

TO

THE COMPULSIVE OVEREATER IN THE MILITARY

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you have a desire
to stop eating
compulsively*



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.

TO THE COMPULSIVE OVEREATER IN THE MILITARY

A major aspect of military life is discipline: the greater the discipline, the more professional the military member. Yet we are still human beings, with the same needs, wants and desires as civilian members of society. Some of us find that drowning our troubles in alcohol is reasonable; maybe using certain drugs helps us to escape the pain; but then there are those of us who have found another way of dealing with our troubled state, and this is with excess food.

At first we may think nothing about the extra five or ten pounds that have crept on, but then, all of a sudden, those pounds multiply into twenty, thirty or maybe even fifty pounds of unwanted weight. At this point we are told to lose weight, or we will be asked to leave the military. Then the rounds of shots, diet pills, new fad diets and weight-loss centers consume our waking hours. We may be successful in shedding the weight that our superiors indicated. We maintain the new weight for a while, and soon feel that we have a handle on the situation and begin to fall back into our old eating patterns. To our horror, we not only gain all of our weight back, we might even gain more than we had lost. We start the process of losing weight once again. While doing this we make those around us miserable, whether they are our family members or those with whom we work.

Why is it that some people can eat normally and others cannot?

“Why is it,” we ask, “that some people can handle just one or two of something while we feel the need to consume the entire box?” For those of us familiar with the above scenario, we have come to understand that we have the disease of compulsive overeating. Though it is much more than this, the disease, simply put, is that once we get started eating, nothing can stop us until we have consumed the entire bag, box or pound.

Why don't diets and exercise regimens work for some of us?

Most military personnel in OA have gone the route of diet clubs, pills, starving, fasting, vomiting, exercise regimens, steam baths and weight-loss clinics so often that the thought of beginning another one of those is appalling. Yet many have found a way out of the endless dieting and frustration through the program of Overeaters Anonymous. Based on the Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions of Alcoholics Anonymous, OA has helped many of us find the strength, hope, and experience to go through life without excess food.

“Just a little willpower is all that it takes to shed these pounds, and I can surely muster that much,” we may say to ourselves. But willpower fails us and off we go again with the food. We can experiment with food only so long before it has us in its grasp and control. The only way those of us in OA have found to be rid of the compulsion and obsession with food is to begin the recovery process. It is not a source of weakness to admit that food is greater than we are, but one of profound strength.

How can OA help the military person?

“I don’t have the time, the money, the food, et cetera, to start a new program,” you may say to yourself. But the program of Overeaters Anonymous has no dues, no tees, no weigh-ins and no special diets. The only thing that is required is that you have a desire to stop eating compulsively. It’s that simple. The following stories by military personnel tell how the program of Overeaters Anonymous is helping them to recover from compulsive overeating—and stay in the military.

As powerless as ever

At 327 pounds, devoid of all feelings except despair, I came to Overeaters Anonymous.

My life over a period of twenty-one years of service in the Navy, had been one of alternate dieting and bingeing, with the bingeing having gone on for a year.

I was a medical officer in a specialty in which the Navy was short, so I had been retained in spite of my weight.

One day I was out fishing with my commanding officer, when he told me about a program for compulsive overeaters offered by the Navy at the naval hospital in Long Beach, California. He said it was based on OA’s Twelve-Step program, and he had seen wonderful changes in people who had completed the program and continued in OA.

In the interval before I actually entered the program, people told me that I’d “get my head screwed on straight,” and that I’d “find God.” I didn’t know what either of these notions had to do with being fat.

When I arrived at the naval hospital, I was given a food plan, an AA Big Book, and the Twelve and Twelve. For the first two weeks we were restricted to the hospital except for attending OA meetings each night. I learned a lot about myself while program was being spoon-fed to me over the next six weeks.

Looking back, I think the main things that set Overeaters Anonymous apart from other programs for me were: 1) The concept that I had a disease for which there was control but no cure; 2) The idea that there was a Higher Power who was interested in my life and body here and now and not just salvation of my soul in some future eternity; and 3) The principle of abstinence from compulsive overeating. Up to that time, I knew only two ways to eat: dieting or bingeing. Simply abstaining from compulsive overeating was a novel idea for me.

With the help of my Higher Power and the support of the people in OA, I lost my excess weight in about six months. At that point, a fact was revealed to me which I think is very important. At my top weight it was not terribly difficult to say, “I am powerless over food and my life is unmanageable.” Everybody in the room could see that. The significant thing is that when I reached goal weight I was able to say, “I am just as powerless over food as I ever was, and my life is still as unmanageable.”

Taking that first step over again was very important to me, just as giving service in OA is necessary to stay in fit spiritual condition.

Life has not been perfect, but I have kept coming back. Overeaters Anonymous is a way of life which is necessary for me to stay sane.

Safe harbor

After eighteen and a half years of service in the Navy, I was one bitter sailor. Because my “body fat content” exceeded maximum acceptable levels, I was faced with the specter of administrative discharge. Retirement pay (and mortgage payments) down the tubes. Educational benefits and future employability deep-sixed. Medical benefits for my family and myself over the side. And all because of a chart that showed a thirty-nine-inch waist was too big for a fourteen and a half-inch neck.

Of course, my resemblance to a bearded snowman in my dress white uniform was totally irrelevant. The fact that I had been on a six-month weight-loss program for more than two years had no bearing on my current predicament. And the irrefutable reality of my small heart attack the previous year had nothing to do with my weight. Right?

The Navy has innumerable active and effective programs for helping sailors with their problems. Alcoholics, drug abusers, wife beaters, husband abusers—whatever the trouble, ask for help and it is there. But, “Too fat? Too bad!” Or so it seemed to me. I was, of course, ignoring all the counseling sessions that didn’t help. Dietitians talking to me were whistling in the wind. Exercise programs were out (I’d had a heart attack, remember). Even psychiatric help was proffered and discarded.

Instead of the discharge I expected, I was given still another “last chance.” I was ordered to lose weight, exercise—and go to Overeaters Anonymous.

I came to OA expecting failure. I found instead that I was not alone with my problem, and what a revelation that was! I found that success was not only conceivable, but attainable. I found friends and loving support. And I found a path that is leading to a true Higher Power in my life.

In the beginning, my only higher power was my executive officer. A direct order brought me to OA. At one of my first meetings, an astute member expressed joking envy of my “higher power”—how nice to have such simple and direct contact, rapid feedback and quick decisions!

Whatever the miracle that brought me to my first OA meeting, it began the much larger miracle of changing the rest of my life. As things now stand, it would take much more than a direct order to pry me away from OA.

G.I. blues

Until the time when I was identified by the Air Force as a candidate for their weight-control program, the Air Force paid little attention to weight standards, but now they were to be strictly enforced.

My first sergeant told me I had ninety days to lose six pounds. To anyone but a compulsive overeater that might seem like a reasonable goal; but I could gain ten pounds in one week. How was I going to lose? I resorted to diets, exercise programs and general self-abuse in search of ways to lose weight.

I lost the six pounds the first month, then decided a little cake wouldn’t hurt. I began to eat and didn’t stop for a week. I gained back all the weight I had lost.

I began again the second month and lost eight pounds, then went out to celebrate. This time I ate for two weeks and gained back the eight pounds plus two more as a bonus.

The third month I dieted on liquid protein and took up running. This ended in a trip to the base hospital and a warning from my doctor that I was killing myself. The ninety-day deadline came around, and I had not lost the weight. The result was a letter of reprimand and a warning to lose six pounds in ninety days or lose a stripe.

I tried and tried, but I could not lose the weight. The more I resolved not to eat, the greater became the compulsion to overeat. I felt like an addict looking for a fix. On the first of June, I was relieved of my supervisory position, received a nonjudicial punishment and was denied a promotion to staff sergeant which I was due. The commander warned me that the next step would be to put me out of the service.

Humiliated and in despair, I was willing to try anything, including Overeaters Anonymous. I didn't know much about it except that it worked in desperate cases. In that respect, I qualified.

At my first meeting I asked about membership dues, and a member told me I had paid them before I came through the door. I was puzzled. Nobody had collected money at the door. There had only been a crazy woman there, hugging everyone and hollering, "Welcome! Welcome home!" So I said I didn't understand.

"You paid with all your pain, suffering and self-hate before you came," the OA member explained.

Today I am an active, abstaining member of OA. Although I left the Air Force eventually, it was by choice and not because I was overweight. My disease has been arrested, one day at a time, and my life now is centered not on food but on a Power greater than myself.

Anchors aweigh

Most of my formative and adolescent years were affected by compulsive overeating. As early as age five I knew I was different. I was obsessed with food, and with how I was going to indulge without being obvious. I began sneaking food. The secrecy kept me in constant fear, but I was so good at it that no one knew I had a problem. The pressure to present a false picture of who I was caused me to develop a mask which I wore until I became abstinent in OA.

When I was eighteen I thought I could fix my problem by joining the Navy. I arrived at boot camp with great expectations of how my life would be, but ended up scared, resentful and rebellious.

Boot camp progressed quickly, but so did my eating. I used to steal from the chow hall and from the women in my barracks. I'd hide my stash of food in the air conditioning ducts and eat during the night. My eating was out of control and so was I. Feelings of inadequacy surfaced daily, and food was used as an anesthetic to numb them. Most people lose weight during boot camp; I gained.

My first military assignment was to a specialized school. The pressure to graduate in the top ten percent of the class was overwhelming. I'd eat while studying, sneaking food from my roommates. My body size became an issue, and I dreaded that I wouldn't fit into my uniform.

At this point I discovered bulimia. I'd binge to the point where my stomach was very bloated, then I'd take laxatives and enemas to rid myself of the food. I was afraid that

my commanding officer would confront me over my rapid weight fluctuations, but I was able to escape to my next assignment before that happened. My drinking, laxative abuse and excessive exercising progressed to the point where my health was permanently damaged. I was depressed about my weight, retaining the illusion that if I was twenty pounds lighter, everything would be perfect.

My last-ditch effort to become the thin woman I so desperately wanted to be was “cosmetic surgery” to cut the fat off. The surgery was successful, but my eating remained out of control. I gained fifty pounds after surgery, stretching the scars that should never have been visible in the first place.

I went to my first OA meeting due to the persistence of a friend. She gave me some program literature to read, but I decided that OA wasn't for me. My eating became more out of control. My uniform didn't fit, and I was given consistently poor marks for my overweight state and appearance. My bingeing and purging escalated, and I was unable to stop the continuous cycle of self-hate.

After six months I returned to OA. I felt like a failure because I couldn't get abstinent. I binged after every meeting, telling myself that “tomorrow” I would stop overeating.

At first I didn't understand the Twelve Steps, and I refused to write an inventory because the emotional pain was too much to bear. I went through numerous sponsors because I couldn't find the “right one.”

Through all this, however, I still read the literature and went to meetings. Gradually, my outlook on life changed. My need for immediate gratification with food ended, and I knew that I would never be able to eat like I once had. I found a loving sponsor who allowed me to grow at my own pace. And my concept of H.P. changed dramatically, allowing me to have a Higher Power who loves me no matter what

I've been abstinent for two years now and have been given the gift of life on a daily basis. I can honestly say that OA has changed the way I relate to myself. I know that I'm not perfect, but I focus on the progress in all areas of my life. I'm glad I kept coming back.

Serenity at sea

Another six-month military assignment is about to end.

The main difference between this cruise and the one that came before lies in the fact that I'm now consistently working my OA program, rather than only considering OA during a crisis.

The self-pity and resentment that I felt during my last deployment led to my hitting bottom. As the resentments and loneliness increased so did my weight, which resulted in poor evaluations and the threat of discharge. Thanks to the OA program, I have since met the Navy's weight and physical fitness requirements, and my last evaluation revealed an improved job performance.

Just like my last voyage, this current cruise took me away from my loving wife who was pregnant and due to deliver while I was at sea. Leaving her was especially hard as I am a romantic at heart. But this program taught me that by loving myself and working the Steps, I could still express my love for my wife through the mail even while I was miles away.

The changes in me were also evident after the birth of our child. On my previous tour of duty I had been depressed, lonely and resentful toward the Navy for taking me away from my family during the birth of my child. But this time I was overjoyed and grateful to God for a healthy baby. I celebrated with my shipmates, sharing my joy instead of withdrawing into the isolation and self-pity which is so characteristic of my disease.

As my sponsor once said, this program is a living program, and the answers to life's problems are in the Steps and the Big Book. While at sea, I wrote another Fourth-Step inventory, going deeper than I had gone before. It felt good to be able to look at a fear that I had been holding on to for the past ten years. In Step Five, I was able to look at the good in myself as well as the bad, grateful for my honesty in both areas. The real growth came with the removal of my defects via Steps Six and Seven. I no longer have to dwell on past wrongs, and I get rid of new resentments that crop up by doing Step Ten on a daily basis.

The miracle of this program is that, as I share it, I can see change in the people around me. My wife, in particular, has changed; her letters to me have become more spiritual. When this cruise comes to an end and I walk off the bow, I will know that God will continue to do for me what I cannot do alone.

The keys to the galley

What is it like being a compulsive overeater and a cook in the Navy? Well, it depends. Some days are great and some are extremely difficult.

The great days are when I keep in touch with my Higher Power. For me that means reading my meditation books, saying my prayers and taking Step Three daily. It also means going to meetings, talking to my sponsor, and making phone calls.

The difficult days are when I don't do those things. That's when character defects are apt to pop up, and I'm tempted to submit to them by returning to the food.

Before OA, a day in the ship's galley was a nonstop binge. Holding the keys to the galley gave me license to overeat. But today I have a choice. For today, this choice—my new way of life—is far better than anything I've ever known.

The road to recovery has been anything but smooth. Like the sea, the going can be rough. But it's a journey I intend to carry on one day at a time. Today I am maintaining a sixty-pound weight loss, something I've never been able to do before. Most important, I have found a peace and serenity I never knew was possible before coming to OA.

As I write, my ship is at sea, which means that, for today, it's just me and my Higher Power. Thankfully, this program has given me a way to live without submitting to the food and to my old ways. It's easy when I put H.P. at the helm.

The Twelve Traditions

1. Our common welfare should come first; personal recovery depends upon OA unity.
2. For our group purpose there is but one ultimate authority—a loving God as He may express Himself in our group conscience. Our leaders are but trusted servants; they do not govern.
3. The only requirement for OA membership is a desire to stop eating compulsively.
4. Each group should be autonomous except in matters affecting other groups or OA as a whole.
5. Each group has but one primary purpose—to carry its message to the compulsive overeater who still suffers.
6. An OA group ought never endorse, finance, or lend the OA name to any related facility or outside enterprise, lest problems of money, property and prestige divert us from our primary purpose.
7. Every OA group ought to be fully self-supporting, declining outside contributions.
8. Overeaters Anonymous should remain forever nonprofessional, but our service centers may employ special workers.
9. OA, as such, ought never be organized; but we may create service boards or committees directly responsible to those they serve.
10. Overeaters Anonymous has no opinion on outside issues; hence the OA name ought never be drawn into public controversy.
11. Our public relations policy is based on attraction rather than promotion; we need always maintain personal anonymity at the level of press, radio, films, television and other public media of communication.
12. Anonymity is the spiritual foundation of all these Traditions, ever reminding us to place principles before personalities.

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

How can I find out more about OA?

To learn more about the Overeaters Anonymous program of recovery or to attend a meeting, contact the World Service Office listed below.



Overeaters Anonymous, inc.
World Service Office
6075 Zenith Court NE
Rio Rancho, New Mexico 87124-6424 USA
Mailing Address: P.O. Box 44020
Rio Rancho, NM 87174-4020
(505) 891-2664
www.overeatersanonymous.org