

Flying Solo

I'm a writer, an occupation that requires isolation, and I'm a binge eater, a disease of isolation. Since 1973 I've either been self-employed or in positions that gave me privacy, so I could have my work and binge eat, too. In every desk I had a drawer where I kept my stash. When I was out for vacations or illness, I made sure to leave no trace of my cache of sweet and salty snacks—my binge favorites.

Until my late twenties, I maintained a normal weight, going up and down by 10-15 pounds, and gaining only 35 in each of my three pregnancies. For the first two, I easily returned to my pre-baby size. But after my third child was born, I had postpartum depression—a mental illness not recognized as such in the late 1960s—and began to gain. Within two years I topped out at about 325 pounds, though I avoided the scale and really don't know my top weight.

Over the years, through a suicide attempt, intense psychotherapy, and two divorces, I gained and lost over 100 pounds three or four times.

In my teens I was a distance swimmer in the National Junior Olympics; I got back in the pool in my mid-thirties to purge through extreme exercise (swimming two hours at a time). I've used every method known to womankind: counting calories, stringent diets, jaws wired, ears stapled, diet pills and shots, diuretics, laxatives, extended fasting, amphetamines, marijuana (oh, the munchies!), antidepressants, rice diet, grapefruit diet, water diet (a gallon a day—predictable results), Optifast, Metrecal, Ayds, hoodia, liquid meals, and every pay-and-weigh program. All the while I fantasized that my life would be picture-perfect if I could just be thin.

Someone dear to me—anorexic, bulimic, alcoholic, and drug addict—got into AA in the 1970s and became enthusiastically sober, which piqued my interest in OA. For years I saw her eat huge amounts and stay thin, so I tried to purge as she had. I'm now grateful that I failed. Sadly, she died in February 2022, having never successfully recovered from food-related disorders.

In 1981, I joined OA; I lost about 40 pounds and kept it off for several years. But I was still fat and didn't see the plateau as a mark of success. I dropped out; four years and 50 pounds later, I returned, sadder but wiser. I helped start two meetings, worked the steps, and got a sponsor, but I was still secretly bingeing through many a "lost weekend," a phrase inspired by the 1950's picture about a secretive alcoholic. He hid his bottles—hung them on a rope out a window or stashed them in an overhead light—and forgot where they were, then tore up his apartment in a frenzied search for his liquor. I saw the movie and knew I had the same disease but with food as my fix. I hid my stash behind the sheets in the linen closet, in a seldom used top shelf in a kitchen cabinet, in a hat box, in my yarn basket, under the bed, in my car, and of course in a desk drawer in my office. I threw binge food away then dug through the garbage for it. I stole candy from my children's plastic pumpkins and Easter baskets. I ate past being stuffed, even

when I knew that my eating was affecting my health. I ate sensibly in front of others and made up for it when flying solo.

About those lost weekends—I'd leave work, stop at the video store and the grocery store for binge food. I parked behind my house so nobody knew I was home, locked the doors, closed the blinds, turned off the phone and binged. If I left the house, it was to get more food. I'd wake on Monday in a bleary-eyed hangover, sugar-shocked, and salt-bloated. I shudder to think of the quality of my work on those Monday mornings coming down.

We all know about driving under the influence of alcohol or drugs. What about driving under the influence of food? Innumerable times I've left the grocery store with a bag of treats on the front seat, and have driven home with one hand on the wheel and one hand in the bag.

For many years, whenever I talked with other OA members or my sponsor, I lied or downplayed the binges. Shame over what I was doing blindfolded me to the danger of the behavior. Bingeing in secret was the only way I knew of dealing with the pain of being fat in a thin America (a myth—36% of Americans are obese); the pain of having been abused by my father and my first husband; the pain of feeling less than someone else—"I'm less than she is because she's smart, beautiful, accomplished, wise, thin, etc.," constantly comparing my insides to someone else's outsides; the pain of feeling better than others—"I'm agnostic, so I'm smarter than the fools who believe in god, brighter than those who live today for an afterlife tomorrow."

So what happened? In the 1990s I got my first sponsor, a nun who'd left the convent but was still a practicing Catholic, and who didn't care that I was agnostic. Right off the bat she told me there were conditions to her sponsorship: I was not to say any of three things: "Yes, but..." or "I'm different..." or "You don't understand..." She worked with me for about four years, through another nice weight loss and a long plateau. But again, still fat, I didn't see my success and dropped out for six years. I came back in 2001, and have stayed in program ever since.

I wish I could say that I got abstinent and rode off into the sunset. But as is true for many of us, I'd get abstinent, then binge, get clean again, then binge, etc. Sometimes my abstinence continued for several years off and on, but with recurrent bingeing. Because I have a disease that tells me I don't have a disease, when I was clean and lost weight, I often felt I had it licked, this compulsive overeating thing. That worst kind of stinking thinking inevitably led me right back to the cookie jar.

Around 2010 I began to lose weight working with a new sponsor and eventually got 90 pounds below my top weight, stopped nighttime eating, and stayed level for ten years, again bingeing from time to time but never between 8pm and noon. During Covid, I put back on 20 pounds before I found Secular Overeaters (SO) online. In 2021 I joined a recovery circle, Zoomed through 90 meetings in 90 days, and my weight stabilized. Then I began slowly losing the Covid pounds.

What is it like for me today? I'm no longer flying solo. In Zoom SO groups, I am comfortable with sharing the truth about what's happening—if I binge, I'm honest about that because I know my buddies understand. The shame is mostly gone, though that's something I must watch as a harbinger: If I'm ashamed of something I've done, that thing needs to be examined. I regularly attend what I now think of as my "home" groups—Mondays, Wednesdays (recovery circle), and Saturdays. I'm grateful that if I miss meetings, someone calls, texts, or emails. I've been with my secular sponsor for four years and we're now co-sponsoring. With her I went through The Twelve Step Workbook of OA, answering every question and avoiding the god talk; took me a year. I share in meetings; keep the "We Care" contact list, chair meetings, Zoom host meetings, edit meeting scripts, attend business meetings (which I used to avoid like the plague), etc. I've grown incredibly close with the women in my recovery circle and can't imagine working my program without them.

Intermittent fasting works for me: I don't eat after 8pm and before noon the next day. I've never been successful following a meal plan, counting calories, or keeping track of everything I eat; I applaud those for whom such things work...to each her own. Through a meal service, someone comes to our home and cooks twelve healthy freezable dinners twice a month. I watch my serving sizes and know I'll binge if my red-light foods are in the house. Though I live with an active compulsive overeater, I don't watch his behavior—that's up to him. I go to sleep at the same time every night and mostly rise at the same time every morning. I swim for 30 minutes several times a week, and get as much exercise around the house as possible, given that I'm 83. And that reminds me: Age is not a barrier to healing...we're never too old to recover.

My goal today is to feel good about myself, regardless of my size and the number on the scale. Best of all, I'm no longer flying solo!

- A.J., North Carolina