

Defining abstinence and denial

I am constantly seeking the best meal plan that will provide me with a comfortable, satisfying abstinence. I am 71 years old and my doctor told me that most women my age have a very hard time losing weight and that I should instead focus on eating more plants, less meat, exercise three times a week and be happy the way I am. No doubt this is sound advice but as someone who was almost 300 pounds, I am too afraid to relax my hold on my food habits.

I had a very bad decade in the 90s. My husband was very sick, I was in a high-pressured job, and we suddenly had two children (9 and 11) who were nephews who had lost their parents to drug addiction. During that decade I gained 50 pounds and topped out at 290. My knees were shot, and no one would do knee replacements at my weight so I had a lap band placed and over the next 18 months, I lost enough weight to fix my knees.

All the time I had the lap band I was a bulimic. I lost the weight, but my compulsive eating did not change. When my knees were fixed, I started exercising regularly and had the lap band tightened so that I continued to lose weight. I was hospitalized for malnutrition and then the surgeon told me the band had slipped and should be removed. I agreed and at my lowest adult weight of 118 (180 pounds lower than my highest weight), I was on my own.

I started gaining 10 pounds a month even though I was exercising 3 times per week at a gym and walking 2-3 miles the days I didn't go to the gym. Exercise is wonderful but it didn't do enough to compensate for my compulsive eating. Desperate, I started attending OA meetings. The traditional meetings made me feel so lonely. The people were all wonderful caring people, but I just couldn't identify with people who can accept a supernatural being who they believe comes to their rescue. Then one day, I accidentally attended a free thinker meeting, and my healing began.

At first, I was in awe of the speakers and was envious of their relationships with each other. The support they shared was so beautiful. For many meetings I did not speak because I felt inferior and didn't want to be judged as weak and a failure—which was a holdover from all my other attempts to control my eating. I attended lots of meetings and listened to the advice “find someone who has what you want and ask them how they attained it”. After about three months, I sent a chat to someone I really admired and asked if I could talk with her. She gave me her phone number and my healing process began.

In all honesty, I lied to my new sponsor for almost a year. It wasn't until I accepted the responsibility of complete honesty that I started to progress. It is a fundamental principle for me that only radical honesty is going to contribute to self-acceptance and give me the strength to do what I need to do. Years of feeling “lesser than” were ingrained in my personality. I do all kinds of things to try to present myself as wise and knowledgeable to compensate for my weight. When I told my sponsor I had not been truthful with her, she was so grateful and shared with me that she was a liar also, but that only honesty would lead to progress.

Denial is such a dangerous and beguiling way of thinking. Being honest was very scary and still is. When I contemplate a compulsive bite, the only thing that stops me is the reminder that I will either lie to my sponsor or feel the disappointment of giving in to my demons. Many times, just the thought of being honest with my sponsor is enough to evaporate the compulsion. The easiest way to share my food with my sponsor is to send her a message with a picture of my food. Many times, she doesn't even comment but just knowing that I am sending her my food makes a difference.

I came for weight loss, but by far the best gift of the program has been the improvement in my self-esteem. I have found my tribe: smart and compassionate people who share my affliction. I didn't even realize how negatively I judged myself until my self-esteem started to improve. I still keep searching for the easy way out, but I know that the freedom that abstinence provides is not magic. But its gifts are worth the struggle.

- Anonymous