

Finding serenity is a continuous journey

For years, I had been trying to lose weight and control my eating. Nothing I tried on my own worked for longer than a month or so at a time. I was feeling desperate, binging out of control almost every day, and three separate doctors informed me that losing weight was essential to my health. My partner mentioned how much OA had helped them. Instead of giving up completely, I found the willingness to try once more. I came into OA around June 1st, 2021, attending an official meeting geared toward secular people.

I am extremely grateful for the program. OA has given me what I couldn't accomplish on my own; a sustainable food plan, a support network, tools to help me with my abstinence, and a new perspective about my compulsive eating behaviors. Of course, nothing happened overnight. My level of abstinence has deepened over time.

I came into OA looking for a miracle cure, figuring I'd stay a couple months, learn everything, and then leave, tweaking but eventually returning to my old way of eating. I was rather naïve. My very first meeting (on Zoom) was a small one, 4-6 individuals including myself. I was extremely self-conscious and feeling vulnerable. I was reluctant to even share my video. To my pleasant surprise, not only were the others warm and welcoming, but they also encouraged me to honestly share my fears and vulnerabilities, promising not to judge or criticize. I managed to ramble for the allotted three minutes. As I began to speak, I felt shame and embarrassment over my situation – or shortcomings as I believed then. However, when I finished, I surprisingly felt relieved and comforted. There was almost a physical relief in admitting I was helpless over my eating compulsions. By sharing my vulnerabilities, I felt listened to and supported. It was also reassuring hearing we all shared having some type of compulsive food behaviors. I found myself drawn to return the following week.

My third week, I finally asked, what should I do? It was suggested, how about trying something simple and small to start. A lightbulb went off in my head, "duh". I was used to making regular incremental process improvements at work. Instead of jumping from the sad state of where I currently was, to being perfectly comfortable about food, what if I just committed to doing something simple. Take it one step at a time.

It was also suggested that I make my commitment aloud. There is power in making a statement witnessed by others (accountability). At that (my third) meeting, I said aloud that I would refrain from processed sugar and white flour.

And then I panicked. How was I going to do this on my own between meetings? And how was this program different from other methods I had tried and failed over the years? I was reminded that I don't have to do this on my own, there are people willing to talk to me during the week to help me be accountable to my commitment. Because the strength of the program is in the fellowship.

Of course, the phone weighed heavily on my mind. It was difficult to pick up, call a stranger, and admit I was having trouble. I've always disliked talking on the phone. Thankfully, two separate people from the meeting reached out to me during the week and offered to talk. Despite being an introvert, I found myself enjoying the short conversations.

By the end of my first month, I committed to attending this meeting every week. A couple months in, I realized that one meeting per week was not enough. There was too long a break between getting my OA batteries recharged. So, I found a second meeting. At about four months, I added a third so my meetings were spaced evenly throughout the week. I prefer morning meetings as they help me to start my day off right. While I have since changed one of my meetings, I still attend three morning meetings a week.

With help from the fellowship, a nutritionist, and my personal trainer, I developed a food plan. While the details have changed as my definition of abstinence changed over time, having an established food plan is the foundation of my program. I group my foods into green/yellow/red categories. Red foods I avoid at all costs. Green foods are fully integrated into my diet. Yellow foods are incorporated cautiously, to ensure I don't eat them compulsively. At times, I have had to shift categories, for example, if I am abusing a particular food it can shift from green to yellow (or even to red).

In addition to my food plan, I have a social support plan. I have accountability buddies I can reach out to as needed. I am part of a recovery circle that meets weekly. There are numerous people I can call/text and I am part of a few groups on WhatsApp.

Doing service has also helped with my recovery. When I had been in program for 7 months, I was asked to be the newcomer greeter for one meeting. But, I was still a "newbie!" What did I have to contribute towards someone else's recovery? Especially someone new to OA. Despite my misgivings, I agreed to do it, and immediately began reaching out to people newer than myself. It wasn't my responsibility to solve their problems. It was only for me to tell my story, and then let them determine if anything I had done, or was doing, might be helpful.

I also incorporate elements that I call self-help. This includes mindfulness, especially mindful eating, identifying & removing problem behaviors, prioritizing my emotional health, diaphragmatic breathing, utilizing cognitive behavioral tools, and physical exercise.

My program, or overall action plan, involves having a food plan, means of social support, prioritizing self-help techniques, and doing OA service. I find all these elements necessary for my continued abstinence. I have found my own path towards abstinence learning from the communal wisdom of the fellowship.

I find it interesting that I am comfortable with Secular OA while having moderate religious convictions. Before coming to OA, I had been trying everything I could think of on my own, including praying for a miracle cure, or at least a divine hint, to overcome my food compulsions. On my own, even with my beliefs and practices, I could not find peace around food. While I

regularly thank God for the beauty and blessings in my life, I also firmly believe that God only helps those who help themselves. Early on in my journey to become abstinent, I decided that while God plays a role in my belief system, praying (& waiting) for a miracle was not a practical method to prevent my compulsive behaviors. I had to put my feet firmly on the path to recovery and achieve it by working hard, utilizing the tools of OA to help me on my journey. My higher power for supporting my program are the people I meet in the rooms or the fellowship in general. What I especially appreciate about secular meetings is that there is room for everyone, without feeling any judgment of your personal belief (or lack thereof) system.

Having compulsive food thoughts is my mind trying to avoid or protect me from emotional distress. I'm learning new tools to avoid being stymied by emotions. Rather than avoiding my emotions or eating over them, I accept my current emotional state, and objectively use it as a growth opportunity to have insight into why I am having the feeling(s), remembering that we can feel multiple emotions at the same time. Reminding myself that thoughts are not actions, I focus on finding self-compassion when my thoughts are turbulent. I can embrace making changes and accept new perspectives.

Connecting with others in program grounds me. By relentlessly working the program as best I can, I am empowering myself to take better control over the aspects of my compulsive food behaviors that can be affected. I have acquired tools and a support network to help me with this ongoing process. I am extremely grateful I found Secular OA, as these meetings have been essential to my transformation from being desperate, to being in recovery.

- Marv E.