

Living Abstinently: A Guide to the FA Tools

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Food Addicts in Recovery Anonymous, Inc.

Woburn, Massachusetts

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fa | FOOD ADDICTS *in recovery anonymous*

There is a solution.

There was nothing left for us but to pick up the simple kit of spiritual tools laid at our feet... By doing so, we have a spiritual experience which revolutionizes our whole attitude toward life, toward others, and towards God's universe.

—*Twenty-Four Hours a Day*, Aug 12

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Introduction

THIS BOOKLET REPRESENTS the collective wisdom and experience of FA members with decades of unbroken abstinence. It describes the daily practices FA members use to gain freedom from the craving, obsession, and compulsion of addiction. We call these practices the “tools of FA.” Every tool is essential. Used together each day, they help us to live the Twelve Steps of recovery—*to live abstinently*—so that we can attain and maintain continuous, contented abstinence from addictive eating one day at a time.

We come to our first FA meeting for a variety of reasons. Whatever the circumstances, many of us are looking for a diet. We may be surprised to receive suggestions reaching far beyond the details of a food plan. However, we soon begin to see that changing what we eat is not enough. We hear stories of addiction—talk of the fear, doubt, insecurity, physical compulsion, and mental obsession that drove us to eat. We realize we are addicted to food, and that we need a new way of life.

Abstinence

In the past, addictive eating was our most common reaction to life. We obtain abstinence from addictive eating by weighing, measuring, and committing our food to an FA sponsor. We have found that we must abstain completely from all flour and sugar.

1. A Daily Food Plan. No matter how great our self-understanding or how strong our willpower, we find we cannot muster the strength to stop eating addictively without help. With the guidance of our sponsors, we write down and commit ourselves to a food plan each day, so that we know what, when, and how much we will eat. If we have difficult medical issues, we explain to our doctors that we are in recovery from addiction and discuss the structure of our food plan with them.

2. Weighing and Measuring. When we weigh and measure our food, we place boundaries around it. Written food plans, digital scales, and measuring spoons take the guesswork out of choosing our quantities of food. We soon find it a relief to eat only and exactly what we have committed to eat—no

licking, no tasting, nothing more and nothing less. Paradoxically, we feel satisfied.

3. Planning Ahead. If we plan each day to support our abstinence, we plan to succeed. Suggestions for solid abstinence include eating at regular intervals without waiting too long in between, packing meals to take with us when we cannot eat at home, and making grocery lists so we can minimize the number of times we shop for food each week

4. Simple Food. Prior to joining FA, we may have been gourmet cooks or spent hours watching cooking shows on TV, but most of us now find that the simpler we keep our food, the greater our freedom.

5. Boundaries. As addicts who are prone to nibbling or bingeing, we need clear beginnings and endings to our meals. A brief chore or quick conversation can easily turn into half an hour away from the table, so we eat without interruption, sitting down rather than walking, standing at a counter, or driving a car. Many of us have found that dollops of milk—even when weighed or measured—led us to nurse endless cups of coffee or tea, so we drink milk as milk and keep our hot beverages plain. A moment of quiet before and after our meals helps to define clear boundaries around our eating.

6. Restaurants. We enjoy occasionally eating out, but we don't take our scales or measuring spoons with us. When possible, we check the menu ahead of time. Once we are seated, we ask our Higher Power to help us order abstinent, simple food and to cut off whatever is more than our usual portion. We can also ask for any needed adjustments. We tell the

waiter: "Please leave the croutons off my salad and put the dressing on the side." Remembering that *less is more* and that we will always have another meal coming, we don't take extra food into a restaurant, and once we've left, the meal is over.

7. Body Size and Weight. The FA program and our daily food plan free us forever from the need to diet and from obsession with our body size. How? We stay abstinent, practice gratitude for our health, and trust our sponsor's guidance regarding our weight. By getting on the scale only at suggested intervals, we take the focus off numbers and learn to accept our own bodies.

Sponsor

We ask an FA sponsor to guide us through the recovery program on every level: physical, mental, and spiritual. Ours is a program of attraction. Find a sponsor who has what you want and ask how it was achieved.

1. Guidance and Support. No one can do this program alone. In order to remain abstinent, we need the concrete guidance and consistent support of a sponsor whose recovery we trust. Sponsors first help us by explaining which foods are abstinent and which foods to avoid, guiding us toward rigorous honesty by listening to us commit our food each day. When we first join FA, we usually speak with our sponsor for fifteen minutes daily. For many of us, this practice continues for some time, until—as we grow in our recovery—we are ready for less frequent contact.

2. Accepting the Gift. Being sponsored is a privilege, an opportunity to learn, and an exercise in humility. To stay abstinent, we reach out for suggestions and help. We benefit most when we consistently call on time and avoid multitask-

ing. Whatever our immediate reactions, we try to keep an open mind instead of arguing that we know best. After all, our best thinking drove us into food addiction.

3. Personal Honesty. In FA, we look for a way of life that is not focused on food or weight and that allows us to face our problems without addictive eating. In order to stay abstinent, we talk with our sponsors about *anything* that might be troubling us. “Only by discussing ourselves, holding back nothing, only by being willing to take advice and accept direction could we set foot on the road to straight thinking, solid honesty, and genuine humility.”¹

¹ *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions*. New York, NY: Alcoholics Anonymous World Services, 1996, 59.

Meetings

We attend meetings, where we share our experience, strength, and hope with each other. We have found that unless we give to newcomers what we have received from the program, we cannot keep it for ourselves.

1. Committed Meetings. With abstinence as our priority, the meetings that help us sustain our abstinence become a priority too. We choose specific meetings, commit to them, and schedule everything else around them. The deeper our commitment, the stronger our recovery; when necessary, many of us willingly drive an hour or more to our meetings. Open AA meetings are a good alternative if there are no FA meetings in our area.

2. Meetings as Medicine. Addictive eating was once our most common reaction to life. Now we attend FA meetings. Meetings focus us on abstinence, gratitude, service, and hope. We remember where our food addiction took us. Try visiting an FA meeting in another area if you're traveling, and you'll likely enjoy your trip even more.

3. Ending Isolation. As food addicts, we have a strong tendency to isolate. In-person meetings give us opportunities to get to know people and to let them know us. To *feel* part of a meeting, we need to *be* part of the meeting, so we plan to arrive early and raise our hands to read or share. We make an effort to talk with others—especially newcomers or those who are alone—before and after the meeting and during the break.

4. Sharing Experience. Each person’s story of addiction and recovery is unique. We do service at our meetings when we share our own story. What did food do to us? How did we hit rock bottom? What helps us stay abstinent today? If we are being honest and trying to be helpful, what we say and how we speak are enough. Reminding ourselves that we are not performing or advising, we speak from the heart without notes. Sincerity and honesty count more than cleverness and charisma.

5. Strength from Fellowship. “Just being with men and women who have found the way out gives you a feeling of security. You listen to the speakers, you talk with other members, and you absorb the atmosphere of confidence and hope that you find in the place.”²

² *Twenty-Four Hours a Day*. Center City, MN: Hazelden Foundation, 1992, (March 23).

Telephone

Food addiction is a disease of self-centeredness and isolation, so we use the telephone daily to connect with FA members. We begin with a committed call to our sponsor. Phoning others throughout the day, we share our hope, and when we need help, we ask for it. Above all, we call if we are tempted to take the first addictive bite.

1. The Phone, Not the Food. What should we do when we are gripped by a food craving or feel the depression that used to drive us to eat? Fellow FA members can always help, and they are only a phone call away. Phone lists are available at our local meetings and the WSI phone list gives us access to members all over the world. The people who are on phone lists want to be called.

2. Creating a Network. By using the telephone regularly, we lose our feelings of loneliness and create a network of people we feel comfortable calling. The phone is a powerful source of help whenever we’re upset or confused, but if we don’t know anyone, we won’t use it when we need it. Most of us make it a

goal to reach several FA members every day. If we don't know what to say, we might ask how the other person is doing or about their story of food addiction.

3. Learning to Trust. When we are new to FA, calling a member we don't know feels awkward. At first we may worry that we are bothering someone, but usually, both members are of service to each other. Every call makes the next one easier, and we soon begin to understand the value of this tool.

4. Practical Suggestions. We use the phone for every kind of question or concern. We've asked people how they fit phone calls into their day, practice quiet time, or prepare their food. We've gotten help when we've been startled by a food craving, didn't know how to manage a potluck dinner with friends, had to speak with the hostess of a formal dinner party about our needs, or faced planning our meals on a transcontinental flight. To receive helpful suggestions in FA, all we have to do is ask.

Anonymity

Anonymity is the spiritual foundation of our program. We are not afraid to admit our own addiction, but at the public level, we protect the program by concealing our full names and faces. Humility is essential for our recovery. No individual member should ever be seen as representing FA as a whole. Within the program, we reach out to help, but we do not gossip or reveal anyone's membership in FA except our own. Each person's story is theirs to reveal.

1. Protecting the Program. If we publicly reveal ourselves as FA members and have a relapse, the public may assume that the program failed us, not understanding that we failed to practice the program. To protect FA as a whole, we do not reveal our full names or faces in print, social media, or on radio or television. However, sharing humbly and individually about our own membership in FA with families, friends, doctors, clergy, and employers is not a break of anonymity.

2. Anonymity and Confidentiality. We try not to confuse the principles of anonymity and confidentiality. Both are

important and critical to our recovery. To maintain confidentiality, we do not share the details of our phone calls with other FA members, nor do we share a story that we may hear at a meeting. We respect the privacy of FA members. To maintain anonymity, we are careful not to reveal anyone else's membership in FA. Occasionally, someone outside our fellowship may ask us how we know another FA member, and we might answer, "We met through mutual friends." Anonymity should not be an issue, however, when we refer one FA member to another. We encourage members to reach out to others who are struggling, without specifying why.

3. Humility in Action. "Let us always remember that anonymity—not taking credit for our own or others' recovery—is humility at work." Every time we speak humbly in public as an individual rather than as a representative of FA, we embrace anonymity. Every time we help another food addict but refrain from taking any credit, we recognize that we are depending on a power greater than ourselves.

4. Principles before Personalities. Each FA member, no matter the length of abstinence or the service positions held, must stay *one among many* in order to remain in recovery. There are no experts, gurus, founders, or stars in FA.

5. Crosstalk. We practice anonymity when sharing at meetings by focusing on our own experience rather than commenting on, or even praising, what others have said. Everyone's anonymity is preserved and the meeting maintains its necessary focus on newcomers when we share our personal stories, confining our words to our own experience, using "I" statements.

Literature

We study FA Conference-approved literature to strengthen and reinforce our program. When we read it daily, the literature impresses on us basic truths we have found vital to our recovery. Literature is an ever-available tool that gives us insight into our problem, strength to deal with it, and the hope that there is a solution for us.

1. Recovery Bookends. We read *Twenty-Four Hours a Day* when we wake up and a page or two of *Alcoholics Anonymous* before we go to sleep. This practice helps us begin each day with hope and end each day with faith and gratitude. At first we find it strange to read about alcohol, but we soon learn that food addicts and alcoholics have the same disease of addiction. Although we may be familiar with other meditation books, most of us focus on *Twenty-Four Hours a Day* so we can remember something of what we have read and apply it during that day.

2. The FA Book. Many FA members make a daily habit of reading *Food Addicts in Recovery Anonymous*. It helps us better

understand the specifics of our disease and recovery.

3. Help on the Go. The FA pamphlets, the *Just for Today* card, audio recordings of FA qualifications, and *connection* magazine are easy to carry with us or download. Many members pick up a piece of literature or listen to a recording when they have a free moment or are experiencing uncertainty or stress. These resources are available when we can't get to a meeting or make a call.

Writing

Writing is an indispensable tool for sustaining abstinence and working the Twelve Steps. We write down our food plan each day before committing it to our sponsor. When we are troubled, writing also helps us see situations more clearly and better discern any necessary action.

1. Daily Food Plan. Each day we take a few moments to write down our food plan for the next day, checking to make sure we have on hand the foods we are choosing. By putting this plan on paper, we commit ourselves to accepting the boundaries of our abstinence and gain a sense of peace.

2. Clarity. When we are confused or upset, many of us find that writing a letter to our Higher Power gives us greater understanding of difficult situations or emotions. We take a moment of quiet, ask our Higher Power for clarity, and begin writing freely. We're frequently surprised at the results. Pen and paper may be more helpful than keyboards.

3. connection. When we have ninety days of abstinence, we can write our stories for *connection*, the FA magazine.

Quiet Time

To maintain our abstinence, we must learn to rely on a power greater than ourselves. We set aside a full half hour each day to sit quietly and relax. In this time with our Higher Power, we listen, seeking the perspective, serenity, and strength that will enable us to stay abstinent and respond sanely to the challenges and joys of the day.

1. Keeping It Simple. In quiet time, FA's term for meditation, we relax body and mind. Some members find it helpful to focus on their breathing, to repeat one word or a short prayer silently, or to think about a phrase from the *Twenty-Four Hours a Day* reading.

2. Daily Discipline. We try to take quiet time at the same time every day, usually in the morning. Over time, the discipline becomes easier and we look forward to a calming and centering experience. We devote an uninterrupted half hour because it may take almost that long to still our bodies and stop our racing minds. When needed, we benefit from extra quiet time later in the day.

3. Distractions. Experience has taught us that we need to avoid all distractions in order to get the full benefit of quiet time—to make a spiritual connection with our Higher Power. We choose a place where we can sit and be free of interruptions. We silence our phones. We close our eyes. We relax and try to completely let go of planning, to-do lists, and worries.

4. Cultivating Patience. None of us achieves perfect quietness every day. Our sponsors, as well as more experienced FA members, encourage us not to give up or criticize ourselves on days when our minds are busy or our bodies restless.

5. Seeking Serenity. *Twenty-Four Hours a Day* reminds us, “Only when you are calm and serene can you do good work. Emotional upsets make you useless.”³ Quiet time helps us to calmly face life’s challenges.

6. Higher Power. In daily quiet time, we gradually build a relationship with the God of our understanding. “You try praying in a quiet time each morning and you begin to feel stronger, as though your prayers were heard. So you gradually come to believe there must be a Power in the world outside yourself, which is stronger than you and to which you can turn for help.”⁴

³*Twenty-Four Hours a Day*. (March 17).

⁴*Twenty-Four Hours a Day*. (March 25).

Gratitude

Food addiction is a disease of negativity. Our contented abstinence depends on our willingness to replace negative thoughts and feelings with thankful ones. In the past, we thought of gratitude as a feeling, but in FA, we practice it as an action.

1. Choosing Gratitude. We find that actions of gratitude lead to feelings of gratitude. In recovery we have a choice. We never forget how grateful we are for freedom from addictive eating, and we soon discover that there is something to be grateful for in everything that happens each day. When life seems hard, we can turn our attitude around by looking for the good in even the hardest of challenges. Writing a gratitude list is always helpful.

2. Morning and Night. We begin each morning and end each night by thanking our Higher Power for our abstinence. No matter what else may have happened, abstinence is a gift, and an abstinent day is a great day.

3. Gratitude Takes Time and Practice. Some of us routinely see the glass as half empty rather than half full. We can’t expect

instant transformation, but if we want to stay abstinent, we have to make the effort to change. *Twenty-Four Hours a Day* reminds us that saying thank you “is a daily practice that is absolutely necessary. If a day is not one of thankfulness, the practice has to be repeated until it becomes so.”⁵ Try exchanging negative thoughts for positive thoughts for one day and see what happens. **Positive Action Changes Everything (PACE).**

Service

We do service by staying abstinent. Abstinence gives us freedom from compulsion and obsession with food so that we can be available to others. Any service that reaches a fellow sufferer adds to the quality of our own recovery. We are promised a life of sane and happy usefulness as a result of working the Twelve Steps. Service fulfills that promise.

1. Service Begins with Abstinence. Before we can help anyone else, we need to take care of ourselves. Abstinence is our most fundamental form of service. One day at a time, abstinence gives us the spiritual strength, stability, and clarity we need to help other food addicts, and be available to our families, friends, and community.

2. Sponsoring. When we have six months of abstinence, we can give back what we have been given. Grateful for our own sponsors, we set aside time to take calls from sponsees. We are privileged to guide them in their recovery, just as we have been guided in ours. Our sponsors help us as we learn how to pass on the FA program.

³ *Twenty-Four Hours a Day*. (January 22).

3. Newcomers. We hear people say that meetings are for newcomers. We provide vital FA service by doing all we can to help them at our meetings. We seek them out during breaks to see if they have questions, warmly welcome them, and share a little of our own stories. When the greeters are busy helping others, we make sure that newcomers have meeting and phone lists, and we introduce them to available sponsors if they wish to start FA. Between meetings, we call them to offer encouragement and hope.

4. Everyone Can Give. Any service that reaches a fellow sufferer adds to the quality of our own recovery. We do what we can when we can. Sharing at meetings, attending business meetings, and supporting FA at the local, regional, and World Service levels enables us to give back what we have so generously been given. And service is fun!

5. Service Keeps Us Abstinent. “But even faith is not the whole story. There must be service. We must give this thing away if we want to keep it. . . To be of service to other people makes our lives worth living.”⁶ For the sake of our survival, and the survival of FA, we need to participate fully in the program. The more we give, the more we receive: we grow stronger in our abstinence and happier in our lives.

⁶ *Twenty-Four Hours a Day*. (June 16).

Conclusion

WE USE THESE TOOLS to live the Twelve Steps. To remain abstinent, we give our will and lives to the care of our Higher Power. We practice honesty with our sponsor, and we do service by carrying the message to others through telephone calls and meetings. We seek regular contact with our Higher Power through writing and quiet time, and we practice anonymity. Joyous gratitude is the gift of living abstinently.

“Spiritual development is achieved by daily persistence in living the way you believe God wants you to live. Like the wearing away of a stone by steady drops of water, so will your daily persistence wear away all the difficulties and gain spiritual success for you. Never falter in this daily, steady persistence. Go forward boldly and unafraid. God will help and strengthen you, as long as you are trying to do [God’s] will.”⁷

⁷ *Twenty-Four Hours a Day*. (March 25).

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.

Adapted with permission from AA.

Notes



FOOD ADDICTS

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