The only requirement for OA membership is a desire to stop eating compulsively.

Lessons from Relapse
Overeaters Anonymous Preamble

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 eating and to carry the message of recovery through the Twelve Steps of OA to those who still suffer.

Lifeline presents experiences and opinions of OA members. Opinions expressed herein are not to be attributed to Overeaters Anonymous as a whole, nor does publication of any article imply endorsement, either by Overeaters Anonymous or Lifeline.

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Moving? Let us know! Contact OA: telephone 505-891-2664; fax 505-891-4320; email info@oa.org; mail Overeaters Anonymous, PO Box 44020, Rio Rancho, NM 87174-4020 USA.
I am so glad that nobody in OA keeps score. I am sitting alone on a Saturday night, but today I went grocery shopping and to a meeting. That doesn’t sound like a lot; however, it is remarkable considering this time last year I could hardly leave my home. I was in relapse with days of abstinence here and there, but I couldn’t escape the compulsion, and I was getting sicker and sicker by the day. I realized how ill I was when I attempted to make myself sick after a binge, something that had always terrified me.
I was either going to die or go insane if I continued this behavior. Grudgingly, I went back to OA, feeling ashamed and guilty about my fall from grace. I had been in OA five years and was abstinent for most of them. Relapse happened when I started to get complacent and believe that I was normal and didn’t need the program anymore. I knew there was no place else to go.

I committed to lead a meeting once a month and was too proud to admit defeat. Only because I did not want to do another share while bingeing, I decided I would try to be abstinent for one day. I said to myself, “What would I be doing today if I were abstinent?” And I did it, as painful as it was. I read *A New Beginning: Stories of Recovery from Relapse* cover to cover and the *Welcome Back* pamphlet. I also read a *Lifeline* article that referenced page 107 of *Voices of Recovery* and suggests, “Think, Pray, Act.” That was my saving grace when the desire to eat was overwhelming.

I said to HP, “However long this takes, I’m willing to wait. I have no other choice. This disease has beaten me.” Gradually, the food fog cleared, sanity returned, and I really wanted to be abstinent.

Yesterday is history. I can spend the rest of my life crying over what has been, or I can try to do my best in the present. I need to remember that, especially when I start to feel self-pity. Today my abstinence is not perfect, and the weight loss is slow, but I am grateful. I may not be where I want to be, but thank God and OA, I’m not where I was.

— Carol B., United Kingdom

**Needed Connections**

For the first time in such a long time, I am putting recovery first in my life. I am so grateful.

I first came to program when I was 23 years old. I eventually got to goal weight and then left program and the Tools behind for seventeen years. I ate my way to 420 pounds (191 kg) with brief respites for rehab, periodic meetings, and a little hope. Then I’d return to food and the hell of this disease of self-loathing.

Even after my return to program in 2005, marked by a weight loss of 108 pounds (49 kg), my path was up and down. But I kept coming back.

What I seek today is clear and has been for quite some time. I seek the clarity to be grateful for my gifts, present to life, consistent with my spiritual path, and healthy. It feels so good to be clean with a bit of abstinence behind me. I feel giddy, almost on an emotional pink cloud, and able to handle issues that come up by taking action.

In the past, I gave up this feeling for so little, for a momentary thought that I could have a half a piece of something. Once I took that action, however, my experience was that I continued to eat for days, weeks, months, or many years. By deciding to pick up the food, I forfeited serenity, happiness, peace of mind, the ability to deal with life’s problems, and a spiritual connection to the world. When I chose food, I chose loneliness, self-hate, fear, hopelessness, and anger. That was insanity. It was insane to make that exchange. And it was not about self-discipline or because I was a bad person. It was, and is, a disease.

For today, I put recovery first. It starts with my food plan and then moves to the other Steps and Tools. This writing
is part of my path. I need the connections this program offers me in order to move forward. I need to know that Higher Power, as defined by me, takes away all the perceived negativity and allows me to get on with my day. I need you all. I need the newcomer to hear me, to hear the pain of disease. I need the longtimer who is in relapse to understand that I share that pain. I need to bond with others in recovery so we can carry the message wherever we go.

It is only by removing my self-centered nature, doing the next right thing, and creating an attitude of gratitude, hope, and action that I can get through my day, be present for myself and those around me, and go to sleep abstinent.

— R.K.

Recovering My Abstinence

When I first started OA, I had difficulty defining my abstinence. Finally I discovered a definition that worked for me. But after four months and a 17-pound (8-kg) weight loss, I relapsed. Management changes at work made my life more complicated. I was working more hours and had an irregular schedule. The stress increased, and my spare time decreased. The more hours I worked, the less I spent on my program. I no longer spent time reading, journaling, or staying in touch with my OA family. I went to fewer meetings. My food became sloppy, and my portions increased. I made up excuses to eat. After all, I had worked hard today and deserved it. I said it was just a “slip,” then just a “break” in my abstinence.

After nearly a month, I knew my program was suffering. I started going back to meetings and getting in touch with my OA family, but I still came up with excuses to eat. At least I’m working on the spiritual part of my program, I justified. I was in constant contact with my Higher Power, but still I ate.

I started working on my Fourth Step and old issues surfaced, which was my new excuse to eat. I believed as long as I was working on some part of the program, then I was making progress. Soon I had to admit I had broken my abstinence. I was not abstinent, period.

I sat down one night and read an article in a back issue of Lifeline. The last paragraph spoke to me: “I’ve discovered through OA that the purpose of food is fuel for my body, not pleasure or a cushion from reality. I know now that anytime I use food for any reason other than nutrition, I am compulsively overeating. Learning to live with food in my life by not compulsive overeating is abstinence in action” (“Abstinence in Action,” Lifeline, March 1994, pp. 22–23). I had to face that I was powerless over food and it was controlling my life. I was using food as a cushion from reality.

After reading this article, I recovered my abstinence. It has now been fourteen days, and I am grateful. I am turning to my OA Tools instead of food whenever life and work seem like too much. I want to keep my peace and serenity and learn to eat to live, not live to eat. Whenever I put my abstinence first, the rest of my program and life seem to fall into place. Some days it’s still a struggle, but with the help of my Higher Power, sponsors, and OA family, I can put my abstinence first and remain abstinent one day at a time.

— P.A., Illinois USA

Staying Plugged In

After two-plus years in and out of relapse, I have surrendered and am again experiencing the gift of abstinence. It’s
such an amazing and elusive sense of being. It reminds me of an electric cord that makes light appear when it’s plugged in. It’s dark . . . then in the blink of an eye, all is light and exposed.

My God, it looks beautiful! I see blue skies, creative ideas pop into my mind, and I feel profound joy that cannot be put into words. It’s a welcome sight from the darkness, and I don’t even notice the imperfections in my environment. I smile at people in my path. I reach out and can be compassionate toward people I despised during my darkness.

But once I get used to being in the light, I start to see some of the ugly stuff that makes me uncomfortable. I see truths I’d rather not face because they knot up my insides or anger me. I see bills I cannot afford to pay, and I see how unmanageable my life is. So I arrive at a place where I want to return to the darkness because I don’t want to feel the pain that growing through these truths brings me.

The higher self knows, if I pull the cord and disconnect myself from this power source, all will be dark again. It knows I will become numb and the darkness will bring nothing but misery. If the higher self “wins,” then it will stay connected to the light source. While it knows I will likely experience some growing pains, it also knows those will pass and joy will return.

If the lower self “wins,” I will unplug my power source by taking back my will and picking up the substance that will lead me back to hell. Who knows how long I might stay there this time? At this moment I am connected to the source, but that could change in a second. I’ve been switching the light on and off for the past few months, and while that’s better than not switching it on at all, it doesn’t give me the serenity I crave.

For today, rather than giving into cravings for things and substances, I am giving into the craving to follow God’s will. That’s why, for the next moment, I am staying plugged in.

— Lindsay, Keene, New Hampshire USA
I Was Powerless

Eighteen years ago, I was a young and athletic bulimic. I had struggled with compulsive overeating since childhood but discovered laxatives, diuretics, compulsive exercise, and starvation. I was crazy in the head with food, but my body did not show it.

As a newcomer to OA, I felt a little out of place. Others were older and larger, and there was all the God talk. I went to three meetings a month and started an anorexics and bulimics group. I found support and love through the Twelve Step community, but because of my normal size, I couldn’t see the need for a prescribed meal plan. I wasn’t overweight, so why punish myself? My abstinence was loosely defined.

I guess my HP wanted me to earn my seat, because my abstinence failed when I became pregnant. I avoided sugar but felt I deserved massive portions of food. I gained 80 pounds (36 kg) and was on bed rest for the last nine weeks of my pregnancy. I had no control and gorged myself, rationalizing that all my girlfriends had lost their pregnancy weight. How disappointing when I weighed only 10 pounds (5 kg) less when I left the hospital! I got into the sugar and then became a human garbage disposal. This behavior continued for eight years.
I knew where to go for help, but shame kept me from reaching out. I told myself I didn’t have time for a bunch of fat, happy people. I believed if I went to the meetings, it would bring up emotions that I would eat over—so many excuses.

I hate to look back at those eight years; they were very dark. I hated myself for allowing this disease to win. There were times I thought about dying. I felt my husband and kids would be better off with a healthy, normal wife and mother.

Two years ago, I started looking into spa treatments to get back on track with my health. A year later, I was still daydreaming about going to a spa when I realized what I needed wasn’t massages and tofu. I needed to admit I was powerless over food and that my life was unmanageable. I asked for help. The act of reaching for support was overwhelming. The pain and misery I had carried around for years suddenly felt lighter. By humbling myself and asking another OA member for support, I was able to step into recovery.

My sponsor talks about being vigilant, and we do have to be vigilant. It’s like walking up the down escalator. We have to fight our way to our destination. If we stop climbing, we are pulled back two or three steps in a matter of seconds.

If you are in relapse right now, please fight for your life! You deserve recovery! Reach out for help!

— Edited and reprinted from Novations newsletter, Northern Virginia Intergroup, April 2007

Desire to Stop

In September 2013, my life was overdone. I was changing jobs and moving from one country to another. I worked until the last second and then started in my new position the moment I landed. In the run up to moving, I overfilled my time by being everything to everybody and left myself out of the equation. I also left a tight-knit OA community and found in my new locale only one other member, no meeting, and little outreach. I took a risk, jumped, and fell splat.

As I reflect, I am not surprised I relapsed. I was fatigued and overwhelmed. This created guilt and a hopeless loop of spiritual, emotional, and physical ruin, and so my mind led me to the food. My brain defaults to compulsive eating since this is the deepest neuro-pathway I have carved out over the years. Since joining OA, I have begun creating new pathways, but they need time, support, and nurturing to mature and develop.

During that period of relapse, I recalled often my introduction to OA, my Fellowship, and the spiritually uplifting feeling I gained from working the program. I wanted that again and sought it in my new environment. I sought out online meetings and called the one isolated OA member and offered to host a retreat. I immersed myself in the literature, got a new sponsor, forged connections with other OA members, and offered service by reaching out to others around me.

In the deep recesses of my mind, I had a desire to stop eating compulsively. I made it my goal to regain abstinence and rejoin the road to recovery. I needed to concentrate on where I was going and not relive where I had been. I started by taking one day at time. Now, I am moving toward a better ending.

— O.V., Bermuda

I’m Worth It

I have had many a relapse in this program, but one thing I know for sure
is to keep coming back, weight loss or no weight loss. I believe I will never turn my back on OA and the Twelve Step way of life. I have learned so much about myself and how not to quit. My relapse has always been about self-will and what I wanted, which was not to have to deal with life on life’s terms.

Right now, I am back on that recovery road. Is it easy? Not by a long shot! But it’s so worth it, and today I’m worth it. After all these years, I know I have a choice where food is concerned, and that with God’s help and my willingness, I don’t have to hide in the food today. I face life on life’s terms, one day at a time. I am so grateful to have a God who never will leave me. Keep coming back. It works if we work it.

— Knova W., Ohio

Entirely Ready

I’m a compulsive overeater. I’ve been blessed with twenty years and seven months of abstinence, and I’ve given away about 55 pounds (25 kg) by the grace of God and the power of the Twelve Steps. My top weight was close to 200 pounds (91 kg). After a horrendous relapse through which I gained 45 pounds (20 kg) in nine months, I was halfway willing and went to OA meetings. I hit bottom five months later after being suicidal, and then I became willing to go to any length.

What does it mean to be willing to go to any length? When I was first in recovery, it meant going to at least three OA meetings per week, planning my food for the next twenty-four hours and committing it to my food sponsor, talking to my Step sponsor three times per week, reading and writing about the Twelve Steps, and taking time to pray and meditate every day. It also meant putting my recovery and abstinence before everything else, including eating out the first year and doing excessive exercise. It meant talking with my sponsor before making major decisions.

Today being willing to go to any length means being willing to do the tough stuff, such as being honest at OA meetings when I’m struggling with food or life situations, even though I’ve been blessed with years of abstinence. It means embodying the saying from Step Six: “Being ‘entirely ready’ means that we firmly turn our backs on the old self-destructive behaviors and make every effort to act and live by the principles embodied in the twelve steps” (The Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions of Overeaters Anonymous, p. 56). It also means I’m willing to give back to OA. When I do OA service, I’m taking out insurance against that first compulsive bite. I currently sponsor several members, and I’m a Lifeline Representative. When I do service, I hear how God carried me on wings of prayer during times in the past when I was unable to reach out.

The Twelve and Twelve also says, “As we face step six, we recognize and acknowledge our human fear of change. Then, because we are willing to go to any length for recovery from compulsive eating, we move ahead with this step anyhow” (p. 57). When I’m entirely ready, God gives me the courage to do that which I fear.

I am grateful to be blessed with a healthy weight, loving relationships, joy, and freedom from self-consciousness.

— Anonymous

Twenty-First Year

In 1993 I had five years of abstinence in OA, maintenance of a 70-pound (32-
kg) weight loss, and a series of mysterious physical symptoms arising. Over the next eleven years, my mystery illness produced more and greater symptoms. I couldn’t make it to meetings, and I felt no one understood what I was going through. I felt like I needed to take back some foods, and it was okay. I didn’t run this idea past anyone in program, and in retrospect I realize that was my disease talking.

By 2004, I had gained close to 150 pounds (68 kg), and that year my doctors found and removed a large pituitary tumor that was benign. Part of the weight gain was due to the secretion of extra growth hormone by the tumor but most of it was due to bingeing.

After the tumor was removed, I lost about 70 pounds (32 kg) of the 150 pounds (68 kg) because the tumor was no longer flooding my body with growth hormone, but I was still in relapse. I’ve spent the bulk of the years since regaining and losing some of that weight. You know the drill: “every diet or period of control was followed by a period of uncontrolled eating” (The Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions of Overeaters Anonymous, p. 3). During relapse, I somehow believed the disease when it told me I could be a normal eater someday, and I could do it on my own.

On September 16, 2014, I just wanted to stop eating compulsively. Sure I wanted to lose weight and ward off the diseases of obesity that I was clearly headed toward, but mostly I just wanted to stop. Whenever I had a morning, a day, or a span of days without compulsive eating, I felt much better, regardless of my size. But I found life without excess food unbearable. I couldn’t stop my compulsive eating. I was powerless over food, and my life was unmanageable.

I looked online and saw few meetings in my area, but for the first time, I noticed a tab for telephone meetings. I dialed in and cried because I knew I was home.

For the bulk of those twenty-one years of relapse, I didn’t desire to stop eating compulsively. I desired that HP change my life back to how it was. I desired that I could have my treats every day or whenever I wanted. I desired that OA would morph into something that could take away my isolation and anger without my having to do anything. It took me twenty-one years of relapse before I could admit to myself again that I was not a normal eater, nor would I ever be a normal eater, and that I couldn’t do it alone.

— Kathleen A.
What I Learned from Relapse

Two Things
I entered treatment for my eating disorder in the spring of 1989. I was 557 pounds (253 kg), depressed, and deeply ashamed.

The treatment center used OA and presented my condition to me as an illness. It was a major insight for me, and the wall of shame began to chip away. Seven and a half weeks of treatment yielded an 88-pound (40-kg) weight loss, education about my illness, and seedlings of hope.

The next couple of years were a whirlwind of recovery: meetings, outpatient therapy, and swimming. I got a great sponsor and worked the Steps. I found a power greater than myself in the groups. I understood my illness was not a personal weakness. Many revelations helped me move forward.

Undoubtedly, I was having a spiritual experience. People were freely giving help. Before, help required a credit card. I expected a huge bill, but it never came.

I eventually approached my goal weight and began moving without the worries of a heavy person. I had lost 340 pounds (154 kg), but the emotional and spiritual recovery was far greater.

So I lived life happily ever after right? No! After all this lifesaving work, my mind graduated me from the program. I went back to school, began playing sports, and had less time for recovery, which all added up to relapse and a bottom worse than I had already experienced.

In 2000, I topped out at 746 pounds (338 kg). Life was about food and little else. In 2001, I went for the first of two bariatric surgeries. It was pure physical recovery without OA, and I slipped again into relapse. In 2006, a blood clot nearly took my life. After three months in the hospital, I took short-term disability, which allowed me ninety days to get stronger. I got back to work but wasn’t in recovery. In fact, I started drinking heavily and overeating. I was sinking again and fast.

In 2013, I decided to come back to OA. I simply did what worked before, and wouldn’t you know it? As I committed to five or six hours a week of recovery, I got better. I leaned heavily on my spiritual
life, which I retained through all of the suffering. As I write today in March 2014, I am 470 pounds (213 kg) and feeling human again.

Our founders devised a program of simple ideas: We are bound by weakness, and there is a way out. We just have to follow directions.

I realize two things clearly: I am a food addict, and I need help living a healthy life. Problem one requires a food plan with honesty and accountability. Problem two requires that I study and apply the Twelve Steps of recovery. Without these things, you may as well reread my story because it will happen again.

Thanks for life, OA!
— Ed A.

What I Heard

When I came to OA in July 1983, I was desperate. I’d again gotten up to my top weight of 195 pounds (88 kg)—I’m only 5 feet 1 inch (155 cm) tall—and I could not stop eating. The first meeting, I heard what I needed. The next day, I started abstaining from sugar and eating just three moderate meals a day. In seven months, I lost 35 pounds (16 kg) but only attended one meeting a week and did little in the way of service. When my sponsor told me I should start sponsoring, I refused, saying that I didn’t have enough experience. I began eyeing the bakery section of the supermarket.

One day, someone brought a dessert plate to work. The dessert had not set properly, so no one ate any of it. I began to identify with this dessert that everyone was rejecting, and memories of all the times I felt rejected came back. I had to be nice to this dessert to make up for all the times people had been unkind to me. Of course I ate the whole thing.

What followed was seven years of relapse, although I never stopped going to meetings or working with a sponsor, because I sensed that OA had the answer. But I wasn’t really working the program. In all that time, I couldn’t put together even thirty days of abstinence.

Finally a high cholesterol scare, along with the discovery of a food plan aimed at preventing heart disease, got me back on track. This time I offered to serve as a sponsor, although no one took me up on it.

Nine months later, I moved to another state for a better job. I stayed with friends for seven weeks while I looked for an apartment, and I decided I didn’t need to go to meetings until I found a permanent place to stay. Guess what happened? I relapsed again. This time, mercifully, it was for only three years.

I kept going to meetings, but they were different in my new location, and I didn’t much like a lot of the people. Then one day after I had gotten to a new high weight above the 200-pound (91-kg) mark, a light came on in my head. I realized many of those people had something I didn’t have: long-term abstinence. I began listening to what they said.

What I heard was that no matter what happened—divorce, being passed over for promotion, having their buttons pushed by another person—they didn’t pick up the food. Instead, they prayed, made phone calls, or wrote. I realized if they could go through both tragedies and everyday frustrations without eating compulsively, then I could too.

Nearly sixteen years later, I’m still abstinent. I’ve been able to stay on course by working the Steps and doing service at the group level and higher.
— D.B., Grand Prairie, Texas USA
Belly Full of OA

After regular attendance at meetings for thirteen years and enjoying what I considered emotional, physical, and spiritual recovery, I quit going. After a five-year hiatus, I mustered up the courage to go back to my home meeting.

I see now that I was too involved in service work. Yes, there can be too much of a good thing. I also changed my program and made it too difficult to maintain. I tried to back down and make changes, but I just gave up because it seemed like the damage had been done.

I had become my own Higher Power and allowed several people to become too dependent on me. I never thought I’d quit OA. I swore I would be a member for the rest of my life because I thought it had saved my life.

During my relapse I ate the foods from which I had been abstaining for years. I quit participating in most of the activities that had given me joy. I began feeling tired and depressed. A medical reason, and not just the sugar, existed for my tiredness. Doctors diagnosed me with Hairy Cell Leukemia. I received treatment and am in remission. What’s sad is I went through this alone. I did not have the group’s support to love me through it.

It’s been hard to continue in relapse with a belly full of OA! To anyone who decides to leave, it’s true when they tell you, “We’ll love you until you can love yourself. Welcome to Overeaters Anonymous, welcome home.”

— Susie T., Woodsboro, Maryland USA

New Recovery

Every morning for two years, as I returned from a horrendous relapse, my sponsor has listened to what I’ve written in my “new” recovery. I have learned my abstinence has nothing to do with the situations in my life. Life returned to sanity when I learned to separate my abstinence from my circumstances.

After fourteen years I was so “together” and living a life “beyond my wildest dreams,” just as the program promised. So what if I missed a meeting here or there and stopped sponsoring? I forgot that abstinence was the only reason I had any life at all!

I had a wonderful husband; a successful career; and a normal, loving child whose formative years were my fourteen years of abstinence. Despite all that, I couldn’t stand myself. I had regained half of my weight, and three quarters of it was between my ears! Suddenly people weren’t behaving to suit me. I expected too much of others and myself. Nothing was my fault, but everything was my business.

After struggling for a year and a half to get abstinent, I finally had six weeks, went to an OA meeting, and got a sponsor. The ensuing second recovery saved my sanity and life. I’ll never know why I insisted on being abstinent before returning.

This past December my husband took ill. The man I shared everything with no longer existed, but my abstinence allowed me to accept the tragedy and make appropriate decisions. Gradually, the man I knew returned for eight short weeks, and then he was gone.

The illness and death of my husband tested my abstinence. But now I realize I am truly powerless over food. My Higher Power handles that for me. It took a long period of abstinence to see that for an addict like me, it is easier to be abstinent and continue to work the Steps than to try to get abstinent and find the willingness to work the Steps again.

— Marie J., New Jersey USA
Strong After-Meeting

I have been in and out of relapse for more than twenty years, so the Twelfth Step Within is very near to my heart. I know the despair of going to meetings thinking I must be one of the unfortunates who is, “constitutionally incapable of being honest with themselves” (Alcoholics Anonymous, 4th ed., p. 58).

I know the pain of thinking I have nothing to offer and skulking off after meetings while everyone else shares fellowship. You see recovery in others. You remember when you felt the same hope. Now you doubt ever being able to recover. You wonder how much longer this will go on and what will come next: a disabling stroke, death, or just this living torture?

A few years ago, I decided to start a recovery-after-relapse meeting on a day when there were no other local OA meetings. The meeting limped along for eight months,
sometimes with two people, occasionally with three to five people, and then with just me. Finally it closed. However, all was not lost; one member became abstinent.

After closing that meeting, I got the idea to attach an after-meeting to a very successful beginner’s meeting, which regularly attracted twenty-five to forty-five people. I announced during the beginner’s meeting that all those in relapse and those who want to share their recovery could stay after for a brief meeting. Now, our after-meeting attracts three to ten people consistently. We dispense with all structured readings. Instead, we read a short page from *A New Beginning: Stories of Recovery from Relapse* and then get right to sharing by going around the circle. Food references are permitted.

We feel it is important to go around the circle and let everyone have an opportunity to share or pass as they wish. So often, people in relapse are reluctant to share in larger meetings or when extroverts tend to dominate. This small, informal group provides an intimate setting to allow members to open up and shed light on their secrets and unhealthy eating behaviors in an accepting and healing atmosphere of recovery.

I believe that HP is present at our meetings. There is so much hope when a longtimer shares that for many years she called herself the “queen of relapse” but now, through the grace of HP and this program, is celebrating six years of abstinence. People with good recovery provide inspiration, and those in relapse are encouraged to talk, share their feelings, and heal.

This idea is simple, and I offer it to anyone who would like to try it. We dedicate our meeting to those who have lost their lives to this disease, and at every meeting we pray, “God, please get between me and the food today, so that the food does not get between me and you.”

— Andrea K.

**Don’t Give Up**

I am celebrating thirteen years in Overeaters Anonymous. I have eleven years of continuous abstinence and am maintaining a 120-pound (54-kg) weight loss. I have had tremendous weight swings during my abstinence; however, how much I weigh and what I eat have nothing to do with my definition of abstinence.

As a newcomer in 1992, I wondered why people would leave OA if it was such a wonderful program. I also did not understand lack of compassion for those who regained their weight.

My relapse lasted six months. Denial is a sneaky thing, and I found it difficult to know the exact moment relapse began. I had released 107 pounds (49 kg). I began to believe people’s comments that I didn’t look like a compulsive overeater. It began innocently when I ate some food off my daughter’s plate. Eventually, my sick mind experimented with a little of this and a little of that until it escalated to all my binge foods.

I followed the suggestions in our literature and switched from weighing myself twice a week to once a month. My weight crept up by 6 pounds (3 kg). I thought I could do a fad diet to get the weight off and nobody would know. It backfired, and the scale was up 10 pounds (5 kg). No matter what I did, the scale affirmed my weight was up 20 pounds (9 kg). Then I gave up. I felt I could no longer stand up at my home meeting and say I had one year or more of abstinence.

I had been calling my sponsor three times a week and was playing a danger-
ous game of lies and deceit. I knew she knew the truth but was too afraid to confront me, so I let her go.

All of my attempts to work the program had been futile, and I needed to ask someone to help me. I would have done anything to get what the Big Book promised. All the women I asked turned me down, and I was running out of options. I found a man who was strong in practicing the principles of the Big Book. He made me start my abstinence over more than once.

Eight years ago I started a monthly Twelfth Step Within meeting and have chaired many events for the Twelfth Step Within community. Many of the people who remain in program are not perfect and cannot sustain abstinence without starting over and over again. I don’t claim perfection, but I strive to do the best I can.

God, Higher Power, or whatever you call the one great force loves you. OA has a place for you if you want it.

Many times I want to put on my running shoes. However, I know myself. If I leave the rooms, I don’t know if I will have the courage to come crawling back. I stay no matter how much or little I weigh, no matter what comes out of my mouth, or what I am thinking. Where else am I going to go? I don’t know anywhere else where people know me, love me, and accept me for who I am—a real, recovering compulsive overeater.

Please don’t give up; God and I have not given up on you.

— Shirley S., Sunnyvale, California USA

Talk Openly

My home group made a group conscience decision a few years ago to provide a relapse meeting. We call it the Twelfth Step Within Meeting, and sometimes we have to explain what Twelfth Step Within means. It is carrying the message to members already in OA who have lost and can’t regain their abstinence.

I was drawn to this service because of my own experience with relapse. I feel passionate about making sure those in relapse feel like they still have a home. If they are like I was, then surely they feel so much shame and think the group is better off without them. I rejoice whenever I see a member in relapse return to the Fellowship.

One of the requirements to lead this meeting is having experience with relapse, so a few of us take turns leading the meeting, which we hold about once every quarter and one hour prior to our regular meeting time. We used OA’s Recovery From Relapse Meeting Format, which is free to download from oa.org and makes it all the easier to set the meeting up and give this service. We advertise it in the group, saying that any member may attend and the meeting is centered on helping those in relapse or those wishing to prevent a relapse.

In my experience, relapse separated me from many of the Tools, so when I lead, I include reading aloud together from our wonderful literature, writing a bit, and then sharing. We always review the Recovery Checklist. The meeting is smaller and more intimate than the general meeting and hopefully breaks down barriers for members to share the truth about their struggles.

I believe talking openly about relapse helps reduce the stigma and shame that can be associated with it. Relapse happens, and it’s not contagious. Each day, every one of us is just a bite away from a relapse. The last thing anyone wants is for a struggling member to leave OA.

— Barb B., Anoka, Minnesota USA
Two years before I went to my first OA meeting, my husband and I bought our dream house. It had the high ceilings I considered absolutely essential to staying on a diet and losing the more than 100 pounds (45 kg) I needed to lose. Everybody knows low ceilings lead to claustrophobia, which leads to bingeing. High ceilings had to be the answer. My new house would be a pristine, binge-free zone!

Two days later I was bingeing to the point of pain, sitting on the toilet in a locked bathroom. I did that for two more years before coming into OA.

In OA I learned I had to find a sufficient substitute for the food. Every diet I tried failed because I never found a substitute for the food. I was like a coiled spring, holding tight and managing to deprive myself for a while until I couldn’t stand the deprivation. Then the spring would snap, uncoil, and I would be on a four-month binge until I tried it all over again.

In OA I found a substitute for the food. Instead of using food to deal with life, I learned the Twelve Steps are the answer. They are my design for living the spiritual principles and processes necessary to deal with every facet of my life abstinently.

I believe I took Step One many years before I came to OA. I knew I was powerless over food. I just was never willing to do anything about it. I simply stayed at “step zero,” living in the problem while waiting for somebody to come along and do something!

In OA I learned I only had to change one thing—everything! I started working the Steps in earnest. I wanted to skip Step Three. How could I ever have a relationship with a Higher Power? That seemed too simplistic and unscientific for me. But I was told that skipping Step Three was not an option! Step Three was the key. If I continued trying to do it on my own, in my own way, without spiritual principles, I was doomed to fail.

Because I was desperate for recovery, I acted “as if” until I suddenly found myself six months abstinent. I realized I had indeed undergone vast changes in my attitude and outlook on life. I was different. There was finally a power in my life greater than food. Was I now done? Had I mastered this thing?

Q How do you use the Twelve Steps as a substitute for the food, resentments, and self-centeredness?

No, there was more work to be done. I learned the Twelve Steps form a natural progression, each one necessary preparation for the next. I now know with absolute certainty that the Twelve Steps are like a string of holiday lights. If any single bulb is missing or burned out, the entire string doesn’t work. I can’t skip any Steps. My life depends on working all twelve to the best of my ability.

Maybe yours does too?

— Gloria L.

Editor’s Note: As part of the 2015 Strategic Plan initiative to increase focus on the Importance of Working All Twelve Steps, members of the OA Board of Trustees and region chairs are contributing one article per issue to share their experience, strength, and hope on this theme.
Tradition 5

Each group has but one primary purpose—to carry its message to the compulsive overeater who still suffers.

A Deep Satisfaction

My sponsor often encourages me to look for and expect miracles in my everyday life. At first I was skeptical, but she’s right. Living in recovery means living a life beyond my wildest dreams.

These miracles come in the most unlikely places. In Tradition Five it says, “As we concentrate on carrying the message of hope to others, we are empowered to use our unique talents in ways that are truly useful to others. The result is better than any outcome we could have planned for ourselves, for we find a deep satisfaction . . .” (The Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions of Overeaters Anonymous, pp. 150–151). This has been my experience. Who knew that feeling worthwhile, useful, and connected could feel better than compulsive eating? Recovery taught me this, and I don’t want to ever go back to disease behaviors.

I have so many opportunities to carry the message to the compulsive overeater who still suffers. Even if there isn’t a newcomer at a meeting, there are longtime members who still suffer. When someone is in relapse or struggling, helping that person is also the group’s primary purpose. Just like Our Invitation to You says, “It’s our weakness, not our strength that binds us together.”

I finally get why our primary purpose is to carry the message to those who still suffer. It doesn’t matter how long I have been abstinent, I still need to hear the message, and I can’t keep it unless I give it away.

— Edited and reprinted from OA Today newsletter, St. Louis Bi-State Area Intergroup, May 2014

Web Links

Discover interesting and helpful OA website links.

Young Persons in OA: Compulsive food behaviors often start in the teen/young adult years. For information and resources, visit OA’s “Young Persons in OA” page under Newcomers. oa.org/newcomers/young-persons-in-oa/

Strong Abstinence Checklist and Writing Exercise: Carry this wallet card in your pocket or purse wherever you go! Use to help keep your abstinence strong or as the focus for meetings and workshops. bookstore.oa.org
Admitted to God, to ourselves and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs.

Heavy Load Lifted

Why is this Step necessary? The Big Book gives us “The best reason first: If we skip this vital step, we may not overcome [our addiction]” (*Alcoholics Anonymous*, 4th ed., p. 72).

For me, this means returning to a body I hate, clothes that don’t fit, bad hygiene, bad breath, abandonment of relationships and work commitments, and a life of misery, hopelessness, and loneliness. Those are pretty good reasons to follow through with this Step.

As a compulsive overeater, I lived a double life—in fact, I was a chameleon. In many different relationships, I played out many different personalities. I was “very much the actor . . . want[ing] to enjoy a certain reputation” (*Alcoholics Anonymous*, 4th ed., p. 73). I knew in my heart this reputation was undeserved, so offstage I pushed that knowledge and my fears down with food.

It was an exhausting existence trying to be someone else all of the time. I was in a constant state of dread, fearing that cracks would appear and people would see who I really was. I wanted to be loved to the extreme by everyone who knew me, but the truth was I didn’t even know me. I lacked all humility. When I was thin, I was God’s gift to the human race, and when I was fat, I was God’s mistake.

After writing my Step Four, I shared it all with my sponsor. I knew only a full disclosure would save me. It was the first time I had ever been entirely honest with someone about the exact nature of my wrongs. In the past, I gave only snippets of truth and held back anything that implicated me.

But here in Step Five, with a trusted sponsor who had also walked this walk, I protected my pride, “illuminating every twist of character, every dark cranny of the past” (*Alcoholics Anonymous*, 4th ed., p. 75). There were embarrassing and scary moments, but I continued to read aloud, humbling myself before God and this other person.

The first Step Five I took had such a huge impact; I had an overwhelming sense of peace and ease. This extraordinarily heavy load lifted from my strained and weary body. God was real, and he felt so close that fear was almost a stranger. It was the beginning of a new way of life.

Each day, I practice the gift of sharing and speak with my sponsor and friends in recovery. Secrets, big and small, will only take me back in the food, and I never want to visit again. A day at a time, I am coming up on my third year of abstinence. OA changed my life because it changed me into the person I was meant to be. No longer do I need to hate myself!

— Sacha, United Kingdom
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.

Simple Recovery

If I put this Tradition in my own words, I would say, “As a member of an OA group, I should never pitch or stress the names of non-OA-approved literature, spiritual leaders, self-help gurus, vitamins, weight loss programs, church revivals, or other Twelve Step groups, lest problems of money, property, and status divert me from my own recovery and carrying the message of recovery to others.”

The Tradition actually uses the word “never.” This is uncommon in Twelve Step literature. Often something is “suggested” or “recommended.” Why is a clear boundary with outside issues so important? “The reason can be summarized in three words: Keep it simple” (The Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions of Overeaters Anonymous, p. 153).

I can’t tell you how much this compulsive eater needs that slogan. Prior to OA, I was hooked on self-help books, and I remember trying so many things to lose weight or to improve myself. The problem with those things for me was that I needed a Fellowship and a power greater than me to begin living a sane life of long-term recovery from compulsive eating. I found the solution in the Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions. They are instructions on how to be abstinent and sane. Also, they’re clear: I don’t have to figure anything out on my own. And they’re free!

If there was a profit motive in OA, I am not sure I would have stayed. I was always quite suspicious of people trying to take advantage of me or put one over on me, and it would have been the perfect excuse to bail.

When I focus on my primary purpose, I recover. As a result, when I am at an OA meeting, I put first things first and focus on the solution found in the Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions.

At a meeting, if someone says, “I know this isn’t OA approved, but it’s really helped me,” and begins to share or read, then it’s an indication to bring up the Sixth Tradition with them after the meeting in a one-on-one as well as during a group conscience. It’s never an easy conversation, but others often don’t know that by following the Traditions, we create a foundation for a healthy, recovering group.

Let’s keep it simple and focus on our primary purpose and leave the rest for outside the meeting.

— Anonymous
I had a problem with my temper, enjoyed the occasional gossip session, and could be a harsh judge of others. As a matter of fact, I had so many character flaws I couldn’t see how I would ever rid myself of them.

I held my sponsor’s hand as she led me through the early Steps, and I started to see all I had to do was become ready for God to remove those defects. I was not the one doing the heavy lifting here. God was. When I was finally ready to give those flaws to God, I saw great improvement—not perfection. I still deal with my defects every day, but I rarely lose my temper. When I do, I make amends as soon as I become aware of the transgression.

The essential ingredient in becoming ready to give these things to God was spiritual growth. I needed to grow in the understanding that I was not the one with the power to remove my defects. Only God has that power. That was a huge change in perception for me. Before, I would try using my own inadequate power to make changes, and I would fail. This failure was a constant source of frustration. Lucky for me, I had meetings and a sponsor. They gave me suggestions, and I actually followed some of them.

The first five Steps led me to the trust and spiritual experience that I needed to comprehend that God had a better way and I could trust him to do the hard work. I had to do my part, and then he would take it from there. What an awesome experience watching God work in my life. He has used people, places, and things to teach me tremendous life lessons.

My fear of the Sixth Step was born of skewed perception. By the grace of God alone, I was relieved of that fear. I am blessed to see the things God can do when I give up running the show.

— Kelly J.

For Discussion . . . AND JOURNALING

What program Tools can you use to encourage members in your area who may be experiencing relapse to Talk Openly (p. 15) about what’s going on with them? Make a plan with others in your group to use these Tools to give Twelfth Step Within service.
Miraculous Willingness
As someone who always considered herself a naturally lazy creature of comfort, my immediate willingness to volunteer for service positions was downright shocking. When I started my OA journey almost three years ago, going to meetings was the first Tool I used. Service followed immediately as the second.

At 27 years old, 5 feet 1 inch (155 cm), and 238 pounds (108 kg), I was considering starting a family with my husband and thought I finally had found the reason to lose weight. It was the first time I had ever resolved to get healthy. I spent $500 on a personal trainer, lost a whopping 8 pounds (4 kg), and then nothing. I had failed despite the breakthrough I thought I needed to get my head straight. I did not want to gain even more weight during a pregnancy, and I did not want to be a fat mom. Yet there I was, eating and terrified.

I had been to OA meetings before but was scared away by the Steps and all mentions of God. Now that I was desperate, I was willing to put those fears aside for as long as I could in order to let something—anything—happen. What happened was this miraculous and powerful willingness to find a sponsor, open up to strangers, and take the literature service position at my first home group. This position helped me claim my seat each week and made me feel like I was earning my recovery.

From there, I went on to serve at the intergroup and region levels and became a sponsor. Every time I give service, whether it’s taking a phone call as a meeting contact or flying out to an assembly, I feel this tremendous humility, like I am paying off a large debt. Indeed, I am. If I spent $500 to lose 8 pounds (4 kg), then serving my Fellowship for the gifts it has given me, including a 45-pound (20-kg) weight release and a healthy pregnancy in which I only gained 5 pounds (2 kg) of “motherly reserve” seems pretty fair. I owe OA more than I can possibly give.

I serve because the miracles keep coming; and the miracles keep coming because I serve.
— Briana H., Oakland, California USA
No one would know the second layer was missing if they could see the top layer, would they? But here I was starting in on the top layer of food. Why couldn’t I stop myself? The thought that someone would catch me was torture, but I could not resist. Mom kept a well-stocked freezer. The food was always there, ready for visitors. With such bountiful amounts, my food addiction must be my mother’s fault!

Growing up we lived on a farm, miles from any dairies and supermarkets to satisfy my food addiction. I knew all of Mom’s “hidey holes” where I could find food to steal. I loved being the dutiful daughter when we had visitors, offering to clean up the dishes while my family entertained. I could hide in the kitchen with all the leftovers. My respectful and submissive behavior was preplanned manipulation!

I was an overachieving good girl doing all the right things on the surface, but aching beyond explanation inside. Until age 37 and my homecoming to OA, I lived the roller-coaster ride of diets, binges, starvation; the degradation of laxative abuse; and the flogging of my body with overexercising. I supported numerous weight-loss organizations—I joined one eight times! I could not admit I had no control.

At 37 I found myself again in Mom’s home sneaking the lids off food tins, and I started to realize the insanity of my life. Many good things have graced my life, but this dirty, dark demon of a disease festered and tormented my body despite my best efforts.

Thank goodness OA has convinced me my efforts will not reap rewards unless my Higher Power, whom I call God, directs them. All those years of struggle, despair, manipulation, and vain attempts at control only became clear when someone showed me the door to OA and gave me the strength to do what OA suggests.

I’m now 43 and grateful for the amazing life I lead. The spiritual journey in my recovery is the thing that changed my life. Without this I would still be chasing the next diet, trying to achieve a tiny waist, and searching for answers in places they don’t exist.

Today I know my God has the answers, whatever the question. Anything I surrender will lose its power and thus empower me. But I need to make an effort—God does not serve me breakfast in bed. If I do my bit, I cannot help but live a sane and useful life.

I am celebrating my abstinence. Mom’s freezer is still there, and it’s still filled to the brim. What joy I have today being able to smile and know it has no power over me or the serenity I receive, one day at a time.

— Heather E., Woburn, New Zealand
Newcomers: Send your experiences and concerns to Newcomers Corner. See the table-of-contents page for contact information.

If you are a newcomer, does this understanding cause conflicted feelings? Do you have trouble with the idea of being powerless over food compulsions? Is it difficult to believe that only a power greater than ourselves can and will restore us to sanity free from food compulsion? Is it hard to embrace the idea that if we turn our will and life over to God, as we understand him, we can find serenity not only where food and the body is concerned, but in all aspects of life?

Is there hesitancy in believing that the OA Twelve Step program and Fellowship can work for us as a means to achieve a spiritual state and a connection with a Higher Power that will free us of our compulsions around food?

We don’t have to resolve all of this at once or on anyone else’s timetable. Nothing in this program says so. All we have to do is keep coming back.

Nothing else has worked, right? Isn’t that why we’re here? Where else can we find people who have lost 30, 50, or 100 pounds (14, 23, or 45 kg) and kept them off for years? More significant, what other program deals with mind, body, and spirit, which we all are, in order to heal on every level that drives us to eat or purge or starve compulsively?

What other program promises us that we can be free from the torture of these compulsions? The longer we stay, the more we see this being realized among so many of us. Most important, the longer we stay, the more opportunity we have to figure out how this program works for each of us.

What’s the alternative? If nothing else, here we are among the only people in this world who can understand and relate to sneaking food; driving to convenience stores or drive-throughs to satisfy a desperate craving, even when we’re not hungry; stealing food from stores, coworkers, or family; going on binges that last hours, days, or weeks and are beyond our willpower to end; eating in bathrooms or other secret, lonely places; and eating food that has fallen on the floor, has spoiled, isn’t fully defrosted or cooked, or is retrieved from the trash. Where else can we find people who understand how food can be terrifying?

Anyone who identifies with any of this is among friends in OA, friends with whom we can finally be honest about our secrets and who will love and support us for who we are. This is home, and we are always welcome here. Keep coming back.

— C.M., New Jersey USA
At a recent meeting, a member shared that the new *Overeaters Anonymous, Third Edition* is wonderful. She has it on her e-reader, and since the e-book has an option to share comments with all other readers, she responded with comments. Since the comment function is there, she assumed it is an OA-approved feature and that it is okay to comment. Is it? Is this cross talk or a break in anonymity?

OA has no opinion on outside issues. In addition, OA does not endorse any outside enterprises. If the member chose to share a comment, that is her choice. Members who mention that they are in OA are choosing to break their own anonymity. The opinions of the OA members do not represent OA as a whole.

— *Members of the Board of Trustees provide answers to these questions*

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**Send Us Your Stories! The next deadlines for Lifeline are . . .**

**June 15**

**Character Defects: An Examined Life** How did you break through denial and fear to face and acknowledge your character defects? What character defect has been the most troublesome?

**Serenity in a Nonstop World** What is the role of serenity in your program? What are the benefits of serenity? When does the Serenity Prayer help you most?

**July 15**

**Great Big Gratitude List** It’s time to count our blessings together! Describe the gifts of the program you have received and share your gratitude for these gifts.

**Giving Thanks** What role does gratitude play in your recovery? How did gratitude open your eyes to the gifts of the program? What has been your experience with keeping a gratitude list?

**IDEA Day** Share your experience, strength, and hope related to starting and maintaining abstinence.

**Celebrate the Season** How do you maintain abstinence during holidays and celebrations? Share your strategies for shifting the focus away from food, dealing with triggers, and joining in the fun.

**Holiday Magic** How are holidays in OA different? Share your stories, inspiration, and reflections on living the Twelve Steps in times of celebration.

*For more information about these and other upcoming Lifeline topics, refer to the July 2014 Lifeline or visit oa.org/lifeline-magazine/monthly-topics/*.
Letters must have a complete name and address. Please specify if your name, city, state, province, and/or country should remain anonymous if published.

We received no Share Its for this issue. We welcome your comments.

“During relapse I had experienced complete powerlessness and the totality of God’s grace. When I returned to OA I held onto practicing the Twelve Steps and the Tools of the program, just as someone who grabs a rope from a helicopter when the roof of the house is about to give way to flood waters. I learned that God offered me the gift of abstinence at all times. It was true grace; I couldn’t earn it. I had to pray for the willingness to ask God to help me. And I have accepted the gift one day at a time.”  


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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.

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 Steps and Twelve Traditions of Alcoholics Anonymous for adaptation granted by AA World Services, Inc.
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.