

Richmond Times-Dispatch

Richmond, VA

Sunday, Aug 24, 2008

<http://www.inrich.com/cva/ric/living.apx.-content-articles-RTD-2008-08-24-0026.html>

CONTROLLING THE TIGER

Overeaters Anonymous: 'map to life that works if you work it'



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Each of the women at the table grabs the hand of the woman next to her, and in unison they say the Serenity Prayer, and then, lifting their clasped hands, they chant:

"Keep coming back. It works if you work it."

It is an upbeat ending to a meeting in which each of the women has admitted being a compulsive overeater or food addict. They can't always control what they eat or how much they eat. They eat when they are stressed, depressed or tired, even though they might not be hungry. They eat when they are angry and can't or won't express it. They eat to fill emotional wounds.

The hour long, midday Overeaters Anonymous meeting at a church in western Henrico County provides an opportunity for them to connect with others going through the same things.

Despite the fact that more Americans are tipping the scales toward obesity, solutions to prevent people from becoming overweight and to help those who lose weight keep it off long term are hard to come by. Just admonishing people to eat less and move more misses a lot of what drives eating behavior.

Overeaters Anonymous is one option that is often overlooked because, like other 12-step groups, the organization discourages participants from seeking publicity. Nonetheless, people find OA. The national Overeaters Anonymous office estimates there are more than 6,500 groups meeting each week in more than 75 countries.

"It took me a while to get to OA," said R., who asked to be identified by her middle initial only. Overeaters Anonymous is modeled after Alcoholics Anonymous, which stresses that members remain anonymous and unidentifiable in media reports.

R. said she went to her first OA meeting in 1990 but did not really embrace the program until 2000. In between, she had gastric bypass surgery, an operation that removes most of the stomach, limiting a person to only a few ounces of food at a time. She weighed 340 pounds, more than twice what she weighs now, when she had the surgery in 1995.

"I was desperate," R. said. "My weight was going up faster than I could buy clothes." After the surgery, she got down to 228 pounds before her weight started going back up again, reaching 270. She went down again, to 238, then back up, to 279.

That is when she turned to Overeaters Anonymous.

Like Alcoholics Anonymous, Overeaters Anonymous, started in 1960, is a self-help organization based on The Twelve Steps, principles or methods that guide people as they try to recover from addiction, whether it be to food, gambling, alcohol or drugs.

Overeaters Anonymous was founded by three women. One of the three, according to the OA Web site, got the idea to start the group after attending a Gamblers Anonymous meeting with a friend. As she listened to those in the group talk, she recognized some of the same patterns and factors in her own behavior when it came to food and eating.

The notion that one can be addicted to food as one can be addicted to alcohol or narcotics is still subject to debate.

Researchers have tried to make the case by looking at what happens in the brain when a person in various states of food deprivation is exposed to food. Some studies have used just the scent of food to elicit responses that suggest addictive behaviors. Studies have also singled out carbohydrates and sugar, in particular, as foods having the most addictive potential.

Even if food addiction is a problem for some, it does not explain why so many more people are packing on a few or a lot of extra pounds.

"A lot of us have oral dependence," said Jeanne Decker, a clinical psychologist in private practice in the Richmond area, suggesting eating is part habit for some.

"We want to eat something, drink something, or bite our nails or smoke cigarettes. The core issue is putting something in our mouths for comfort," Decker said.

Pair that dependence with the availability of tasty, low-cost, readily accessible food, and there are people who will overeat and become overweight, Decker said.

"I think that is a much greater problem than digging around in someone's early childhood," said Decker, when asked if, for instance, a history of abuse might make one prone to overeating.

Overeaters Anonymous emphasizes healing oneself physically, spiritually and emotionally. Some members do have abuse or trauma in their backgrounds.

R. said she was an abused child and has been in therapy for it.

Another member, W., said she remembers turning to food for comfort at age 2 after her grandfather died.

"My mother was so devastated by the loss of her father, she went to bed and stayed in her room a month. She did not do anything," W. said. She imagines that as a 2-year-old, the loss of her mother's attention and the loss of her grandfather were devastating. Family photos show her starting to pick up weight around then, she said.

Sessions with a therapist have been part of her recovery. So has Overeaters Anonymous.

"I came to lose weight. I got much more than that," W. said. "It's a threefold disease, this addiction that I have. Most addictions are spiritual, mental and physical. I have certainly gotten some fitness in all three of those areas. It's just to me, an OA is a road map to life that works if you work it. It does take commitment, and it does take some hard work. But the rewards are worth every minute of it."

W. has done the 90 meetings in 90 days regimen, a program recommendation for those who are going through particularly challenging periods and need the daily interaction. She has been coming to Overeaters Anonymous meetings for about 20 years. The first couple of years, she lost 70 pounds, weight she has kept off within about a 10-pound fluctuation now and then.

"When I find myself getting in trouble with food again, I go to more meetings, make more telephone calls, work my steps," W. said.

Meetings, sponsors and working The Twelve Steps make up the core of the program.

Members are not provided a food plan, but they are encouraged to see a professional who can help them develop one.

"It gives you something to commit to instead of being vague about what you are going to eat," R. said. "When you are vague, it's very easy to overeat."

A food plan also helps identify foods that are triggers to overeating and that probably should be avoided. W. said she was a grazer -- eating throughout the day.

"My first food plan was to eat just three meals a day," W. said. "Then I gave up sugar. It might not be for everybody, but sugar and white flour are two things that are real triggers for me."

Sponsors, available by phone, e-mail or in person, help with staying focused and on track. They take calls from people who need support, and they make calls to those who might be struggling and express a need for help. At meetings, a notebook is passed around, and those who want to be sponsors or who need sponsors can take a name or leave theirs.

Working the steps requires taking emotional risks. Steps 1, 2 and 3 require admitting to being powerless over food, believing in a higher power and turning over one's life to the care of that higher power. Steps 4 and 5 require doing a "fearless moral inventory" and admitting one's faults. Meetings with the theme of honesty, open-mindedness and willingness are on the lineup.

"They talk about letting go and letting God, letting a higher power do the work for you because so much of our weight thing is trying to control it," R. said.

"It's some kind of miracle that when you let go, abstinence comes. It doesn't make any sense. It's not logical. If you say, 'I am powerless over food in my life and it has become unmanageable,' well doesn't that mean you have admitted defeat and everything is going to fall apart? But it doesn't. For some reason, it works."