

HOW IS RECOVERY IN OA DIFFERENT FROM RECOVERY IN AA?

By Dr. Judi Hollis

For close to half a century, I have been a champion of the idea that the program that helps alcoholics into lifelong recovery can also help overeaters in their struggles with food. Denial mechanisms are the same and necessary behavior/personality changes are similar. What has worked for alcoholics to maintain sobriety can also work for you. But as you progress, you may need to note how the paths diverge.

Discussions of how the two programs are similar but different came up in 1981 when I was privileged to speak at the Los Angeles birthday celebration when OA turned twenty-one years old. I suggested then that OA, in turning twenty-one, had grown into adulthood. It was time to take all the great wisdom learned from the daddy program, (AA) and couple that with our own experience to develop differently from our parent. That is the process of maturation and that is what growing up is all about.

Here, I offer you a preview of some of my intended remarks at the BETTY FORD CENTER AWARENESS HOUR and invite your responses, corrections, and suggestions.

1. MINER'S CANARIES

Overweight Americans are miner's canaries warning that there is something deeply unsatisfying about the way we live in this culture. Those of us eating excessively represent a modern plague. Once in recovery, we are the outsiders, the misfits, the ones gently surrendering to discipline. As we attempt to live more consciously and eat more mindfully, we sometimes make others feel uncomfortable. While AA meetings may be filled with raucous laughter and good humor, our meetings may seem too emotionally sensitive and even depressing. We are in a daily struggle and surrendering to slow and painful recoveries.

Often for alcoholics, after about three days clean, they start looking pretty good. Puffiness subsides, cleanup is quick, and congratulations start pouring in. They are presentable, even normal looking, and they set off toward a whole new life. One could almost forget they even had the illness. Conversely, many overeaters, live at least a year before others notice the results of their efforts. Our recovery program may not be as quickly visible as it is for alcoholics. We have to see the weight loss as a *by-product*, not as a goal. We have to be content with each day eating well, despite the slowness of weight loss. We become trained to value "each day to the good."

2. NEW RELATIONSHIP

If you were asked how recovery from overeating would differ from an alcoholism recovery, what is your immediate, emphatic response? It's probably some variation on, "Well, you can give up drinking alcohol, but everyone still has to eat!"

Yes, alcoholics can plug the jug, heroin addicts can put down the syringe, and shoppers can cut up the charge cards. But overeaters have to take our wild tiger out of the cage at least three times a day and walk him around the block. We also have to

become FRIENDS! We have to develop a new *relationship* with our substance, savoring it, planning for it, constantly negotiating with it.

Just "swearing off" can't work, and gobbling up miniscule portions of diet foods is still compulsive eating. We have to develop great daily discipline and awareness. We have to pay attention and stay awake!

Those recovering from sex addiction are advised to first get their heads on straight before considering a return to sexuality. The same goes for overeaters. We are instructed to initially have a very rigid food plan, but later become more flexitarian, learning to eat with purpose. In my third book, HOT & HEAVY, I advised that with sex as with food, instead of "just say no," we learn how to say a more conscious "yes."

3. KNOW IT ALL

I doubt you'll ever catch TV ads telling you about a "simple, painless, effortless way" to stop drinking. However, we're inundated with all the latest get-thin-quick schemes about weight loss. We can't help but be discouraged facing all the ads out there telling us how easy it should be.

Despite all the cocktail party conversations about "how to eat," most of us have already tried everything our own. Those paths include lifelong dieting, bouts with Weight Watchers, Jenny Craig, even by-pass surgery. Having tried and failed so many times makes it difficult for us to accept new ideas with what Buddhists call "beginners mind," or OA'ers call "newcomer eyes." Whatever new help in a recovery program is offered, we often reject with some variation on "been there, done that:"

"Oh yeah, I know all that."

"Yah, I tried that already"

"I know what to do."

In recovery, we have to surrender to following directions from a fellow sufferer. It's that vulnerable surrender that begins the healing.

4. CRITERIA CONFLICTS

How do we ascertain what recovery looks like? Alcoholics in recovery often celebrate their time without imbibing alcohol as their "day count" or "year count." Sometimes Overeaters try to celebrate this "day count" idea, but it's complicated. We have a double-edged goal: approaching normal body size while trying to copy the AA program's ideas on "abstinence." A person who celebrates days of "no flour or sugar," can still be gaining weight. Some claim to be sugar free while eating mass quantities of everything else. What if we are off sugar, but eating a side of beef for dinner? What if we no longer eat our binge foods or trigger foods, or fattening substances, but our *manner* of eating is to gobble, sneak, grab and devour? What if we spend our days obsessing about what we will or won't eat while still inhaling celery over the kitchen sink? Is that success in recovery? What's our criteria?

5. ROMANCING THE DRUG

Alcoholics don't ever have to contemplate "just one sip." And, they can avoid their substance and not even talk about it. As overeaters, we have to consider an oft quoted line from the AA Big Book:

"The idea that somehow, someday he will *enjoy* and *control* his drinking is the great obsession of every abnormal drinker."

A successful recovery from a food obsession results in exactly that. We must learn to both enjoy and control our eating. In an effort to accomplish that control, we need a lot of help. We are advised to pick out both a food sponsor and a step sponsor. We daily announce to our food sponsor our intentions of what TO EAT, rather than what to resist. We make a daily commitment to ourselves and announce our intentions out loud. We don't want to set ourselves up for worry and indecision. We are in a struggle for our very souls. It's not a game. For this reason, we have to pay attention to how, what, when and where we eat. We might initially seem like fanatics as we plan ahead considering many factors like age, activity level, social commitments, dress fit, and mood. Instead of swearing off, we are required to consciously go *towards* our substance. A favorite OA slogan is "Failing to plan is planning to fail."

6. SERIOUS BUSINESS

The OA program is like graduate school for the other addictions. We accept that we are not like the normal dieters out there, constantly struggling with a few pounds and sheepishly giggling about each minor foray out to the binge world. We don't laugh about being a "chocoholic." It's not about going on a new diet, but about entering a whole new way of life where deep personal change is difficult along with a change in how we are nurtured and comforted.

In recovery, we are bound to continue to have cravings for our love object. Like none of the other addicts, we have to learn how to lean in to our cravings. That does not mean "give in," but "*lean* in." We accept feelings of suffering and deprivation as a necessary part of our progress. We learn about giving up immediate pleasure for deferred gratification. We're almost like the Trappist Monk, Thomas Merton who said,

"I didn't become a monk to suffer *more* than other beings.
I became a monk to suffer more *skillfully* than other beings."

So, not to end on a sour note, but we have to ultimately realize that there is nothing we can eat, drink, buy, or kiss that makes any difference. We only succeed by going within, neither lard laden nor sugar coated, to discover our truly remarkable drug-free selves.

Please let me know your thoughts on these points.

Judi