

# Battling addiction to food

## Group helps locals keep eating under control

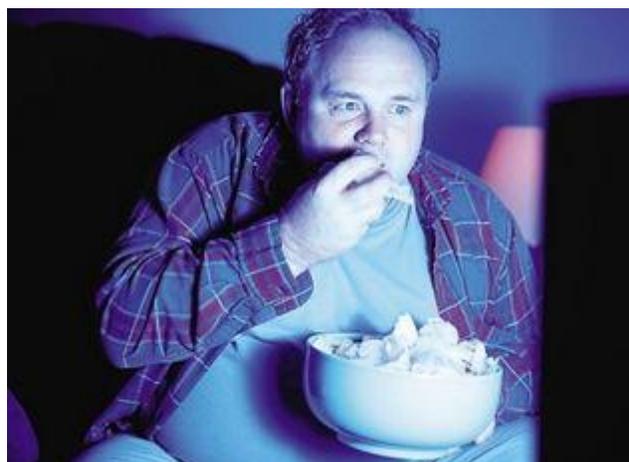
By Jeff McMenemy

Jeff.McMenemy@dowjones.com

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A 55-year-old Eliot, Maine, woman decided to start attending Food Addicts meetings because she was tired of being overweight and tired of lying to herself.

"I was a grazer. I ate all day long," said the woman, who agreed to speak to Seacoast Sunday along with several other group members if her identity wasn't revealed. "I was a sneak eater, too. I was private. I didn't eat in front of other people. It was like ...; you were lying every day to yourself that you were going to behave yourself, and then you were lying to other people about how much you ate."



**Chronic overeaters seeking a local support group to help change unhealthy habits have several options.**

The woman has been in the 12-step Food Addicts program that meets Mondays at 7 p.m. in St. John's Episcopal Church Parish Hall on Chapel Street in Portsmouth, for 14 years. She said she has lost weight and stayed at a healthy, consistent weight, and learned to deal with her addiction.

"We're aware when we're in this program that we're always going to be a food addict," she said. "We don't go back to the old ways, that will just take us back to the way we were before."

The group members, who spoke while sitting around a table in the church hall, are inviting anyone who feels they might have a food addiction to an annual public meeting at the church from 7 to 8:30 p.m. on April 29. People can learn about the program and ask questions to current members.

The group works on getting new members to eat three balanced meals with non-processed foods each day, while not eating snacks, they said. Clearly, the program is working for the group of middle-aged men and women who spoke during the interview, all of whom appeared fit and healthy.

But diet is only part of the program, which focuses on learning to live well with the food addiction and understanding what triggers bingeing and purging, they said.

A 48-year-old woman from New York who was visiting the Portsmouth meeting, said she finally lost weight, and kept it off, when she came to the program. Ten different diets she tried didn't work.

"I was 20, and I was 200 pounds and 5-foot-3, and I was depressed about my eating," she said.

The most important thing she learned is she has an addiction.

"My drug of choice was food," she said. "It taught me that I had three problems and not just one. I always had a weight problem, and I found out I also had a food problem, and I also had a living problem. I needed a program that would address all three of those."

Whenever she experienced negative feelings, her inclination "was to quell it by stuffing my face with food."

"I lived kind of a double life. I was very successful and I had lots of friends ...; but I had a hidden life where I would eat," she said. "Nobody ever saw me eat. I was not a public eater. But when I ate, I ate a lot."

She said Food Addicts gave her the tools to stop overeating, including her three-times-a day food plan and a sponsor who had been through the same kind of ordeals.

"I could really find some peace of letting go of the illusion that I was really controlling anything, because I wasn't controlling anything," she said. "It gave me a tremendous network of support to turn to when I wanted to eat in the form of meetings, phone calls, people who would take my calls anytime and give me the help and support ...; I needed."

Dealing with a food addiction is different than being addicted to alcohol, she said, because at Food Addicts, you have to eat three healthy meals a day.

"It's about dealing with an addictive mind that's always looking for the next opportunity to eat," she said. "They say in AA you slay the dragon, but in FA you have to take him out and pet him three times a day."

As a sponsor, she now offers help to people who come into the program, and while the diet can be considered strict, the 48-year-old said she has never felt better because of it and the entire FA program.

"I still can't believe I've been coming for 26 years and I haven't eaten ...; between meals or had snacks for almost 25 years," she said.

A 58-year-old woman from Falmouth, Maine, said she came into the program actually underweight, after years of bingeing and purging.

"So I had to actually gain weight in the program," she said. "My addiction certainly was in the form of food. I was also bulimic for many, many years. But the addiction was in my head. There's a very mental component to all of this."

She put being thin ahead of everything else. "I was obsessed with my weight," she said. "I would do anything to not be fat, including ruin my health, throwing up, over-exercising, whatever it took. Because that was more important to me than life itself, literally."

FA helped her because of the support she received from other members and the food plan, because it gives food addicts a way to be sober.

"You can't not eat," she said. "Our definition of sobriety is weighed and measured meals, three times a day. Meals have a beginning, middle and end, and then you go onto to something else until it's time for the next meal."

The shared experiences of group members made it easier for her to come in to what was initially a room full of strangers, talk about what she had been through and receive support, not criticism.

"When I first stood up and told my story, throwing up for 20 years is not pretty and there were heads nodding around the room," she said. "People got it and I could feel comfortable and safe talking about it. I don't talk about it at work."

Most FA members come to the program after trying numerous diets and other approaches to dealing with their food addiction.

A 66-year-old woman from Kensington, who now acts as a sponsor for several newer members, said she tried therapy for "a whole mess of years" before coming to the program. "The idea that I could get relief from talking to someone on the phone or going to a meeting was mind blowing," she said. "It was a whole new way of doing things."

She now starts her day sponsoring other members by talking to them on the phone.

"Some mornings I have calls from China and Sweden and England and Ohio," she said.

A 49-year-old woman from South Portland, Maine, said she had to get past the initial impression she had about the program when she walked in, because everybody she saw was thin.

"I walked into this room and there's all these skinny people," she said. "(And I thought) more skinny people are going to tell me what to do. Skinny people have been telling me what to do my entire life, but then they didn't."

Instead, they offered her a way to lose weight and keep the weight off.

Group members don't count calories and there are no preset goal weights.

"Everybody's body is different," said the 48-year-old woman from New York. "The goal is not to be thin, the goal is to be in a healthy body size for you."

But she stressed the program is about much more than just the diet, it's "a way of life."

"People are really honest about how hard it has been to struggle with food and people talk at the front of the room about doing things that are really shameful," she said. "But you get it out there and you

don't feel ashamed. You don't feel that loneliness and isolation. That goes a long way toward being safe enough to put the food down. There's always so much hope in the room."

**Food Addicts in Recovery Anonymous**  
**Local chapters and meeting times and places.**

Monday

Portsmouth: 7 p.m., St. John's Church, Parish Hall, 101 Chapel St. Contacts: Lynne M. at 778-1799 and Susan D. at (207) 748-3238

Wednesday

North Hampton: 9 a.m., UCC Church, 295 Atlantic Ave. Contact: Laura W. at 964-7036

Thursday

Dover: 6:30 p.m., Dover Baptist Church, 151 Washington St. Contacts: Cathy N. at 350-0646 and Laura W. at 964-7036

For more information and additional support group locations: [www.foodaddicts.org](http://www.foodaddicts.org)