Food addicts meetings in Erie area offer hope to overweight people

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Food Addicts in Recovery Anonymous asks that its members not be publicly identified. This story identifies them only by first names. If requested, names were changed.

A slender man wearing glasses stood up and pulled a few photographs out of his pocket.

He passed them out before starting his story. The snapshots showed him on vacation when he was younger and about 80 pounds heavier than he is now.

"Hi, I'm Patrick," he said. "And I'm a food addict."

Patrick shared his life story during a Friday morning meeting of the Food Addicts in Recovery Anonymous support group at Asbury United Methodist Church in Millcreek Township.

The first thing you notice about the people who attend the support group meeting is they come in all shapes and sizes. A few of them are overweight, but others look like the "after" photos in a Weight Watchers commercial.

"Some of us are overweight, some of us are underweight, and some of us are at the weight we should be," said Maggie, a Food Addicts member since 2008. "But we all have an addiction to food."

Maggie weighed 258 pounds when she joined Food Addicts in Recovery Anonymous. She had tried other weight-loss groups and joined a health club in an effort to lose weight.

The result was the same. She would lose a few pounds, but eventually gain them back and few extra ones, too.

"All I ever did was think about food and what I had to do to burn off the calories I
just ate," said Maggie, a 40-year-old mother of three. "I would eat differently around other people than when I was by myself. When I was alone, I'd binge and purge. I'd eat things out of the trash."

Maggie learned about Food Addicts from a friend who lost 80 pounds in less than a year. Her friend also seemed more at peace with herself.

So Maggie went to a meeting, which is free and open to the public. A freewill offering is taken to cover expenses.

She heard other people with food addictions tell their stories, and she felt like they were peeking into her own life.

"How do they know my secrets?" Maggie said. "They were talking about how they ate food out of the trash, and no one was laughing at them."

Food Addicts in Recovery Anonymous is based on the 12 steps and 12 traditions of Alcoholics Anonymous. Members do not weigh in, though many share how much weight they have lost.

New members are paired with a sponsor, a member with at least 90 days of abstinence -- meaning they have followed a healthy, disciplined eating plan.

The sponsor helps the new member create his or her own eating plan, which includes three healthy meals, no snacks, and no foods made with flour or sugar.

"Like all 12-step programs, Food Addicts is simple, but it's not easy," Patrick said.

Meetings are held four times a week at various Erie County locations, and help is just a phone call away. A new member is often in daily contact with his or her sponsor, and other members make themselves available.

Marlene has attended Food Addicts meetings since March 2010. The 62-year-old woman has struggled to lose weight almost all of her life, and once weighed more than 400 pounds.

"I'd join a program or go on a diet and lose weight, but I was white-knuckling it the whole time," Marlene said.

"I was holding on with all my might to wait until I could eat again."

Less than a year after joining Food Addicts, Marlene weighs just more than 200 pounds. And eating only three healthy meals a day isn’t so difficult.

"When I joined, I couldn't imagine going from supper to bedtime without eating," Marlene said. "But the cravings are gone."

Maggie went to her first Food Addicts meeting on a Sunday. By Tuesday night, her cravings for processed food and sugar had vanished.

"It's like I have an allergy to flour and sugar," Maggie said. "I take it one day at a
Maggie started shedding weight almost immediately. She lost 110 pounds in eight months and now weighs 148 pounds.

"This is life or death for me," Maggie said. "I have been as big as 300 pounds, and I knew that diabetes, heart disease and cancer were all waiting for me. I knew this was my last chance."

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