

Black OA Members Share Their Experience, Strength and Hope



Overeaters Anonymous, Inc.
World Service Office
6075 Zenith Ct. NE
Rio Rancho, NM 87144-6424 USA
Mail Address: PO Box 44020
Rio Rancho, NM 87174-4020 USA
Phone: 505-891-2664 • Fax: 505-891-4320
Email: info@oa.org
www.oa.org

© 2007 Overeaters Anonymous, Inc.
All rights reserved.

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 compulsive overeaters and to practice these principles in all our affairs.

Permission to use the Twelve Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous for adaptation granted by AA World Services, Inc.

Black OA Members Share Their Experience, Strength and Hope

Are you a black woman or man who feels ashamed about your weight? Does it upset you when someone describes you as “heavysset”? Do you overeat our traditional ethnic foods? Do you hide how much you are eating from your family and friends? Do you look at other people who are fashionably dressed, and feel ashamed of your appearance? Do you feel that your weight is already out of control, so you might as well eat whatever you want? Has your health been affected by your weight? Has your doctor told you that you need to lose weight? Do your overeating and weight issues affect your family?

If you have answered yes to any of these questions, you have something in common with us. You are not alone. And people like us have found a place where we feel comfortable sharing our problems around food and weight. Overeaters Anonymous supports us in our recovery from compulsive eating, and OA's Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions are the same as those that have helped so many people recover from alcoholism and other addictions.

If you are a black person struggling with overeating and weight, please read this pamphlet filled with hopeful stories by black OA members from around the world. If you are not black, but you want to understand how someone from a different culture feels coming into OA, please read our stories with an open mind and heart. Our common problem of compulsive eating unites us. Come home to OA!

Black, British and Proud

Iwas born in England to Jamaican parents who showed their love through food and religion. I learned that my mother loved me to death with food. When I felt unable to speak or ask for my needs to be met, I ate to anesthetize my feelings of fear, anger

and frustration. Chocolate was my drug of choice and became my dearest friend. It soothed my pain and numbed my mind to torturing thoughts. As I grew, so did my need for chocolate.

In my world children were seen and not heard, and I was taught to honor my parents. I attended a church that affirmed this view of parents and preached about God as a big white man with a stick who punished me for lustful thoughts of men and chocolate. It didn't feel right, but I felt I had no right to articulate my view, so I ate more to sate the fears.

After church on Sundays, my mother cooked enormous quantities of food and encouraged visitors, friends and family to eat until they burst. I did, gaining approval and more love from my parents. The trouble was, I grew into a woman who escaped from that house and regime but carried the illness with me.

By the age of 18 I weighed 168 pounds (76 kg). Each year I gained a stone (14 pounds, 6 kg). By the time I was 29 I weighed 300 pounds (136 kg). My self-esteem was low and public ridicule was high. Fortunately, I had heard of Overeaters Anonymous through my doctor and attended my first meeting in April 1993.

There I found a group of people who immediately understood and empathized with the illness of compulsive overeating. It was quite different from the world I had known. These OA people smiled and cried with me as I shared about my relationship with food. They welcomed me the moment I walked through the doors; neither color nor religion mattered then or now. I kept going back for their support, to talk and listen to other compulsive overeaters. Eventually I came to accept that this was an illness, and I could change. I found a sponsor, chose a food plan and abstained from my drug of choice. Then a miracle happened: my weight began to drop, and I felt better about myself.

When I arrived in the rooms, I didn't trust God anymore. I blamed him for making me fat and hated him for making me feel guilty. Through the fellow-

ship of the group, I have learned how to have a better relationship with the God of my understanding, whom I now see as a power greater than myself who loves and assists me in my daily life.

It hasn't been easy, but I am living proof that this program works when you work it!

During my life in OA, both my father and dearest sister died: my father from heart disease and my sister from compulsive overeating. She weighed 500 pounds (227 kg) when she died. OA taught me to accept her death because she was powerless over food, and to carry on in the program. I continue to go to meetings and help other recovering compulsive overeaters. Without them I could not recover. I need the love, support and identification I feel every time I come to a meeting, join hands and admit that I am a compulsive overeater.

In my 10 years of membership, I have seen the groups growing and more black members coming through our doors. I am grateful to be offering more diversity in the meetings.

My self-esteem is growing day by day and I can let go of the rubbish I learned as a child. I have learned to detach from the habits and traditions my family taught me and to respect my parents for doing the best they could. I have learned how to have good relationships with other people and myself. Today, I'd rather have a bad day in Overeaters Anonymous than a good day while overeating.

— P.C., England

Surprise Rewards

Coming to OA was a leap of faith for me. The demographics of my neighborhood meant that I would join a predominantly white group. I'd been there before, but when it came to food, I felt my issues were different because my culture was different. I also thought that, at 54, most people would be much younger than I. I didn't think I would find folks like me there. But I was desperate, so I went anyway.

Large meetings provide the greatest opportunity for diversity, and the meetings in my area were all large. So when HP led me to my first meeting, I found several African Americans there. Attending other meetings led me to more African Americans, both male and female. I was happy that OA had some diversity in its membership, but HP had other surprises and treats in store for me on this journey.

Those who reached out to me were equally diverse. A tall, thin blonde who was a lawyer like me reached out her hand to welcome me into OA and told me to keep coming back. From then on, I thought of her as my special OA angel. If no one had spoken to me, I might have reacted differently, but she was warm and inviting. Imagine my surprise when I met her adopted, adolescent African American son!

Higher Power definitely had a plan for me with this first meeting. In a sea of many meetings, I picked the only Big Book meeting, which was perfect for me since I had alcohol issues as well. The meeting and the concept of abstinence (people spoke of no flour, no sugar, three meals a day and life in between) so intrigued me that I went to my second meeting the following night. There I met my best friend in program: a 27-year-old Latina who was at her first meeting. Being the rookies at a beginner's meeting, we gravitated toward each other and since then have spent much time together working the program and discussing the Big Book and what we heard during shares.

I've learned many things in program. Skin colors, family structures and relationships, ages, occupations and manifestations of the disease are different, but we are all powerless over food. You would never know about America's racial differences from the shares of most white Americans in program. But I can mention it and people listen; some respond. Our compulsive behaviors are frighteningly alike! I know I'm in the right place when I hear someone very different from me describe in minute detail a compulsive behavior or secret I thought no one but me knew.

I became abstinent after that first meeting. I found a sponsor and worked the program. Today, two-and-a-half years later, I'm still abstinent and maintaining an 85-pound (39-kg) weight loss that I accomplished in my first year in program. I do service at my meeting and intergroup levels; I attend three to four meetings a week, more when I need to. I begin each day on my knees, write down everything I eat and email a daily AEIOU Tenth Step (A-abstinence, E-exercise, I-what I did for me, O-what I did for others, U-underlying emotions I dealt with) to a fellow member. I sponsor and take program calls from many people. I've certainly found differences, but through the grace of God, we reach out to each other across that chasm of race and culture and connect on a level that allows us to refrain from compulsive eating.

— C.E., USA

Struggling to Be Free

I have been in OA since February 1998, achieved abstinence in June 1998 and have just celebrated my seventh year of abstinence. Discovering OA as a black woman has been a dramatic change for me.

In January 1998, I found myself crying in the parking lot of my latest and last diet program club. I had been successful on this liquid diet plan but had almost gone broke trying to lose 50 pounds (23 kg). I called my diet counselor from the parking lot and lied to her about why I could not attend that week's meeting. After a few days of living with the guilt of lying, I told her I could no longer afford this diet. I knew there had to be another way to lose weight and maintain good health. I had tried every diet invented over the last 34 years and felt that I was losing my mind. The counselor recommended I join OA.

I thought about her words later. If she had the answer, why hadn't she told everyone who attended the diet program? I felt guilty that I had been saved, and angry because I had left my suffering friends in that room with no knowledge of OA.

My cousin had mentioned OA to me the year before, but I became busy and never followed up. I called my cousin, and we had a meeting on the phone. She explained the program to me and became my temporary sponsor. I got a meeting list and began attending meetings in January 1998.

It was hard to find a sponsor. It seemed that many of the participants either were not abstinent or were not available to sponsor. I did not see much physical recovery in the meetings I attended, even though I was finding emotional and spiritual recovery. At one meeting, a woman shared about OA-HOW. I tried a few of those meetings and liked their more disciplined structure. I found a sponsor, became abstinent and then became a sponsor myself.

I have a rich background in cooking soul food, but have learned how to cook in a low-fat way, using spices and herbs to replace the flavor of fatty substances. No one in program could help me with that. I am usually the only person of color at the meetings I attend. I feel okay about that and feel accepted as just another person with a food addiction, struggling to be free.

I have been giving my children healthy cooking ideas, hoping that my 27 grandchildren will be turned on to healthy eating and perhaps escape some of the medical conditions that go along with being African American. I introduce new vegetables to our Sunday dinners, and as a result, my grandchildren have started to look for them. These dinners are a good time for my family to catch up and discuss nutritious food plans.

My cousin and I met at the World Service Conventions in Dallas in 2000 and New Orleans in 2003. We are planning to meet in Philadelphia for the 2007 Convention. The Ebony OA group has enlightened me and helped in my recovery. I have released 174 pounds (79 kg) since 2000, and my health has improved. My diabetes is in remission, I no longer have high blood pressure, I can walk actively again, and I went from a size 4X to a 12.

I am spreading OA's message in my neighborhood and family. I have embraced recovery and am

grateful for OA. It has brought sanity to my life. I wish I had found OA in my 20s—I could have saved myself much physical and emotional pain, as well as money. OA is a way of life, one day at a time.

— L.G., USA

The Gift of Desperation

One afternoon while making my second trip of the day to the grocery store, I spotted another black lady I hadn't seen in a while. As she stepped out from behind her car, I saw with surprise that she had lost a lot of weight. When I complimented her on how good she looked, she said, "It's Overeaters Anonymous, honey, and I feel just as good as I look!"

She invited me to the next OA meeting. We were the only black people there. I felt nervous and scared that I would not fit in, but had the gift of desperation after failing all my other weight loss attempts. By then I couldn't stand myself because I couldn't fit into any of my outfits. But I wasn't alone, so I stayed. After a while, I felt okay even when my black friend was not there to support me.

I asked someone who had what I wanted—abstinence—to be my sponsor. She encouraged me to visit a doctor (another thing I was scared of), helped me make a reasonable, healthy food plan and had me call her every few days. My frequent trips to the store stopped. Instead, I attended other meetings and spent more time reading OA literature.

Family members thought it odd that my eating habits had changed. Some even signified about me being "too good" to eat the food they had spent all day cooking. My only support came from our program and my Higher Power.

As my weight began to come off and stay off, even old friends made unkind remarks. But by then I had made new friends. Some of them were black, and one of them was me.

I reached my goal weight in about a year. My doctor was pleased that my weight loss and new positive attitude had boosted my health. I began to

learn the meaning of gratitude, and my lifelong depression lifted.

A few years ago another OA sister opened a meeting to attract more people of color. I attend it regularly and appreciate being in a meeting where at least half the members are black. Lately friends have joined me for power walking, so I don't feel as alone there either.

I believe that OA's program is based on inclusiveness. I hope each meeting can follow the example of the first one I attended. As I gave my name that night, everyone there said, "Welcome!" I have felt welcomed ever since.

— Anonymous, USA

More than Just Showing Up

What I remember most about my first OA meeting is that no people of color were there—only middle-aged and older, overall-wearing, overweight and obese white people. Only by the grace of God did I stay. In retrospect, I think I knew those people could help me if I let them.

I came into the rooms about five years ago weighing approximately 200 pounds (91 kg): a lot of weight for my 5-foot-2-inch (157-cm) frame. I was only 23 years old, but my disease was as voracious as if I had been overeating and bingeing for 46 years. Today I carry scars from that time—stretch marks on my extremities and dark spots on the insides of my thighs from my legs rubbing together as I walked. They remind me of who I was and always will be: a food addict.

I was so afraid of bingeing that I would go to a 7 a.m. meeting to be safe from myself for an hour. I didn't become abstinent right away, but once I did, five or six months later, the weight melted off. I ate three meals a day, which seemed impossible to me at first.

Food is love in the African American culture, and we define food as good when it's laden with fat, sugar and flour. My parents knew something was

wrong with my eating. I had been dieting since my preteen years. I would lose weight, but it inevitably returned. When my parents divorced, my mother enabled my eating, knowing that food made me happy. The vision of her lament and remorse when she took me shopping is something I will always remember. She'd stand outside my dressing room door, probably praying the garment would fit, while I would sob silently because I couldn't get one leg into those pants.

In OA, a place where I am still an ethnic minority, I have overcome years of conditioning around issues of race. The program has given me a new way of thinking and acting. Today I know that compulsive overeating doesn't discriminate and that I must be willing to go to any lengths to get better. When I practice the Twelve Traditions and allow myself to see people from the inside out, the message of recovery is always waiting for me.

I work a rigorously honest program, and I'm a tough sponsor because OA is saving my life. I take my program seriously and have been wearing sizes 8 and 10 ever since doing so. God has given me the willingness to finally commit to an exercise program. I still read literature and go to at least three meetings a week. These measures remind me that no situation is too great to be lessened.

Since coming to OA, I have lost two aunts and my grandmother; witnessed two fatal car accidents; traveled to Belize, France and London; undergone surgery; began growing dreadlocks; ended a long-term relationship; married; earned a graduate degree with a 4.0 grade point average; and gone from being miserable at work to landing the job of my dreams. I'm still the same size, and I'm still standing! This program has given me resiliency, and the promises are working in my life.

Self-centered fear and resentment are defects of character that destroy people like us. Show up for the life you want, and don't quit before the miracle happens.

— X.J., USA

Slow Acceptance

African American culture has its unique culinary delights. My Southern mother prepared various tasty dishes daily. The image of my father eating an extremely large amount of food for breakfast has stuck indelibly in my mind. In high school, I overate to pass the time. Eating gradually became a way to cope with the pressures of adolescence.

My disease began to intensify in my 20s. I became a vegetarian, ate one meal per day and fasted. Although I lost weight, when I returned to my normal eating behaviors, the weight returned with extra pounds. In my 30s I began to turn more and more to food when I was anxious, upset, stressed, tired or sleepy. In addition, I became a big sweets eater. All this caused a considerable weight gain.

While living on the West Coast, I was bingeing and watching television late one night and saw a commercial for Overeaters Anonymous. I called OA. The person who answered gave me information on meetings in my area, but it took another two months for me to work up the nerve to attend a meeting.

Three black men and no black women were at that meeting. I did not feel out of place and noticed that the people were all shapes and sizes. I attended this meeting once more and purchased literature. I did not attend another meeting for years, although I frequently read the literature.

I moved to the East Coast and attended my first meeting in eight years. It was a good meeting attended by several other black men, but no black women. I felt uncomfortable calling myself a compulsive overeater and only attended this meeting two more times. I still was reading the literature but not working the program.

Finally, six years later, I began attending meetings regularly. I had realized that I was powerless over food and my life had become unmanageable. I attended a meeting close to my home and have made this meeting my home group. For the past 20 months, I have been the only black male to attend a

meeting. This made me uncomfortable at first, but I kept coming back. I have noticed how members sit next to me only when it is the last seat available.

By working the Steps and following the Traditions, I now feel accepted within the group as we share our strength, hope, experience and recovery. OA has been invaluable in my battle with compulsive overeating. This program has helped me to better understand my religion and my relationship with Higher Power.

The sanity I have gained from using the tools of the program, one day at a time, has helped me to arrest this cunning, powerful and baffling disease. Thank God and the Fellowship of Overeaters Anonymous.

— A.D., USA

No Longer an “Only”

Eight years ago, I attended my first OA meeting. About 15 people were in the room. I was scared and nervous but knew I had to be there. Everyone was friendly, but I immediately bonded with one woman. Over the next several months, she taught me a lot about recovery. She later confided in me, “I was so glad when you walked into the meeting. I was tired of being an only.” I knew immediately what she meant, but she continued: “The only black person in the meeting. The only one with dreadlocks.” My friend and I didn’t talk about it much, but we shared a special kinship not only because of the shared OA fellowship, but also because of our shared experiences as women of color living in a society still plagued by prejudice, racism and intolerance.

Over the past eight years, OA has taught me many things, including that my disease of compulsive eating is a symptom of my inability to deal with life on life’s terms. I walked into the rooms in pain, though I didn’t admit it because I used food to numb myself. Disappointment, fear, unfulfilled longings, loneliness, sadness and anger marked my life. The source of those feelings was not just personal, but also social, cultural and political. My sur-

vival as a black woman in America has meant that I have had to develop as a warrior. But my fighting weapons did not keep me from compulsive eating. I would come home from a rally or march, lock the door and eat. The biggest injustice of all was the one I committed against myself every time I overate! I abused my body, shut myself off from the spirit of life and pushed away those who loved me.

The Twelve Steps tell me that no matter what our race or ethnicity, we all suffer from the same disease and the solution is the same for all of us. In meetings, I share whatever is happening in my life, and the ban against cross talk means that I can do so without fear of being challenged or rejected. I can share my truth fully as I work on my recovery. Working with my sponsor, who is white, I have found the courage to stop eating compulsively and to work the Steps. When I look at another OA member, I don’t see the color of his or her hair, eyes or skin. I only see another compulsive eater who wants to get well. I am grateful for the OA program and for the OA members who have shown me the true meaning of unconditional love.

— T.J., USA

All Kinds of People

I am an OA member in Ottawa, Canada, who is happy, joyous and free these days. I have been free from compulsive eating since February 15, 1997, thanks to my Higher Power, who has given me the strength to look at my character traits, pick out a few and work on them.

One day in 1996, I had had enough and made a call to the local OA hotline. A nice lady called me back and we had a two-hour conversation. It was the first normal-sounding conversation I’d had in a long time. I had been buried so deep in isolation that my conversations had become brief and businesslike. She began by saying that OA was made up of all kinds of people—bulimics, anorexics and every shape and size I could imagine. This shocked me because I expected her to say that “all kinds of peo-

ple” meant all races and educational backgrounds. She described the basics of the program in terms I could understand, and I volunteered a little of my pain and readiness to try something new. She said that this willingness to surrender was rare in a newcomer and directed me to the next OA meeting.

The day I came into OA was April 24, 1996. I remember feeling that I had come home when I heard people talking about the many things they did with food and how they had managed to deal with those behaviors using the Twelve Steps, the tools and the Traditions of the program. I took a few phone numbers that first night. I called that lady back to say I had enjoyed the first meeting, but was apprehensive because I was so different from them. Not one of them was black or close to black; not even black Canadian, let alone African or West Indian. How was I going to fit in? I spend my days translating my thoughts so the mainstream culture in Canada, England, Italy or the Philippines (the four countries I’ve lived in) can understand. For a moment I was discouraged. Was I going to have to spend all my time translating my feelings? How could I even begin to do that?

That wonderful lady, who has been my sponsor since the fall of 1996, said exactly the right thing: Don’t worry; we’re all the same inside.

— *D.P., Canada*

Recovery Keeps Me Coming Back

I am an African American woman maintaining a 40-pound (18-kg) weight loss with 27 years in program, more than 26 of them abstinent. As a young woman, I came to OA seeking emotional support from another program. Tired of yo-yo dieting, I was ready for the message that I could recover physically, emotionally and spiritually if I was willing to follow a few simple Steps and Traditions and practice the principles in all my affairs.

Recently someone asked me to speak on several panels to help show the diversity of recovery in OA. While I am grateful to be a member of OA and want

to share my recovery, it did not begin with a person or a group of my color. It began in a community that had a black Fellowship in the inner city and a white Fellowship in the suburbs. Thanks to the principles of OA, both meetings welcomed all overeaters. Color does not keep me coming back; recovery from the disease does.

When asked to share because I am a person of color, I feel as if color is on display rather than the fact that I am a recovering member of the Fellowship and am willing to give freely of what has been freely and lovingly given to me. I have learned we don’t speak for OA, nor do I speak for African Americans or people of color. My simple story is that I fit into this loving, respectful fellowship of people who are different from one another in many ways, yet who share a disease that affects them physically, mentally and spiritually and who have found a solution that works under all conditions and circumstances. The honesty, openness and willingness to go to any lengths in OA show me how to recover from compulsive overeating.

I have wanted people to look like me, especially when I moved from a community in which blacks were well represented to a town with a black population of less than 2 percent. I and three other women of color tried to establish a meeting for people of color, then let it go after we saw it becoming a social gathering rather than an OA meeting.

I have been in this program in three states and have found the love, respect, support and guidance that helped me work on recovery in areas in which I felt I didn’t fit in. In my case, the longing for people of color or people of my background came more from the grief involved in the loss of a social marker of identity than with the idea that I didn’t fit in because of my color.

Step work helps in this area, as in all areas. The presence or lack of people who look like me is not what this program is about. Carrying the message of recovery to the still-suffering compulsive overeater is. As I recover and carry the message, I make new friends of many races and backgrounds.

Thank goodness this is a spiritual program, simple but not easy, and one of attraction rather than promotion, open to all who want it. I feel grateful for those who carried the message to me and those I carry the message to even though we are of different backgrounds and colors. I am grateful for the Steps, Traditions and principles that are the foundation of OA. Today I live a healthy and useful life however I choose, with whomever I choose. If it can happen for me, it can happen for anybody.

— *M.R., USA*

A Joyous Journey

I’m 69, have been married for nearly 50 years, and I have two children and four grandchildren. I have probably been a compulsive overeater for more than 60 years. I come from the South, where African Americans did not perceive being overweight the same way whites did. They called it “healthy” and said, “Look at this fine child.” One of my brothers was thin, and my mother tried to fatten him up. She was not paying attention to me, so I fattened myself up. He stayed thin.

In high school I went to a doctor for diet pills. I took those off and on for years. I lost weight, but became cranky and could not sleep. The doctor gave me pills to help me sleep, which I also took for years.

At 19, I got engaged and went on a crash diet to look good in my wedding dress. Being in love got me off pills. I lost the weight, fit into my dress and married, but I didn’t stay thin. I miscarried in my first year of marriage and had trouble getting pregnant again. I became much heavier.

I finally got pregnant and had two babies over the next few years. After my second pregnancy, I was so big I looked like a monster to myself. I began taking diet pills again and was off and running—screaming at my kids, moving refrigerators and cleaning madly.

When my kids were in school, I learned I was addicted to diet pills and swore off them. A friend

took me to a diet club, and I lost 129 pounds (59 kg). However, I gained it all back, which started my yearly return to the diet club, where I would lose about 40 pounds (18 kg), then gain it all back and more.

I retired in 1994, became sedentary and gained even more weight. My friend from the diet club said her doctor had recommended Overeaters Anonymous. She had attended one meeting and asked me to go with her to another. By then I was at my top weight of 285 pounds (130 kg).

In OA I met a lady who had been a member for 30 years and was maintaining her weight loss; she explained the gray sheet to me. I had tried everything else, so I agreed to try this. After the symptoms of carbohydrate withdrawal disappeared, I began to lose my cravings. Since then my recovery has been a joyous journey. The reading, listening and sharing help me. Other members of the Fellowship know what I am going through; I am not alone.

I was the only black person in meetings for a long time. Other people of color who came did not return. But the program worked for me, so I could not abandon it just because I was in the minority. I also felt good that everybody knew my name; before OA and outside of OA I had always felt invisible.

I lost 100 pounds (45 kg) almost effortlessly, without feeling deprived. I avoid potatoes, pasta and sweets and eat three times a day with nothing in between. I talk to my sponsor every day and am now working the Fourth Step, which I had once feared.

Being in OA has helped me get through my breast cancer and the deaths of loved ones without gaining weight. I have learned how to deal differently with my children and husband, and I am no longer sarcastic and crabby. I like myself. My son told me, "Mom, I like the way you are. Keep doing what you're doing."

— J.C., USA

Race Should Not Separate Us

I am a 35-year-old, proud African American woman who has been in OA for almost a year. At my first meeting I was delighted when another sister walked into the room. She and I were the only two black people there. I may not have come back if I had not seen a face like mine that day.

I think black people receive the same benefits from OA as non-black people do. This miraculous program has changed my life in many ways—all for the better. The disease of compulsive overeating has no respect for race or color. Everyone inside the rooms has something to give and learn regardless of race.

My family never talked about or even considered Twelve-Step programs. I think many black families are that way because African Americans tend to believe that Sunday-morning church services and Bible-study classes are the best, if not the only, places to help heal whatever ails us. I don't want to stereotype blacks, but that is what my family and many other blacks I know think. That thinking has merit; God is all-powerful. On the other hand, the OA program is spiritual, and most meetings take place in churches.

I wish more of my black sisters would find OA. I think many more blacks would come and stay if those already in OA were visible and welcoming. I would also enjoy attending an all-black OA meeting from time to time, but nothing of the sort exists in my area. It isn't about segregating, but sometimes it comforts me to be in a room filled with people who share my cultural background. I don't feel comfortable discussing some issues in a room in which I am the minority.

I think race makes no difference in the struggle against the disease. All cultures include foods from which an OA member must abstain to work the program seriously—whether it's sweet potato pie or baklava. Everyone experiences difficulties in the beginning, but with the help of a Higher Power, difficulties ultimately give way to freedom from the food obsession.

My sponsor, who is not black, is a wonderful person, sponsor and inspiration. She and I have become close and even discuss racial topics. Currently, I have 60 days of abstinence—one day at a time, thank God. Since being in the program, I have gone from a size 16 to a size 12. My goal is a size 10.

One of the things I most love about recovery is my "wastebasket cleanse." I get a thrill at the end of my workday when I look in the wastebasket beneath my desk and find only empty water bottles and a discarded coffee cup. That basket once brimmed with candy wrappers, soda cans, chip bags and remnants of other stuff that was killing me slowly but surely. I even used to put some of the wrappings in other wastebaskets so the cleaning people wouldn't know how much I ate. Thanks to program and recovery, I no longer hide in shame.

When push comes to shove, we are all one in this disease. Color should never keep us apart.

— Anonymous, USA

No Longer an Outsider

I'll never fit in. I don't belong. How will I fit in here when I don't even fit in with my own family?" These thoughts ran through my head the day I went to my first OA meeting. It bothered me that I was the only college-aged person at the meeting, but I felt more uncomfortable because I was the only black person there. When I noticed that, I desperately wanted to leave but was too timid, so I stayed for the whole meeting.

I came to OA because I wanted to learn how to control my eating. For years I had been obsessed with food, and shortly after starting college I became bulimic. At first I would binge for fun, then purge and work out to keep the weight off. I felt I could eat whatever I wanted because of this. I knew many other girls who did the same.

However, I was soon bingeing all the time. I would try to fight the desire, but would end up eating a tremendous amount of food and then purg-

ing and feeling guilty. I had tried many diets, and they only made me binge more. I would binge up to four times a day, work out for four to five hours, then purge until I was lightheaded. I was depressed and terrified. I had no idea how to stop bingeing. I thought I was crazy and felt aggravated that my family and friends thought I was healthy. Keeping my bulimia a secret was destroying me.

After that first meeting I tried to leave quickly, distraught that I didn't blend in. My only desire was to go home and drown my sorrows with a box of doughnuts. As I was walking out the door, a woman only a few years older than I asked what brought me to OA. Her question caught me off guard. I began to think about the three binges I had had that day and about how I worked out every day at 5 a.m. I thought about how depressed, scared and alone I felt and how disappointed I was to be different from everyone else at the meeting. I looked at this woman I didn't know and began to cry.

"I'm a mess," I told her. "I'm pretty sure I have an eating disorder and nobody knows. I don't know what to do." She looked understanding and began to tell me how she too had suffered from bulimia. For the first time I didn't feel alone. She single-handedly convinced me that OA would work if I gave it time.

Five months later I am doing much better. I haven't binged in almost four months and have been abstinent for a month. The kind lady I met at the first meeting is my sponsor and my friend. Now I can't imagine life without OA. I no longer care that I am the only black person at my meeting. Everyone is so nice and understanding that I no longer feel like an outsider. While I was never overweight, I have lost some weight because I no longer eat like a maniac. Most importantly, I am no longer depressed, and when I have a problem I talk about it with my sponsor instead of eating over it.

— L.E., USA

An Equal-Opportunity Afflicter

I came into the rooms of Overeaters Anonymous in the late 1970s, finding Caucasians to be the majority of people attending. Initially I felt uncomfortable. A lifetime of being discriminated against because of race, compounded with being a grossly obese female, rendered me a supersensitive person who cringed at what I perceived as the smallest slight. If people did not speak to me, surely it was because I was black.

But listening to the speakers and those who shared, I discovered we are bound together by a disease that is an equal-opportunity afflicter. Compulsive overeating has no boundaries; it includes all ethnicities, social classes and sexes. I knew I was home, and in spite of my fear and discomfort I am grateful I stayed and experienced recovery.

Although obesity is rampant in my community, the number of OA meetings has remained small, but that is changing. In my home group, which has floundered for many years, people are now working the Steps, following a food plan and recovering. As a result, the meeting is growing and OA is thriving in this African American community. God and this program do not discriminate. I know today that anyone who wants to recover can, regardless of race.

I have attended meetings nationwide where I am the only African American and have felt welcomed at most of them. I have had the experience that all African Americans are familiar with: being around people who are uncomfortable with my presence. I take a personal inventory, focus on the meeting, get what I can out of it and leave the rest there. Has it always been this way? No. But my desire to recover was stronger than any real or imagined slight. At 340 pounds (155 kg), food had me licked. Thank God this program is for anyone who wants it.

This African American woman stayed in the rooms—sometimes scared, feeling unwanted and self-conscious—until the miracle came. My sponsor is Caucasian and we learn from each other. The

strongest group I attended was predominately Caucasian, and those women demonstrated what recovery was all about. They led me to a sponsor who took the time to lead me through the Steps, and I thank God each day for her and them. To my African American brothers and sisters who may feel intimidated, I say come on in. This is our Fellowship, and there is room for all compulsive overeaters. The only desire you need is to stop eating compulsively.

— N.E., USA

Transcending Cultural Boundaries

I have been in OA for more than 17 years and still remember my first meeting: the only meeting predominantly composed of African Americans. That seemed important to me then. However, the meeting was small and only one person had any recovery. This person became my sponsor. I loved the meeting but needed more support. My sponsor suggested I attend other meetings. Imagine my surprise when I went to a meeting in a nearby suburb and saw scores of recovering compulsive overeaters. Then I knew I was not alone.

Many African Americans lived in my area, yet few attended OA meetings. I reached out to others and helped start a new meeting. Part of my outreach was selfish. I was afraid to be vulnerable to those outside my race, and I felt different. No one ever told me "thin is well," and some of my food issues were different. Over the years I learned some valuable lessons.

The disease always tells me I'm different from other compulsive overeaters. It doesn't matter whether the differences concern food, weight, race, marital status, gender, income, politics or sexual orientation. This type of thinking keeps me focused on the problem. When I live in the solution I realize that the Steps and Traditions are spiritual principles that supersede all cultural boundaries and personal differences. I live in a diverse world and practice loving tolerance within the OA Fellowship.

Now many more African Americans attend the new meeting. I'm grateful the message is reaching a greater population. However, my personal recovery is not based upon the demographic makeup of the Fellowship. My Higher Power speaks through many types of people, and today I am willing to listen. For that I can thank OA.

— T.C., USA

Hooked by Love and Acceptance

While watching television and feeling fearful one day, I noticed an announcement about a meeting of Overeaters Anonymous within walking distance of my home. Excited that such a meeting existed, I hoped I wouldn't gain back the weight I had just lost. It seemed as though a glimmer of light had pierced my darkness. Finally I had found a place where people would understand what I was going through. Thinking it was too good to be true, I told no one. I simply showed up.

My hope quickly vanished. I was in a room full of white women and wondered how they could possibly understand me. I didn't have the courage to walk out, so I stayed, heartbroken and full of despair. But as I began to listen, I noticed that the women sounded just like me and did some of the same things I did. I did belong, and I kept coming back.

One day a woman came up to me and told me I needed a black sponsor. What was I supposed to do? There weren't any. Again my hope faded. Feeling sorry for myself, I wondered how I would find recovery from this disease as a black woman in a white organization. I had nowhere else to go, so I kept coming back and praying. Then I began to notice one particular member. Week after week, I listened and liked the things I heard. Her words were full of love, peace and understanding. My grandmother had taught me as a child to judge a person by his or her character, not color. From observing her, I knew my chances of getting a sponsor were better. I finally found the courage to approach her

and say hello. Before I realized what I was saying, I was asking her to be my sponsor, and she said yes. It was a joy I had never known; here stood my chance to recover from compulsive overeating.

I loved my sponsor, and she taught me much. Her love and acceptance hooked me and gave me a firm foundation into OA, for which I am grateful. To any person of color new to OA, I say pray, listen with the heart, and keep coming back. I discovered that this disease has no color barrier. When I heard a member say that her mother had told her to clean her plate because children in Europe were starving, I laughed. I had been told as a child to clean my plate because children in Africa were starving.

— G.H., USA

The Twelve Traditions

1. Our common welfare should come first; personal recovery depends upon OA 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 OA membership is a desire to stop eating compulsively.
4. Each group should be autonomous except in matters affecting other groups or OA as a whole.
5. Each group has but one primary purpose—to carry its message to the compulsive overeater who still suffers.
6. An OA group ought never endorse, finance, or lend the OA name to any related facility or outside enterprise, lest problems of money, property and prestige divert us from our primary purpose.
7. Every OA group ought to be fully self-supporting, declining outside contributions.
8. Overeaters Anonymous should remain forever nonprofessional, but our service centers may employ special workers.
9. OA, as such, ought never be organized; but we may create service boards or committees directly responsible to those they serve.
10. Overeaters Anonymous has no opinion on outside issues; hence the OA 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, films, television and other public media of communication.
12. Anonymity is the spiritual foundation of all these Traditions, ever reminding us to place principles before personalities.

Permission to use the Twelve Traditions of Alcoholics Anonymous for adaptation granted by AA World Services, Inc.