

Food Addiction and the FA Solution:

For Anyone Who Wants to Learn More

What makes some people continue to eat when they are not hungry? Why are they unable to stick to a diet despite warnings from doctors and their own understanding of health and nutrition?

Most people are familiar with the concept of alcoholism and drug addiction, but the idea that certain foods and quantities of foods can be addictive is only slowly gaining acceptance. This pamphlet is for anyone who wants to learn more about food addiction and the solution offered by Food Addicts in Recovery Anonymous (FA), a program based on the Twelve Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous (AA).

Carl Lowe, Jr., MD, a fellow of the American College of Surgeons and a member of the American Society for Metabolic and Bariatric Surgery, shared the following observations:

In my view, undeniably, food addiction is real. I see it every day. Looking for more ways to help my patients, I asked if I could sit in on an FA meeting. I stayed for a good while after the meeting ended, because I couldn't pull myself away. I saw the changes FA was making in people's lives, and I thought, This is exactly what my patients need.

I refer all my patients to FA. I explain, "Right now, you have a relationship with food that is taking you down a road you don't want to take. These people can help you." FA seems to me to be a perfect solution. It works. No question about it.

Addiction is a dependence upon a habit-forming substance or behavior, regardless of the consequences or the strength of a person's desire to abstain. It is characterized by:

- intense craving
- increasing need
- the disease's negative impact on the lives of addicts and those who love them.

Can a person be addicted to food?

Recovering food addicts say yes. They experience their relationship with food as a form of addiction. They are powerless over where, when, and how much they eat, although many have tremendous willpower in other areas of their lives.

Here are some of the symptoms of food addiction:

- Overeating (bingeing or grazing)
- Purging (bulimia)
- Undereating
- Obesity (and related problems such as diabetes, heart disease, and sleep apnea)
- Compulsive exercise and/or dieting
- Obsession with food or weight
- Depression, shame, isolation, and hopelessness related to food, weight, or body image.

Food addiction tends to remain unrecognized because of the focus on these symptoms rather than their underlying cause – addiction. FA is a program for those who want to stop eating addictively. Like Alcoholics Anonymous, FA treats food addiction as a threefold illness: physical, mental, and spiritual. Recovering food addicts in FA remain at their goal-weight for years and even decades. Long-term abstinence from addictive eating is made possible by a member’s willingness to live a structured way of life and work the Twelve Steps.

Abstinence

Abstinence in FA is equivalent to AA’s “sobriety” and is clearly defined: weighed and measured meals with nothing in between, no flour, no sugar, and the avoidance of any individual binge foods. These boundaries can seem impossible, but paradoxically, members find that abstinence frees them from the physical cravings that drove them. As a result, recovering food addicts achieve a healthy weight, whether they need to gain ten pounds (five kilos) or lose two hundred (ninety kilos). Yet abstinence is not a diet and FA is not a weight-loss program.

A New Way of Life

FA members cannot sustain long-term recovery by merely following a food plan, even when they’ve reached a healthy weight. Instead, they find support for continuous abstinence by:

- Committing to a food plan with an experienced FA member (a sponsor)
- Attending FA meetings regularly
- Reading FA and AA literature
- Making contact with other food addicts every day
- Seeking help from a Higher Power through daily meditation
- Encouraging and guiding newer members.

The Twelve Steps

Addiction is a devastating illness. Most food addicts find that while they sometimes feel in control of their eating, their relationship with food or their body image remains an ongoing struggle. Unless they experience a fundamental inner change, they will eat addictively again. When members work the Steps in sequence while abstinent, they experience a spiritual awakening and a transformative change in their personality. Their desire to eat addictively is removed, one day at a time. The Twelve Steps are spiritually-based and can work for anyone with an open mind, whether they are atheists, agnostics, or committed members of a particular religious tradition. Each member finds recovery through a Higher Power that is personal to them.

Honesty, open-mindedness, and willingness are required if we are to find “a new freedom and a new happiness” (*Alcoholics Anonymous*, 83). Members can reach a healthy weight and stay there, but even more, they find joy in a fellowship united by a common purpose – to stay abstinent and to help another food addict find recovery. Despite life’s challenges, FA members committed to the FA program and the Twelve Steps can remain abstinent and face each day with strength and gratitude.

Voices of Recovery

A lifetime dieter, a young athlete, a middle-aged man, and a mother describe how they have changed since entering the FA program:

- *If I was tired, I ate. If I was worried, I ate. If I was late, or angry, or even happy, I ate. I dieted with all my willpower, but I weighed 245 pounds (111 kilos), and when I woke up in the morning I'd see myself in the mirror, bent over like an old woman. Through FA and with the help of my Higher Power, I lost more than 115 pounds (52 kilos), but that's not the most important part of my story. The miracle is that I have stayed slim and abstinent for almost forty years and that for many years I've not had even a moment of desire for anything other than my abstinent food—no matter what I've had to face.*
- *I tried my first diet one summer when I was about fourteen. Between bulimia, dieting, running, and eventually laxatives, I lost too much weight. I tried to stay ten pounds (5 kilos) underweight, and the purging helped to keep me thin, but my life was a mess. At twenty-five, in FA and abstinent, I finally stabilized at a healthy weight and reflected on my life. FA did much more for me, though. Years later, when I was diagnosed with cancer and faced major surgery and chemotherapy, I stayed abstinent and committed to my recovery. I felt that I was carried. Now, years later, I have three beautiful sons, a loving husband, and a wonderful life. I've been abstinent for over twenty years, and I never want to take my abstinence for granted.*
- *By the time I was 53 and came into FA, my cholesterol was about 300, and my blood sugar was so high I was pre-diabetic. I'd struggled for years, driven by fear of failure. Progressing into full-blown food addiction, I was filled with rage and guilt. In FA, my cholesterol plummeted and blood sugar levels normalized. I lost weight and kept it off, but even more, I've had moments of tremendous joy and peace. FA has made it possible for me to let go of my attachment to food so that I can hear an inner voice—the voice of my Higher Power. It says to me, "Be giving. Be of use." It tells me, "Don't eat addictively. Live!"*
- *I wasn't a binge eater. I just ate all the time, all day long. I was drawn to FA, but for years I stayed on the edge of the program. Finally, one weekend, I'd had enough. I went to a meeting and asked someone to sponsor me. With her help, I got abstinent, and before I knew it, I was helping other people get abstinent and stay abstinent. It still exhilarates me. I'm abstinent twenty-five years now, and my weight never changes. I feel happy and secure. The other day, my daughter said that the best thing that ever happened to her was my coming into FA. That meant the world to me.*

For more information or to find a meeting, please visit www.FoodAddicts.org.

The Twelve Steps

1. We admitted we were powerless over food—that our lives had become unmanageable.
2. Came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.
3. Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understood Him.
4. Made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves.
5. Admitted to God, to ourselves, and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs.
6. Were entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character.
7. Humbly asked Him to remove our shortcomings.
8. Made a list of all persons we had harmed, and became willing to make amends to them all.
9. Made direct amends to such people wherever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others.
10. Continued to take personal inventory, and when we were wrong, promptly admitted it.
11. Sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God as we understood Him, praying only for knowledge of His will for us and the power to carry that out.
12. Having had a spiritual awakening as the result of these steps, we tried to carry this message to food addicts, and to practice these principles in all our affairs.

The Twelve Traditions

1. Our common welfare should come first; personal recovery depends on FA unity.
2. For our group purpose there is but one ultimate authority—a loving God as He may express Himself in our group conscience. Our leaders are but trusted servants; they do not govern.
3. The only requirement for FA membership is a desire to stop eating addictively.
4. Each group should be autonomous except in matters affecting other groups or FA as a whole.
5. Each group has but one primary purpose—to carry its message to the food addict who still suffers.
6. An FA group ought never endorse, finance, or lend the FA name to any related facility or outside enterprise, lest problems of money, property, and prestige divert us from our primary purpose.
7. Every FA group ought to be fully self-supporting, declining outside contributions.
8. Food Addicts in Recovery Anonymous should remain forever nonprofessional, but our service centers may employ special workers.
9. FA, as such, ought never be organized; but we may create service boards or committees directly responsible to those they serve.
10. Food Addicts in Recovery Anonymous has no opinion on outside issues, hence the FA name ought never be drawn into public controversy.
11. Our public relations policy is based on attraction rather than promotion; we need always maintain personal anonymity at the level of press, radio, and films.
12. Anonymity is the spiritual foundation of all our Traditions, ever reminding us to place principles before personalities.

What is FA?

Food Addicts in Recovery Anonymous (FA) is a program based on the Twelve Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous (AA). There are no dues, fees, or weigh-ins at FA meetings. FA is a fellowship of individuals who, through shared experience and mutual support, are recovering from the disease of food addiction.

FA was formally organized in 1998, although it began as part of another twelve-step program in the early 1980s. Some FA members have been continuously abstinent since that time. Abstinence in FA is equivalent to AA's "sobriety" and is clearly defined: weighed and measured meals with nothing in between, no flour, no sugar, and the avoidance of any individual binge foods.

Who joins FA?

FA members are people of all ages from every part of the world. FA includes people who were morbidly obese, substantially underweight, or even at a normal weight. Regardless of their size, they were tormented by cravings, dieting, bulimia, and/or an obsession with exercise.

Does the program really work?

Many FA members tried other solutions to address their problems with food, including years of diets or exercise. FA offers a long-term answer. Abstinent members find freedom from addiction and maintain healthy weights. The number of people with years of unbroken abstinence continues to grow.

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