

Food Addiction: Undereating? Underweight? Purging?

Can a person be addicted to food?

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

Here are some of the possible signs of food addiction:

- Overeating – bingeing or grazing repeatedly
- Purging
- Abusing laxatives
- Compulsive exercise and/or dieting
- Undereating or restricting
- Obsession with food or weight
- Being under or over a healthy weight
- Medical problems resulting from overeating, undereating, and/or purging
- Despondency, shame, isolation, and hopelessness related to food, weight, or body image

We have experienced that food addiction can go unrecognized because many focus on the associated behaviors and effects, rather than their underlying cause – addiction.

Food Addicts in Recovery Anonymous (FA) is a fellowship of people who come together to stop eating addictively. The first step in FA recovery is *abstinence*. Abstinence is clearly defined as weighed and measured meals with nothing in between, no flour, no sugar, and the avoidance of any individual binge foods. *Abstinence in FA is equivalent to A.A.'s sobriety.*

FA views food addiction as a threefold illness: physical, mental, and spiritual. While abstinence is not a diet and FA is not a weight-loss program, recovering food addicts in FA remain at a healthy weight for years and even decades. .

FA members have found they cannot sustain long-term recovery by merely following a food plan, even when they've reached a healthy weight. 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. When members are led through the Twelve Steps in sequence while abstinent, they experience a change in their thinking that brings about a transformative personality change. Their desire to eat addictively is removed, one day at a time.

In this pamphlet, FA members who were bulimic or underweight share dozens of brief stories—specific memories of moments in time—describing their

experiences in addiction and recovery. Although not all the details will match your own, you may identify with some of what you read here and feel that there is a place for you in FA.

Life in Food Addiction

I wasn't obese, I wasn't purging, and I wasn't starving. But I kept gaining and losing the same five, ten, fifteen pounds over and over again. I didn't know where to turn for help because I couldn't name my problem. I had no idea I was using food addictively.

My body will forever carry the scars of the abuse I inflicted on myself. My decades of vomiting caused permanent damage to my sinuses and destroyed the enamel on my teeth. In recovery, I've spent over \$100,000 on dental work for root canals, implants, and extractions.

I attended an in-patient treatment center for food addiction, and was able to stop my bulimia. However, when I was released, I still battled with myself, struggling every day to control my eating and weight.

In seventh grade I sat behind my classmate Lisa, whose purple T-shirt I can still see in my mind's eye. I'd stare at her upper arms, transfixed by how skinny they were. How could I get my arms to look like that? I starved myself for the next year and, at 5'4", ended up at 89 pounds. Eleven years later, I had eaten my way up to 181 pounds.

When I was 14 years old, I was 84 pounds and diagnosed as anorexic. I didn't want to gain weight, so I existed on juice and hard candy. As a result, my hair fell out in clumps, my skin turned gray, my ankles swelled from protein deficiency, and I lost my period. Later, I had to use fertility treatments to have children.

I gorged compulsively until I weighed 205 pounds at fifteen. Boys called me "fatso" and laughed when I was unable to run, even one time, around the school track. That summer, I starved myself, lost 95 pounds and was welcomed back to school as a popular girl. I vowed never to get big again. I became addicted to losing weight and only felt "thin enough" when my belly dipped concave between my hip bones. From then on, I swung between periods of bingeing and starvation. In FA recovery, I'm a normal weight, but the sags and folds of my skin betray my extreme weight fluctuations.

The side effects of abusing laxatives were humiliating, but I didn't care. Ironically, the years of laxatives left me chronically constipated. Thankfully, now that I'm in recovery, I no longer use laxatives—or lie to doctors about needing them.

To control my weight, I used energy supplements, prescription diet pills, and biweekly juice cleanses. Inevitably, I'd start raging, screaming at my kids, throwing things, and demanding my husband start seeing my therapist. I destroyed my mother's eightieth birthday celebration; I'd used Ipecac syrup that afternoon to induce vomiting and ended up in the emergency room.

I ran seven days a week. I intensely hated the running and how it made my face purple and splotchy, but I imagined it pounding the calories out of my body. When my neighbor

mentioned how impressed she was to see me running before sunrise, my worthy-meter spiked—I felt proud of my self-discipline and willingness to sacrifice sleep. I even left a slumber party at 5:00 AM, stepping over all the sleeping girls so I wouldn't miss my run.

I didn't have access to a scale at college, so every day before class I would take out my pink measuring tape and allow myself to eat only if my measurements were small enough. My excessive thinness not only made me feel superior, in control and safe; it made me feel special. When friends expressed concern that I was too thin, I chalked it up to jealousy.

I constantly weighed myself. If I saw the magic number I had in my head, it was a good day and I was good. If I was up a few pounds, it was a bad day and I was bad. I never wanted to stop eating, I just wanted to stop gaining weight. I weighed less than 100 pounds on my wedding day, but I still thought I looked fat in my dress. No matter how thin I got, it was never enough. Years later, I pulled the dress out of its box and was shocked to see a waistline so tiny it could have belonged to a Barbie doll.

I thought I was brilliant for figuring out how to burn calories all day long. In addition to taking two hour-long exercise classes every day, I parked my car two miles away from the office, ran to work in my professional clothes, and took the stairs to my eleventh-floor apartment, leaving my family on the elevator. Yet I didn't understand the term "exercise bulimic" when I first heard it.

I did not realize, until I entered recovery in my 50s, how secretive and compartmentalized my life had become. I told no one – not my husband nor any of my therapists – about my three-decade-long carousel of dieting, overeating, and purging. No one knew me because no one knew what I was really doing to myself. Maintaining this level of deception was exhausting.

The last time I threw up, eight years ago, I burst blood vessels in my eyes and developed quarter-sized blood blisters in my mouth that got infected; I was really scared, but when my therapist asked me if I'd be willing to stop my purging if it meant putting on 10 pounds, my answer was no. Besides, I loved the euphoria I felt after emptying myself out. I got high on the feeling of an empty stomach.

When I registered for Boston's December "Santa Speedo" race, in which participants run in a bathing suit, I starved myself from Halloween to Thanksgiving and loved the feeling of being fast and light. Inevitably, I binged and purged the night after the race.

I liked to think that my bulimia was my well-kept secret, but when you throw up multiple times each day, someone is bound to find out. Once, after bingeing at a potluck, I purged in the guest powder room and overflowed the toilet. Of course, I had to tell the owner of the house. She was kind, but it was beyond humiliating.

Finding FA

I was so skeptical at my first FA meeting. The person telling their story had lost 200 lbs; I was sure I didn't belong in a program for obese people. I was about to sneak out, when the person next to me shared that she'd been bulimic, like me. She explained that although the physical manifestations of food addiction vary, the solution is the same for all food addicts. I'm so glad I trusted her enough to stay.

The most terrifying part of getting abstinent was replacing old behaviors with new ones. I was so used to counting calories, that I spent half an hour in the dairy aisle reading the nutritional information on every brand of plain yogurt in order to find the one with fewest calories per serving. In FA, I never have to count calories again.

While controlling and restricting my food intake, I was obsessed with my weight and every bite that I ate, but I felt *powerful*. I could run eight miles a day and then work out at the gym for three hours. I could limit my eating until my stomach caved in. I was in charge. I didn't need a meeting for people who said they felt "powerless over food." Eventually, though, I really lost control and I began gaining weight, despite hours of brutal exercise. FA gave me support, structure, and a way of living that finally relieved me of the constant struggle to be thin. I stay at a comfortable weight, without starving, bingeing, or exercise.

When I started FA, I immediately recognized that its structure was brilliant. Committing my food by writing it down the night before and having daily contact with a sponsor relieved me of the committee in my head that held constant debates over what and how much I should eat.

I was jealous of FA newcomers who were elated at their weight loss, since my sponsor was asking me to gain weight. I knew I was too thin — after all, I had peach fuzz on my arms and legs due to undereating — but letting go of control was terrifying. I was only willing to take someone else's suggestions because I had run out of options. Allowing a sponsor to guide my food plan after so many years of trying to exercise self-control reminded me of the games of "trust" I'd played as a child, making my body a plank and falling back into the arms of a friend. First my sponsor, then my fellows, and eventually my higher power became trusted arms ready to catch me.

I ended up in the hospital after bursting a blood vessel in my eye because I could not stop purging. I was desperate. An online search led me to FA. When I heard the words "powerless" and "addiction" and "recovery," I was ready to consider help.

As someone who fiercely controlled how much, when, and what I ate, putting whatever I ate on a scale was initially easy. Putting my *body* on the scale was a huge challenge. My body obsession led me to use the scale as my dictator. If I weighed “too much,” I hated myself and if I weighed less, I allowed myself to binge and purge. In FA, I was guided to only weigh myself once a month, putting the scale out of sight at all other times. Before getting on the scale, I asked my higher power to help me accept my weight, saying: “My weight is your business, not mine.”

I was wary of being sold another diet, but I felt hope at my first FA meeting. I understood the concept of addiction immediately and could clearly see that I'd been using food as a drug. I knew that I used exercise the same way. In FA, I met people who'd struggled like I had. They told stories like mine, but they were calm, smiling, and peaceful. They'd been in the same size bodies for years.

I knew I was underweight, but to me, gaining weight was synonymous with uncontrollable bingeing. In the past, when I tried to gain weight, I couldn't stop eating. My FA sponsor frequently assured me that I had a safe, healthy food plan, dispelling my fears by saying “You won't overeat or gain too much weight in FA.” She was absolutely right.

On my fourth day of abstinence, I looked in the mirror and was amazed! My eyes weren't bloodshot and my throat didn't hurt. I hadn't purged for *four days*. I had the powerful sensation that maybe, just maybe, this might work for me.

As an under-eater *and* a binger, I never knew how to feed and nourish my body in a healthy way. My attempts to stay thin took all my energy and most of my time. Weighing and measuring my food didn't feel like an answer to my obsession, but I do feel incredible peace in FA. I learned to trust my sponsor because I knew they had also been obsessed with food and now had peace. Committed meetings and phone calls with other members have always helped me when I have been afraid of gaining weight. I am no longer alone.

I thought any carbs would make me gain weight. I hadn't had fruit in four years and was terrified of eating any grains or dairy. I thought I had to have apple cider vinegar with each meal or I'd release too much insulin and gain weight. In FA, I had to take a leap of faith. When I took the suggestions I was given by my sponsor and other FA members, I stabilized at a healthy weight for me. Even better, my fear lifted. I wasn't afraid of gaining weight or driven to try to lose more.

Early on in FA, there were many nights I cried after dinner; I felt too full. I'd made a commitment not to throw up, so I didn't. But, I kept asking myself: Can I continue eating this way? The next day, I would call my sponsor and say, “I'm

here, but I will only commit to doing this one more day!” Through that daily call, meetings, phone calls to other members, FA literature, and times of quiet meditation, I was always given the strength and willingness to make it through another day.

I came in hopeless, flying a white flag. I was weak from bulimia, over-exercise, and undereating. My teeth were ruined. FA seemed overwhelming at first—too many changes to my life: my eating, going to meetings, calling other members. I had tried everything else, but the people I met here were healthy and happy. I wanted to have what they had. I decided to try every suggestion, and to my amazement, it worked.

Before FA, I stayed severely underweight by bingeing on cabbage and other low-calorie vegetables. I ate huge quantities and frequently embarrassed myself because of the stomach pains and gas I experienced. When I came into FA, faced with a measured food plan, I was terrified of feeling hungry. My sponsor had personal experience with the fear of starvation and generously shared her own stories. She had lived what I lived. She had felt how I felt. This was absolutely critical to my willingness to trust her with my food plan. I wasn’t going to die. I trusted that the fear of being hungry was just a feeling and it did pass.

Although I grew up with an alcoholic mother, I never considered that my relationship with food was an addiction. I went to outrageous lengths to eat copious quantities and then threw up to stay thin. At my first meeting, FA members described being unable to stop eating, even though it was hurting them, and I saw the parallels between my experiences with food and my mother’s experiences with alcohol. After some time in FA, I saw that “dry is not sober” and “thin is not well.” I need to work the FA program in order to address the underlying issues that fueled my addictive eating.

I was secretive and dishonest my whole life, so talking about what I did with food and how it ran my life was hugely challenging. The foundation of this program is honesty, open mindedness, and willingness, so I began to practice telling the truth to my sponsor: who I was, rather than hiding behind a facade. Now I consider having a sponsor who really knows me and helps me continue to grow one of the greatest gifts of this program.

Although I’d been underweight, I came into FA needing to lose twenty pounds. I loved the process of losing weight and didn’t want to stop, but when I got too thin, I balked at the idea of adding food to my food plan. It took a while for my weight to settle and for me to trust that my sponsor would help me to find the appropriate weight for my height and body type.

Initially, I was resistant to calling a sponsor and meditating in the morning, since that was the time I went for my run. My sponsor suggested that I put first things

first, but my mind could not *compute* that I would be able to lose weight without my daily run. After breaking my abstinence a number of times, I finally became willing to prioritize my recovery over exercise.

I had lost the same ten pounds dozens and dozens of times, but I'd never been able to keep it off. When I stayed at the same weight for a week, then a month, It was hard to wrap my brain around the fact that I was staying at a consistent, healthy weight for me with no starving, dieting, or exercise.

I had to gain weight to be healthy. It was a gradual change that gave me time to work through my fears, to surrender and let go of bingeing and purging. By the time I reached a healthy weight, I had given away my too-small clothes and started to buy things that were the right size for my body — something I had resisted for years.

Life in Recovery

It amazes me that I absolutely love my body today. When I was underweight, or even at a healthy weight, I always felt fat. There is nothing better than feeling like my body is a perfect fit.

Having a sponsor and being connected to a larger fellowship allows me to borrow power to take right actions when my own fuel tank is empty. My fellows listen to my daily challenges and share their own personal experiences with hope, sanity, and gratitude. I'm grateful to my higher power for bringing me the gift of this program.

Today I'm a different person both physically and mentally – my family and friends can attest to that! I am generally happier, more honest, grateful and look for opportunities to help others. I am connected to the universe and no longer feel fear and insecurity. I don't numb my feelings with food; I work through them with help from my Higher Power, sponsor, and fellowship.

I no longer believe that exercise controls weight; I do moderate exercise now and enjoy it. More importantly, I don't use exercise as a cure-all for bingeing on sweets. I love my body and my weight. I am satisfied with my food and with my life. It is enough.

I purged my food through excessive exercise; I thought the more I sweated, the less I would weigh, and the more I could eat. After living this program of recovery, I've found exercise is just one way of having fun — it's a hobby, rather than a punishing means to an end.

When I weighed 126 lbs, at 5'5", I thought I was obese. I starved myself, binged and threw-up. When I learned how to eat appropriately and had the support and love of the members in the program, I experienced recovery: I have energy every day, I'm strong, and by the way, I still weigh 126 lbs.

As a result of my bulimia, I had low bone density and didn't menstruate. I tried writing down what I would eat each day and committing it to whomever might believe me—my mother, my doctor, my best friend. I wanted to get better, but I rarely ate what I promised; I just couldn't. Now, I commit my food to a sponsor, and because I've learned what commitment means, I follow through. As a bonus, I no longer have low bone density, and I menstruate without the help of medication.

I lived a solitary secret life, stuffing myself with food and violently throwing up, only to start the cycle over again. The benefits of being part of the FA fellowship mean having a huge network of love and support around the world. I've even traveled to other

countries, visiting with fellows, going to their meetings, and just enjoying the company of those who open their homes and their lives up to me.

My whole world has changed in recovery. I'm not obsessed with suicide or angry at the world for dealing me an unfair hand. I don't compare my life to others or feel that everyone has more than I do. Mentally, my mind is quiet; I no longer have a voice of self-hatred telling me I'm ugly and unlikable. The mental gymnastics of counting calories are gone; my weight does not determine my self worth.

Abstinence has saved my life. I was literally killing myself with my fork. My thoughts no longer race to negativity; I don't believe the sky is falling and my loved ones are dying. The FA program of recovery gave me healthy disciplines, and applying the Twelve Steps to my life gave me a new way of thinking and living.

Today, I love to dance. I don't need alcohol or sugar or flour to have fun. I can be present for my kids; I don't need to wake up late, take long naps, and go to bed early. I go on vacation and enjoy the beauty of a new environment; I don't worry about what I'm going to eat or not eat. Today, I show up for my job; I've grown in responsibilities instead of quitting because I'm afraid of a person or situation.

I did not come into the FA program to make friends. However, today, I have a fellowship of support and people from all over the world who really know and understand me and whom I can count on. It all started by consistently showing up at meetings, making phone calls, and getting involved in FA service to help another food addict.

It feels good to go into my closet every season and know that my clothes are going to fit. I don't get a hit if they're too big or a gut punch if they're too small.

I was told that I couldn't have children because of the damage I did to my body. But I gained some weight, and I was able to get pregnant! I'm thrilled to be abstinent, knowing I am taking optimal care of my growing baby. I'm not bingeing, purging, or over-exercising, which would put the baby's health at risk. Without recovery from food addiction, none of this would be possible.

I no longer have pounding headaches, and my jaw isn't sore from constantly chewing pack after pack of gum. And the best part: I don't need two cups of coffee to start moving. This morning, my eyes opened and I felt no dread, bloating, or self-hatred. After a year in recovery, I have a daily experience of wanting to get out of bed as soon as my alarm goes off. I'm awake, comfortable in my body, and ready to start my morning.

There is a Place for You

If you are struggling with food, you are not alone. The recovering food addicts who share their experiences in this pamphlet once felt hopeless. Today, they have found a common solution in Food Addicts in Recovery Anonymous.

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 (A.A.). 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. Abstinance in FA is equivalent to A.A.'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 those with no weight to

lose or gain. Regardless of their size, they were tormented by cravings, dieting, purging, 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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