

## A NEW WAY TO HANDLE LIFE

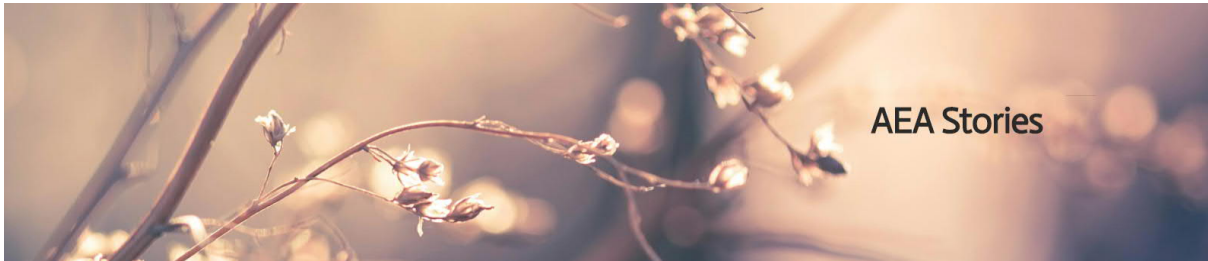
I didn't think I had a problem with food until I was fifteen years old and at high school, but now I realise that I was born with the problem. I didn't recognise it as a child because I wasn't overeating or starving, but I did have other characteristics, like wanting to be alone all the time, feeling ugly, wrong and bad. I stole, lied and was a very secretive child.

At high school, when I was about fifteen years old, I remember being in a physical education class when the whole class had to be weighed. I weighed nine stone! I thought I was fat. I was shocked and ashamed that I could weigh so much. I determined that I would lose weight and I decided to keep it a secret. I stopped eating breakfast and lunch and started attending an aerobics class, which was held in the school gym during lunchtime.

When I got home, I ate only as much of the evening meal as I could get away with, without anyone asking any questions. I began to lose weight and people commented on how good I looked. I loved the admiration I was getting and I wanted more of it. After a time, my weight loss became a point of concern to my family and I knew I was going to have to start eating more. I decided to take laxatives to control the weight gain and I also started smoking cigarettes and drinking strong black coffee.

Eventually, I moved out of home – free at last I thought. I started drinking alcohol a lot more and I joined a gym. A good day was when I didn't eat at all and a bad day would be eating a six-pack of sausages or a whole box of rice risotto.

One day, about a year later, the boyfriend I was living with moved out and went to live in Australia. I was very down. The only thing that I wanted to do was eat. I imagined buying all my favourite foods and being left alone to eat. I thought it would make me feel better. This desire to eat was my dirty, dark secret. I hated myself for wanting to eat. I thought it showed weakness. In spite of my critical thinking, I did buy all that food and I had a big binge on food. My plan was to exercise it off afterward, however when I tried to exercise, I got cramp. I panicked. How was I going to get rid of all that food I had just eaten? I tried vomiting – it worked. This started a pattern of eating and vomiting that continued until well into my thirties. I would plan binges with great excitement and then vomit up as much food as I could, often choking. I would go to extreme lengths to make myself sick, like pouring bleach into the toilet first so I would inhale the fumes and it would help me be sick.



Thinking about food, when to eat, how much to buy, where to get the money and how to get rid of it, became my whole life. I had started smoking marijuana and taking other drugs when I could. I wasn't interested in working, making friends, being a member of my family, saving money or any of the other things I saw my peers doing.

I didn't like myself and I knew I should change. I decided to go to the doctor and tell her about the vomiting I was doing. I thought she would feel sorry for me and give me diet pills, which I would use instead of vomiting. Then I could eat what I wanted without putting on weight. The only problem with my plan was that the doctor didn't offer me diet pills; instead she offered me anti-depressants and suggested I go to a Twelve Step fellowship for compulsive eating.

I was ashamed. I wanted the life of my fantasies. I couldn't accept that I was sick and I didn't want to take responsibility for my own recovery. My attitude was: 'God you made me like this, you fix me'. I continued to binge and vomit for a long time, even after I started looking for a solution.

Eventually, I came to understand that I have a disease and it is called addiction. I am addicted to food and other substances. I learnt that addiction can swap from substance to substance, which is why I can't handle food, alcohol, drugs and exercise sensibly, like normal people. I learnt that addiction is a threefold illness that affects me spiritually, mentally and physically. I learnt that I can't fix myself and that there are lots of other people who are addicted to food, like me. Some of them are working together to help each other. They are not living in addiction anymore. They have found a solution in the Twelve Step fellowship of Addictive Eaters Anonymous (AEA).

As my eating got worse, I started to see the freedom these people had from food and I wanted it. I was developing a more open mind, able to listen and, with help, started to do what they were doing. Today, I have a new life free of bingeing, vomiting, drinking, taking drugs, exercising and smoking. I'm not overweight or underweight. I don't think about food all day every day. I have friends and I am a part of my family, I have been in the same job for many years, I can save money and take holidays.

I could never do these things for myself; they have happened to me while I have been going to AEA meetings and trying to follow the directions of my sponsor. My sponsor is a person in AEA who guides me in working the Twelve Steps and finding a Higher Power. It is my Higher Power, I believe, who has stopped me addictively eating today. I am very grateful. Being in AEA has given me hope that my life will continue to get better. In AEA, I am finding freedom from food and a way to handle life.