

Step by Step

Summer 2018



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. Step 1 and the gift of desperation

I took Step One when I walked back into OA after 10 years.

I had read about OA ten years before in a women's magazine - everything in the article sounded like me. The secret eating and bingeing, I was unable to stick to a diet beyond a couple of months.

I was 20 years old and my life was just fine if only I could get control of my eating, lose some weight and be a size 10!

I attended my first OA meeting looking for direction, a cure. What I heard were women complaining about their bosses and ex-husbands and talking about God. I couldn't relate at all and I wanted nothing to do with God so I walked out of the room determined to find another way.

Ten years later, many pounds heavier after years of failed diets and my eating now completely out of control, I had 'the gift of

desperation'. A gift I wanted desperately to return if I could.

When I went to my second OA meeting I saw women recovered from the disease of compulsive eating.

When they described the disease, they were talking about my relationship with food.

They were a healthy body weight and radiated serenity. There were three newcomers in the meeting that evening and we all felt we had found something special in that room. I felt hope.

I went to that meeting because I couldn't control my eating no matter how hard I tried.

As Step 1 says, "We admitted we were powerless over food".

Aside from the food, my life wasn't looking so rosy; I was working crazy hours, fuelling myself with excess food and full of resentment and fear. My relationships were poor, feeling more comfortable sitting at home in front of the TV eating rather than dealing with people in the real world. (...that our lives had become unmanageable).

I take Step One when I attend meetings, I take Step One when I use the OA tools each day. I take Step One when I call my sponsor and my fellows. I take Step One when I work all the other steps. Step One is my admission to myself that I need this programme on a daily basis to stay healthy and useful and free of compulsive behaviour.

2. Just being me... The road to Step 3

From as young as I can remember I have been addicted to food; the comfort, the anticipation, the thrill of the smell of chocolate and the sound of the wrappers. I was over weight from a young age. My parents did not have the tools to parent and showed comfort the only way they knew how - through food. So food for me over the years has meant so much more than food. It has been about comfort and protection.

I have spent years oscillating between periods of being over-weight, normal weight and under-weight. The biggest I have been is 13 stone and the smallest I have been is 7 stone 13lbs.

Food was my higher power; though I did not know it back then.

I thought I could control it and that the right body weight was the solution to my low self-esteem. Being slim, physically attractive would mean that I was a 'real person', part of the crowd, someone to know. Hence, I did not have a clue who I was. I did not know what kind of boys I liked, what kind of friends I wanted, what my hobbies were; I just

wanted to be popular. I am still learning these things about myself today.

I have been in OA for 7 months now and abstinent for 7 months. I got a sponsor at my second meeting. I was ready. Was I terrified of putting on weight? Yes. When I came in, I was not over-weight, but I was obsessed with calories counting and not putting the weight back on.

From that day I put my faith in the programme.

I followed a food plan and have stuck to it, despite my fear of putting on weight. I eat three meals a day and am clear about what my abstinence is. If I want to change the menu of my food plan, I check it out with my sponsor first. I am rigorously honest about my motives for choosing certain foods. I am in other fellowships and have completed Step 3's before, but my steps 1-3 in OA have been life changing. They are solid.

I have made the decision to turn over my body weight and food to my HP. I don't have to make decisions about my food or weight

anymore; that is out of my hands. It is amazing but also scary. It also means that I am now facing life on life's terms which too I practise handing over.

I am being restored to sanity. Ironically, after all those years of fear and control about my body weight; I am now a healthy normal weight!! That is from letting go, so no drama!

What do I do with my life without the drama? Now I feel so much calmer.

I feel fragile and little sometimes, because I am uncovering years of pain and hurt that was masked by the food but I feel like I am getting to the core of who I am and I am proud of myself. I feel like I am learning to just be me. No frills, no flashing lights, no drama...Just me.

3. My Higher Power....

There are lots of options for what our God or higher power can be. We luckily, don't have to get stuck in 'religious stuff'. For me, when I took Step Two, my higher power (that which was restoring me to sanity) was my sponsor and my meeting; I knew if I called her each morning and went to meetings, I was abstinent.

As I was not going to turn my life or will over to the care of my sponsor or OA for Step Three, my higher power was like the Force, from Star Wars--a power of goodness to which we can connect and by which we can be empowered to make the right/best choice in a situation; the power that was (and still is) keeping me abstinent, keeping me willing to be abstinent one more day. My idea hasn't really changed that much, though I use the word God mostly now - for simplicity's sake.

Someone I sponsored for a while decided upon "Not Me" as her higher power.

She still uses that. I really like that. It's simple and there can be no argument with that.

As I couldn't be abstinent on my own (If I could have, I would have!), my sponsor helped me realize it was a higher power doing it, and the higher power had already proven itself trustworthy—in the fact that I was abstinent day after day.

The proof of a trustworthy higher power was in the pudding, so to speak!

I don't worry about having a "relationship" with my higher power. For me I don't have any clue what my higher power is, and I don't have a relationship with it, not like a friend or parent or anything. It's a power that works, and on which I can rely.

I don't always feel a closeness; sometimes my understanding is just intellectual. But it doesn't seem to matter.

As long as I believe it will work (Step 2), and decide to act on that belief (Step 3), I pretty much am okay. I don't always trust God in the details, but after a bit of trying to do things on my own, I am reminded that life will be better (and usually easier) if I let go of the reins and control. And then I do, let go, that is, and get on with whatever is next (that's Steps 4-12).

So whatever my Higher Power is or isn't, I am grateful it's working for me today (and has been keeping me abstinent one day at a time for 37 years), and I don't worry about the details, and get on with being abstinent one more day.

4. Being wrong is a home truth for me

Here am I, thinking now that I am an abstinent member of OA it automatically means that I am an outstanding citizen within my family. But eavesdropping on a conversation between my wife and son lands a bombshell of a home truth in my lap.

My son asks: 'Mammy, do you ever wake up grumpy?'

And my wife replies: 'Sometimes!' Then there is a substantial pause before continuing, 'And sometimes I let him sleep on!'

Dumbfounded, I find this rock-hard lump of information too difficult to swallow and digest. 'After all wasn't I abstinent? After all wasn't I restored to sanity as a result?' I asked myself.

'My wife must be wrong!', I decide. 'That's it; that's the answer' I announce grandly to myself, 'She needs to change, she is the one who needs a programme.' Relieved and delighted, her statement is now dismissed.

Coasting happily along, everything is going fine until one day I am asked to put out the garbage bin. Before I know what is happening I am shouting 'You do it yourself! I have more important things to do.' Next thing we are into a full-blown row.

Later, seething with resentments, I brood on the fact that nothing has changed; we are back to what our lives used to be like before I found OA.

'But I'm abstinent.' I think to myself, 'they said I would be happy in OA if I was abstinent and practicing the programme. They said I would be happy if I was doing service at home as well as at meetings; and I do a ton of it. I'm abstinent and practicing the programme. What the hell is going wrong?'

So I blame OA, thinking that if the programme worked I would be happy. Armed with my new found 'facts' I head for a meeting with my sponsor. Relating all of the problems at home and the reasons that my relationships are falling apart, I lay the blame squarely at the feet of family, sponsor, OA, Higher Power and anyone else I can think of. He listens patiently, every now and again, a winsome smile crossing his face. When I am finished he asks if he may summarise what he has heard. Suspiciously, I agree!

'You're saying you are practicing the 12 Steps in all of your affairs, but still you are unhappy and it's not your fault but everyone else's?' he summarises,

'Is that right?' he continues with compassion and understanding in his voice.

'Exactly right!' I agree wholeheartedly; delighted to have a sponsor who understands me, continuing 'How do I straighten them out?'

My sponsor is now nodding his head wisely as if he knows all too well the tribulations I am living through. My expectations are high. I wait expectantly.

'Go home and apologise to your wife.' is what he says as he picks up his phone, intending to leave.

I am left speechless; anger and bitterness rise up like bile in my throat. 'How dare he speak to me this way?' I fume to myself.

But my sponsor is not finished yet. He offers just one parting piece of advice 'By the way, give gratitude for this suggestion, for all those you found fault with and especially for your wife and family. Start now; delay is dangerous, and rebellion may be fatal. Next time you hear a home truth don't bother rationalising it away; give gratitude for being told it.'

A number of hours pass before sanity returns. Still hurting, I now very much wanted to hurt my sponsor. But I have to accept that I had asked for advice and received it. Basically, he was saying that I am wrong, dead wrong!

I couldn't for the life of me see how I could be wrong, without any proof, But I chose to accept that I was just that - wrong.

Later that evening I began the truly painful exercise of giving gratitude for my wife, children, sponsor, Higher Power, OA, my group and the members.

All the time as I did so there was real rebellion in my head and heart, shouting,

screaming: that I am right, right, right, right; my sponsor is wrong, wrong, wrong, wrong!

Daily, I persevered. Over the succeeding days, weeks and months I kept it up, often in the face of much negative emotions and misgivings. Then breakthroughs began to happen, and I could see how my head and emotions had been blatantly lying to me.

Now, once I hear a home truth about my character that I am completely ignorant of, I no longer rebel or rationalise it away. Instead I immediately pray to my Higher Power accepting that I am wrong even though I don't know how and go and share that with my sponsor.

As a result, today I am a very happily married family man and a truly grateful member of OA.

5. Interview – My Journey through Steps 1, 2 and 3

What brought you to fully accept your powerlessness over food - that your life had become unmanageable (Step 1)?

Three years of fighting with myself in meetings, with a head full of programme and a body full of food, broken. Taking old, previously wrapped and discarded binge food out of a bin as I had no money for new binge food, and purging in a carrier bag because the toilet at home was broken. Remaining in a damaging relationship because I was afraid of being alone. I had finally lost myself in food to cope with life.

I knew I could not go near substances with sugar or white flour so I prayed for the willingness to be willing to abstain. I could not do second portions or random snacks so I prayed for the willingness to be willing to abstain. I could not stand fixated in the mirror or wake up feeling for my ribs. I could not grab random food from shops when I felt like it or eat on the hoof – at a bus stop or standing up so I prayed for the willingness to be willing to slow down and sit somewhere.

My life was totally unmanageable. I desperately needed help to create healthy boundaries and behaviours with food.

How did you come to believe that higher power of your understanding could help you with your compulsive overeating (Step 2)?

The evidence of being abstinent with food at meal times led me to believe in a higher power working in my life:

- I could stop eating when the meal was finished
- I could walk away from the fridge and say no and make a call when I wanted my binge foods
- I could say no to food offered to me outside of plan and allergic
- The evidence that I had not picked up the food when life hurt - miracle
- Evidence in action – doing the things I did not think or dream possible like live independently free of debt, pay my bills, not live off an extended overdraft, manage my health and admin.

8. In Step 3, you made a decision to turn your will and your life over to the care of a higher power of your understanding. Practically, how does that decision play out in your life today?

By being willing to:

- Start my day with prayer and meditation and ask God for one more abstinent day
- To keep life simple and keep it in the day
- To not pick up no matter what the illness is saying to me
- To ask God to guide me with food preparation

9. What are the key things that you have learned about:

a. Yourself that are pivotal in maintaining your abstinence today;

1. Life is not all about me!
2. My illness is self-obsessed, and self-centred and I need to challenge it.
'Selfishness - self-centeredness! That, we think, is the root of our troubles. Driven by a hundred forms of fear, self-delusion, self-seeking, and self-pity, we step on the toes of our fellows and they retaliate.'
(Alcoholics Anonymous. Page.62)
3. Less is more. I have had to learn to listen and listen to learn (often times the hard way.)
4. If it is not broke don't fix it. My illness wants to keep me compulsive and forever fixing and rearranging things, even when they are going well.
5. Accept that feelings are not facts. My feelings change all the time, from one moment to the next. If I try to live by them I am forever changing my mind once I have decided on something.

b. The 12-step programme that are pivotal in maintaining your abstinence today?

1. Recovery is only possible with step one firmly in place. I can only ever binge on a lie. I cannot binge if I am honestly working the solution.
2. Abstinence and being willing to go to any lengths to maintain that is a priority for me. I therefore need to work my program daily.
3. My relationship with my Higher Power needs to come first as a result of working all 12 of the Steps.
4. The Steps are about truth, and being willing to be rigorously honest. It's taken hard work, commitment, fellowship and a sponsor
5. Recovery is not an overnight matter. 'There is a long period of reconstruction ahead.' (Alcoholics Anonymous, p.83).

10. What would you say to the still suffering compulsive overeater who wants to stop eating compulsively?

Recovery and long term abstinence is possible in the rooms of Overeaters Anonymous, so keep coming back! It needs to come first in your life though if you truly desire to be well, so be willing to go to any lengths.

Try six meetings to see if you identify yourself as a compulsive overeater then find an abstinent sponsor and be willing to listen.

One size does not fit all so find a plan of eating that works for you and stick to it. Then keep your eyes on your own plate, as it is easy to get distracted.

6. Me and my job – Communications Officer, National Service Board

I think I first learned about the importance of service in OA from reading literature such as the Lifeline Sampler, where so many stories emphasised the importance of service because it helps us feel useful, connected and part of something bigger than ourselves.

I started off doing service in my home group, but soon got curious about what was going

on at Intergroup - I also wanted to meet other people who really took their recovery seriously. So I became the Intergroup rep for one of my home meetings.

I have to admit, at first part of my motivation for doing service was based in my character defects – sometimes I would take on an Intergroup role because I thought I was the

only one who could do it 'properly', or because it boosted my ego. But there were also lots of positive aspects too.

I found that working with others on projects meant it was easy to make new friends in the fellowship, and I learned lots about listening to people, respecting other people's ideas and how to work in a team.

I had always thought that at some point I'd like to serve on the OAGB National Board, but it seemed quite daunting and so I kept putting it off, thinking I wasn't quite ready. However, in 2016 I attend the annual meeting of the NSB which is attended by all the Intergroup Chairs.

The Board at that time only had 4 members, some of whom were due to finish that year and there had been little interest from anyone looking to join. One of the other IG chairs talked about how, if the NSB was to be really effective in serving the OA fellowship, we had to find a way to have more than just the bare minimum of members on the Board, and if a group of us all came forward at the same time, it could really make a difference.

At that point I realised that there really wasn't any need to be fearful of the NSB – all I had to do was take the same amount of time and energy that I was currently giving to my Intergroup role, and just turn it to a new purpose. The resistance I'd had seemed to lessen, and I felt strongly that my Higher Power was guiding me to take on this new challenge.

As well as learning lots of new skills and getting to know some wonderful people,

doing service has also helped my personal recovery. I can easily get carried away and want to get involved with every interesting project and idea that comes along, but I've had to learn a lot about budgeting my time, putting in boundaries and seeking balance between service and other parts of my life.

I'm so grateful for our Traditions, especially Tradition 2 which helps remind me that I'm not in charge. Sometimes that's frustrating, because I can be pretty convinced that I know best! But when I'm trying to run the show things quickly get overwhelming, and I soon remember what a relief it is to hand the reins back to my Higher Power.

I've recently had to realise that, like anything in life, there is such a thing as doing too much service!

When I overdo it and take on too much, I'm not showing trust in my fellows or my Higher Power, as I am thinking that if something is going to get done, it has to be done by me – which is very far from the truth!

I remember someone saying in a meeting, 'service is gratitude in action' and this has definitely been the case for me. I still sometimes find it hard to believe the physical, mental and spiritual changes that have happened for me since coming to OA, and this gratitude is the source of the passion and energy I put into doing service – it really is a pleasure!

7. My journey with abstinence and Step 3

As an anorexic starting in OA in 1990 I formed my own definition of abstinence, because "the action of refraining from compulsive overeating" didn't address the periods of restriction between my binges. My definition was "doing what is best for me (in the widest possible sense)".

It encapsulates the essence of Step Three that the whole of our lives, not just the food, has to be turned over to HP for the program to work fully, and it worked well with the difficult relationships that had driven me into OA (the anorexia was just an excuse). It also

helps with difficult food choices - when I remember to apply it.

On the strength of this definition, I did service with abstinence requirements, at group, intergroup and national level. My weight went up and down on a more-or-less annual cycle related to the stress level at my job. When I lost my job and moved to a new job in a town with no OA meetings I started one, but it did not thrive, and neither did my recovery.

My weight crept down until I got some medical problems from being underweight, malnourished and over-exercising.

I was willing to change my behaviour enough to overcome these, so I modified my food plan and put on a very few kilos.

The body-mass-index chart still said I was underweight, but I felt so much better that I didn't think it mattered. I was doing service for a healthy group in a neighbouring town.

However, my sponsor told me that I was not abstinent by the new definition because my weight was rock-steadily 2-3 kg below the lower bound of a healthy weight for my height. I had been lining myself up for the job of intergroup treasurer. I was far from sure I could do the job, for lack not of experience or expertise, but time - against the demands of three similarly responsible jobs for voluntary organisations with no weight requirements. I felt guilty that after all these years in OA I should be barred from taking a job that I thought I really SHOULD do, just because of a couple of kilos and a weak will.

I switched from weighing three times a year to once a month. I made food plan adjustments and actually got to 8 st (50.8 kg), but my ability to exercise also improved, and the weight disappeared again. Only a miniscule adjustment in my food plan was needed, but I was stumped about what to increase in case I couldn't decrease it again if it turned out to be too much.

I added a small amount to my daily snacks and reset my abstinence date. One day I

found some fresh chillies going cheap in the supermarket. I can't bear wasting food, so I bought them and put some into my food. It made me feel sick, so what did I do? Put more into the following day's food, felt guilty and stupid at making myself feel sicker, missed a meal, and crammed in the whole of my next planned meal although I still felt sick, just to prove that I wasn't harming myself.

I knew I was abusing myself with food but I couldn't bear the thought of wasting it. Still, it took me three days and a frank share at my home group to realise that I had broken the "compulsive eating and compulsive behaviour around food" part of my abstinence, whatever the status of the "working towards a healthy body weight" part.

Something similar happened in October, again with "going-cheap" food that I could smell was "off" but I ate it anyway. Square One for abstinence, and out for the count for intergroup jobs since the AGM was only a month away.

OK, I thought, redefine abstinence to include not knowingly eating foods that will make me feel sick or otherwise harm me.

Logical; but then I started feeling sick after eating food that was not obviously "off" or harmful. The sick feelings came after different foods, so had I gone through the throwing-out ordeal for nothing? And am I abstinent or am I not? Missing meals is hardly "working towards a healthy weight", after all.

This story does not yet have a happy ending, but no OA story has a happy ending until I die abstinent (although it could easily have a sad ending). After a visit to the doctor I am taking medicine and keeping a food diary, the sick feelings are rarer and have caused only a couple of missed meals. I am getting better at judging when eating will make me feel sicker. I am going back to the interrupted experiment of increasing my snacks. Other people have come forward to do the intergroup jobs I think that HP was preserving me from over-commitment while I do his/her will in other bodies where I serve. The weight, which had taken a half-kilo hit, has recovered.

The disease has shown itself to be just as devious for me as it is for all those who have shared before me: to use a tennis analogy, it was practising backhands while I was practising service. The 12&12 is right about Steps 6 and 7 having to include admitting we are powerless over other defects (p. 55), in

my case obsession/compulsion around not wasting food. The compost bin is the place for foods that I have prepared that I know will harm me (the mould and slugs will love them!), and back on the supermarket shelf is where foods belong that I haven't yet bought that might harm me.

8. Facing up to reality

'All the mind's activity is easy if it is not subject to reality' – Marcel Proust

From 'For Today', October 24th (page 258)

Facing reality has been a problem all my life. If the truth is inconvenient, uncomfortable or just too challenging of my view of the world I will either deny it or try to prove it wrong through self will. The reality that food or being thin isn't the answer to my problems, and that I can't control my relationship to them or the consequences is continually an inconvenient truth.

My biggest barrier to surrendering to this programme was the idea that I couldn't control food or my body. What do you mean? I had given up sugar for a year. I had successfully dieted loads of times. I was the thinnest I had ever been. I could use my self-will to do anything, being out of control was not my problem. Until the effort of forcing my mind, body and soul to control the uncontrollable left me spiritually and emotionally dead.

I realised that if I carried on with the obsessive thoughts and energy involved in controlling my disease I may be thin, but I would end up suicidal and alone. I had reached a point where I could admit that I couldn't do it on my own, that my way hadn't

worked and I was willing to try things that I didn't particularly want to do in order to find a different way.

I remember the relief in admitting that I was a compulsive overeater and I couldn't 'win'. It didn't feel like a defeat - it felt like the world had been lifted from my shoulders. I could let go and let the programme do its work.

I could channel my self-will into developing a relationship with a higher power.

I didn't have to work so hard being and doing the impossible.

It meant that I could also see and face reality much more clearly. Sometimes that was and is hard - I want to be the best, I want people to be and react to me in certain ways, I want to have my cake and eat it in every sense! But life sometimes kindly, sometimes more forcefully, will continually humble me and remind me that I am just another Bozo on the bus. I can still find this hard and spend a little bit of time in denial or resentment but the power of this programme and step 1 is that it doesn't take me too long to realise that my unwillingness to face reality is causing me more pain than the situation itself. Then I feel that weight lifted again, the world seems bigger and I feel OK with exactly who and where I am.

Upcoming OA Events

Sponsorship Workshop, Glasgow – 17th June 2018

Heart of England Convention, Steps 7, 8 and 9 – 13th to 15th July 2018

Region 9 Convention, London – 28th to 30th September 2018

National Assembly, Plymouth, Devon – 26th to 28th October 2018

Find out more about all these events on our website, www.oagb.org.uk



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Did you know you can download shares recorded at OA meetings from the OAGB website? You can also contribute recordings from your own meetings to share experience, strength and hope.

Visit www.oagb.org.uk/audio-shares to find out more!

Opportunities for Service

OAGB are always looking for volunteers to help us carry the OA message.

We're particularly keen to find people who'd be willing to help answer the email enquiries we receive to the general@oagb.org.uk email address. You'd be working as part of a rota with other volunteers and would receive full training for the role.

Find about more about this and all the other ways you can help by visiting

www.oagb.org.uk/service-opportunities



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:

- What has been the impact of working Steps 4, 5 and 6 on my life?
- How do I practice Tradition 4, 5 or 6?
- Choose a quote or section from a piece of OA-approved literature and share about it
- Reflect on how an OA programme slogan has helped you to be sane and abstinent today
- Interview a fellow OA member about one of the above topics, or on their OA story

Please make your submission by **20th August 2018** by 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.

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