



Belfast woman loses 100 pounds with Food Addicts program

By Abigail Curtis, BDN Staff
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BELFAST, Maine — A few years ago, Kathy didn't know where to turn.

The Belfast woman was 100 pounds overweight and felt isolated and unhappy. She even contemplated skipping her son's high school graduation because she didn't want people looking at her. And in her discontent, the only thing that brought her a measure of peace was eating.

"Nothing was right. I was miserable. Miserable emotionally and physically," Kathy, 53, who now belongs to Food Addicts in Recovery Anonymous, said recently. "When I ate, it calmed me down and I felt better."

But the calm she found in sweet treats consumed mindlessly in front of the television set was deceptive: the petite hair stylist didn't have the life she longed for. She was out of breath at the top of stairs, she had a hard time finding cute clothes that fit and when she volunteered to direct traffic for the cyclists finishing the Trek Across Maine, she wished that she could do the 180-mile charity ride, too.

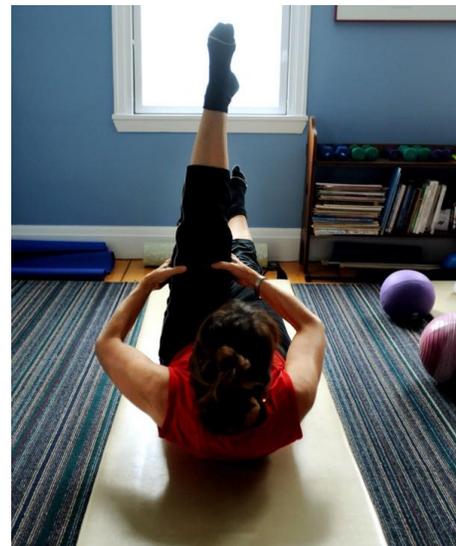
"My health was getting out of control. I just felt rotten. I was depressed," she said.

In order to make a positive change, she at first spent "hundreds and hundreds" of dollars on other diets, which worked for awhile, she said, before she'd revert back to her old patterns with food.

Then, Kathy heard of Food Addicts in Recovery Anonymous, a 12-step program that is similar to Alcoholics Anonymous. She



Kathy has been attending FA meetings, Food Addicts in recovery anonymous, for four years and has lost 100 pounds through the 12-step program.



Kathy not only follows the nutritional guidelines of FA, but also does pilates every morning and walks.

went to her first meeting four years ago and found the people there welcoming, though their message was tough.

“It’s not a diet program. It’s a recovery program,” she said. “It really works the best for people who feel desperate and hopeless. This isn’t for everybody. It’s for addicts — food addicts. It’s a tough word — addict.”

Food Addicts in Recovery Anonymous — or FA — has chapters located throughout the United States and abroad, with local meetings held in Belfast, Ellsworth, Rockland, Blue Hill, Bangor and Waterville, among other Maine locations. The group accepts men and women of all ages, some of whom have been obese while others have been underweight, bulimic or otherwise obsessed with food and maintaining their weight, according to the website.

“What we have in common is that our obsession with food has kept us from living fulfilling lives,” the website states.

While FA is not without controversy — some local nutrition experts worry that the group itself might be “too extreme” — adherents like Kathy and her friend, George from Orono, say that it has provided them with a lifeline to health and freedom from food addiction.

“We’re like alcoholics with food,” Kathy said. “People say, ‘Everything in moderation.’ Well, I have trouble with moderation. I either want none or all. That’s just my way of thinking.”

But Valerie Langbein, the director of nutrition services at Eastern Maine Medical Center in Bangor, said that while she believes FA has some positive attributes, she also questions certain elements of its mission — including the group’s prohibition of sugar, flour and wheat.

“That’s arbitrary to me,” she said. “I question limiting food groups because truly, in weight management you’re looking at two things: calories in and calories out. That’s the reality.”

The dietician said that people can get support from aspects of the 12-step program, and that any group that helps to instill discipline in food choices is generally a good thing.

“Weight management is really tricky,” she said. “I do worry that [FA] is a little on the extreme side ... I’m not familiar with data saying that obesity is caused by a food addiction, and therein lies the special challenge of anybody trying to lose weight. You can quit smoking because you don’t need cigarettes. You can quit drinking. You can’t quit eating.”

George, a longtime recovering alcoholic who began noticing four years ago that he was “using” sugar and flour the same way he used to use alcohol, said that food addiction is very real to him. In some ways, dealing with his food addiction has been more challenging than dealing with his past alcohol or drug use, he said.

“There’s a saying that we have to take the tiger out of its cage three times a day and take it for a walk,” the businessman said. “Food addiction is a serious thing.”

Kathy kept going to the meetings and found support through sponsors who had been in her situation. She followed the steps and began to take control of her eating, weighing and measuring her portions

and eliminating foods including sugar and flour. The weight began to fall off — 100 pounds in total. But most importantly, Kathy said, she began to take control of her life.

“It makes me focus on recovery from addiction. I work on it daily through meditation and prayer,” she said.

She enjoys shopping at Goodwill for fun outfits. She has been doing Pilates. And this spring she is training to ride in the Trek Across Maine. Kathy credits the support and help she’s received from FA for the positive changes she’s made and encourages others to consider checking out the donation-only program.

“It’s helped me to lose the weight and maintain it,” she said. “And have peace around my weight and food, which I’ve never had before.”

Food Addicts In Recovery Anonymous

Belfast: 6:30 p.m. Mondays, Room 206 at The Belfast Center

Ellsworth: 6:30 p.m. Wednesdays, St. Dunstan’s Church

Waterville: 6:30 p.m. Fridays, Inland Hospital Conference Room.

Blue Hill: 8:30 a.m. Saturdays, St Francis Church

Rockland: 8:30 a.m. Saturdays, Knox Center – Rockland Room

Bangor: 4 p.m. Sundays, Acadia Hospital, Osprey Room