



(Alive & Free column from Hazelden for the week of Nov. 26, 2007; contact editor Marty Duda with questions at 651-213-4455)

## **OA offers a spiritual solution to compulsive overeating**

"I did not enter my first meeting with hope," recalls one member of Overeaters Anonymous. "I entered with despair. But I left with hope, because it was the first time in my life that I realized or heard that I was not morally imperfect, that I was not weak-willed, that I was not some defect. I had a disease—the disease of compulsive overeating."

These words capture some core principles of Overeaters Anonymous (OA). One is that its members have an abnormal relationship with food. Another is that no plan for healing this relationship can succeed when it's based on personal willpower alone.

As an alternative, OA suggests reliance on a "power greater than ourselves," also referred to as God or a Higher Power. This frankly spiritual approach sets OA apart from other responses to overeating.

Atheists and agnostics may well express skepticism: What can a relationship to God or a Higher Power possibly have to do with overeating? What can possibly work other than dieting, exercise, and self-control?

OA offers three answers to these questions:

First, you are free to define God or Higher Power in any way that you choose. These words refer to *any* source of help outside ourselves—for example, fellow members of OA. No belief in a supernatural being is required. As a result, OA's doors are open to atheists, agnostics, and members of any religion.

Second, any solution to overeating must address mental obsession with eating. "Overeaters Anonymous," the group's core text, includes stories of people who lost dozens of pounds through dieting, exercising, and purging—only to regain the weight later. Even when these people shed pounds, their thoughts focused on food.



One OA member describes this mental state: "My whole life was about getting the food, buying the food, preparing the food, sneaking the food, and hiding the food from morning until night."

Another person said, "I used food for everything. It was my excitement. It was my entertainment. It was my antidepressant. It was my social life."

Driven by such compulsion, OA members recall doing things that no sane person would do: Eating stale, spoiled, or rotten food. Stealing from other people's plates. Picking up food off the ground.

Third, abandon all attempts to remove the obsession by yourself. After all, your attempts to do this in the past have consistently failed. Instead, turn to your Higher Power for help.

"Overeaters Anonymous" the book puts it this way: "This mental obsession was something we couldn't be rid of by our unaided human will. Another power, stronger than ourselves, had to be found to relieve us of it, if we were to stop eating compulsively and stay stopped."

This solution might sound vague or impractical. But OA offers practical suggestions for getting daily guidance from a self-transcending source. For example:

- Rather than eating in response to a craving, attend an OA meeting or call someone in the program.
- Meet regularly with a sponsor—someone with longer experience in OA who serves as a mentor.
- Instead of acting on impulse, pause to pray or meditate.

You can learn more about OA by calling 505-891-2664 or going online to [www.oa.org](http://www.oa.org). The Web site explains how to find OA meetings and related resources near you. The above quotes from OA members are samples from "Hearing Is Believing: OA Members Speak," a recording available from OA on CD or cassette.

The following books may also be of interest:

- "Overeaters Anonymous, second edition" (Overeaters Anonymous World Services, Inc., 2001).

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- "The Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions of Overeaters Anonymous" (Overeaters Anonymous World Services, Inc., 2002).
- "Compulsive Overeater: The Basic Text for Compulsive Overeaters" by Bill B. (Hazelden, 1981).
- "Twelve Steps for Overeaters: An Interpretation of the Twelve Steps of Overeaters Anonymous" by Elisabeth L. (Hazelden, 1993).

*Alive & Free is a health column that offers information to help prevent and address addiction and substance abuse problems. It is provided by Hazelden, a nonprofit agency based in Center City, Minn., that offers a wide range of information and services on addiction and recovery. For more resources, call Hazelden at 1-800-257-7800 or check its Web site at [www.hazelden.org](http://www.hazelden.org). Direct your inquiries to [mduda@hazelden.org](mailto:mduda@hazelden.org).*