

## WORKING THE PROGRAM

# What If I Don't Believe in “God”?

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*Members like you  
share their OA  
recovery*

## 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.

## Preamble

Overeaters Anonymous is a Fellowship of individuals who, through shared experience, strength, and hope, are recovering from compulsive overeating. We welcome everyone who wants to stop eating compulsively. There are no dues or fees for members; we are self-supporting through our own contributions, neither soliciting nor accepting outside donations. OA is not affiliated with any public or private organization, political movement, ideology, or religious doctrine; we take no position on outside issues. Our primary purpose is to abstain from compulsive eating and compulsive food behaviors and to carry the message of recovery through the Twelve Steps of OA to those who still suffer.

## Introduction

The spiritual experiences and beliefs expressed by members of Overeaters Anonymous are as varied as those found in society at large. Some members have spiritual orientations; still others have come to OA with a history of religious conflict or do not accept the concept of God.

Working the OA program of recovery is a highly individual process. We don't all think alike. As stated in *The Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions of Overeaters Anonymous*, page ix, "Our common bonds are two: the disease of compulsive eating from which we all have suffered, and the solution that we all are finding as we live by the principles embodied in these Steps." This is what unites us in OA. Differences regarding a spiritual concept, or lack thereof, need not keep us from working the program. As the Third Tradition states, if we have the desire to stop eating compulsively, there is a place for us in OA. Therefore, we need not explain or defend our individual beliefs even if they differ from the majority opinion.

This pamphlet reflects the experience, strength, and hope of OA members who do not express a belief in "God" but work the OA program. We hope you will find their insights helpful as you work our Twelve-Step program of recovery.

## What if I don't believe in "God"?

An atheist is one who denies the existence of God. An agnostic is one who claims the existence of God cannot be proven. Some people assume these beliefs mean a resistance to personal spirituality. Others believe such an assumption is far from the truth.

*"I think we naturally assume people who call themselves atheists or agnostics are not spiritual people. Therein lies the basis for confusion."*

*"In the course of my recovery, I've had the privilege of attending OA meetings with people who identify themselves as atheists and agnostics—and they were some of the most spiritual meetings I've ever attended. We are people who know you don't have to believe in God to belong to OA or to be abstinent. We walk a spiritual path that incorporates the principles of OA into our daily lives."*

Admittedly, it may be harder for nonbelievers to jump right in and start working OA's Twelve-Step program. Some members say the very mention of the word *God* hindered their early attempts to embrace the Twelve-Step way of life.

*"I found it easiest to try the parts of OA I could do immediately and leave the God stuff for later. As they say in OA, 'Take what you like and leave the rest.'"*

*"Many skeptics, like myself, have come to terms with the use of the word God. Some even use the word, while others simply tolerate it at meetings."*

*"In my experience, many members who are atheists or agnostics still rely on something greater than themselves and food."*

*“I am agnostic. I believe there will always be a question about the existence of God. But more important than continually asking whether or not there is a God, I have simply stopped asking the question.”*

Clearly it is more helpful to focus on recovery from compulsive eating than to continually seek arguments that lead us astray.

The pain of compulsive eating has led some members to a point of desperation. They became willing to take actions suggested by abstaining, recovering members regardless of their spiritual beliefs or disbeliefs at the time.

*“I had always used food as my Higher Power. I certainly ‘acted as if’ food could or would help me deal with life—inspiring, exciting, comforting, distracting, and fulfilling me in turn. By the time I came to OA, however, I could no longer find food adequately inspiring or exciting. The comfort ended as soon as the swallowing stopped, if not before, and I ceased to know what ‘filling’ was, much less ‘fulfilling.’ Distraction was about the only function food still performed and that was uncomfortably short.”*

*“OA was right. My Higher Power—food—didn’t work. After some miserable attempts to use OA as a diet program, I began to take some of the slogans and sayings I was hearing to heart. ‘Listen.’ ‘Resign from the debating society.’ ‘Take the cotton out of your ears and put it in your mouth.’ And I became abstinent from compulsive eating.”*

“Identify, don’t compare” is common sense wisdom for many members. Often the “Power greater than ourselves” referred to in Step Two is the power of seeing a whole group of people who are recovering from this disease. Some found it easy to go to OA meetings simply because they identified with others, as this member relates:

*“I knew of the program long before I became a*

*member. In fact, I had attended two meetings in my twenties. I purchased some literature but rejected OA as soon as the spiritual nature of the program became apparent.*

*“Joining OA in a committed fashion at age 33 was comparatively easy, however. I identified with the members, and some sense of grace allowed me to suspend my agitation about spiritual recovery. Initially, it was the people, not the Steps, who impressed me.”*

The only requirement for membership in OA is the desire to stop eating compulsively. Open-mindedness is our watchword as we read in *The Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions of Overeaters Anonymous*, page 13:

*“OA doesn’t tell us we have to believe in God—only that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity. We are invited to define that Power however we wish and relate to it in whatever way works for us. OA only suggests that we remain open to spiritual growth.”*

Frequently, newcomers will simply accept the program has worked for others and, therefore, can work for them. The new freedom and happiness we are promised are reflected in the harmony with ourselves, others and everything in our present reality.

*“I’m a longtime OA member, and I continue to use the OA program itself as a Power greater than myself because I continually witness people who have recovery from compulsive overeating and that’s why I’m here.”*

*“While I do not believe in the prevailing concept of God, I do believe that a transcendent, moral, and spiritual plane is the highest level of awareness for human beings.”*

*“My Higher Power is the Fellowship of OA, where each individual surrenders to the wisdom,*

*conscience and love of the program.”*

*“My Higher Power is my moral intuition, my conscience, my highest nature, tapping into the greatness of all wisdom.”*

*“My Higher Power is nature: the germination of a seed, the brilliance and energy of the sun, a woman giving birth to a baby, the formation of snowflakes, lightning and rushing rivers.”*

*“I am spiritual when I ‘place principles before personalities.’ I am spiritual when I reach out to another compulsive eater with a listening heart, a phone call or a loving hug. I am spiritual when I honestly search my soul for defects and have the willingness to persistently seek to be rid of them.”*

Few OA members who have hit rock bottom have trouble with the First Step, regardless of their religious beliefs or conception of a Power greater than themselves. The OA program of recovery offers a way for us to move forward, to leave behind the wreckage that we have made of our self-esteem, our bodies, our relationships, ourselves. None of us recovers by continuing the thinking and behavior which brought us to the Fellowship.

*The Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions of Overeaters Anonymous*, page 14, offers this suggestion:

*“We learned we could ‘act as if.’ This didn’t mean we were to be dishonestly pious or pretend we believed in God when we didn’t. It meant we were free to set aside theological arguments and examine the idea of spiritual power in light of our own desperate need for help with our lives.”*

Working the Steps can present particular difficulty for those whose Higher Power is not a deity to which one prays. It is especially important to remember that working the OA program is an individual process. How we interpret and work the program depends, in large part, on how we view the world and what we believe.

*“The Steps don’t ask a great deal of us at first glance. In fact, I see now that all I did was pay lip service to Steps One, Two and Three at first. Realistically, they are tall orders and completely inward processes. For me they boiled down to ‘You hate what it is like now. What you’re doing and thinking made things as they presently are. Obviously those things must change. You can get better if you listen and try to act and think differently.’”*

*“The Steps are just practical ways to change—guides to spiritual progress. It was the height of my personal arrogance to try to dictate my recovery as a newcomer. I can now accept others where they are on all three levels: weight-wise, feelings-wise and God-wise. I am not spiritually identical today to how I was when I came to my first meeting, but I’m still me and still as special as I was then. I must admit, though, that I’m lighter and happier now.”*

Deciding to turn over our will and lives is crucial and perhaps the most difficult task in the program. Here is how one member handles it:

*“For me, Step Three was making a commitment to work the OA program of recovery despite my doubts, criticisms, rationalizations and desires to do it ‘my way.’ Some would call this surrender. But rather than surrendering to an omnipotent being that would pull strings in my life from now on, I made the decision to turn my will and my life over to the process of working the Twelve Steps.*

*“While I’m not certain of the existence of God, I can’t deny the empirical evidence of OA recovery that I see in meetings. Whatever the power is behind the OA program, I feel it strongly every time I step through the doors of an OA meeting or use the tools of the program.*

*“Working Steps Three and Eleven, to me, means realizing that this power is real and its label doesn’t matter.”*

All in all, the experiences of those who work this program with their own concept of a Higher Power show that this program does work regardless of one's personal interpretation of that Power. Clarity, peace of mind and growth are some of the many byproducts of OA's recovery program. When we stay in the program and apply these principles in keeping with a personal understanding of a Higher Power, these rich rewards are ours! These are certainly good reasons to "keep coming back."

So many of us cried out, "I can't do it, I'm different." When we took the time to try—choosing instead lives of abstinence and working the Steps—we stopped being the one for whom the program just wouldn't work and became one of the thousands for whom it did work. Every day. One day at a time.



## 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.



## **How to find OA**

Visit the OA Web site at [www.oa.org](http://www.oa.org),  
or contact the World Service Office at 505-891-2664.  
Many local telephone directories also include listings  
for Overeaters Anonymous.

### **Overeaters Anonymous®**

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Rev. 3/16 #195