

My OA Story – by Jeff S. (cont'd)



Growing Up As A Compulsive Overeater

*My earliest recollections are as a 8/9 year old binge eating numerous slices of pizza or hoagies that my dad would provide me and my 3 siblings as a “treat” on a Saturday night. It was also a treat for my mom because it meant she did not have to make dinner. (My mother was a gourmet cook whose meals I would never eat unless they contained alot of starch, fat or sugar). As a kid, I would only eat sugar laden cereals for breakfast, e.g., Sugar Frosted Flakes (which were indeed GREAT!), Fruit Loops, Coco Pops or Captain Crunch-my drug of choice. For lunch, my standard fare was peanut butter and jelly sandwiches and chocolate milk (I am a child of the late 1950s and the main drink I consumed with most meals back then was Nestle’s Quik (N-E-S-T-L-E-S, Nestle’s makes the very best-Choco-late.” Note: I really preferred the syrup version because I could not only more quickly sweeten my milk, but I could also suck it down straight from the bottle an extra amount of syrup -a super bonus treat- after I finished my milk.) Sometimes at lunch I would vary my sandwich content, the jelly-grape rather than strawberry, and the peanut butter-smooth rather than crunchy. That was it though. My mother and I had numerous fights when I was young over switching the sandwich content to healthy tuna instead of P&J, a battle she never won.

As an active youngster, I was only nominally overweight. I played basketball most days. As I entered my mid-teens I found myself, however, ten or fifteen pounds overweight. Since my hormones-puberty created a need to look good to my female classmates, I started at age fourteen going on diets. The diets continued for the next 25 years, with me always losing and then regaining the weight lost. My teenage diets were much weirder than my adult diets. At 17, just before I went off to college I went on a 3 hot dogs a day diet. This diet was followed by my three cups of yogurt a day diet, eating only those foods 3 meals every day with nothing in between. (The yogurt was sweetened and I put “stuff” on the hotdogs).I did lose thirty pounds every time I did one of those weird 30/45 day diets. My adult diets, which occurred every six months, were more normal, usually just eating alot of salads and meat. Regardless, until I came into OA I was never at a normal weight very long, nor on a diet very long. Why? Because eventually, after the diet ended I would unknowingly start eating my trigger/addictive foods and gain all my weight back, and usually more. Also, besides having no clue about my food addiction and compulsive eating, I had no idea what was triggering me emotionally and spiritually to start picking up my trigger foods in the first place. At that stage of the game, my main life coping skill was food- feel good, emotionally numbing food.

Coming To (OA) Believe

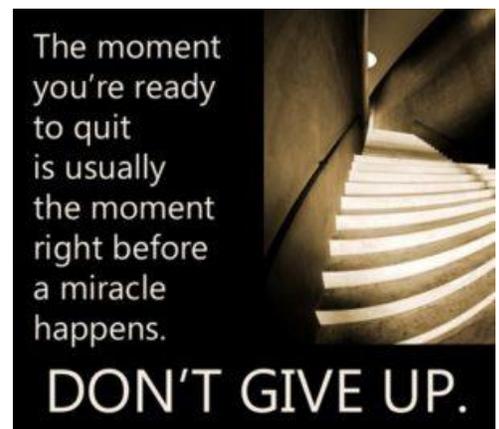


In 1990 at the age of 37 my life was a mess-unmanageable. Not only had I gotten divorced, and was very sadly no longer living with my two young sons (then 3 and 6 years old), I was also on the verge of bankruptcy and in a very bad rebound love relationship. Even more so, I spent much of my waking hours worrying about, and trying to control, the aforementioned problems. I was angry, fearful of the future and had little serenity in my life. I was also living half a block from a small string of stores which met all my needs as a food addict: a 7-11, a Chinese Restaurant and an Italian Restaurant. On most nights I would consume so much junk food that I either felt sick or threw up to feel relief from stomach acid and pain.

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At that time a friend of mine took me to my first 12 step meeting for codependency-relationship issues. Within a few months I heard about, and attended, my first OA meeting in Princeton, New Jersey. Upon entering my first 12 step meeting, and for a number of months thereafter, I was nervous with the talk and readings that mentioned God or a Higher Power. Initially such talk seemed like something that one found in a cult or religious sect. However, since no one in the group asked me to shave my head, sell beads and books at the airport, or walk around neighborhoods in a dark suit giving out pamphlets about the end of the world, I got used to the “Higher Power” talk. It was not long after starting program that the fellowship of the rooms, the 12 Step books and other spiritually related resources I was reading, allowed me to “chill out” about a Higher Power. This was particularly amazing because I entered program a grade-A certified agnostic (It was nice that there was a chapter in the AA Big Book written for people like me). My agnosticism stemmed from my parents who did not have a religious or spiritual bone in their bodies. My father was a cynical perfectionist who never discussed God. My mother, who had a nervous breakdown when I was two, and relied on alcohol to get her through most days, certainly had no interest in God. The only time my parents may have used the phrase “Oh God” was probably in the privacy and confines of their bedroom. In any event, as a second generation agnostic-cynic who liked to debunk and argue with religious folks about the question of God’s existence, it took me awhile to believe there was any power greater than myself- namely, a power greater than my own keen analytical thinking powers- the power to solve my life and eating problems. (Note, as an accomplished compulsive overthinker, worrier, and trained attorney, I became a skilled ruminator. Normally, when I started to worry about something, I would analyze endless possible strategies and outcomes. Because I was prone to negative thinking, any strategy or outcome I developed had to be reanalyzed because in a matter of minutes I found the “possible” negative risk aspects of what I had just thought up. Because I was solely responsible for figuring out everything in my life, I never had any peace of mind with whatever course I would take. (Instead of peace of mind, I usually had a piece of cake).

While I did regularly attend OA meetings back then, I can honestly say that I did not thoroughly work the steps in OA the first four or five years in program. I did work them in my other program, which helped with codependency and family of origin issues, but not with my compulsive overeating. I am now a true believer that working the steps in another program is not an effective way to deal with compulsive overeating. The reason I say this is because working the steps in OA requires us to answer very different questions than working the steps as an alcoholic or drug addict, e.g. , How did my eating make my life unmanageable? How abnormal or insane was my eating? How did my eating affect me physically, emotionally and spiritually? How was my self esteem and health affected by my eating and weight?



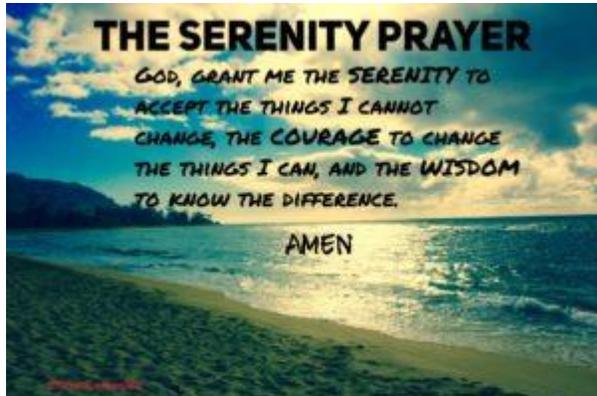
Strangely enough though, in my first few years in program I did have binge free abstinence even though I had not completely worked the steps in OA. How did that happen you may ask? Well, the knowledge I had acquired about the physical aspects of the disease, and the desire to stay thin so I could meet women gave me the self-will not to pick up my addictive foods/substances. Within a year or so of abstaining, and not fully working the steps via the OA program, however, I first started to slowly overeat good carbs, like oatmeal and brown rice, because unbeknownst to me I was not dealing with tough feelings, nor was I in a “spiritually fit” condition to cope with my life problems. This state of mind eventually led to me getting binge food thoughts again and “white knuckling” my eating. Eventually, this led to my slowly opening the door to irrationally “allowing myself” to reintroduce some of my trigger foods, e.g., breaded meat dishes, and some

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salty crunchy unrefined carbs, e.g., pop-corn, nuts, etc. A short time later, the door to my binge foods fully reopened after I remarried and moved in with my wife and her two young boys, all events which were great, but which contained inherent stresses and problems I did not know how to handle. As such, within four months of remarrying in August 1993, I had my first binge in two and a half years on Christmas cookies-lots of Christmas cookies!

Once I started binging again I was off to the food addiction races. This meant I was eating sugar and flour products in large quantities every day (ice cream, candy, pizza, hoagies, chips, pasta, doughnuts, etc.) Over the next year I gained 60 pounds and found my life unmanageable. I unsuccessfully tried a weeklong relapse workshop with a food addictions specialist, followed by a three week rehab in Florida. Both only arrested my illness for few months at a time. I also tried ADD medications and anti-depressants of various types with very limited success.

To shorten my story up, and get to the punchline, I will note here that over the next ten to fifteen years I regularly attended OA meetings and periodically got involved in a number of step writing groups. In a few of these groups I made it through Step 9. These groups were kind of like getting a flu shot which only protects you from the flu for one season. Admittedly, I did not follow up my Step work with the daily maintenance steps (10-12). I regularly read meditation books, but did not do a daily written inventory nor spend much time in prayer an meditation. Furthermore, I did not reach out and make phone calls, sponsor others nor do much service. As such, when negative events occurred over the next several years, e.g, problems with my older son, both my parents dying or my own increasing health problems (diabetes, high blood pressure, joint difficulties, etc.) I once again started using food to cope with life. I had several relapses over this period of time.



Beginning in 2013, however, I began attending Big Book Weekend Workshops.

Over the next few years I attended three such workshops, with the one I attended in May 2014 miraculously leading me to view the steps in a different light. (My Higher Power finally saw that I was ready to really understand and work the program). Additionally, I finally realized what it meant to have a “daily reprieve” from the disease, in particular a reprieve from obsessive food thoughts. Up until that point I just did not recognize that I had to actually “work” the steps every day, particularly the maintenance steps. Just regularly going to meetings and trying to not pick up my addictive

foods was no defense to my eventually getting food thoughts and then the food obsession. I needed to do an inventory of my defects **every day**. I needed to spend time in prayer and meditation **every day**. I needed to make OA outreach calls **every day**, particularly to people I know who are struggling. And finally, I needed to sponsor others and do some form of service every day. Once I started to do all this “work” the food thoughts and the obsession went away. Also, because this daily work lessened or eliminated negative feelings and kept my defects from festering, I had a closer connection to my Higher Power.

I finally had a spiritual awakening and no longer “needed” to compulsively eat. I also then completely understood our program slogan, “It works when you work it.”

— Jeff S.