

Step by Step

Autumn 2017



Our experience, strength and hope of recovery

Step by Step contains stories of recovery from compulsive eating through working the Overeaters Anonymous (OA) Twelve-Step programme. The stories express experiences and opinions of individual OA members and do not represent OA as a whole. For more information on the OA programme of recovery, meeting locations and how to contact us, please visit www.oagb.org.uk



over 200 meetings across
BRITAIN

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1. *Food is a problem*

I remember a time when food wasn't a problem. I was fat, unpopular and didn't know how to 'just be myself'. Food, especially sweets and chocolate, made it all okay. Food couldn't be a problem then; it was a solution.

I discovered exercise as a teenager. This protected my eating for several years. It kept me thin, and that was important. Then I started smoking, stopped exercising, and the dreaded weight - with all its guilt and self-hatred - came back.

I don't think I'll ever know why 18 stone 3 pounds was the tipping point. I'd always

vowed to do something when I was a stone heavier (at 13 stone, I'd do something when I got to 14 stone. At 14 stone, I'd do something at 15 stone, and so on). Regardless of why, at 18 stone 3 pounds, I found myself shocked out of my numb self-satisfaction into a desperate need for action.

I declared to myself that it was simply a question of portion control. For three months I drove myself crazy trying to eat healthily. I would vow "no chocolate" minutes before buying some with no clear idea of how or why. "Oh well, perhaps another day", I would think while stuffing food I could hardly taste into my mouth. At last the chaos in my mind got too much, and I recognised it (thanks to another addiction) as powerlessness.

2. Thanks to the OA programme

What brought you into OA?

Absolute desperation to get help with my eating disorder which was destroying my life. The medical profession exhausted all the possibilities with me (including an eating disorder clinic and medication), and I was at the end of the road. By the time I found OA, I had been overeating compulsively for 30 years and bulimic for 20 of those.

How did you feel at your first meeting?

I felt absolute gratitude that I had found a group of people who practised similar behaviours around food. I felt I could finally take a breath after being unable to breathe for so long - suffocating in my illness. I felt welcome, and I could feel love in the room as well as a quiet understanding that existed amongst fellows. I am deeply grateful to this day that it is not expensive for me to be part of the fellowship which means that the hand of recovery is extended to all men and women who need it.

How did you get abstinent?

The day came when I knew that food had finally beaten me and brought me down to my knees. I was so tired of vomiting and my jaw physically hurt from chewing. I could not do it

I got to my first OA meeting on the 14th of February 2015 and felt a strong sense of identification from the first share.

My home group is still a little scary and full of people I don't understand, but I know I'm going to a place where I fit in. I'm not alone; I feel understood. It sets me up for the week as, at the end of the meeting, *'I put my hand in yours, and together we can do what we could never do alone'* (*I Put My Hand In Yours*, Copyright Overeaters Anonymous. All rights reserved). Thank you, everyone, you've made a huge and positive difference to my life.

for another day. I came back to the fellowship and was abstinent from then on. *I got abstinent by surrendering to the programme and to what my sponsor had to teach me. I worked the steps vigorously and honestly.* I accepted that this is who I am and that I will always have this illness, but that my life does not need to be defined by it. Thousands around the world have found freedom from compulsive overeating, and I believed and trusted that I could have that freedom too.

What keeps you coming back?

Knowing that only OA keeps my illness at bay and that nothing else has ever helped me. My life today is also dedicated to helping others work through the programme and find the same freedom I found.

How has OA changed your life?

I could talk about this forever and a day. "I was lost and now I am found" comes to mind. I was always so lonely, empty, disconnected and emotionally fragile. I used antidepressants to help me function and to make me feel like I didn't want to die (at least a little bit). I was frightened of everything and everyone and had a very bleak outlook on life. Today, OA has changed my life beyond recognition. I believe

in a Higher Power of my own understanding, who is incredibly loving and kind, and on whom I can rely on absolutely. I am free from all medication and find joy in even the smallest things in life. I am mindful, I am calm, and I am loving. I eat three meals a day and nothing in between, and I don't purge (just for today). Most importantly, I show up for my life today. I am a mother, an employee, a partner, a fellow,

a sponsor, a sponsee and a friend. I am so many things to so many people today thanks to the OA programme. But there is one thing that I am no longer, and that is a victim. *I have been given a gift - a gift of life, just for today.*

3. Abstinence – the most important thing in my life

I walked into OA 6½ years ago. I was desperate to get a grip on my overeating. My life was completely unmanageable; my thoughts were complicated, fearful and self-centred.

I was willing to take a chance in a fellowship I knew nothing about. In the meeting, I fidgeted, interrupted, cross talked and did all the things you are not supposed to do!

But to my surprise I heard enough, enough to find identification. Oh MY GOD! I realised I was a compulsive overeater. I had a name for it...a disease, apparently. Hey, and, guess what? I wasn't alone - other poor things had it too.

I went home that evening and my husband made me a cup of tea, the biscuits came out, and he handed me one. The words that came out of my mouth next changed my life. They were the start of the miracle. I said, "I want the biscuits, but I don't NEED them".

My abstinence started right there and then after my first meeting. I gave up the battle and am winning the fight, one day at a time, three meals a day, life in-between, 6½ years and counting.

The next day, I put my breakfast on a tray and ate all that was on the tray. I did the same for lunch and dinner. My first day of abstinence! I did one day, and I didn't dissolve or melt through starvation. I could do one day

and, if I could do that, I could do tomorrow too. I was willing.

The following day, I bought a notepad, and I drew three big circles on each page, B L D.

I wrote down exactly what I ate at each meal and put it in its circle. I was learning to be honest, truthful, and responsible for what I ate.

After a few months, I tweaked my food: healthier, fresher, smaller portions, safely within my abstinence. I released 3½ stones in weight.

I did the steps with my sponsor, went to intergroup, gave 2 years' service, and joined the National Service Board for a while too. Learning, growing and challenging - all within a loving fellowship.

My program has always been based on forgiveness. It is the only way for me truly to work this program. I first had to learn to forgive myself, parents, siblings and friends (people, places and things).

So, for me it turned out to be "abstinence first". I was lucky enough to be at rock bottom at my first meeting, 45 years of hell had put me in that 'precious' position. I am truly grateful I could do the 12 steps while not in the food. I did them fully and honestly to the very best of my ability - that continues daily.

I fully embraced my relationship with my HP. This for me has become fascinating, magical

and miraculous. I have tapped into a power greater than myself. I can never, ever be alone again.

Life has been quite difficult at times since I came into OA, but my abstinence has never wavered.

Abstinence has given me sanity and clarity to deal with all that life has put in my way (and my family's way). I am beyond grateful, I am less fearful. I am more hopeful as I journey on through this life experience.

OA has opened a whole side of me I never knew even existed. I am in touch with my spiritual true nature that has blown my heart

wide open. I could never be the same again.... thank God.

I am learning to think less and love more.

I am learning to judge less and accept more.

I am learning to talk less and listen more.

I am learning to smile, laugh and be myself.

I'm alright, I am.... not bad at all!

Today, abstinence is the most important thing in my life.

I choose it, and my HP holds my hand.

4. Don't be butter!

I was recently doing some cooking for a family gathering, and I realised it was a metaphor for OA. I was making something for non-compulsive eaters, so it contained sugar.

As I started to beat the mixture with the hand-held electric whisk, it didn't immediately come together. The butter was a bit too cold and stubbornly stayed in big blocks and chunks. The eggs mixed in immediately. The flour stayed powdery, and clouds puffed up, no matter how slowly I whisked – and pockets of flour remained through the mix, and dry on the sides of the bowl. The sugar took some time to dissolve from sharp crystals into the batter.

I worked harder on the butter, targeting the biggest, coldest chunks. They smashed into the beaters, getting spun around, slipping and sliding, glancing off the metal. Gradually they reduced in size, but they didn't want to become part of the whole. They didn't want to join in, become amalgamated into the mix.

They wanted to retain their individuality, to stay as butter!

I thought how some people who come to OA aren't ready to do what the programme says. They want to do it their own way - start another diet to lose weight (the way they've always done it, or a new way). Even several months - or years - down the line, some of us still think of OA as a way to lose weight – that's the goal (I know that we now say in the definition of abstinence that we refrain from compulsive eating “while working towards or maintaining a healthy body weight”¹, but that isn't our primary purpose). For me at least, it was only later that I realised my goal was to quiet the craziness in my head around food. ‘We come for the vanity and stay for the sanity,’ is a phrase I've heard in the rooms.

It takes ‘as long as it takes’ to understand the programme, the steps, the way of life, the mentality and the switch to ‘practise these

¹ Abstinence in Overeaters Anonymous is defined as the action of refraining from compulsive eating and compulsive food behaviors while working towards or maintaining a healthy body weight. Spiritual, emotional, and physical recovery is the result of living the Overeaters Anonymous Twelve-Step program

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principles in all our affairs'. We want to stay as individuals – after all, many of us are successful professionals, capable managers, efficient and effective members of society – we can't see how entirely we have to change our attitudes.

But over time, the people who have found recovery and sanity in OA (imperfectly or perfectly perhaps - lucky them!), are the ones who embrace the change. Perhaps reluctantly, or perhaps eventually out of desperation - seeing that "Half measures availed us nothing" (Alcoholics Anonymous, 4th Edition, pg. 59). We

have managed to stop being hard, cold "batter" and joined the whole. We've mixed into the mix. We've become cake batter – smooth, easy, harmonious, all practising the same principles – but still with all the individual ingredients there.

So, although we're all still ourselves, with our different personalities, backgrounds and experiences, the most recovered OAs I know have overcome any desire to do things "my way" - to resist. *We've found that the OA way IS the way that works.*

5. Where are they now?

Where are they now, those fellows who
Were in the rooms when I was new?
To those members no longer there,
I send my love & lots of prayer.
You held my hand and led me here,
You gave a tissue, lent an ear.
You said to me, "keep coming back"
& hugs and love, you didn't lack.
You set my feet upon this road,
Tho' often I would not be told!
I kicked and screamed and threw a fit,
But you led me forward, bit by bit,

And when I fell, helped me recommit.
But most of all, I wish you knew,
How well I am. So thanks, you few.
For how the programme changed my life!
And how that angst and pain and strife,
Went once I put down the fork and knife.

*Thanks to you all
I made the discovery,
That abstinence is mine,
Of course, one day at a time!*



6. Light at the end of the tunnel

I was asked the other day to read from the 'Big Book' (Alcoholics Anonymous) during a one-to-one phone call. I could choose any passage I liked. Decisions! *There are so many passages in the Big Book that I love, that have given me hope and where I have found identification.* I clearly remember reading some passages for the first time and having the "light bulb" moment. This was written for me! I'm not going insane! I'm not alone!

The passage I eventually chose was from Chapter 2 "There Is A Solution". Even the title of the chapter is comforting and confident. *We are like the passengers who suffer from*

alcoholism" (Alcoholics Anonymous, 4th Edition, pg. 17).

This is the joy I felt when I first started the program - that there actually was hope. There was light at the end of the tunnel, not some false dawn promised by a diet on the cover of a glossy magazine. It is simply stated that there is a solution. The details aren't spelled out here. My chaotic mind wouldn't have been able to take them in at that stage anyway. I learned that I could get off the treadmill (both literally and metaphorically!).

Every time I read this passage, I'm reminded of that feeling. The hope and the certainty fill me again and I realise that I am blessed to have found this program.

7. Powerless over food

I am a very grateful recovering compulsive overeater - a very grateful recovering overeater because *I have just celebrated a year's abstinence and have lost 6½ stone. I do not say this to brag, but to show that this program does work and to give others hope.*

When I walked into my first OA meeting, this is what I needed to hear to bring me back to my second meeting and so on. I came in through another 12-step programme for which I was also very grateful, as I knew what to expect! I had learned that swapping addictions is very common, and that is what I had done.

With hindsight, though, I realise that I have always been powerless over food. Even with my knowledge of the 12-step way of life, I listened to the differences and not the similarities; and judged everyone who was bigger than me, telling myself it didn't work and

giving myself the permission to leave and do it my way.

I have always been a great 'dieter', losing a lot of weight very quickly and winning all sorts of prizes at slimming clubs. But I always felt hungry and deprived and would press the 'f-it' button when I couldn't reach the impossibly high (low?!) target I had set for myself, which resulted in my putting on all the weight I had lost plus much more.

I come from a family where there are no other addicts. I had a very privileged upbringing but always felt out of place - as if I didn't belong. I was physically very different and so believed I was either adopted or swapped at birth. I found life very difficult and challenging and was resentful that I didn't have the 'life manual' that my brother and sister seemed to have. We didn't express feelings in my family, so I always suppressed what I was feeling, which affected my self-worth and self-esteem. I felt bad and wrong. My family are high achievers and very academic. As I grew up, I learned that I

couldn't compete with them in this way, so I would get the attention I craved by being as difficult and bad as possible. I became very good at this and learned early on that this negative attention-seeking was my way of having a voice and being heard.

I used food as my way of managing my feelings. I would lie and steal money and food to this end. Food also became my treat and helped me complete arduous tasks like homework. My mother and I had a very difficult relationship, and I believed that being thin meant that I would be loved. I was very aware of my body image, especially as I was very jealous of my sister who had a wonderful figure without even trying. Later I learned that that was untrue, and she did have to work at it, but I had my rose-tinted justifiable anger and resentment glasses on. I remember with great sadness the really challenging times when mum and I would go shopping together and she would insist on coming into the changing room with me, looking me up and down and commenting on my figure, so much so that I wanted to run away. Food helped me with this running away and escaping from life. It was my anaesthetic. I discovered other substances to suppress these feelings, so food took a back seat for a while. My best friend developed bulimia, and although this hasn't been my problem thus far, I did get very close to it. I was in complete denial about my food as 'I wasn't as bad as her'. I even gracefully visited her in a rehab facility, where, ironically, I later spent time. Once I was in recovery for my other addictions, food became my everything. I would plan what treats I would have throughout the day, forgetting that I had sworn off for the umpteenth time that same morning. I manipulated my husband to buy me 'naughties' as we called them and would build up a stash. I would finish my evening meal as quickly as I could to get onto the 'best bit'. I didn't have to hide my food from my husband which helped me 'normalise' what I was doing. But throwing chocolate away in the bin, only to go back and get it out again, wash it off and eat it was insane, addictive behaviour - although I wouldn't go anywhere near those thoughts at the time. I would also, in a trance like state, go into the

kitchen at night and eat anything I could. When, rarely, I didn't have my stash, I would eat anything else including cold spaghetti from the tin.

My husband kept telling me to 'just stop eating', but he wasn't an addict and just didn't understand. I felt very alone. Every stone threshold I passed I would promise myself I wouldn't go over the next one and always did. I went to the chemist and weighed myself and was horrified to see that I was 18 stone 11 pounds. I believe my higher power, whom I choose to call God, intervened at this point and the food stopped working for me. It didn't give me the blessed relief I longed for; and, although I still loved the taste, the guilt, remorse and self-loathing I felt was overwhelming. I came back to OA.

This time something was different. *I accepted early on that I was powerless over food and my life had become unmanageable. I did what was suggested.* I got a sponsor whom I rang daily and continue to ring three times a week (and in between times if necessary). I chose a food plan with her help and started to eat three healthy meals a day with no snacks in between. Previously, I never knew when one meal ended and another began as I'd eat continuously. I learned to have boundaries around my food and food behaviours. I am working the steps daily to the best of my ability and am going through the steps individually with my sponsor. I do service where I can, and I started a new meeting locally. That was something I would never do in the past. I'd give up when the going got tough. I do a 10th step inventory every night to help me become more aware of my character defects and learn to deal with them appropriately.

I have been blessed with a sponsee (which means I can revisit the steps with her) and a loving God who guides me. I have always believed in God but never thought he believed in me. I went to a very religious school, not because my parents were religious but because it was a good school. This only added to my early confusion. Our motto was *'that our*

daughters may be as the polished corners of the temple'. Well, I was never going to live up to that! So, to fit in, I rebelled against all the religious ideals the school set. Then, in my addiction, I used God as a "999 God", turning to him only when I was in trouble. Today, it is so different. I pray and meditate and try to do God's will and not my own. I have a loving and not a punishing God in my life today.

My life is changed beyond all recognition, and I feel like I have been transported into the fourth dimension of existence as the 'Big Book' (Alcoholics Anonymous) tells us will happen if we work our program to the best of our ability. I have an honest, supportive and connected relationship with my family and husband, where I no longer have to have any dirty secrets. My husband seems to understand a little

more and we have both learned to apologise, rather than letting something escalate to a full-blown argument. When I am unsettled or off-kilter, he suggests I go to a meeting! *God may not have given me everything I want, but He has given me everything I need.* I can be a helpful member of society and a joy to be around rather than the misery I was. It's not all plain sailing and I do, of course, encounter difficulties and dark days in my recovery; but I have coping strategies today and a wonderful support network of fellow OAers, sponsorship, service, steps, meetings and outside help from my counsellor so that I can take the appropriate action and do the next right thing. Thank God for OA.

8. Me and my job as Treasurer of the National Service Board

Hello – I'm a Lisa, a compulsive overeater. I've been in recovery for just over 10 years now, and abstinent by my own definition throughout that time.

My very first sponsor shared with me the importance of service right from the start. I came into OA in the January and by November I was an Intergroup (IG) representative. I can tell you, I was terrified at that first IG meeting – I went and sat in my car half way through just to get my breath back. As it turned out, there was nothing alarming about it! Everyone made me feel welcome, and it was an amazing opportunity to expand my list of OA contacts. I'm happy to say that many of the fellows I met at that first meeting are still on my contacts list today. Each time I attend a meeting or a convention, there they are! It's like coming home to my family.

My second sponsor served on the OAGB Board for some time and always expected me to take up a board position at some time in the future. Honestly, I had no desire whatsoever! I thought the meetings would all be held in

London, and I live in the North of England, so reckoned I wouldn't be qualified and would be out of my depth, so I left it. After a while, I stepped down from my roles in IG and then didn't do service beyond group level. As a result, I found my recovery world becoming smaller and smaller – my list of contacts was shrinking instead of growing, and I realised I wasn't practising Step 12 at all. So last year, I went to IG again as a group representative and volunteered to do service helping organise a weekend retreat; and then it seemed that I might try doing something for the Board. At National Assembly, I had made a blunder (although there are no coincidences, right?) and I attended the meeting at the wrong time. This meant I was full of embarrassed fluster, and ended up with the role of treasurer. Anyone who knows me would fall about laughing – given my past relationship with money, or lack thereof! I took it one step at a time; however, one day at a time and, after an initial false start, a mini nervous breakdown and fantasies about just leaving the country and hoping nobody would find me – *I had a transformation;*

I ASKED FOR HELP – and I accepted it when it came!

For some people perhaps, this wouldn't be a huge breakthrough – but for me as a terminally self-sufficient person, it was a tremendous upturn in my recovery. Now I can contact my sponsor daily, rather than doing so only when I'm in trouble. I make fellowship calls almost every day. In ordinary life outside the fellowship, I can get the intuitive thought and

action... 'I know, I'll ask someone to help me'. And you know what? – people do!

So for me, serving on the Board has been a tremendous boost for my recovery – now when things are difficult, new or just stressful, I turn to my fellows on the Board and receive unconditional support. And life is good!



9. Divine Presence

Divine Presence

I've been waiting for you,

Sometimes patiently

Sometimes with a fervour that burns

With intensity and impatience

Cheeks flushed

Breath catching in my throat.

Mostly when you arrive

It's unexpected,

A warmth washing over me

Subtle, soft, a holding of sorts

But gently, ever so gently

I could pull away

A child tearing away from her mother

Pulling away from the steady hand

That feels as old as the hills

And sometimes I do;

Sometimes I snatch myself away

Willing my own way

Pushing for the universe to bend

To my will, my wishes

I could pull away so easily now

But I don't.

I fold into you, lean into your grace

Your warmth, your love

And surrender.

What peace I find there,

In that letting go, in that acceptance,

A serenity I never even knew existed.

10. My truth about control

I have been abstinent since January 2015 and am working the steps with a sponsor. Today I see that my 'need' to control situations stems from fear and arrogance (thinking 'I know best'). Fear that things will not go my way (i.e. the 'better way') and a lack of faith that I won't be OK as a result. Also, my control is closely linked to my ambition – my *'little plans and designs'* (Alcoholics Anonymous, 4th Edition, pg. 63); and detached from the helpful and sane attitude of 'Thy will, not mine, be done' which is presented in the 'Big Book' (Alcoholics Anonymous).

When I pick up my defect of control, it leads to stress, anxiety and tension in my back, neck and shoulders because I start to believe that 'it's all up to me'. I take on the 'weight of the world'; and I get resentful when others don't perform according to my plan. When I am directing, I don't have peace.

By contrast, my shortcoming of control has served a purpose. It gave me a false sense of security – just as the food once did. It 'worked' up to a point, but then others retaliated when I stepped on their toes. I don't have to look far for examples of this – I have crossed boundaries with my partner on numerous occasions (I am grateful

that he is tolerant). There is the desk-cleaning incident of 2017 (I thought I was being helpful by tidying his desk without asking!); the clothes-buying incident of 2015 (I thought it a good idea to buy him new clothes despite his saying 'no thanks'); and there must have been a cupboard-clearing incident of 2016 (and it wasn't my cupboard that I decided needed clearing!). These are just some examples of how I do not let my higher power run things – I am in self-will and selfishness by putting my 'need' for security before the needs of others.

Honestly, am I willing to try life without control? Yes, I am willing to give it a go; but also have reservations about whether I can make progress. I am quickly reminded by my higher power about Step 7 – *if I sincerely and humbly ask for God's help, I have learned that what may seem impossible, becomes possible (I am a compulsive overeater who is abstinent today after-all).*

Without control, my day is more peaceful for myself and my partner. I show more respect towards others and their abilities as opposed to imposing my thinking upon them. My arrogance is transformed into humility, and the qualities that may shine through are faith, trust, and surrender as I repeat the OA slogan "Let go, Let God".

11. OAGB announcements

Audio Shares - recordings from this year's National Assembly and over 30 abstinent speakers recorded at OA meetings are available to listen or download now. www.oagb.org.uk/audio-shares

Service positions - lots of ways to get involved and support OAGB (from as little as

an hour or two a month). The Step by Step team are looking for a Designer. www.oagb.org.uk/service-positions

Save the date - Region 9 Assembly and Convention to be held in London 26th-30th September 2018

Find a meeting page - the NSB are considering providing a meetings list on the OAGB website (as opposed to a link to OA.org). If you would be willing to help develop this, or to test-drive the usability of the new page, please contact communications@oagb.org.uk

Winter edition of Step by Step – are you keen to read future issues of Step by Step? We rely on contributions from OA members, so please consider doing service by sharing your story of recovery with us. Perhaps consider one of the following topics:

- Abstinence – the most important thing in my life?
- How working Steps 1, 2 and 3 supports my abstinence
- How practicing Traditions 1, 2 and 3 supports my abstinence
- Reflecting on how a specific OA-approved literature source has supported your recovery

- Reflecting on how an OA programme slogan has helped you to be sane and abstinent today

Please make your submission by **Wednesday 31st January 2018** either via email (stepbystep@oagb.org.uk) or post (Step by Step, c/o OAGB Ltd, 483 Green Lanes, London, N13 4BS). Please include your full name and address (email or postal). Full anonymity will be maintained in publication.

Submissions become the property of OAGB for editing, publication and copyright purposes. Submission, however, does not guarantee publication. We do not publish stories that contain outside issues or that do not demonstrate recovery through the OA programme. Please note your contribution may be held and published in a future edition of Step by Step.

Previous issues of Step by Step, as well as full writers' guidelines are available on the OAGB website (<https://www.oagb.org.uk/step-by-step-newsletters/>)

GOD,
please grant me the
SERENITY
to accept the things I cannot change,
COURAGE
to change the things I can, and
WISDOM
to know the difference