

# Authenticity in Recovery

When the pandemic first happened, unlike many friends, I began a period of extreme food restriction, and I immediately lost more than 40 pounds. I felt in control and powerful, the way I always feel when I restrict my food intake. However, as the confinement and isolation continued, my almost lifelong desperate need for sugar grew stronger, and my binges returned, growing ever more extreme, while my efforts at restriction took greater effort and lasted for shorter periods. Newly retired, I felt uncomfortably isolated and, at the same time, uncomfortably under a microscope because my spouse now worked from home. I felt uncomfortable in life and my body. As I lost control of my eating, I felt my confidence dwindling, and the happy, relaxed exterior I usually presented to my partner and to myself became increasingly false. My sleep became more disrupted, and during the long nights awake, my despair and shame felt overwhelming. I was sliding down a cliff I thought I had left behind with earlier periods of bingeing and restricting, a dynamic that had started when I was in adolescence. I had no work life to distract me and nowhere to go. I didn't know how to stop my fall.

It was at this point that I found OA on zoom. From my first meeting, I felt a comfort I had longed for. Although a grateful member of AIAnon for decades, and a beneficiary of therapy at different points in my life, for the first time in my life, I understood the relationship between the anorexic me - powerful, thin, controlling - and the bingeing me - needy, out of control, fearful. Both sets of behaviors, I learned, were manifestations of my compulsion with food. Both were connected to my fears and my isolation. I told people, I finally understood myself: I'm one person, and I have an addiction to sugar and to compulsive restricting and bingeing.

I began attending many meetings, and I felt understood and optimistic. Even before I got a sponsor, my eating extremes lessened. And with a sponsor, I started to create food plans, to identify my red, green and yellow foods, and to work the steps, I felt hopeful. However, around this time, I began to suffer a new emotional turmoil. I felt strongly that being authentic would be crucial to my recovery, but I knew that I did not authentically believe in God. I've been an atheist since I was 12 years old, and it is a key part of my sense of self. I understand and respect the ways in which religion supports and motivates billions of people around the world, but it is not right for me. The turmoil I felt was not due to other people putting pressure on me. It was due to the feeling I had hit a wall that could endanger my recovery. How could I work Step Three? My binges returned, and I started to lose my optimism. On the one hand, I felt OA was my home, and on the other, I felt alien there.

And then, amazingly, I learned of secular OA, and from the first secular meeting, I felt the deepest connection to the fellowship. In meetings, I heard abstinent people speak of their search for spiritual and emotional meaning to guide their recovery. I learned that we each take our own unique journey, just as we each develop our own unique food plan. I learned to use the steps in a way that has the deepest meaning for me. My sense of a higher power blossomed. My higher power resides in my values and in my best self, and it connects me to the collective wisdom of the millions of people in 12 step programs, as well as to all of those who have

searched for compassion and wisdom around the world through time. My best self guides me to listen, to serve others, to be aware and honest. My higher power is always present to comfort and guide, just as the OA fellowship is always there to comfort and guide.

Today, I have a big, warm, supportive program. I go to meetings; I have a sponsor and accountability partners; I write my action and food plans daily; I meditate, read literature, and do service including sponsorship of others. I have defined my version of abstinence, and I embrace it imperfectly One Day at a Time. Bottom line, I live, as best I can, my authentic life, and, to the best of my ability, I do not use food to numb or distract. I am so thankful for OA. I am so grateful for secular OA, the gift of the program that helped me get to this point, and which will help me as I move forward.

- Marta A.