

Fitting in

Growing up with emotionally immature parents, I taught myself to put my own needs aside and adapt to theirs. I did everything I could to be an easy child to care for so they would accept and love me. This led to me feeling like I was never enough, even in my very early years, and I used food as a coping skill from the beginning. Overeating or eating lots of sugar was a habit and a compulsion I could do and still not be a problem for others. Like many children, I was taught that sugary treats were something you earned for being good. Quiet and well-mannered, I always deserved something extra and my parents only constant way to show affection was to provide that extra treat. Sugar and snacks carried strong positive feelings for me, making it addictive in more ways than one. Eating gave me comfort, an outlet for emotions I could not control and unmet needs. Food never wanted me to be something I wasn't.

Going into my teens, I was stuck between a mother who wanted me to be less and a father who wanted me to be more. "Be less opinionated, be quieter, look happier, you are too pale, you are too much, those grades aren't enough" came from one parent. "Don't be so quiet, stop being awkward, try new things, be more social, school isn't everything" came from the other. From both sides came opinions about my weight and lack of athleticism. Once I finally moved into my own place at university, I didn't know who I was or what I wanted, just that I wasn't enough. My already blooming bulimia reached a higher level, and my compulsive overeating was a fact I could no longer ignore, but had no tools to handle. I was ashamed, confused and alone.

For about 15 years, I tried to fit in wherever I went—to be easy to hang out with, easy to work with, easy to date, easy to like at any given time and place. During this period, I saw a string of therapists and went on and off antidepressants. I felt like a useless excuse for a human—ugly, less than, and lost. With the high expectations I set for myself, I could do nothing other than fail and binge. The bulimia stopped but the bingeing continued and along with it, more shame, and more self-hatred. I leaned heavily on the support of friends as I never trusted my family with any of this, still just being a good kid to them while trying to avoid feelings and stuffing myself full of food. I did good things; I know this. People told me I was a smart student, a great co-worker, a valued friend and a beautiful woman. Since I never felt like I was truly myself or deserved any of their compliments, I didn't really believe them.

Fast forward to 2021. I was 33 years old, the heaviest I'd ever been and deeply depressed. I didn't want to die, but I didn't want to live like I did anymore. Unlike in the movies, I didn't go on a long journey to find myself. I just went to another therapist. But unlike all the others, this therapist saw my real problem. Yes, I did have severe and recurring depressions. But that was not the reason I binged; it was the result of bingeing. I ate because I never learned how to handle my emotions in any other way, or to prioritize them to start with. I ate because I was uncomfortable with myself and still didn't know how to be me. I ate because I was an addict. In that therapist's office, I figured out who I was, what I stand for, what I need and what I like. I found out that I'm a pretty cool and quirky person, with the right to set boundaries and make demands of people around me and that I matter, that I am enough. As important as that was, she also told me I could get more help with my addiction from something called OA.

I'm an atheist, and I was on edge at my first OA meeting. When I told them I was new and unsure about what I'd read online about OA, I was assured that it was not a religious fellowship. But as the meeting progressed, what they said and what I heard didn't make sense to me. I stayed on after the meeting to ask more about it, and the fellows kindly gave me tips to help me be more comfortable with the semantics. Stubborn as I am, I came back and tried some more, but soon realized I couldn't do it. After all my work on becoming comfortable with myself, I couldn't act as if this was helping me. I couldn't compromise on my feelings towards religion, or the outdated language and worldviews, semantics or not. This was not for me. I needed to find another way to deal with my compulsive eating.

Like other desperate millennials, I turned to the internet for help and found my answer. Not only did I find others who felt like me, thought like me and had similar problems, they offered solutions and guides on how to work the OA program without a deity. Before Covid-19, I wouldn't have found anything like this; but moving meetings online made the few secular meetings more visible, and they could be visited by everyone, no matter the distance. I felt so lucky: the secular community of OA was a real thing, and they welcomed me with open arms. I had already made a list of triggering foods, situations and behaviors with my therapist, so that was the foundation of my food plan and action plan. Even luckier, I found a secular sponsor who guided me through my own version of the 12 steps, helping me turn unhealthy character traits into actions for a healthier lifestyle. First on that list is to remember that I am enough.

In the virtual rooms, I found friends and fellows who I didn't have to adapt to or censor myself for. I didn't have to spend energy translating what was said or read to make the program work for me. Instead, I could focus all my energy on my recovery, on supporting and being supported by the community. I have spent this last year and a half working the program my way. Using the tools of OA, I have developed healthy habits for myself. I go to 2-4 secular meetings every week, check in with my sponsor regularly and write my 10th step evaluation of my goals to my accountability buddy every day. I stay vigilant and seek new inspiration in alternative literature, secular podcasts and workshops. I share my experience, strength and hope and do service to help others find their freedom from compulsive eating.

During this time, in real life, I've become more comfortable being myself, taking up space, taking care of my own needs and not always being easy to handle. How I act is my responsibility, how everyone else feels about that is not. I can find comfort in music, soothe myself by petting my cats and express my feelings with writing or moving my body. I don't have to eat, I don't need sugar, I don't want to reach for those old coping mechanisms. With the secular community in OA, I have the support and the tools I need to go forward, one day at a time. I've found my home, and I fit right in, just as I am.

- Linda