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IN SIGHT for Oregon Lawyers and Judges

IMPROVING THE QUALITY OF YOUR PERSONAL AND PROFESSIONAL LIFE

REGAINING MY LIFE AFTER COMPULSIVE OVEREATING

I have an eating disorder called bulimia/compulsive overeating (COE). I suffered from obesity from ages 6 to 14, then bulimia from age 14.

I can remember overeating as a child, as far back as I can recall. I was seeking comfort and relief from anxiety, worry, stress, and loneliness by using excess food. It became a habit and an obsession.

As I received input or pressure about my overweight body, my obsession turned to body image and I used purging to lose and manage my weight. I believed that if only I were thin, life would be perfect. This thinking pattern fueled my obsession with and compulsive behaviors around food.

I remember the first time I purged. I was watching a TV show and the woman being interviewed was talking about how she warded off a sexual assault by sticking her fingers down her throat so she would vomit. I thought, "This is a good way to purge food." Initially, I felt empowered and in control. Later, as the behavior became out of control, I felt unwell and out of control.

The belief that purging was my golden ticket to controlling my weight while eating excessively caused me to continue to do it again and again. Later, when I was out of control and having adverse physical manifestations of the disease, I kept telling myself that eventually I would get help, once I had the time and resources to check myself into an in-patient eating disorders program. That day never came. In addition, the shame and embarrassment factor engendered isolation, which in turn

fueled the vicious cycle because I was not seeking help. I believed that if my friends and family found out, I would be ruined and lose respect and love.

COE and purging was my "go to" substance and coping mechanism for every emotion, good or bad. It allowed me to disconnect from my emotional and spiritual self. In reality, it never helped me cope in any healthy or meaningful way; instead, it arrested my ability to develop normal, healthy coping skills, such as fostering and nurturing healthy relationships, constructive problem-solving, nurturing a healthy body, and pursuing spiritual growth and well-being on a daily basis.

COE is a progressive, deadly disease and I am no exception. My life was consumed with engaging in, and hiding, the behavior. It routinely took time away from work, family, and friends. My self-esteem was crushed by the understanding that I could not stop the behavior through my own self-will. I damaged my teeth and was constantly exhausted. I realized and admitted that it would eventually kill me. I knew I needed help.

I sought help from a counselor. I attended group support meetings for women with eating disorders, which were led by counselors who specialized in eating disorders.

Unfortunately, counseling and support groups did not resolve my problem. I benefited from associating with people suffering from the same or similar illnesses and my condition improved, but only intermittently. I was unable to be honest with my

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counselors, the other group members, and myself about my disease, and I just could not attain lasting abstinence from COE.

About a decade after first attempting to address my disease through individual and group counseling, I went to my first Overeaters Anonymous (OA) meeting. What prompted me was the fact that a close family member was in crisis, and one component of her situation was compulsive overeating. I asked myself, who was I to judge her or attempt to “fix” her (or anyone else for that matter) when my own relationship with food was also out of control. I invited her to join me in going to OA. It was the first time attending a meeting for both of us.

During and after that first meeting, I felt overwhelmed with hope, relief, and joy. I felt as though I had finally found a place and a method by which I could arrest the disease, recover, and stay abstinent, surrounded by people who shared a common, core identity with me. The only requirement for OA membership is a desire to stop eating compulsively. I felt like I had hit my bottom, in terms of being out of control. I had a deep desire to stop eating compulsively, and OA gave me much more!

I had always dismissed 12-step programs. Though I really knew nothing about them, I was put off by the “religious” component. Once I reached the point where I was willing to admit that I was powerless over food and that my illness had rendered me out of control, I became humble enough to possess an open mind about the Higher Power aspect of OA. That state of humility and powerlessness allowed me to read OA and AA literature with an open mind and heart. I discovered that the Higher Power (“God”) aspect of OA, for me, was like the “Higher Consciousness” philosophies espoused by Fichte, Kant, Hegel, and other figures in German Idealism, blended with the teachings of Karl Jung and Eastern mystical teachings. I was already familiar, intellectually, with these ideas, but until I put “prayer and meditation” into practice, none of it really came alive. My sense of a higher consciousness or higher power continues to deepen and evolve because I continue to “work my program.”

Since my first OA meeting 10 years ago, I have stayed in OA, worked a progressive 12-step program, and maintained a healthy body weight through abstinence from COE. I use the tools of the program, which are (1) a plan of eating; (2) sponsorship (getting a sponsor and being a sponsor); (3) attending meetings (at least once a week); (4) reaching out to other OA members; (5) reading OA and other 12-step literature; (6) journaling; (7) anonymity; (8) action plan; and (9) OA service.

By practicing anonymity in OA, we refrain from talking about our jobs, our families, or our status in society, and we avoid gossip. These practices place us in the frame of mind that’s necessary to achieve abstinence. Anonymity prevents me from focusing on food and on “Me” and allows me to shun self-will and negative behaviors, in favor of humbleness, honesty, and service. Once I got over myself and put my focus on a higher power and on being of service to it and to others, recovery and abstinence have naturally followed.

My earliest challenge in recovery was to forge a whole new relationship with food and, over time, my thinking and behaviors changed. Living abstinely literally rewired my brain so that the urge to eat compulsively dissipated. The urges have not left me completely, but I no longer act on them. Before recovery, food served as a treat, a comfort, entertainment, and a substance to abuse to allow me to disconnect from anxiety and turmoil. Now food is a source of fuel. When I am following my honest plan of eating, I can enjoy food and take much comfort in the feeling of eating the right quantities at the right times for the right reasons, without the accompanying guilt, shame, and self-loathing. I lean on my plan of eating so that I don’t have to take that first compulsive bite. I never fully lived until I started working a 12-step program and using the tools of OA. Now that my days and nights are not spent focused on binging and purging, I am FREE to live my life! OA’s 12-step program provides the perfect structure through the 12 steps and 12 traditions, in which I can live out my life to the fullest, one day at a time, with integrity and freedom from COE.

I have achieved a level of physical, emotional, and spiritual health that, before recovery, I would

only fantasize about. The quality of my relationships has improved. I possess the ability to handle situations – including painful and challenging situations – without using excess food to cope. I feel authentic integrity. I no longer feel like I am living a lie. I used to feel as though I was someone other than who I held myself out to be, and nobody knew the dark side; meanwhile, I was utterly consumed by my dark side. No more! I no longer procrastinate my recovery. Instead, I take simple but profound steps each and every day to stay free from COE and to grow as a human being.

If you know someone who suffers from an eating disorder, please share my story with them.

If you are struggling with an eating disorder or issues around food, the OAAP can connect you with resources and is here to help. Call the OAAP and ask to speak with an attorney counselor: 503-226-1057 or 1-800-321-6227. It's free. It's confidential.

LIVING IN HEALTH AND INTEGRITY