

## Overeaters Anonymous program gives support to those with eating compulsions, disorders



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Tammy opens the Monday night meeting of Overeaters Anonymous by announcing she should have "liar" written across her forehead rather than "loser."

"I've been abusing laxatives, and I quit smoking, so I've been yelling more than ever," said the attractive, fit-looking woman with the likable smile.

Of course, Tammy's not her real name. Like Alcoholics Anonymous, OA's most valued tradition (there are 12) is personal anonymity.

That means "Tammy" doesn't have to share her last name, age, occupation or anything else about herself at the meeting. All she has to bring to OA is the desire to stop eating compulsively.

"Hi, I'm Tammy and I'm a compulsive overeater-bulimic," she says, after reading aloud the Step One chapter in "The Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions of Overeaters Anonymous."

Tammy tells the group she's been exercising bulimia and getting into anorexia and strict calorie watching. She comments about the sodium content in her Dasani berry-flavored water and how that could affect her weight.

And she says she smacked one of her kids ... "really hard."

"It didn't faze him but it sure fazed me," says Tammy, looking down at her manicured nails rather than facing her peers.

But none of the other six people in classroom-like meeting room with the tables set in a square says a word. They don't bombard her with questions. They don't offer advice or make comments. They just listen.

Their lives become unmanageable when they don't work the Overeaters Anonymous program.

□ "Sharon" has been in OA for 26 years. She first came to an OA meeting to support a friend. Her friend never returned but Sharon did.

"What brought me back was I realized it wasn't going to be a diet, that there were issues in my life that I needed to look at and the issues were causing me to overeat," she said.

Sharon had tried every yo-yo diet — from cabbage soup to the grapefruit, various weight-loss programs and even started smoking to curb her appetite.

"That's what we always look for, the easier, softer way," she said. "It's just that the easier, softer way doesn't work."

But the program works if you work the program, she said.

Founded in 1960 and patterned after AA, OA is a 12-step recovery program that starts with admitting you are powerless over food and your life has become unmanageable.

In addition to working the steps, those in recovery attend OA meetings; try to abstain from compulsive overeating usually by creating and following a meal plan; and get a sponsor, someone to regularly check in with and talk to when the old behaviors come calling.

And they do from time to time.

Sharon said there was a stint of about 10 years when she didn't attend meetings because of a time conflict. She had gotten divorced and remarried a man who understood her compulsive overeating disease. She used the OA literature and what she had learned in the program to survive.

"But after a few years I found myself returning to some old behaviors," she said.

Sharon started thinking she could handle her problem without her higher power (in the program this is to each his/her own — maybe God, maybe something else).

"In other words, I could maybe have a cookie once in awhile and it was OK," she said. "But after awhile, like six months, it was not just a cookie; it was maybe a piece of pie and a cookie. I realized old behaviors were creeping back in."

Sharon said once there was a time when she'd bake a cake and eat an entire row out of the pan. Then she'd worry someone would notice the missing row, so she'd eat the row on the other side to even it out. Or she'd find goodies in the freezer and eat the entire package, only to run into the problem of where to hide the wrapper or needing to replace the treat.

As she gained more and more weight, she became more and more depressed.

That's why the people at that first OA meeting, folks who shared her disease but were no longer overweight and seemed mostly serene, were so attractive.

So she started attending meetings, working the steps, making amendments and finding spirituality.

"Each week it got better," she said.

### **'I'm 'George' and I'm a compulsive overeater'**

George, the next person to speak at the Monday night meeting, says he learned about OA through his bulimic daughter.

"I had just gotten married and I'd had an eating problem before," he says. "I identified with the program, not so much the physical aspects but the spiritual and emotional aspects."

So he started coming to meetings each week, listening to others talk about their diseases and opening up about his own.

"You have to turn your life over (to your higher power) to get rid of your old habits," George says.

He says as the weeks went by it became easier to talk, and he was encouraged to try new things.

"I really found out about who I was and became more self-assured and a better overall human being," says George.

### **'Hi, I'm 'Donna' and I eat compulsively'**

Donna's struggle with compulsive overeating dates back to the first grade, when she would steal food out of other kids' lunchboxes and money from their desks.

"You could buy five candy bars for a quarter, and I would put them in my little purse so I could eat them when no one was looking," she says.

The oldest of eight kids and raised in a strict religious family where children were meant to be seen and not heard, Donna learned at a young age to use food to cope. The problem carried into adulthood, and she tried every diet that grabbed any hype.

Then she "hit bottom," the term addicts use to describe the moment they realize they aren't able to handle their addictions on their own.

"I started my usual Monday morning diet and by noon I was off of it," Donna says.

Fourteen years ago Donna checked into treatment after being diagnosed as a nonpurging bulimic.

"It's a disease over which I have no control," she says. "So I started coming to meetings and getting a sponsor and working the steps."

One of the OA aspects she appreciates most is being able to come to the weekly meetings and "spill her guts," knowing the information will go no further than that room, she said. Through that she's learned to face her feelings rather than turning to food.

But it still is a learning process — learning to live one day at a time; learning the only person she can control is herself; learning while she cannot control other people, she can control her reactions to them.

### **'I'm 'Joan' and I'm a compulsive overeater'**

Joan says she used to go as many as five days without eating.

"Then I'd get to make up for the five days I lost," she says.

Joan has been overweight and underweight and considers both the same side of the coin.

"The fat begins in your head," she says. "It's a battle of the mind."

Joan says she always has loved baking, cooking and entertaining, and it likely didn't appear to others that she had a problem with compulsive overeating.

"It's who I am when I'm alone," she says.

However, through attending meetings and working the program, she's learned to overcome her "self-defeating behaviors of habit," she's made lifelong friends and she's experienced numerous other pluses.

"I have so much to be thankful for," Joan says.

### **'Hi, I'm 'Heidi' '**

Heidi says her higher power moved mountains so she could get to the meeting. She hadn't been to a meeting in a while and wasn't planning to go that night. But a phone call

from a friend paired with her schedule magically opening up from 7 to 8 p.m. gave her the push she needed to get back to it.

And then she started to cry.

"I wasn't going to share tonight but since you opened up I wanted to," she says, looking at Tammy.

Sometimes OA members need to unload their heavy stuff. Other times, they just need to listen. Either is fine; there are no real rules. When it's a large group, though, people try and keep their sharing time to a minimum so everyone gets an opportunity, if they need it.

But on this particular night it wasn't a large group so everyone had a turn.

One even shared twice.

### **'I'm Tammy and I'm a compulsive overeater-bulimic'**

Tammy says she was embarrassed for having said anything at all because she, too, wants to be perfect.

"I only look how I do because I didn't do anything right," she says.

Tammy says she's continuing to exercise in a healthy way — only allowing herself five days of exercising. She says overall she's fine, great and wonderful ... except she's really not.

Then she looks at Heidi and says though she's never seen her there before, she was very happy to meet her.

"I'm really glad to be here and see all of your smiling faces," she says.

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