

FOOD FREEDOM:

A RESOURCE MANUAL FOR SECULAR OVEREATERS

Table of Contents

1. Introduction--Our origins and perspective
2. Action Plan--Getting started--what should we do?
3. Social Support--Our First Step, you probably can't do this alone
4. Food Plan--Ad-libbing around food doesn't work for us
5. Self-Help--Steps you can take by yourself
6. Service--The last step is helping others like us
7. Final Word

Preface

Dear Secular Overeaters,

We heard you! Here is a Resource Manual to help atheists, agnostics and other secular/non-religious folks in our recovery.

In the tradition of OA, a group of us individual secular OA Members have come up with a Resource Manual to help us as individuals in our recovery. This is not OA "Conference-approved" literature. For such literature, please

go to OA.org. Since it is not “Conference-approved,” please do not share this Manual during OA meetings. You can share it during the socializing period after an OA meeting, just as we share all kinds of advice. This is for sharing one-on-one with other individuals in and out of OA.

Over the last two years, ever since we began expanding the number of meetings for our constituency, especially via Zoom, we have been welcoming lots of secular newcomers and other seculars returning to OA after a break. However, there have not been enough secular sponsors to go around. To help meet that need, we have come up with some new approaches.

First, we set up our Monday Workshops with Secular Sponsors. For about a year, we invited a different secular OA sponsor to speak each week about a practice that helps in their recovery (noon, EDT). We generated lots of podcasts. That Monday meeting still functions with a focus on helping folks who don’t have sponsors. You can find it at OA.org. However, it does not have a live secular sponsor speaking every week. It is still a great meeting.

We also launched a Sponsorship Initiative to grow new sponsors. If you are interested in becoming a secular sponsor, please check out the two-page guide we developed:

<https://secularovereaters.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/SO-BSS-09152021.pdf>

We have encouraged the use of peer-based approaches, such as Secular Accountability Buddies and Secular Recovery Circles. These are both described in this Manual.

This Manual provides you with a guide to dozens of the practices described by secular sponsors in our Monday Workshops and many others besides. It is the easiest way for a secular overeater to learn about these practices. You

can use it on your own, with a Buddy, in a Circle—or as a new Sponsor with your Sponsees.

We are rushing this into circulation in rough form so you can use it now. We want to have something to offer to a secular newcomer or returnee who shows up at our meetings.

And we want to use all our brains to help in our recovery. Therefore, we would love your comments on how to improve this Manual. Our design team will gather up those comments and develop a more polished version.

To access and use this Manual, all you have to do is click on this URL and it will open in your browser:

<https://bit.ly/FoodFreedomforSeculars>

You can print all or part of this Resource Manual for free. However, in a hard copy version, you cannot visit all the wonderful online resources.

If you are not skilled with Google Docs, you can always come back and search for this email to get back to the URL above. Searching for “Resource Manual” in your email program (Gmail, Yahoo, etc.) should bring this email back up and allow you to click on the URL above and get back to the online version.

If you do not know how to make Comments on the URL, please feel free to text or email us at the address below.

We hope this Manual will help you get and stay abstinent. Writing it sure did help us!

For the Literature Initiative,

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1. INTRODUCTION

We welcome you as a “Secular Overeater.”

Let’s take those two words one at a time.

We are individual Members of the larger community of Overeaters Anonymous (OA.) Like everyone in OA, we struggle for freedom from the bondage of compulsions around food and eating.

However, we are secular, as the dictionary defines secular, we are “not religious.” We do not believe in god or a non-material being who will intervene in our lives and help us stop overeating. By contrast, many other Members of OA do hold those beliefs. As a consequence, much of the literature and many OA meetings emphasize god. If you have similar beliefs or non-beliefs to us secular overeaters or simply prefer a more secular approach, we welcome you.

We have organized meetings for people like us. In those meetings, we share our experience, strength and hope as secular Members of OA. You can find most of those meetings at the official OA website, OA.org, under the Special Topic of “Atheist-Agnostic”. Some other similar meetings are listed elsewhere, for example under “Unconventional Spirituality.” You can find almost all of the secular OA meetings in one place listed at this website set up by a secular Member of OA: SecularOA.org. We now have secular OA meetings every day at different times available online, but composed of people from around the world.

We are a group of individual Members of OA who share information and support each other. We are not an organization and we have no affiliation with any other organization.

Like most of us in OA, we use the word “abstinence” to describe that freedom around food. Together, we have lost thousands of pounds. Many of us have stopped overeating, obsessing, bingeing, purging, restricting and other extreme behaviors around food for long periods of time—decades even! In a real sense, we have made peace with food.

We help each other to eat rationally so that, if we choose to, we can move towards and/or maintain a desired, healthy body weight—without obsessive thinking or extreme behaviors that once included excessive exercise, fad diets, purging, fasting, surgery or medication. We have tried all those, and more.

If you start attending one or more secular OA meetings by Zoom or by phone and follow the simple suggestions in this Manual, it is highly likely that you too can change your relationship with food and eating. You can, if you want, reach your preferred body size and maintain it—without any extreme or dangerous actions, without obsessing mentally—and live a better, fuller life. You can make peace with food.

As a peer-support community, there are no professionals in OA. No one is seeking to make a living, much less a profit. As a result, like most peer support communities, also known as “mutual aid” or “self-help” groups, there is no cost. Food freedom is free!

As individuals, most of us have experience within the larger Overeaters Anonymous (OA) community. You may have found us through OA. You may be a current member of OA. Almost all of us are. You may have considered, or have already tried, Overeaters Anonymous in the past and are returning because you have heard about this secular option. Or you may be brand new to OA and, like most of us in OA, have tried everything else and have finally turned to OA. Like Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) on which we and the rest of OA are based, OA is for many of us “the last house on the block.”

Here is a [15 question quiz](#) to help you decide if you are a compulsive eater and, by extension, whether it is worth putting a lot of time and effort into OA.

If you think you are one of us, welcome.

The manual is a compilation of many of the things we secular overeaters have learned to stop our compulsions related to eating and thinking about food. Much of it is based on workshops in the [Monday Secular Sponsor Workshop](#). It does not assume the existence of God. It works fine.

Please join us. All of the secular 12 Step communities have grown significantly during the pandemic. Since we are a scattered minority within OA, we have been able to find ourselves on the internet as all meetings shifted to online. In just a year, from 2020 to 2021, we have grown from six secular meetings in OA to twenty-one, with the founders of meetings coming from four countries. You can go to our website to join any one of our meetings by Zoom and get to know us.

Before we describe the resources in this Manual, we would like to give you some of the perspectives we have developed along the way.

Our Perspective

1. There is no one way to stop compulsive eating.

Each person must figure out an action plan and a food plan for themselves, ideally working with others in our program, including at least some people with more experience and success.

2. This is a scientific, empirical process.

While some of us may find that looking for ways to take these Christian-inspired 12 Steps and alter or re-word them may be helpful, for others it is not. There are two words that stand out over everything we have heard and seen, and they are: whatever works. We come to OA because our eating harms us and anything that reduces or eliminates the harmful eating is our goal. Thus, whatever works.

3. The “12 Steps” are only one approach and need not be undertaken immediately—or ever.

In this Manual, we have attempted to extract the aspects of the traditional OA experience most helpful to secular fellows and augment them with additional resources. OA and AA anchor recovery to a sequence of actions numbered one to twelve. These Steps are the core tenets of recovery in these programs. However, many of us have dealt

with addictions within OA and other 12 Step programs without ever having completed or even started the 12 Steps. It is not uncommon for newcomers to focus on finding social support in meetings and a sponsor, developing a food plan, and eating rationally for some time before undertaking the rigorous program of personal improvement of the 12 Steps. However, the 12 Steps include basic tools from the Christian traditions which many of us do find helpful to our recovery regardless of our religious beliefs or lack of them. Steps 4 and 5 direct us to conduct a moral inventory, a process of deep personal introspection and sharing the results of that process with another person. Steps 8 and 9 extend that self-examination to all our relationships, followed by making amends to all the people in our lives whom we have harmed—a form of what might nowadays be called “restorative justice.” In the listing of tools later in the book, we list all the 12 Steps. For many of us, the Steps are vital to maintaining our continued rationality around food. However, it does not have to come first, nor need you ever use any of them. Indeed, many of us seek personal improvement through professional therapy, or other self-help groups.

4. We only know a little.

This Manual lays out our current experiences and insights into what secular members of OA have found to work. That said, we know only a little and our goal is to grow our knowledge. We invite you to join us.

5. Meeting with other Secular Overeaters, like OA itself, is a gateway.

We are also well aware that the way we use food may be linked to various adverse experiences from our past (e.g. childhood abuse or life traumas), as well as current life circumstances (e.g., health conditions, family life or work life) For many of us, meeting with other Secular Overeaters like the rest of OA, is a gateway to other support we may need for issues beyond how we eat. Some of this may come from the OA fellowship and tools. Sometimes our sponsor or other members of OA will refer us to other sources of support outside OA that they have found helpful.

We are not therapists, doctors, career counselors, or experts on any aspect of life. We are simply a fellowship of people who have found that working together helps many of us make progress toward a better way to eat and live.

6. Progress is perfection.

Freedom from compulsive eating is often a process of making progress over time. With alcohol, the goal is simple and absolute: completely stopping. Food is quite different. Most of us will have rough edges around our compulsion. Did I stuff myself with healthy food (e.g. vegetables)? Should I eat more slowly? We may be adjusting our action plan and food plan all our lives.

7. Most of us need an Action Plan.

While everyone is different, as noted above, many of us have found it important to develop our own personal Action Plan to help us avoid our compulsive behavior and thinking. In Chapter 2, we describe Action Plans.

As we reviewed what has worked for us in our Action Plans, we found it useful to divide our Action Plans into four categories: Social Support, Food Plan, Self-Help, and Service. We discuss each of these categories in their own Chapters 3-6.

We have listed these in an order that many of us have found helpful, but you may decide to jump in anywhere. No matter where you begin, it is likely that you will go back at different times in your recovery and include other practices or make changes in how you use each at different times.

Chapter 3: Social Support. In any Action Plan, most of us find that the first thing we need is social support from other overeaters. There are many ways to get it, but we recommend starting with some level of support, even if it is only going to one meeting a week or texting another member.

Chapter 4: Food Plan. Unlike AA, where you can simply stop drinking alcohol once and for all, we compulsive overeaters need to develop some

plan of eating. Again, there are many and you will probably change yours over time.

Chapter 5: Self-help. Besides a food plan, which is the basic self-help practice, there are many other actions we can take ourselves, with suggestions and guidance from others. OA has many and we Secular Overeaters have developed many others.

Chapter 6: Service (or supporting others). Perhaps the most important insight of the original AA was the importance of helping others. Historically, that is the 12th Step. Again and again in the Big Book of Alcoholics Anonymous, the message is clear. If you reach out to help another fellow sufferer, you are less likely to practice your own addiction.

2. Action Plan

Your first task is to develop your own Action Plan. An Action Plan is a list of what you have committed to do to get rid of your compulsion around food. While we respect the fact that each of us is different and needs our own individualized approach, most of us have found it useful to put our decisions in writing. In many traditions, there is a saying that if you don't have a plan in writing, then you don't have a plan. It is rarely more elaborate than a single sheet of paper or computer file, with a few notes on it.

First, Social Support. Come to one of our Zoom Meetings and find a little social support. The Meetings are all free to newcomers. (Old timers are asked to consider a contribution of \$5, but there are no fees for Membership.) All our current Secular meetings are listed at <https://secularovereaters.org/so-meetings/>

The Meetings usually last an hour. While you are attending the Meeting, put your contact information in the Chat and identify yourself as a Newcomer, looking for someone to talk to. Most of our Meetings have a socialization period on Zoom after the meeting where you can ask questions. Usually, a volunteer Member of the Meeting will introduce themselves as the "Newcomer Greeter" and offer to call or text you. Whether you agree is always up to you.

Click on this link and we will send you a free newcomers kit, in the USA or outside: <https://secularovereaters.org/so-newcomers/>

You may go to one or many meetings before deciding to reach out to another human being. At some point, you will probably identify one or more fellow compulsive eaters you feel more comfortable with and have begun to communicate with, if only superficially.

If you are lucky, you will connect with a Secular "Sponsor" who is taking on "Sponsees." Sponsors will provide support as you go through this Manual or other materials.

However, most of our Secular Meetings are relatively new, so there are not enough Secular Sponsors. We have been developing other approaches to social support, e.g. Accountability Buddies, Recovery Circles and our Monday noon EST Workshops with Secular Sponsors. Or you may prefer more informal sources of Social Support. All of these and others are described in Chapter Three.

We put Social Support first in this Manual because of its importance.

Next, your Action Plan should include the changes you would like to make in your attitudes and behavior around food.

Food Changes. Let us begin the discussion of your overall Action Plan with a Food Plan since difficulty with food is what brings most of us here.

At some point, you will probably need a Food Plan. Your Food Plan may be simple or detailed. Discuss it with other people including some of us with longer periods of eating rationally (what we call "abstinence"). Your Food Plan can be as simple as "no yellow cake with chocolate frosting"--especially if you have been eating one every day! Don't worry. You will probably change it many times in the future.

The "A New Plan of Eating" Pamphlet in the Newcomers Kit lists nine different Food Plans you might consider. Many of us consult a nutritionist. Go to Chapter Four, Food Plan for more information.

Most of us do not do well "free-lancing," when we open the refrigerator or arrive at the counter of a fast food joint.

Your Food Plan is part of your overall Action Plan along with Social Support, Self-Help and Service.

The Rest of Your First Action Plan. The key ingredients to us in an Action Plan correspond to remaining Chapters in this Manual: Social Support, Self-help (that is, things we can do by ourselves like exercising, meditating and journaling) and finally Service (or helping other compulsive eaters including serving as a Sponsor, Accountability Buddy or Member of a Recovery Circle.)

As you attend Meetings you will hear other Members describe these and other practices you might include in your first Action Plan.

Through trial and error, eventually your Action Plan will include enough support, self-help, and service practices to allow you to follow that food plan, stop eating compulsively, and become a better person.

This Manual is our first attempt to assemble a number of practices that have helped many of us stop eating compulsively or obsessing about food, without god or any mysterious intervention. And we have described them in a non-mystical way.

You can skim through this Resource Manual and the website SecularOA.org for other ideas. Searching the internet for "secular overeaters" will lead you to other resources. It is usually a good idea to discuss your Action Plan with your Sponsor or Buddies.

It might be useful for you to print and fill out the following form as you read through this manual and develop your first Action Plan. Below the Action Plan Form are some suggestions to consider.

Here is my Action Plan (filled out on this date:).

Here is what I will do daily and the times I will do them:

Food plan:

Support from others:

Self-help:

Service:

Here is what I will do each week:

Food Plan:

Support from others:

Self-help:

Service:

Here is what I will do each month:

Food Plan:

Support from others:

Self-help:

Service:

Here is what I will do less frequently (quarterly, annually):

Food Plan:

Support from others:

Self-help:

Service:

Here is what I hope my Action Plan will grow into over time:

Food Plan:

Support from others:

Self-help:

Service:

Good luck!

Other Considerations

Here are some other consideration for creating an action plan:

- **Ability.** What can you reasonably do based on your life, schedule, financial resources, family constraints (e.g., young children, aging parents)
- **Current motivation.** This may change. For example, if you become more desperate around food or, alternatively, experience success.
- **Desired Outcomes.** Giving up refined carbs will lead toward more weight loss and reducing sugar might affect diabetes, blood sugar, etc.
- **Self-Evaluation.** Another key may be what science calls measurement and evaluation, though we might call it inventory. Am I getting the outcomes I desire and to what extent? If not, do I change the mix? (yes, no, partially: why or why not) This blends some of our OA culture with the science of habit-formation. For more on that aspect of science, go to the website of Stanford's Professor B.J. Fogg (tinyhabits.com).
- **Desired Support.** How much support do you want? Note that some of your decisions may be informed by social support. Other times it may be based on your own judgment. Your sponsor may suggest a fairly complete list—or leave it up to your discretion.

Science of Addiction

The more we read the growing science of addiction, nutrition and behavior change, the more we will benefit.

Pre-formulated Action Plans

At least one non-secular community in OA prescribes a very detailed action plan (although they do not call it that). That community is named HOW, for "honest, open, and willing," a quote from the Big Book (<https://how-oa.org>). It is a very disciplined sub-community, part of HOW remains inside OA and

part went outside. It prescribes a specific, no sugar and no refined flour food plan and specific actions to take each day: call your sponsor every morning, read them the answer to one of thirty questions, make three outreach calls, etc. It provides accountability, time patterns, repetition, cultural support and validation (e.g. candle ceremony for anniversary and sponsors).

Developing Your Own Action Plan

Alternatively, you may develop your own individualized action plan, drawing elements from each of the chapters to follow: Social Support, Food Plan, Self-Help, and Service. Part of the approach should be based on the idea of experimentation. The mix may include other options like meditation, recovery circles, frequency (e.g., of meetings or exercise), types or times of the day, or tricks like using headsets so you can do the dishes while attending a phone meeting. Whatever works for you. At meetings, in forums, and articles, we can share these things and crowdsource our wisdom.

As we work the program, we look for progress and ask ourselves is this working for me (whatever works)? Am I making progress? Is this a win for me, today?

Based on the answers to those questions, we may find we now have a solution and our goal is to maintain it as an ongoing part of our Action Plan. If it does not work, or stops working and begins to degrade or relapse, then we refine our process till we find what does.

As noted earlier, we don't claim to be the answer for everyone, secular or otherwise. In fact, most of us would say that while OA has helped us reduce our harmful eating, so have a variety of other things.

In summary, this is the most basic formula for any problem. What is the problem and what have I tried so far to solve it? What would the conditions be, if the problem is solved? Now try some actions and evaluate and modify till it works.

Resources

“Action Plans” – a presentation from the Secular Sponsor Speaker Series

The presenter, Rachel talks about how to create and use action plans to support our well-being and growth. The session includes a role play and answers to audience questions.

[Recording \(33 minutes\)](#) (see 122820)

[Written Summary](#)

We'll close with a quote attributed to the inventor, Thomas Edison, that captures the spirit of our approach, although sadly no one seems to be able to find the source for this quote :-)

A guy named Edison said, "Using candles and oil lamps causes fires and nasty smoke. I want a world with light and safety. Let's try some other ways to make light." After 1200 attempts, he learned about tungsten in a near-vacuum. Some years later, someone said something else might work even better. When it comes to food problems, we are still burning candles.

3. SOCIAL SUPPORT

Social Support is what we get from other secular overeaters in our OA community. It's the first step we take—reaching out to another human being or going to a meeting. There are two tendencies in 12 Step Fellowships, like AA and OA. Some of us rely heavily on literature. This approach is associated with Bill W. and the Big Book (Alcoholics Anonymous.) The other is more social. We find meetings, relationships and the tips we pick up from other Members to be more important aspects of the program. This second tendency is associated with Jim B. who helped Bill W. write the Big Book. The AA book, *Living Sober*, is a wonderful collection of tips that are useful for dealing with any addiction including compulsive eating.

This Chapter describes a variety of sources of social support (e.g., meetings, sponsors, accountability buddies, recovery circles) and resources to help you get started. Identify sources of social support for yourself, even if it is only one person you call or text regularly. You do not need to do this alone!

Task for self-reflection: How much support do I think I will need? Am I able to stay focused on tasks on my own or do I do better in a group?

Here is a partial listing of the sources of Social Support you might include in your first Action Plan.

3A. Go to Meetings

For most of us, attending meetings was our first OA action. Indeed, for some, going to meetings constitutes their entire program. There are no qualifications to attend a meeting. The only requirement for membership in OA is a desire to stop eating compulsively. This is the easiest and most reliable source of social support.

Every newcomer should attend one or more meetings each week.

Some newcomers decide to attend 90 meetings in 90 days. Others may only go to one or two meetings a week, but have more frequent contact with a sponsor, co-sponsor, or buddy.

You can find meetings on the oa.org (select Atheist/Agnostic under the "Special Topics" menu) and SecularOA.orgs. These days many meetings are online via Zoom. Meetings typically last for an hour and are free.

Listen to what others with similar problems are doing and jot down a few notes. Copy some phone numbers shared and talk with other members as you develop your plan. Make a special note of people you like or who have problems similar to yours.

At every OA meeting, there is a "We Care" list in which attendees who would like to connect with others share their names (first name and first letter of last name) and contact information (typically a phone number or email). Some attendees will indicate if they are a sponsor or seeking a sponsor.

For in-person meetings, the We Care list is typically a sheet of paper that is passed around the room. Online meetings use the Chat function in Zoom. At the end of online meetings, you can save the Chat file, so you have a list of fellows who are willing to take a phone call or email. Reach out to them and ask questions. Or post a request for someone to call you. We all know how difficult it is to make that first phone call. There is a name for this problem in OA—the "800 pound telephone."

If you don't have a computer, you can access Zoom meetings by phone. For over a decade, one of the largest secular-friendly meetings called "Unconventional Spirituality" has been meeting only by phone, Sunday Mornings at 10 am Eastern Time.

You can also reach out via email or regular mail to our Google Group and ask for a "newcomer greeter." To join the group, send an email to secular overeaters community@gmail.com.

Resources

See the "Meetings" tab on SecularOA.org to find meetings and for information about how to start a new meeting.

Newcomer Packet

Go to <https://bit.ly/SOnewcomer> to request the OA brochure "Where do I start?," and optional secular materials.

3B. Find a Sponsor

A sponsor is someone who is willing to share their "experience, strength, and hope" with you. Often, the most important thing sponsors do is provide compassionate, non-directive listening and take the time to see your life from your perspective. Some may share their food or action plans to give you ideas. Most of us do better with sponsors, no matter how long we have been in OA.

So how do you find a sponsor? As noted above, "We Care" lists are an important avenue for sponsors to identify themselves and say whether they are taking on new sponsees. Most sponsors will always take a few phone calls, especially from newcomers. Many is the sponsee who started off with informal phone calls to a Sponsor only to have the conversations blossom into a formal sponsoring relationship. And don't feel that you need to stay with a sponsor if the relationship is not working for you. The important thing is to find someone who is a good match for you at this point in time.

If someone in a meeting is not listed as a sponsor, but you like what they have to say, give them a call. Anyone can sponsor up to the level of their experience. Whatever the length of their abstinence, or even less, they can listen to you and tell you what has worked for them.

Resources

"Secular Sponsoring" – a presentation from the Secular Sponsor Speaker Series

The presenter, Vini T explains her approach to sponsoring, both as a sponsor and a sponsee.

[Recording \(19 minutes\)](#) (see 113020)

[Written Summary](#)

[Finding a Sponsor](#)

This resource covers sponsors, their role, how to find one, sponsor interview questions, and quotes from sponsees about their sponsors.

[Sponsoring a Secular Member](#)

This resource has information about secular sponsor workshops, OA sponsoring resources (not secular), and books and other resources to support a secular approach. It also includes quotes from sponsors.

[Sponsorship Kit](#)

A set of pamphlets from the OA Bookstore. You can also request them by posting a request on secular overeaters.community@gmail.com.

3C. Seek Sponsors for Limited Roles

Sponsorship does not have to be all or nothing. Someone who is just starting out as a sponsor, can serve as an “accountability sponsor” for a newcomer. This would be appropriate for a member who wants to check in daily or weekly about how well they are doing with their abstinence or food plan. Another example is a “gratitude sponsor,” with whom a member can share their gratitude list. Again, this could be daily or weekly.

If you cannot find a sponsor, there are a number of peer-based alternatives. Co-sponsors are described here, followed by buddies and peer support groups in the next two sections.

Co-sponsoring is widely used in OA and other 12-step fellowships. In this model, two members, often with roughly comparable levels of experience, agree to serve as sponsors for each other. Together, they can work through any of the secular or traditional books, workbooks, or pamphlets.

Two newcomers could go through the [First Twelve Days](#) pamphlet from the OA website together.

3D. Find Accountability Buddies

Buddies, a more limited version of co-sponsoring, is also common in OA and other 12-step programs. It is more widely used by secular overeaters due to the relative shortage of sponsors. Typically, a “buddy” takes on just a single sponsoring role (e.g. accountability, compassionate listener). For example, you could serve as an accountability buddy for a member who agrees to call before they engage in particular food behaviors (e.g., eating in the middle of the night, eating ice cream after dinner). Indeed, a compassionate listener buddy is one of the most powerful tools in the wider peer-support world.

One way to do this is for two people to meet, divide the time available, and listen to each other in confidence without interrupting or offering advice. This is basically an expanded version of “shares” at OA meetings, with the added understanding that people may deal with difficult subjects and express strong feelings!

You can also simply take timed turns telling each other your life stories. It is good to include early memories about food, your eating history, your experiences to date with OA, and your current abstinence, including places where you struggle.

Resources

[Accountability Buddies](#)

A podcast and written resources about accountability buddies.

3E. Join or Start a Specialized Peer Support Group

Resource

“Group Support” – a presentation from the Secular Sponsor Speaker Series

The presenter, Alan, shares different models of group support, including recovery circles.

[Recording \(31 minutes\)](#) (see 122120)

[Written Summary](#)

Recovery Circles

In part to address a current shortage of secular sponsors, some individuals in the secular OA community have encouraged the formation of peer support groups called “recovery circles,” small groups of three to six people who commit to meet on a regular basis to promote their recovery.

Resources

[Recovery Circles](#) - links to a handout and audio recording on secularovereaters.org

Relapse Prevention Support Groups

Relapse prevention support groups consist of members who meet regularly to provide help and accountability to one another to prevent relapses. There are predictable warning signs that precede a relapse. For example, changes in how you are approaching the OA program (e.g., decreased meeting attendance), food (e.g., not following your food plan closely), or how you are feeling emotionally (e.g., anxiety or depression). Here is a presentation on this approach. The presenter, Alan, discusses the four warning signs of relapse and offers suggestions for recovery.

Resources

Relapse – a presentation from the Secular Sponsor Speaker Series

[Recording \(23 minutes\)](#) (see 032921)

Handout: [Relapse Prevention Support Group Workshop](#)

3F. Improve Your Listening Skills

Arguably, the most important thing an OA sponsor or peer can do is listen. So often we already have our own solutions to problems that emerge as we talk and express feelings that might lead us to overeat.

All of the social structures described above—meetings, sponsoring, and various types of peer-to-peer support—rely on members being good listeners.

Suggested Practice: Once a week, do a longer meeting with another member to learn to use listening as a way to deal with emotions. Begin with a half hour and increase to two hours. Divide the time. Begin with your life stories.

What is going on in your life now? Does it remind you of past experiences? Allow yourself to express feelings, even deep ones.

Resources

Listening Tools - A presentation from the Secular Sponsor Speaker Series

The presenter, Jim D, and workshop participants share ideas for being a good listener as an OA sponsor or peer.

[Recording \(27 minutes\)](#) (see 010421)

[Written Summary](#)

3G. Join or Start a Study Group

A study group is a group of people who have chosen to get together with the purpose of studying something—such as the 12 steps or a particular book or workbook—in a methodical way, usually with an ongoing and regular meeting.

Resources

“Study Groups” – a presentation from the Secular Sponsor Speaker Series

The presenter, Rachel, talks about how to integrate various kinds of study groups, such as book groups or step groups into a recovery program.

[Recording \(31 minutes\)](#) (see 031521)

[Written Summary](#)

[**Twelve Step Workshop and Study Guide, Second Edition**](#) – An in-depth resource for taking groups or individual sponsees on a journey through OA’s Twelve Steps to a Life of Recovery (includes leader scripts, worksheets, and readings)

[**The Twelve Step Workbook, Second Edition**](#) – This workbook is composed questions based on OA's keystone book, *The Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions of Overeaters Anonymous, Second Edition*

[**Exploring Abstinence through Writing: A Draft Workbook to Try Out**](#)

A workbook that reflects the experiences, strengths, and hopes of members of Overeaters Anonymous in Northern Virginia.

3H. Attend a Workshop

We used a workshop format to develop this manual. For almost a year, every Monday from 12:00 to 1:00 PM Eastern Time, on Zoom, there was a workshop in which an experienced secular sponsor (a different speaker each week) presented a tool or practice that they have found to be useful to their abstinence.

The format of these workshops was as follows:

- The presenter speaks for about 15 minutes
- The presenter demonstrates using the tool or practice with a volunteer serving as their “sponsee”
- Attendees break into pairs to practice it for themselves, with each person taking five minutes in each role (sponsor and sponsee)
- All attendees return to the main room for Q&A with the speaker

The purpose of these workshops is to support the development of new sponsors and give each participant skills to use with each other as co-sponsors or buddies. A further purpose is to expand the range of models we use in OA.

These workshops have formed the basis for much of the information in this guide. Many of the Workshop sessions serve as Resources in this book. You can hear the full set of workshop podcasts at [Secular Sponsor Speaker Series](#).

As of this writing, the Monday Meeting uses the workshop format on the first Monday of each month. On the third Monday, a podcast of a prior workshop is played. The other Mondays use the Ask It Basket, Accountability, and Literature formats.

Other workshops:

- OA schedules frequent workshops and events. For more information, see [Virtual Region of Overeaters Anonymous](#).
- From time to time, we organize secular workshops. These are announced at all our secular meetings.

3I. Listen to Podcasts

There are several podcasts available that feature speakers who share their stories and wisdom to help other OA members. These podcasts are typically 20- to 30-minutes long. Here is one listing of podcasts for secular overeaters: [Podcasts](#).

3J. Electronic Outreach

Reaching out to people you don't know can sometimes feel uncomfortable, but outreach is a lifeline whether by phone, text, email, or other electronic platforms. When we are triggered to reach out for our favorite food, there are few things more effective than making a phone call. Even if you don't reach your sponsor, an OA buddy, or another member, the act of making a call often "breaks the spell."

Even before the pandemic, most OA support was done electronically, by phone, email, or internet. As mentioned above under "3A. Meetings," use the We Care list to find members you can call, or post your number or email to let others know you would like to be contacted. There is no need to feel uncomfortable. This is a very common OA tool used by most members. In the presentation, linked below, the presenter, Allie, suggests that you begin by calling three people each day and talking for at least 5 minutes.

Resources

"Outreach" – a presentation from the Secular Sponsor Speaker Series

The presenter, Allie, shares her thoughts about how to use the phone, texting, email, or WhatsApp.

[Recording \(33 minutes\)](#) (see 011121)

Handout: [Telephone and Electronic Contact](#)

[Secular Overeaters and Friends \(in Overeaters Anonymous\)](#) – private Facebook group

Secular Overeaters Community Google Group

This online group discusses personal experiences, helpful literature, relevant events and activities, "tips and techniques," and other topics related to

challenges with food. To join, email secular overeaters.community@gmail.com (for the best experience, sign up with a Gmail account).

4. FOOD PLAN

4A. Define your goals and explore your difficulties with food and eating

The real first step for most of us is deciding what constitutes rational eating. In AA, it's straightforward—you give up alcohol. Food is not so simple. You cannot stop eating without jeopardizing your health, at least not for long.

Set Goals

Our primary goal is to reduce and ideally eliminate harmful ways of eating. This may involve progressive improvement over time or occur as a large shift that happens quickly. Everyone is different; it's a personal decision based on the level of improvement one desires.

Example goals from some of our members:

- Achieve a healthy weight and be at peace with food most of the time
- Stop purging and eat in a balanced way
- Learn to go through life with all of its challenges and not use food as a coping mechanism
- Be comfortable in one's own skin

It's up to you to decide what you want to achieve. There are no rights or wrongs. It is about you and your relationship to how you eat.

Explore Your Food and Eating Difficulties

Learn about your food and eating difficulties by examining how you are currently eating and how it harms you.

The following are areas to explore:

- Food

- What do I eat now (eating inventory)?
- How do I eat (e.g., compulsively, bingeing, grazing, purging, restricting)?
- Weight
- Health (e.g., risk of heart attack, stroke, diabetes)
- Emotional (e.g., hate how I look, self-loathing when I wake up in the morning)
- Relationships with others (e.g., family upset about my eating, weight)
- Life functioning (e.g., can't get a partner, can't go hiking, work life is suffering)

Next, consider efforts you have made in the past that haven't worked for you. These might include

- Diets (on your own or commercial plans)
- Therapy
- Surgery
- Hypnosis
- Exercise plans

Then ask yourself in what ways you would like your food and eating to be different? What are your desired outcomes in the following areas?

- Weight (e.g., what you want to weigh)
- Health (e.g., improved blood pressure, cholesterol, blood sugar)
- Emotional (e.g., feel better about your body and self)
- Relationships with others
- Life functioning (e.g., can garden and hike, feel more comfortable dating)

4B. Develop your own personal food plan

Now you can choose a plan of eating that will get you to your desired outcomes in a reasonable period of time. This plan will almost always change and evolve over time. The important thing is to have one.

Food plans address types of foods and/or behaviors. The word "plan" may sound rigid and formal, but it doesn't have to be. There are a range of options to fit individual needs and preferences. Here are some examples:

- Give up one or more foods

- Give up a category of foods (e.g., sugar, fast food, chips, soda)
- Make small behavior changes (e.g., no food after 8pm, no food in the car, no samples at the supermarket)
- Adhere to a meal schedules (e.g., three meals a day or three a day plus a certain number of snacks)
- Follow a detailed food plan with specific portions and choices (e.g., OA plan—see “A New Plan of Eating” publication or one from your physician or nutritionist)
- Weighed and measured meals

Some OA members like to have support for following or being accountable for their food plans. Examples of how to do this include:

- Contact (call, text, or email) a sponsor or buddy before you eat
- Contact a sponsor or buddy after you eat
- Write down what you plan to or have eaten
- Track calories
- Track days free from certain foods and behaviors
- Ask yourself, “Am I making progress and what does that mean to me?”

Start any place you want and adjust your plan as you learn from experience what makes the most sense for you. Here are three questions to ask yourself or discuss with a sponsor or other support person:

1. Can I maintain my own plan (or close enough)?
2. Is my current food plan helping me achieve my goals (e.g., weight loss, physical health, emotional health)?
3. If either of the above is not working, what might I adjust?

Self-reflection: How much do I like to learn to do new things—a little bit at a time or all at once?

Ways to get started:

1. If you are someone who benefits from a great deal of structure, you might want to try HOW meetings. HOW, which stands for honest, open, and willing, is a movement within OA. Most HOW meetings are not “god-heavy.” You can find a HOW meeting at how-oa.org/about/
2. If you like flexibility, you could work with a sponsor, other member, or a nutritionist to identify a few of your binge foods or behaviors you would like to eliminate.

3. In between, OA has an excellent pamphlet “A New Plan of Eating” which offers you nine different food plans.

Resources

[A New Plan of Eating: A Physical, Emotional, and Spiritual Journey](#)

[Step One, Part One—the Allergy of the Body](#) (from www.oabigbook.info, which is not affiliated with Overeaters Anonymous)

“Identifying Food Behaviors and Approaches” – a presentation from the Secular Sponsor Speaker Series

The presenters, Allie S and Arlene O, share their different approaches to identifying problematic food behaviors as part of defining their abstinence, followed by a general discussion of sponsorship principles.

[Recording \(24 minutes\)](#) (see 120720)

[Written Summary](#)

“Developing a Food Plan” – a presentation from the Secular Sponsor Speaker Series

The presenters, Allie S and Arlene O, talk about how to create a food plan and share basic sample plans.

[Recording \(19 minutes\)](#) (see 121420)

[Written Summary](#)

5. SELF-CARE

At this point, you should have the first two pieces of your action plan in place.

- Support (at least one person you talk to about this program and OA meetings you plan to attend)
- Food Plan

With the help of your support system, you can develop the rest of your Action Plan by incorporating self-help practices others have found helpful.

However, before you take the next step in your recovery journey, check your social support. If you want a sponsor, have you been able to find one? If you

have found one, how is that relationship working? Is there anything you need to do to make it better for you?

Have you established enough peer support (e.g., meetings, accountability buddies, a recovery circle) to help you to stick to your food plan? In general, the more support you get each day, each week, each month, and each year, the less likely you are to engage in harmful eating behaviors.

Once you have done this support check up and have a food plan, you are ready to take the third step on the recovery ladder—self-care.

This chapter describes practices that other secular compulsive eaters have found helpful in their recovery. As always, individuals will differ. Working with your sponsor or another member, review these suggestions and select personal actions you will do and how often you will do them.

As you incorporate new methods of self-care, keep track of how they are working for you. If something isn't working, make a change. Use different tools. Do more (or less). Over time, you'll find what works for you.

For convenient reference, we've labeled each of these practices below as follows:

- * One of the current OA tools of recovery
- ** One of the 12 steps
- *** One of the 12 traditions

Self-reflection: What things do I do now to take care of myself? What are my strengths? In what areas would I like to take better care of myself?

5A. Morning reminder (Steps 1-3) **

Some religious members of OA get down on their knees as soon as they wake up and reflect on the first three steps, often popularized as "I can't stop. God can. I think I'll ask God." This type of morning reminder can be quite helpful. Indeed, the three initials H, O, and W mentioned above, parallel these Steps. 1. Be honest about your problem, 2. Be open to getting help, and 3. Be willing to follow suggestions.

Members who are secular often find their own ways to reflect on these steps. For example, we might:

1. Remind ourselves of past bad binges or the negative consequences of overeating such as massive weight gain, physical illness, or emotional pain
2. Reflect on our abstinence and remember that we have a food plan and an action plan to follow
3. Decide to follow our food plan for another day

5B. Literature *

OA or other recovery literature is an important part of many members' programs. Like connections with other people, it provides knowledge and wisdom gained from human experience.

Although OA literature has a heavy emphasis on God, many secular people find it meaningful and helpful. There are also wonderful secular written resources from recovery programs for a variety of addictions.

Here are some of the ways that OA members use literature:

- Read something in a disciplined way every day
- Read when unable to attend a meeting
- Read when feeling a pull to engage in unhealthy eating behaviors

Resources

"Literature" – a presentation from the Secular Sponsor Speaker Series

The presenter, Jenne, and workshop participants share examples of how to reword questions in The Twelve Step Workbook of Overeaters Anonymous to make them more relevant to secular members and share their favorite books and other forms of literature—both OA and alternative.

[Recording \(24 minutes\)](#) (see 0040521)

[Our Stories](#)

A collection of secular stories from *Lifeline*, an OA magazine, and from members of the OA secular community.

Book Recommendations

A list of recommended books from the secularovereaters.org website.

Living Sober

A booklet with simple examples of how AA members live and stay sober one day at a time.

5C. Writing *

As noted in the [OA Tools of Recovery](#), "Putting our thoughts and feelings down on paper helps us to better understand our actions and reactions in a way that is often not revealed to us by simply thinking or talking about them." This might be done as part of a regular journaling practice, during step work, or as part of a daily inventory using a specific format (see the resource "5 Inventory Formats" below).

Resources

"Writing" – a presentation from the Secular Sponsor Speaker Series

The presenter, Jenne, and workshop participants share a specific writing exercise and other ideas related to using the tool of writing as an OA sponsor or peer.

[Recording \(29 minutes\)](#) (see 011821)

[Written Summary](#)

Handout: [5 Inventory Formats](#)

5D. Daily Inventory (Step 10) **

A daily inventory is a review of how well you followed your action plan and personal improvement commitments that day. It's an opportunity to make sure you are incorporating what you have learned and gained from the program into your daily life. Elements of a review include reflecting on such things as your abstinence, your emotional state, things you did for yourself, and things you did for others. Many people consistently use a specific format for their inventory and do it at a fixed time each day (e.g., just before going to bed or upon waking).

Resources

“Daily Inventories” – a presentation from the Secular Sponsor Speaker Series

The presenters, Laura and Kimberly, share their different approaches to and thoughts about the 10th step daily inventory—from simple to complex.

[Recording \(27 minutes\)](#) (see 012521)

[Written Summary](#)

Handout: [Vowel Inventory](#)

5E. Meditation (Step 11) **

Resources

Step 11: Meditation and Reflection--Allie s.**

Our apologies. We are in process with this podcast. We will add the URL shortly.

Exercise: Try meditating at a fixed time every day. Many of us do it on waking. Remember the only bad way to do meditation is not to do it at all. Sitting quietly for a few minutes is good start.

5F. Self-Exploration (Steps 4 and 5) **

An important part of self-care is to understand ourselves. As noted in the *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions of Overeaters Anonymous* (2nd ed., 2018, p, 25), “How we choose to look at and deal with our lives and the world lies at the core of the disease.” Self-understanding in this context involves

- A deep exploration of the beliefs, attitudes, values, and behaviors that have led to your problems with food and eating
- Sharing what you learn about yourself with a person whom you trust and who can be an objective, accepting listener

There are many 12-step resources that provide guidance on different ways to do this type of exploration. It’s also helpful (and for many people,

essential) to have the support of a sponsor, therapist, or OA peers during the process.

Resources

[Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions of Overeaters Anonymous, Second Edition](#)

[Twelve Step Workshop and Study Guide, Second Edition](#)

There are other approaches to working the 12 Steps for seculars if you search the internet for "secular 12 Steps" or "secular overeaters."

5G. Positivity

Activities that help us feel more positive can decrease the intensity or frequency of difficult emotions that may lead us to engage in unhealthy eating behaviors. The types of activities that create positive feelings differ for everyone, but common ones include exercise, music, relationship building, positive media, getting out in nature, and affirmations.

Self-reflection: What do you currently do to feel positive? What new things could you try?

Resources

"Positivity" – a presentation from the Secular Sponsor Speaker Series

The presenter, Alan, and audience members, share their strategies for feeling positive. Alan also provides a list of questions that anyone can use to identify ways to become more positive.

[Recording \(30 minutes\)](#) (see 020121)

[Written Summary](#)

5H. Improving Relationships (Steps 8 and 9) **

The development and strengthening of relationships is an essential part of self-care. In the sponsor workshop linked below, Rachel describes how Steps 8 and 9 can be used to help us improve our relationships with others, ourselves, and even the unknown. Step 8 involves identifying where in the

past we have done harm to others or ourselves and finding ways to make amends, but it's also about seeing patterns in our current relationships that aren't serving us well.

We do these steps so we can be healed and go forward unburdened by the past as well as to improve current relationships.

Resources

“Steps 8 and 9” – a presentation from the Secular Sponsor Speaker Series

In this presentation, Rachel shares her perspective on Steps 8 and 9 and how she personally completed the steps.

[Recording \(28 minutes\)](#) (see 022221)

Self-reflection: What current relationships give me strength? Where would I like to improve my relationships?

5J. Slogans

Easy does it

Just for today

First things first

12-step communities develop slogans—small nuggets of wisdom—that guide us in our recovery by helping us remember what we are doing to address our food and eating problems, why being on this path is important, and how to keep going.

It's worth exploring the treasure trove of experience, strength, and hope contained in slogans and finding those that are meaningful to you. You can also create your own!

Resources

“Slogans” – a presentation from the Secular Sponsor Speaker Series

In this presentation, Rachel talked about how slogans have been an important part of her recovery and shared her favorites.

[Recording \(30 minutes\)](#) (see 032221)

[Written Summary](#)

Handout: [Slogans That Have Helped Us](#) (northern Virginia Intergroup)

5K. Learn About the 12 Traditions ***

The 12 Traditions summarize the lessons Bill W. derived from his and others' experience when building Alcoholics Anonymous as an organization and community. Setting aside the religious tendency in AA and OA to find 12 of anything, those of us who have studied and managed organizations find them extraordinarily helpful. It is sometimes said that the 12 Steps keep us from killing ourselves and the 12 traditions keep us from killing each other. In fact, the Traditions can also provide guidance in how to live our lives more effectively and with less temptation to eat compulsively.

Twelve Traditions

A web page on the Overeaters Anonymous website.

5I. Secular “Prayer”/Intentionality (Step 11) **

Resources

“Secular Prayer” – a presentation from the Secular Sponsor Speaker Series

In this presentation, Alan talked about how he has come to see that prayer or intention can be useful, depending on how you define these terms.

[Recording \(30 minutes\)](#) (see 042621)

[Written Summary](#)

6. SERVICE (the 12th Step) **

Service is reaching out to other compulsive eaters—the 12th Step. In practice, that often means connecting others to the fellowship of OA and our secular overeaters community within OA. Perhaps the most powerful insight of the founders of AA was that the best thing to keep from having a drink was to reach out to another drunk and help them get sober.

In the story from the Big Book of how AA got started, Bill Wilson was considering going into a bar while on a business trip to Akron, Ohio. Instead, he looked up the name of a local pastor and called to ask if he knew anyone who had a problem with drinking. The pastor referred him to a member of the Oxford Group, who suggested that Bill contact her friend Ann, whose husband was an alcoholic. Bill went to their house and met the husband, Dr. Bob Smith. Bill moved in with Dr. Bob and Ann for a month and eventually helped Bob get sober. Dr. Bob's last drink is generally considered the founding date of AA. That act of outreach or service was the basis of Bill staying sober that day—and ever after, as it has been for Dr. Bob and so many since.

Arguably, OA puts less emphasis on Service than AA. In other fellowships, Members have taken other Members into their homes, lent them money, and gotten them jobs. In OA, we take on responsibilities in our meetings, from opening the room to reading the leader's script. We become Accountability Buddies and Sponsors. Certainly for some of us writing this Manual, helping build the secular community in OA has helped us stay abstinent more effectively than any other aspect of OA.

Service certainly helps with recovery, for most of us, most of the time. However, some of us take on too much service and it becomes a source of stress and a reason to overeat. As usual, the watch words are experimentation and balance. In the presentation, linked below, the presenter, Paula, suggests that you begin by calling three people each day and talking for at least 5 minutes.

Resources

"Service" – a presentation from the Secular Sponsor Speaker Series

The presenter, Paula, shares the importance of service in recovery, which can include simple acts such as putting away chairs, volunteering to read at meetings or taking on a weekly service commitment.

[Recording \(32 minutes\)](#) (see 030821)

6A. Provide Service to Other Members

In the "Social Support" section of this manual there are many suggestions for how you can obtain social support. Read that section again for ideas on

how you can use the same methods to support other members. There are many ways to provide service to other members. For example:

- Reach out to members who post in the chat during Zoom meetings that they would like an outreach call or email.
- In a face-to-face meeting, approach a newcomer to offer fellowship and support.
- Consider becoming a sponsor (or co-sponsor). Sponsors offer help to other members up to their own level of experience. It is also generally a good idea for a sponsor to be abstinent. We need lots of sponsors in Secular Overeaters Anonymous.
- Offer to be an accountability buddy.
- Start or join a recovery circle or other peer support group.

6B. Take on Responsibilities for Meetings/Activities

OA relies on volunteers to make meetings and other activities happen and run smoothly.

Meetings. Every meeting has roles that are filled on a rotating basis—secretary, Zoom moderator (not as hard as it looks), newcomer greeter, treasurer, timer, etc.

Intergroups (IGs). Every meeting needs an IG representative and every [intergroup](#) needs officers. Many intergroups have newsletters or a website and host special events like thankathons. All provide opportunities for service.

Other OA Structures. In addition to IGs, OA has [regions](#), a [world service office](#), and [board of trustees](#) that have roles and responsibilities members can take on to support ongoing operations, conducting meetings, conventions, and other events.

Service Board. Of particular interest to Secular Overeaters, OAs World Service and Board of Trustees has approved the creation of special focus service boards (SFSBs). Each unites all the meetings across all of OA with a special focus; in our case, secular meetings. At the time of this writing, the

secular meetings are considering applying to set up a SFSB. Officers and volunteers will be needed.

Community Gatherings. Section 3H of this manual ("Attend a Workshop") describes a variety of events, in addition to meetings, where secular members get together for education, socializing, and decision making. They provide many opportunities for generating ideas for events, as well as preparation, facilitation, and follow-up tasks.

Chapter 7: Final word

By now, you should be well on your way, with Social Support in place, a Food Plan, and a set of Self-Help practices all listed on a sheet of paper or in a computer document. Hopefully, you are taking on small Service roles in the Meetings you attend, such as Timekeeping or reaching out as the Newcomers Greeting.

We Secular Overeaters are here for you. We want you to succeed. It helps us to help you. Please reach out to us in the meetings you attend, in the Chat file. Please join our Google Group (secular overeaters community@gmail.com) and our Facebook page (www.facebook.com/groups/secularovereaters). Please come to our workshops.

The Responsibility Pledge in OA is: Always to extend the hand and heart of OA to all who share my compulsion; for this I am responsible.

We take this seriously. If the first person you reach out to does not respond, please try again. It helps us to help you.