

The Nature of the Disease

It was a late night after work in the fall of 2012, and through a mutual friend's contact I found myself on the phone with an OA member. At that point, I had never been to a meeting and only had vaguely heard about OA. But as she spoke, I identified with her story, and in my quaking voice, I admitted powerlessness over this cunning and baffling disease for the first time.

For me, food was the way that I could numb my suffering. Why I was suffering, I wasn't sure, but I knew that it was an unshakable, chronic emotional pain that hung around like a low-grade fever afflicting my life. For so many years I had normalized that emotion, so I didn't know what life felt like without it—except for when I binged. Later, I would understand that my feeling was, to put it coarsely, self-hate. That may seem too harsh a term, but upon reflection, it pretty much sums it up.

Before Step 1, I needed to hit a bottom, and for me, that meant that I began to have a desire (willingness) to stop feeling the way I was feeling—even if that meant looking at my relationship food, which at the time was my most prized source of relief. To even entertain the idea of taking away my only tried-and-true coping mechanism (in a sense, my best friend) that I had been using since I was 4 years old, meant that I was truly desperate. Luckily, for addicts like myself, desperation is a very useful thing.

My Sponsor revealed to me that the root of the reasons for my overeating was my self-loathing: feeling a deep sense of worthlessness, like I was an excuse for a human being, devoid of value, unloved and unlovable, existing without merit, less than human, a second-class citizen—constantly feeling “less-than.” It all boiled down to one word: shame.

Shame is an ugly and corroding fundamental belief from which to build a self-identity. It was an internalized value that had to be smashed; pulverized into dust; ripped out of my computer hardware as if it were a corrupting chip with a virus. I don't think that it would be an understatement to say that it was a toxic garbage fire that consumed everything.

These core beliefs had to be eradicated, because they were at the root of my addiction. These diseased portions had to be cut out and replaced with something better. I needed a deep renovation, an internal re-engineering. I needed a new perspective on life and a new set of core beliefs about myself. The solution was to have a psychic change, or a spiritual experience, and then to tap into that nourishing, healing source of energy.

However, that source of energy was not accessible through a wall of active intoxication. And so Step 1 was not about seeking God or a spiritual experience; it was about undergoing physical withdrawal from a chemical dependence to a drug.

Step 1

What separates 12-steppers into different sibling fellowships is the first step, which identifies our specific addiction: “We admitted that we were powerless over _____ — that our lives had become unmanageable.”

Regardless of the name of the various drugs, the effect is essentially the same: We are physically numbed to our raging garbage fire. The drug doesn’t put out the fire; it simply numbs our nerves to it. We are numbed to a fire that is destroying our body. Eventually, the fire will consume everything, and it will kill us.

Numbing feels like an answer, but it is fooling us. It is a lie—a cunning and insidious lie. For me, that anesthetic was not alcohol, but food. My trigger foods and behaviors were my narcotic, my opiate, and they had a physical hold on me.

What follows here is a description of the mechanics of our disease. The structure mirrors the structure of a meeting format handed down through my sponsor’s lineage.

Physical Addiction

Let’s say that we replace this trash fire with 100% pure love and connection to a higher power. Well, here is an incredibly unfortunate but true fact about addicts that has been pointed out to me by OA members: The physical, bodily cravings, when in withdrawal, are stronger even than love.

Many alcoholics love their families intensely, but still, the craving for liquor is greater. The alcoholic then drinks, not to stop the emotions of life, but rather to keep up with the physical cravings. The same is true for us, substituting in trigger foods for alcohol. A higher power is no match for the cravings produced during withdrawal from a physically addictive substance. While a higher power is a remedy to a spiritual malady, cravings are phenomena that lie squarely within the physical realm.

We are fundamentally physically different from normal eaters because our bodies develop a deep physical craving for certain foods. We have an abnormal reaction when we ingest certain foods, which can be thought of as an allergy. It is an allergy we will have for our entire lives. Just like I will be allergic to penicillin my entire life. With penicillin I break out into hives. What does my allergy to trigger foods look like? My abnormal reaction is that I want to eat more and more of my triggers foods after having them, whereas a normal eater naturally stops because they are “satisfied.”

In comparison, I’ve never said that a piece(s) of cake is too “rich” for me to finish. I’m finished when there isn’t any more cake (in which case I’ll go buy more, under cloak of night if need be), or when I’ve had so much that I feel physically nauseated (at which point, I just wait the feeling out, and then go dig in for more). That is why after hitting bottom, we must first go through Step 1 withdrawal from the offending substances—in my case, my trigger foods.

I don't want to downplay withdrawal. It is difficult, because of chemical dependence and other physiological reasons, to get through withdrawal. Sugar and other refined carbs are particularly addictive for scientific reasons. It may take a few days, or maybe a couple weeks to stop craving a certain trigger ingredient after that last bite. Famous drug addicts can go to expensive spa-resort treatment centers, and I can see why—going through withdrawal is not fun. For us regular folks, we really need to use those program tools to get through it.

In full disclosure, unfortunately, I didn't go through withdrawal from all of my trigger foods all at once. I started with some of the more obvious trigger foods, and then I had the ability to become more honest about other foods that I needed to give up. I definitely don't recommend or advise it, but my personal experience was that I started Step 1 in a partial way, which is better than not starting at all. This process took several weeks. (In fact, I didn't become honest with myself about a few particular trigger foods until a year or two later.)

The good medical news is that once we go through withdrawal, we will never have physical cravings again, for the rest of our lives—unless we take that first bite. Now, the mental obsession is a different story, which we will turn toward next. Fortunately, through continuous spiritual growth, we can, on a daily basis, keep the mental obsession at bay.

Mental Obsession

Even after we go through physical withdrawal (and we only need to do that once, unless we relapse), we will always be subject to the mental obsession. The mental obsession lives in the mind, while the physical craving lives in the body.

Many times, after first going through withdrawal, a newcomer will be given grace—meaning a period of time that they are obsession-free, without having to work on spiritual practice. Some call this the “pink cloud.” This is dangerous. The newcomer will think that they are cured and have no need for the other steps, including prayer and meditation. Soon, however, the obsession will come and trick them into taking that first bite, thus reigniting the cravings.

The mental obsession is cunning. It takes a million different forms:

- “Oh, my grandma made this just for me.”
- “Oh, just this once.”
- “Oh, I deserve a treat.”
- “I just can't enjoy this holiday/birthday/special occasion without eating _____.”
- “I've been good for so long.”
- “It would be rude not to have at least one bite.”
- “I can't truly experience this foreign country without trying the local delicacy.”

These are all lies—Trojan horses to hijack the body and rekindle the cravings.

The way to combat obsessive thoughts is through enlarging our spiritual condition *on a daily basis*. And it must be done on a daily basis. (Please don't wait until Step 11 to start meditating!)

My Grand-Sponsor is very clear on the following point: In observations of working with members, every relapse comes from one reason: “spiritual balking.” At a convention a few years ago, a speaker analogized spiritual growth to a car’s daytime running lights. You may not think you need them, but when it gets dark fast from a storm, they will save you. If your lights aren’t always on, if your spiritual light is not always growing, then you will be left vulnerable, unshielded and unprotected from the obsession. Your spiritual guard must always be up, whether you see the storm of obsession on the horizon or not. Fit spiritual condition is how we extinguish obsessive thoughts before they ever arise, and if they do, they are weaker, and we can use our program tools to snuff them out.

When we practice spiritual growth on a daily basis—when we meditate, and pray, and do the inner-engineering to replace that trash fire with self-love, love from a higher power, and freedom from shame—we will be placed in a position of neutrality, safe and protected from obsessive thoughts.

Food Plan

However, without creating and following a food plan, we don’t know whether we are acting in ways that will set off our cravings. We won’t know what our trigger foods are, and which foods contain those trigger ingredients. It’s worth noting that cravings can also be triggered through compulsive food behaviors, which following a food plan helps to regulate. The most fundamental idea is this: Without a food plan, we cannot practice powerlessness.

What happens then? If I don’t eat in accordance with my food plan, the physical cravings will come back, and my spiritual growth, no matter how large, will not be able to help me.

For instance, all the self-love in the world won’t protect me from a physical calamity, such as a plane crash, earthquake or tornado. Just like other physical calamities, *cravings* take place in the physical world—with physical human cells, enzymes, biochemicals and neuropathways—not in the spiritual or mental world. That’s why spiritual and mental fortification only protects against the *obsession*, because obsession takes place in the emotional or spiritual world.

The good news is that cravings are a tornado of biochemicals that can only be unleashed if I set off the tornado by eating in ways that contradict my food plan. (Or by believing I don’t need a food plan to begin with.) The bad news is that if I do get picked up by a tornado, I don’t know where or when (days? decades?) it will set me back down, or if I’ll be alive when it does.

For better or worse, this is the nature of our disease, and the 12 steps, starting with Step 1, is our path to recovery. Please take what you like and leave the rest.

With Love & Gratitude,

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