

25th OA Christmas

This Christmas was my 25th as a member of OA. However, I couldn't say it was my 25th abstinent Christmas as my food plan has changed over the years, even eroded at times, and has never been perfect.

I often bewail to my sponsor that I am a fake, that I should leave OA, that I shouldn't sponsor anyone because I don't even stick to my very relaxed food plan let alone to the original guidelines issued by the treatment centre where I was first introduced to refraining from certain foods and eating habits.

I will still lick a spoon, taste a crumb off my daughters' baking effort containing sugar, eat out of a saucepan or on the run, eat off my plate before I have even got to the table or just not sit down at all. I have spent years confessing to these transgressions, writing stricter food plans, making new resolutions but still, after 25 years in the programme, I continue to 'fail'. Have I ever been truly abstinent?

When I first came in to OA, I did follow the suggested food plan of three meals a day, nothing in between, no sugar and no white flour. It wasn't a difficult plan, but after years of grazing, bingeing, controlling, purging, starving, and stealing, it was very hard to stick to. It was suggested that I avoid the first compulsive bite, get a food sponsor and work the Steps, attend as many meetings as possible, take lots of phone numbers and use them, and find a Higher Power - all to help me through the seemingly impossible challenge of becoming abstinent. So, for the next seven years, one day at a time, I worked the programme, maintained a healthy body weight and was relieved, most of the time, of the obsession with food.

So, what changed? I moved to the country, away from London, from its multitude of meetings and my close network of recovery friends. With a toddler under two and six months' pregnant, I knew no-one in the area and meetings were fewer and further afield. My commuter husband was getting home very late and I would be climbing the walls with irritable hunger by the time he arrived home for dinner. At someone's suggestion, I added an early evening snack. Unfortunately, my lack of willingness to prepare something for myself meant I ate my toddler's supper leftovers instead. Without my regular meetings or a food sponsor, I picked up bad habits and my abstinence became sloppy and disrespectful.

Once I had babysitters in place and could get to more meetings, I cleaned up my act over the next year. Roll on another 10 years and food is still in its place: I don't overeat, I don't over-exercise, I don't purge or starve, I don't obsess, I try to stick to three meals a day with one snack. BUT...

I am chaotic, I don't prioritise my food, I still eat on the run or miss a meal and then end up popping something in my mouth when preparing my family's supper. So, am I abstinent? Not according to my original definition: three meals a day and nothing in between. And yet... my loving sponsor will remind me of what I have recovered FROM: complete isolation from friends and family, daily bouts of self-induced vomiting and laxative abuse, self-harm, exercising beyond my physical limits, utter self-hatred, risk-taking behaviour, loss of dignity and loss of control over every aspect of my life.

And she asks me to look at all the things I AM doing in recovery: still going to three to four meetings a week, reading literature, calling newcomers, sponsoring people through the 12 Steps, not bingeing, not over-eating, avoiding processed sugar, not consuming alcohol, being honest, being a loyal and loving wife and mother for the last 20 years, being there for others, participating in my local community, being a valued friend to people outside of the fellowship as well as in; in short, living a full, meaningful life free from the compulsion to overeat and free from the obsession with food.

I don't work this program perfectly, but as I am constantly reminded when attending meetings or speaking to my sponsor, surely it is better to be imperfect within the loving arms of OA than without.

S, Reading