

INTRODUCING
OVEREATERS ANONYMOUS

To the Young Person

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

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:

	Yes	No
1. Do my eating habits change depending on my feelings?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
2. Am I unhappy or frustrated with my eating habits or body size, or with my attempts to control them?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
3. Do I sometimes feel I can't stop eating even though I want to?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
4. Do I often eat more (or less) than most people do at a meal or throughout the day?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
5. Do I eat large amounts of food even when I'm not physically hungry?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
6. Do I eat normally in front of others but eat excessively, or avoid eating, when I'm alone?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
7. Do I spend a lot of time thinking about my body size?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
8. Do I try to control my body size by fasting, purging, using laxatives, or exercising for long hours?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
9. Do thoughts of food or my body image take up too much of my time and energy?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
10. Do my eating habits, body size, or feelings of shame about how I look limit my social life?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
11. Do I avoid physical activities because of how I feel about my body?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
12. Do I sometimes sneak food or steal money to buy it?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
13. Do I lie about how much I eat or don't eat?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
14. Have I been told that I really ought to eat more (or less)?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
15. Do I wish people wouldn't comment about my body size or eating habits?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

If your answer to any of these questions is yes, you're not alone. Many, including young people, suffer from the disease of compulsive eating, whether they are an overeater, a bulimic, or an anorexic. 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, took action to restore our health, and learned to maintain a healthy 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 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 about our food (such as which foods and the amounts to eat), how we behave with food (such as when and where to eat), and other aspects of our lives. Sometimes we find that *what is eating us* affects how and what we eat.

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.

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 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. That way if you fall the big boom won’t be so loud.”

I tried to ignore their remarks, 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. I’m just like them; I have the same disease.

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”—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 here 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 because 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.

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 their experience in living and abstaining, one day at a time, using the Twelve Steps of OA.

Phoning, texting, and emailing keep you in touch with your sponsor and other OA members. The phone 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.



OA Responsibility Pledge

Always to extend the hand and heart of OA
to all who share my compulsion;
for this I am responsible.

How to Find OA

Visit the OA website at oa.org,
or contact the World Service Office at 1-505-891-2664.

Overeaters Anonymous®

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