flaws. I was able to remain abstinent while I moved across the country to attend a college that has fostered my love of singing. I’ve been able to enjoy rich, honest friendships in OA. I have had loving, supportive sponsors who have helped me with my spirituality, honesty, and daily commitment. I have met loving, interesting people from all different countries and backgrounds who share my compulsion and now share my pursuit of a better way of living.

Every aspect of my life has been renewed as a result of OA. I have a new relationship with a Higher Power and with my parents, friends, and myself. I’ve learned how to walk through fear rather than run, and I now live a life that’s wide open rather than shut inside a box or bag.

I am grateful to be an OA member and to experience the support and love that is all around us.

Amy

I am a 17-year-old, grateful, recovering bulimic, anorexic, and overeater. I remember first using food for company after school in fifth grade. I was never fat, but my awkwardness made me vulnerable to people’s cruelty. Because of my failure to be liked at school, I sought daily comfort in food. Soon, I realized eating too much would make me fat, so I began eating large quantities of food and then exercising like crazy. It was intense. I would often feel sick afterwards, but the sickness was comforting because I believed it was a sign I wouldn’t get fat. (I’ve often binged on healthy foods like fruit and nuts, believing they would counteract the “bad” foods.)

During high school, I learned ways to please everyone and to pretend I was worth their while, all the time feeling like a fraud and resenting them for not liking me for who I was. But, I never showed them my true self: a vulnerable, scared, and insecure girl. I didn’t know that’s who I was, because I was much more absorbed with food.
At 13, I wrote down everything I would eat for the day. On the days I adhered to the rigid plan, I felt smug and satisfied. But on the days I didn’t—look out!

At 14, I found diet pills. These worked for a while, but soon I began taking them after bingeing instead of before, which made me incredibly sick. I also used laxatives. These allowed me to binge to my heart’s content, but after feeling close to death on a toilet seat several times, I gave them up.

At 15, I started abusing exercise, believing it was a healthy obsession. No matter how exhausted I was, I would slug it out in the gym or in 104°F (40°C) heat for hours to work off food.

When I was 16, people became cruel about my thinness. It was important for me to be liked, so I began eating huge quantities of food in front of my friends and nothing much for the rest of the day. People gave me many compliments on how much I could eat, which encouraged me to binge more.

At college, I was desperate to make friends. I believed if I impressed college students with how much I could eat, they would like me. My bingeing became constant, and I was vomiting at least once a day. Every morning I would wake up saying, “Today, I am going to be stronger,” but by evening I was in the shower vomiting up copious amounts of food and thinking, “Tomorrow, I will be stronger.” It never occurred to me that anything was wrong in my life other than my lack of willpower over food; it was the root of my pain and hurt.

OA has helped me believe in my own unique God, and, with love, he has taken the burden of food away and given me a chance to discover the real sources of my grief and frustration. By experiencing relief from food, I can be honest about my intentions. With faith, I know I will act on these intentions in a way that will bring me peace of mind. I no longer pity others or myself. I am deserving of the trust and love the OA Fellowship gives me, and I can now humbly give to others.

By continuing to strengthen my connection with God, I can live every day with faith. Living with faith is all I need to stay abstinent and live a meaningful life, one day at a time.

Dani

Growing up, my life was basically perfect. I had a big brother to play with, my parents were together, and we lived in a well-to-do community where I was showered with opportunities to grow and flourish. I was smart, athletic, pretty, and outgoing.

“How could a girl like me have developed an eating disorder?” This is what I would ask myself while I purged violently over a dirty toilet or sat alone in my room after again declining a party invitation simply because food was involved. My pursuit of skinniness had taken over my entire life. But how? I hadn’t been sexually assaulted. My parents never put me through a traumatic divorce. I had never even lost a loved one. The only flaw in my life was that my dad and I fought constantly and had no relationship. So what? I had absolutely no excuse for “allowing” myself to pick up an eating disorder.

Little did I know, this mentality was feeding my self-pity and feelings of worthlessness, which, in turn, presented themselves as binges and restrictions. I was too busy blaming myself (and my dad) for my disease to take any measures to treat it.

I wallowed in this cycle for over two years until I hit my rock bottom. I had to choose recovery or
death, I chose recovery. I went to my mom and some friends, who led me to OA. (I later discovered this was my first act of surrender, in which I allowed my Higher Power to take charge.)

I had tried again and again to fix my dangerous eating habits through self-will. I tried to eat meals without purging afterward, but I’d restrict a little more. I tried to stop restricting and instead went running for an hour. Needless to say, every attempt failed, and I was quickly back into the binge/purge/restrict cycle. I absolutely could not bring myself to the sobriety of following a healthy meal plan through my own self-control.

This is where OA stepped in. People were willing to prepare my meals and serve me the proper portions for two months straight. About a month into it, I finally realized I wouldn’t blow up like a balloon and become fat by eating again. Once the physical and mental sobriety set in, I was able to start making my own meals. I opted to do it under supervision for the next month to keep me accountable when the disease crept back into my thoughts.

I’ve now been following a meal plan, with my Higher Power’s guidance, for quite some time, and I’ve been returned to sanity and health. I try to slip back at times, but I always jump back on track when I remember who I really need to put in charge.

There is a solution!

One of the things these young OA members have in common is that they didn’t do it alone. You don’t have to either. Overeaters Anonymous will give you the Tools you need to abstain from compulsive eating and compulsive food behaviors.

At meetings, you’ll find others who understand what you’re going through and are willing to share what they have. A sponsor cares especially about you and will share his or her their experience in living and abstaining, one day at a time, using the Twelve Steps of OA.

Telephone Phoning, texting, and emailing keep you in touch with your sponsor and other OA members. The telephone is particularly important when you feel tempted to engage in your compulsion, want to share a problem, or just feel like talking.

Anonymity in OA is the promise of privacy. We guard each other’s identity. What you share at a meeting stays there. What you share with another member goes no further. Who we see at meetings is held in confidence. OA is a safe place where you can be who you are.

Can you do this? Yes, you can. We ask only that you be honest, open-minded, and willing, and that you keep coming to meetings. We think you’ll feel at home in OA. You don’t ever have to struggle alone again.

The Twelve Steps

1. We admitted we were powerless over food—that our lives had become unmanageable.
2. Came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.
3. Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understood Him.
4. Made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves.
5. Admitted to God, to ourselves and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs.
6. Were entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character.
7. Humbly asked Him to remove our shortcomings.
8. Made a list of all persons we had harmed, and became willing to make amends to them all.
9. Made direct amends to such people wherever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others.
10. Continued to take personal inventory and when we were wrong, promptly admitted it.
11. Sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God as we understood Him, praying only for knowledge of His will for us and the power to carry that out.
12. Having had a spiritual awakening as the result of these Steps, we tried to carry this message to compulsive overeaters and to practice these principles in all our affairs.

Permission to use the Twelve Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous for adaptation granted by AA World Services, Inc.

[Conference Seal of Approval Goes Here.]

How to Find OA
Visit the OA website at www.oa.org, or contact the World Service Office at 1-505-891-2664. Many local telephone directories also include local listings for Overeaters Anonymous.

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