



NOT JUST 'A WOMAN'S PROBLEM'

I first went to a 12-step fellowship specialising in food addiction 25 years ago. I'd like to say I've been sober since then, but I got Dr Silkworth's advice in *The Doctor's Opinion* the wrong way round. Instead of remaining to pray, I kept leaving to scoff.

There was a 17-year lag between that first meeting and the moment I was finally able to admit complete defeat. Thirteen of those long, miserable years, as I suffered horribly from the spiritual malady, were spent in the rooms of Alcoholics Anonymous. Now if that's not insanity, I don't know what is.

I always knew there was an answer for food addiction. I saw it in a couple of people at my very first meeting. They were free of the guilt, shame, secrecy, anger and humiliation which had always accompanied my eating.

They told me if I wanted to get well I'd have to give up eating, drinking and drugging. They opened the door to a way out, but I flung it back in their faces. I lost count of the times I came in and out of that fellowship, insisting I wanted to do it my way.

I believe I was born an addict. I always remember having the obsession to eat and I always wanted more. I stole food, ate burnt food, soiled food and food dumped in rubbish bins. I screamed at the staff in a fried chicken joint because they'd run out of chicken. Once I started eating I couldn't stop.

When a primary school classmate collapsed with a ruptured spleen, I was soon plotting to steal his lunch by lining up at the takeaway counter and giving his name. I cradled that bag of sausages and chips to my chest like a baby, only grudgingly giving a few fries away. Selfishness, self-centredness is the nature of my disease.

Yet, for so long, I kidded myself "my case is different" every time I attended that food addiction fellowship. I was a man, for a start. I can't recall any men at my first meeting. There still aren't a lot but I no longer delude myself "this is a women's problem".

I also convinced myself I could use AA as a one-stop shop for all my addiction ills. That never worked either. I can only experience a psychic change alongside other compulsive overeaters, not home alone with God.

This is certainly a fatal, progressive disease. I was around 25 at the time of that first meeting. I was 42 when I started to get well. In between, I sponsored myself for eight years and got some really terrible advice.



Every day I woke up, determined to “beat it”. Within the hour, I’d be eating and the whole sordid cycle would start up again. I kept fantasising about driving into the base of a bridge to break a leg and get some respite in hospital. Perhaps I thought hospital food would fix me. For years, I was totally obsessed with dieting and losing weight, without realising that excess weight was just a symptom of my spiritual problem.

So what changed for me? The two most expensive cans of cola in the world were a catalyst but I believe the real impetus came from God, the same Higher Power who’d alerted me to a Twelve Step fellowship newspaper advertisement some 17 years before. I was working overseas and got myself embroiled in a bar scam in Paris. The French woman I’d met on the Champs Elysses drank two bottles of champagne. This so-called “sober” alcoholic slugged two cans of Coca Cola and choked on a total bill for \$NZ1200.

I knew then my actions weren’t those of a sober man. I was as powerless over food as I ever was over alcohol and I knew, deep down, I had to seek help from recovering food addicts pronto.

I came home and went to every meeting I could, including the ones I’d avoided where people were getting well. But I still had the obsession and craving for some months. My recovery only started when I asked for help. I remember my sponsor asking if I was entirely ready to give up the food. I said, “I couldn’t say 100 per cent, but I think I might be”. Something shifted then.

Next day I called her for a food plan and the fight I’d had all my life somehow started to ebb. I’d finally let go of my old ideas. I haven’t had to eat since, one day at a time, thank God. I started doing the things I’d always feared as controls - weighing and measuring my food, calling others - and found them to be freedoms.

After accepting I was a newcomer, I set out to work the Twelve Steps from Step One. I did my first real, searching and moral inventory. I’ve since made many amends for wrongs I’d done both before and during my time in AA.

Today, I understand the answer’s not in the food plan. It’s the Twelve Steps of AEA and God that sets me free from the merciless obsession.

No matter what happens in my life, good or bad, I don’t have to eat today provided I keep doing the things I’m doing now. I’m very grateful God has removed the problem. The absolute bright spot of my life is trying to carry this message to the still-suffering male food addict. All I can pass on is my own experience and the programme of recovery as outlined in the Big Book.

It took me so long to pick up the set of spiritual tools laid at my feet. Now, it’s a privilege to give it away.