



Twelve Steps help overeaters deal with the holidays

The holidays are intense times of extremes. Emotions often travel the continuum from joy to dread. We are happier or lonelier or more anxious or overwhelmed than at other times of the year. Office parties, family gatherings, and social outings are laden with rich foods and powerful personalities. For the millions of Americans who struggle with food obsessions, the holidays can be as threatening as an open bar is to an alcoholic.

Cathy has had an emotional attachment to food for as long as she can remember, but she said she's more confident that she won't slide into unhealthy eating patterns this holiday season because of Overeaters Anonymous (OA)--a Twelve Step recovery group for people with food obsessions. In the past, Cathy said she used food as a reward to celebrate life's little victories and as a salve when she felt wounded over life's disappointments.

"I loved the 'ritual' of eating--the texture of finger foods, the comforting feeling of having food in my cheeks, the calm I felt when it slid down my throat," she explained. Thanks to OA, Cathy is learning to discern between emotional hunger and physical hunger.

While symptoms among members of OA vary, they all share a common bond: an admission that their lives have become unmanageable because of their compulsive behavior around food. OA members are men and women who come in all shapes and sizes, with all sorts of eating patterns and problems. Some, like Cathy, binged on certain foods, then felt guilt, shame, disgust and depression for having done so. Others suffer from a preoccupation with food, diets, or body image. Others struggle to control their compulsive overeating.

Some OA members have been diagnosed with anorexia nervosa and work to control their fear of food and eating. Still others are bulimics who binged, then purged, their meals. Today, about 7,000 OA groups meet each week in over 52 countries to support each other in a physical, emotional, and spiritual recovery process.

Like recovering alcoholics, OA members learn to live in the moment, a day--or, in their case, a meal--at a time. There are no weigh-ins or packaged meals, dues, fees, or judgment at OA meetings. "There were hugs and a warm welcome," Cathy recalls of her first OA meeting. "I immediately felt unconditionally accepted for who I am, not what I look like."

In OA, the Twelve Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) are re-fashioned to reflect a powerlessness over food (instead of alcohol) in Step One. While AA members strive to abstain from alcohol, OA members commit to abstain from their addictive behaviors regarding food. For Cathy that means keeping her "binge" foods out of her house and life, and not eating obsessively or compulsively.

"I'm learning to pay closer attention to my 'body signals' and signs--to sort out if I'm experiencing a physical hunger or an emotional need," said Cathy. "I'm learning to name the emotion, feel it, then deal with it."

If Cathy feels the urge to binge or if she feels "shaky," she said she sends an email to fellow OA members, describing her fears and feelings. "I don't even need a response," said Cathy. "Just the mere act of reaching out is an immediate help to me."

Cathy intends to use the tools, techniques and support she has garnered from her OA fellowship to help her navigate the temptations of the holidays. "I don't expect my family or coworkers to change their behavior, but I can take better care of myself. I've got strategies in place now to help me through any rough spots. I intend to go to my regular meetings and more if I need to. If I'm going out of town, I'll

ALIVE & FREE

find out where the closest meetings are. If there are none, I'll bring enough OA literature with me to reinforce myself every day."

Cathy also suggests enlisting the help of a spouse or family member or friend ahead of time who can support you if things get difficult and you feel yourself slipping. "It's important to have an escape plan!" she said.

Visit <http://www.aa.org/> or call 505-891-2664 to learn more about AA, AA meetings near you, and AA literature. AA-approved literature and other educational materials for compulsive overeaters are also available through Hazelden Publishing; check out www.hazelden.org/bookplace or call 1-800-328-9000.

--Published November 17, 2003

Alive & Free is a health column that provides information to help prevent substance abuse problems and address such problems. It is created by Hazelden, a nonprofit agency based in Center City, Minn., that offers a wide range of information and services on addiction. For more resources, [email](#) or call Hazelden at 800-257-7810 (outside the US 651-213-4200).