

# Bulimic? Undereating? Underweight?

Is your relationship  
with food and weight  
making you miserable?  
There is hope.

## Are you afraid that you won't be able to stop eating once you start?

Do you constantly think about your weight and obsess about what you have eaten? Have you ever eaten large quantities of food, then purged by vomiting, taking laxatives, under-eating, or over-exercising? Did you then discover that you couldn't stop these unhealthy behaviors? Does undereating give you a feeling of power? These behaviors are often signs of food addiction and can result in feelings of hopelessness and self-hatred.

The following are stories of people who have answered yes to these questions. Some were overweight, some underweight, others a normal weight, but all struggled constantly for control.

Today, all of them have found an answer in Food Addicts in Recovery Anonymous (FA), a twelve-step program for food addiction. If food and weight are making you miserable, there is help and hope in FA. You are not alone!

*(For reasons of privacy and anonymity the names have been omitted from the following stories.)*

## “I didn't care if I was sick— achieving thinness was more important to me than my health.”

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I have always been attached to food, but after my parents' divorce when I was an adolescent, I crossed the line into food addiction. I became obsessed with food and weight, and driven to lose weight by dieting and excessive exercise; I could think of nothing else. I starved myself and did not allow any fatty foods to enter my mouth. I was repulsed by the thought of even a single stick of gum because I realized that each stick had 10 calories. I lost water weight by wrapping myself in plastic bags under my workout clothes before I ran for miles or exercised in our basement. If anyone tried to interfere, I became nasty. Finally, I was working out four hours a day. I had to exercise in order to feel thin, but I never felt thin enough. I didn't care if I was sick— achieving thinness was more important to me than my health.

When I was sixteen years old, I starved myself for five months. Ultimately, I could not stay away from food. Once I began really eating again, I started to binge. Soon I was eating bags and boxes of food, gaining back all the weight I had lost. I was hospitalized in a psychiatric hospital for suicidal depression and overeating. I have been hospitalized five times since then, and lived for a time in a treatment home for alcoholics and drug addicts. I tried antidepressants, therapy, and psychiatry, but nothing kept me from eating. I was a person who needed to run from life.

Eating was the only thing I knew to do in order to cope. I could not stop eating, nor could I slow down; and all the while I longed to be thin. I've tried to

control my eating in many ways: eating jars of mustard or other condiments, chewing and swallowing packs of gum, drinking liters of soda, using boxes of artificial sweeteners. I used to wake up every morning with the drive to find all the food I could get my hands on, then I'd eat for hours and have to vomit and exercise to work off the calories. I hid my food just like a drug addict hides their stash. I thought of nothing or no one else. I spent my last dime in grocery stores that had the best deals on food for a given day—I had to find stores that sold food the cheapest, because I needed huge quantities that would last me for hours.

Then, by God's grace, I hit bottom. God willing, I will never forget the words my father said that night. I called at midnight asking for more money to enter another treatment center, "...I don't know what you're going to do." I was scared to death, but I knew it was time to "grow up." While in another Twelve-Step program, a friend in that fellowship told me about a really strong meeting for people with food problems that had great recovery.

I decided to go and saw real recovery for the first time! It wasn't easy putting the food down and weighing and measuring my three meals a day, but today it's what I do to take care of myself, and it's just like brushing my teeth. All through my years of addiction, I hoped I would find help and then help others; I just didn't know when or where.

Then God answered that prayer and placed Food Addicts in Recovery Anonymous in my path. It would take a book to describe all the changes in my life. Today, my weight is normal and I am free. I am a miracle.

## **“I was so small I had to wear children's clothes— then I lost control and weighed 180 pounds.”**

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**T**wo powers greater than myself controlled my life when I was in disease: an obsession with being thin and delicate (basically looking like a nine-year old girl), and an urge to eat huge quantities of food. Before I joined FA, I tried everything I could to fulfill both drives. At times I thought I was going insane because whenever I followed one urge I could not satisfy the other one. In FA I learned that I have a disease, and I have found a solution.

I was born in Germany. As a child, I spent hours in front of the mirror. I thought my cheeks were too round, my legs too fat, and that my ears stuck out. When I heard about a girl who was anorexic, I was fascinated. I longed to be thin, but I just loved food.

My mom was mentally ill and abused alcohol, so my home was very disorganized. I was keen on going to friends' houses where I could eat sweet things that I couldn't get at home. When I was a teenager, I moved to a foster home and my life changed. I concentrated all my energy on school and very quickly became the top student of my class. I was thin, pretty, and popular with the boys. Inside, though, I felt that there was something wrong with me. I hated my body. I hated becoming a woman. I felt so out of control; I was disgusted with myself. I thought the answer was to be thinner. I started starving when I was 17 years old, and did not stop until I was brought to a clinic because I was undernourished and weak I could no longer walk. Talk therapy in the hospital was not a solution.

I wanted to eat all day but tried every means possible to keep myself from doing it. I started to smoke, drink coffee, and eat huge amounts of low-calorie vegetables. In a panic about all the calories I took in, I forced myself to throw up. I also controlled my weight by running long distances. I ran until my legs were so bruised that I could only continue by having shots in my shins. Despite the burning pain in my legs, I had to continue, because I felt that I had to burn the calories. In addition, I took huge numbers of laxative pills. I cried and felt scared, but kept doing these things anyway.

In college, every night I woke up and ate my roommates' food. I was bulimic. I lied, stole, and hated myself. Every morning I tried to starve again, but the first bite I ate defeated me. Previously, I had been so small that I had had to wear children's clothes; but after all my eating I weighed almost 180 pounds. My grades went from A's to D's. Trapped in a fat body, I was too afraid to face my family and old friends. As soon as I finished school, I ran away to the United States.

After six weeks in Massachusetts, I attended my first FA meeting and joined FA. I found the program both easy and hard. Even so, from the moment I joined FA, I felt liberated and joyful.

Finally, I knew what and how much to eat! I was also very grateful that I felt so accepted.

For the first time, I found a group of people who had the same kind of stories as mine. I was not an awful, terrible person—I have an illness and there is a solution.

I have been in recovery since 1992. Although I live in Germany I am still in close contact with FA members in the United States. I am married to a wonderful

man and have a very satisfying, responsible job. This has all happened only because my life is no longer controlled by my two destructive urges – to eat and to starve. For that, I thank FA.

**“The belief that I could accomplish whatever I set out to do served me well in every area of my life – except my problem with food.”**

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I am the oldest of four girls. We grew up in an Irish Catholic town, without a lot of money or material things. We were raised to believe that if you wanted something badly enough it could be yours, if only you had enough drive and determination.

That became one of my strongest beliefs. When I decided that I wanted something, I channeled every bit of my energy and drive into attaining it. As a result, I became a straight-A student and was accepted by one of the most prestigious colleges in the country.

At college, I focused on competitive running, and became one of the top long-distance runners in the country. All through college I ran twice a day—early in the morning and at practice later that afternoon. I usually ran 70–80 miles a week.

I ran in the freezing cold and snow of New England winters. I ran when I was sick and when I was exhausted. Nothing mattered. I was driven to succeed. The belief that I could accomplish whatever I set out to do served me well in every area of my life, except my problem with food. I started to diet in the fifth or sixth grade, although I was thin at the time. Inside, I think I knew that eating, especially sweets, was something I couldn't control.

I remember always having a feeling that I needed to be filled, a longing for something – I didn't know what. I tried to fill that hole with food. When I binged, I felt as if I was in another world, as though time had stopped—and for a moment I was soothed. I continuously betrayed my resolutions to be thin and ate until I couldn't eat any more. Then inevitably, I punished myself by purging.

I discovered purging in the ninth grade. The first time I tried it, I felt relieved. My jeans felt loose again. I felt thin, free, almost high. I believed I had found a way to control my problem and I used it often. As my disease progressed, I would binge on huge quantities of food, throw it all up, and then go back to the refrigerator and start the process all over again.

In college, I tried all kinds of methods to control my eating. I ran, swam, biked, and did aerobics. I restricted my food. I became a vegetarian. My refusal to keep any food in my dorm room drove me to look in garbage cans for takeout boxes to see if I could find leftovers to eat. I became isolated from my friends, and eventually stopped running track, going out, or even answering the phone. All that was left was bingeing, purging, exercising, and studying. I was put in the college infirmary twice because of my bulimia.

Finally, my therapist and the dean of the college mandated that I take a medical leave of absence. I went back to my family's home, but then on my twenty-first birthday, I attempted suicide by taking pills.

After my suicide attempt I spent three months in an in-patient treatment center, but I was unwilling to accept that I was an addict—unable to control myself with food. It took several more years of struggle and suffering before I finally gave up.

That was when I found FA, and for many years I have abstained from addictive eating and purging. I am married and we have a beautiful daughter.

Today I know that no matter what else happens, it's a good day for me if I don't hurt myself with food. I feel like a blind person who has been given sight. My life has been given back to me by the fellowship and program of FA.

## **“From an early age, I was ill at ease in my body and my life.”**

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I realize now that my problems with food began much earlier than I originally thought. A few years ago, I found a diary I had written when I was eleven. I was a skinny little girl then, but I wrote about feeling that I should start a diet.

Throughout my life, an intense desire to be thin took me from dieting into fasting, compulsive exercising, undereating, and bulimia; a drive to fill myself with food in order to numb my feelings took me to bingeing and, in certain periods, to being fat.

I was ill at ease in my body and my life from an early age. Although I often felt anxious and afraid, I didn't start eating strangely until my first year in high school, when I discovered that the sweet treats I ate after school made me feel better.

From that time on, I was increasingly preoccupied with food and my body size. Even when my weight was normal, my behavior was extreme.

Although I was very thin, I did two water fasts for almost a week each time, trying to lose even more weight. I broke both fasts with lots of sugar.

After the second fast—and a disastrous relationship—I began to lose control of how much I ate. As I ate larger quantities, primarily of sugar, flour, and greasy meats, I gained weight and fell into a horrible depression. Ironically, food seemed like my only comfort.

I battled with weight and bingeing for the next six years of my life, completely unable to control myself. At 26, tired of being fat, I started a regimen that I thought would make me thin, and I pursued it with a vengeance. Severely restricting my calorie intake and running every morning, I lost all the extra weight and more. I would have described myself as thin, but actually, I was emaciated.

At the time, I thought that I had what I wanted, but I could hardly live my life because I was so obsessed with food. I ate pounds of raw vegetables, turned orange from eating mustard and carrots, drank gallons of diet soda, and carried food with me whenever I traveled. I lost a lot of my hair, all of my body fat, my period, and any ability to keep warm. I had to wear a down vest to feel comfortable, even in the middle of the summer.

After two and a half years of this restrictive behavior, I picked up food made with flour and sugar. One bite of a muffin reawakened the old compulsion and I was absolutely driven to eat. The quantities I ate increased and I gained weight daily. To try to control my weight, I became bulimic. Again, I thought I had found a solution (maximum eating, minimum weight gain), but bulimia did not work for me. Despite purging, I was taking in so many calories, that I still gained weight. And worse, the bulimia perpetuated my bingeing. As soon as possible after I ate, I found a bathroom, but once my stomach was empty, I had to eat again.

After more than seven years of struggling with under-eating, bulimia, and bingeing, I found FA. I was totally desperate, so I really tried to follow the suggestions I received. After only a short time, I had two realizations. The first was that the program actually worked, even though I didn't believe it would. The second was that as I abstained from all of my destructive behaviors with food and followed FA suggestions, my depression and self-hatred lifted! Food moved from the center of my life into its proper place, and I became free to live.

I have been in the FA program for eighteen years. I am not cured of my illness and never will be, but if I continue to stay involved with FA, I know that I will never have to turn against myself again. Since joining FA my weight has been normal, and I have not once returned to bingeing or purging. Compulsion with food and obsession about weight have been lifted from me. I am grateful and very happy; I like the way that I live, and I like the way that I look!

**“I was caught between my façade—the successful, ambitious and put-together student—and my dark, unspeakable secret.”**

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I am thirty-three, and I have not thrown up in two years. After fifteen years of obsession with my body, daily bingeing and purging, and lying about myself, I have finally found a solution for my life problems, and have been granted freedom from food. In my disease, I was always slightly underweight, and I would have killed to stay thin.

Today, I am still slender, but I don't have to hurt myself or anyone else in order to stay that way. I grew

up in Germany in an education-minded, middle-class family. I excelled at school and everyone thought of me as a lively, curious, and adventurous child. Inside, however, already at an early age, I felt pressured to work for my parents' and friends' love, and to live up to their expectations.

Food and weight were not an issue for me until I entered puberty, when I suddenly felt ugly, awkward, and fat. Although I did not have to lose a pound, I decided to follow my father's example and go on a diet. At fifteen, I was seriously underweight: my bones stuck out, I was constantly cold, my lips were blue, my skin got very dry and I lost my period. There were many times when I almost fainted due to my dangerously low blood pressure—but in spite of that, I could only think of what I was not going to eat next. By the time I turned sixteen, I was purging, but I didn't even know the term "bulimia." My clueless parents were happy that I had resumed eating and I was happy because I'd found the ultimate solution to all my problems, or so I thought; I could eat whatever and as much as I wanted and stay thin at the same time.

Before long, however, food took over my life. I had to have it. I regularly stole food out of the freezer or the pantry. I stole money from my parents to buy food. I ate large portions at mealtime and then secretly continued eating in my room. I hid food in my room and sneaked the wrappers out in my backpack. Later, I stole my roommate's food, took my boyfriend's money, and I always lied when I was confronted with my behavior.

The most humiliating part was the vomiting, which consumed more and more of my mental and physical energy. Daily, if not hourly, I did everything to cover

up this behavior. I routinely turned on the shower to drown out the noise, and sprayed perfumes to suppress the smell. I spent hours in the bathroom upside down with my head in the toilet bowl, tears in my eyes, gasping for breath and expecting to die, but determined to get that little bit more of food out of my body. After breaking toilets several times, I became more concerned about the workings of the plumbing systems than about the people in my life.

I was caught between my outside façade—the successful, ambitious, and put-together student—and my dark, unspeakable secret. I was convinced that if anyone knew, they would hate me as much as I hated myself.

I tried therapy for the first few years of my bulimia, and it helped me somewhat, but never stopped my crazy eating. I simply gave in, assuming that I would have to binge and purge until my untimely death. I was not willing to go to any lengths to get well until I had lost everything—my husband, my job, and my health.

The recovery program of FA and the Twelve Steps have turned my life around. Since I've joined FA, I've stopped throwing up. I've been able to reconcile the two halves of my "split personality," and to let go of the shame and self-loathing of the past. I am learning, a day at a time, not to hurt myself. My relationships with my parents and my husband have been restored. And best of all, I will never again have to worry about my weight, my food, plumbing systems, or the lies I've told. Finally, I am free to live.

## 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.

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## 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.

**foodaddicts.org**

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