

Welcome Home

In my early days in Overeaters Anonymous (two years ago), I struggled to figure out whether I did or did not belong there, in those meetings, with those other people.

On the side that felt I didn't belong, I'd collected a mound of BS I'd been telling myself for a long time: I was never *that* heavy, never more than 30 or 40 extra pounds. And I wasn't always fat – as a kid, I was skinny. Heck, I'm *vegetarian*, so I must eat healthy! Somehow, I put on a bunch of weight when I went to law school and wound up in a career I hated. I did take the weight off, for a while – all I had to do was starve myself (being anxious and depressed helped!). Now, years later, I had a healthier career and romantic partnership, but all that happiness seemed to bring back the weight issues. I felt ashamed of my body and kept trying to starve myself again, but I couldn't bring myself to do it and felt helpless. I told myself this was normal, that everyone battled weight issues, and it was part of getting older.

On the other side, the one where I belonged in those meetings, I faced hard facts: My doctor was warning me about metabolic syndrome – triglycerides so high I faced imminent pancreatitis, if not cardiac arrest. My father died in his 50s (my current age) from heart disease after three bypass surgeries, and I'd concluded it was genetic and felt doomed. Instead of living, I was preparing to die. I think it was this medical stuff – hard to rationalize my way out of – that got me to my first OA meeting. Like so many addicts before me, I didn't want to die, at least not if there was some other way, something that *worked*.

I knew, at least at the edge of my awareness, that OA existed. When I left law to re-train as a psychotherapist, I took an elective class on substance abuse and was assigned to attend an AA meeting. Even as I furiously assured everyone there that I was merely visiting as a student (not one of *them*), there was no shaking the feeling somehow (why? I was never much of a drinker...) that I *belonged* in that room, just like everyone else.

There was something about the way I, and my entire family, ate - it wasn't normal. We grabbed food like there was never enough, stuffing it down more as a precaution (there might not be enough!) than due to hunger. I ate in a daze, in a trance, as did my brothers. I eyed food all the time (how much is left?) while everyone else relaxed, chatted, and enjoyed a meal. Between meals, I was always grazing for more. I'd gulp it down in a rush, then feel miserable.

I wasn't an alcoholic – I don't like getting drunk - but I had *something* with food, and it was a problem.

When I went to my first OA meeting and heard people share, it began to make sense: I was helpless before this substance – and my life had become unmanageable.

Yeah, I belonged in OA. And I always will.

So...Hi, I'm Will, and I'm a compulsive overeater. When they say “welcome home” at a meeting, I feel like crying because I've, without realizing it, always needed a place where I could deal with this problem, amidst acceptance and compassion.

It didn't take long to find Secular Overeaters. Religion and I never got along, and I draw a blank when

people talk about “God;” I don't have a reference point for that concept in my life. I'm also gay and have had bad experiences with people using religion as a cover for homophobia, which has left me feeling unsafe around religion and religious language. I knew, if OA was going to work for me, I needed to be fully present as my whole self, a gay man and an atheist. It's hard enough to beat this disease without lying about other stuff when I'm trying to tell the hard truth about something as personal as my overeating.

When I spotted a listing for a secular meeting, I never looked back. I'd found a place where they “got” me, and I “got” them. We could focus on the problem, and tackle it together.

I never thought I'd wind up taking the dive and finding a sponsor, doing the Steps, the whole nine yards. But after a few weeks of “I'm just here to attend meetings,” I realized I didn't trust myself to stay abstinent without more support. That's when I coined my personal motto: “When in doubt - more OA!”

There's endless support available in this fellowship - you just have to use it. That's what an action plan is to me: figuring out how much OA is enough, but not too much, to keep me abstinent.

At first I did a meeting nearly every day and volunteered for every service opportunity that arose, until that started to feel overwhelming. My sponsor pointed out that I'm codependent (maybe from growing up with an unpleasable homophobic mother) and feel an impulse to do everything for everyone except myself. My sponsor told me OA is a “save your own ass” organization, and she's right. I work long hours in my career and don't have to attend every meeting nor volunteer for everything. I can do what helps me, and OA will take care of itself, too (although I do often serve as the “timer” at meetings – my small, weekly version of doing service).

My shares, in the beginning, were mostly a chance to cry and express gratitude. I couldn't believe I'd found a place where I could exist in honesty and tackle this disease. Eventually, I started to pull myself together and present more coherent shares. In time, I realized it's about being honest. An honest share is a good share. And that can mean only claiming your seat. It's okay to be “just listening” too.

Now , two years in program and counting, my action plan changes sometimes, but it's basically four meetings every week, including a men's group where I was pleased to find some other gay men and at least one guy who was assigned female at birth. I also do a quick check-in with my accountability buddy every day (usually a text message) and a weekly call with my sponsor.

I have learned about nutrition. I've read books on processed food versus whole foods, and carbohydrates and sugar, and the “Western diet” and metabolic syndrome, and loads of program literature, too (I love day books!). I took workshops on food freedom, which provided useful tricks for difficult situations, like buffets, pot lucks, and eating while traveling. I did my Steps, too, in my own way, with my sponsor and, as she put it, drained the tank of old resentments that drove my overeating. In the process, I finally mourned my first lover who died of AIDS 35 years ago. I'd never had the chance to own that grief, which is why I ate the feelings instead, stuffing them down with food.

It works if you work it. My weight is healthy and stable. Two years ago, my entire blood test results were in bold print - “**exceeds normal limits.**” No longer. Everything looks normal, including the triglycerides (it wasn't genetic, I'm not doomed). My doctor is recommending OA to all her patients.

I've absorbed a lot of OA wisdom. Who knew recovery from compulsive overeating wasn't about self-attacking, or pleasing everyone else, or punishing and starving myself? Who knew the secret was treating myself and others like me with compassion and concern? And it stunned me when I realized I

wasn't giving up eating; I was giving up compulsive overeating. Nowadays, I pause to taste the food I put in my mouth.

My Higher Power was never going to be "God." It started out as the mother I needed but never had – a loving mother who put her arms around me and said, "I understand how hard this is for you, but I'm proud you're pulling it off because I love you and want you to live." That HP helped me do a lot of healing.

By now, I feel sufficiently at home in meetings that, when I need a Higher Power, I simply think of those faces in the rooms, the folks like me (some of them I would call friends, all of them comrades), who are fighting to get their lives back, one day at a time.

Secular OA has literally saved my life. I love the return to sanity I get from this fellowship.

My husband and I recently had two children with an old friend (hubby was the sperm donor), so I now have two more very good reasons to stay healthy and live a long life. With Secular OA, that feels possible.

- Will M.