

Appendix B

A PERSPECTIVE ON BALANCE

When members of the original EDA group in Phoenix first thought about how to define recovery from an eating disorder, we initially considered abstinence as the logical equivalent of sobriety. After all, other Twelve-Step groups had done the same thing—why should EDA be any different? Yet, when we focused on abstinence as the measure of recovery, we found ourselves sidelined by small errors in judgment as we discovered what we needed to do to get and stay free of ill thinking and behavior. This was not helpful at all. Having a negative goal (abstinence), in which people seemed fixated on *not* bingeing, *not* purging, and *not* restricting just felt wrong. An “abstinence is recovery” mindset can be rigid and uncompromising. We decided that any definition of recovery that depended on specific ideas about food, weight, and body image meant defining the solution in terms of the symptoms of the problem. This made no sense to us: focusing on what we *didn't* want drew our attention away from what we *did* want. And when we considered alternatives to abstinence as the hallmark of recovery, the idea of “balance” just felt right.

We wanted to feel safe and happy, free to be ourselves. We wanted to be able to express ourselves without fear of hurting ourselves, or others. We wanted to love and to be loved, to feel and express joy, to sing and dance and shout, unencumbered by our eating disorders. Peace and freedom were what we were really after, but at first this seemed too much to ask! We settled on the idea of balance because it

expressed key ideas concisely. When we are in balance, we can push a few limits yet remain safe; we can be calm yet passionate; we can be efficient yet unhurried; we can be at peace while effecting real change in the world. When we realized that maintaining perspective enabled us to achieve balance, we knew we were on the right track. We found it did not matter whether we acquired perspective through reliance on God or on ideas that gave shape and meaning to our lives.

Newcomers to EDA are often confused about the idea of balance. For people like us, it is not always an easy concept to grasp or apply! Below we offer one person's perspective, but this is by no means a prescriptive definition. We urge every EDA member to search within and consult with others, taking inspiration, guidance, and example from wherever it may present itself in order to come up with their own working definition of balance.

In EDA's early days, I knew "balance" was a reasonable goal, but I wasn't too sure what "being in balance" would feel like. I was still in and out of eating-disordered patterns, and being in balance seemed to require a lot of focus and attention, like walking a tightrope or a balance beam. At the time, I was still emotionally raw, easily upset by all I thought was problematic about myself and about others. Yet I knew that when I focused on what was wrong, I was more likely to seek solace in old behaviors. So I did my best to stay positive and pay attention to what was right and good. As I did so, I found I could deal much more effectively with whatever happened. I began to feel like I could respond with dignity to most situations and provocations. And I loved living free of my eating disorder. It was amazing

to realize I was starting to feel safe and strong, able to live life on life's terms.

As I kept my focus on positive things—love and appreciation for everyone and everything—I started to see tremendous changes in myself, and, perhaps surprisingly, in those around me. Other people weren't changing all that much, but my understanding and empathy—my attitude—surely was. After about a year, I no longer felt triggered by external circumstances. I lost interest in old patterns of thought and behavior. And the more of life I experienced in recovery, the more resilient I became. Before long, years had passed without any reminders of my old ways of coping: full recovery. Yet, as I've gone along, I've tripped myself up a few times and discovered that taking recovery for granted isn't all that safe. Through trial and error, I've learned I need to do a few things to maintain my balance every day. No surprises there—Steps Ten, Eleven, and Twelve keep me safe and protected.

In full recovery, finding and maintaining balance no longer feels like running along a narrow ledge in the semi-dark. Although there is great exhilaration in early recovery, being in balance nowadays feels more like moving easily along a wide, sunlit trail. I am able to take in the grandness of the journey and appreciate the wit and wisdom of fellow travelers. I find joy in the depth and breadth of life without serious risk of tripping over the edge into old insanity.

Just like trail running, maintaining balance sometimes presents challenges. I like feeling safe, but I am not happy when I am not taking any emotional, social, or intellectual risks. Balance means taking enough risk so I continue to grow, but not so many or such large risks that I become overwhelmed: I need to maintain enough perspective that I reliably take care of basics no matter what.

Happily, I have come to understand that I do not have to be “perfect” in any, let alone all, aspects of my life to be in balance. All I need is a modicum of strength and stability in four areas: physical, mental/intellectual, emotional/social, and spiritual/purpose-oriented. Like the legs of a chair, as soon as any one of these areas gets weak or compromised, I am at risk of falling on my rear. I’ve found it isn’t so hard to spend a little time each day maintaining the “legs of my chair.” A blessing of recovery is that I have come to enjoy the process!

Physical:

In recovery, I generally find it easy to take care of the physical basics (food, shelter, sleep, exercise, and physical intimacy), because I know these are essential to maintaining balance. In early recovery I took care of physical needs primarily because doing so was a means to an end: when I addressed basic needs, I could (finally!) turn my attention to things that provided perspective and meaning. But over time, I’ve become much more appreciative of my physical senses and my physical being; I find genuine delight in being fully human. Physical touch and intimacy, and caring for another person are more fulfilling than I could have imagined decades ago. Hugging friends and family brings a flood of emotion I don’t remember feeling with such intensity and depth in earlier years. Seeing the faces of those most dear to me fills me with joy, and my heart quickens when I hear the voices of those I love. My favorite tracks of music often give me goose bumps, and ok, I’ll admit, I get great pleasure belting out songs in my car with the windows rolled up. Sunlight on my face and a warm breeze on my arms make me happy. I feel peaceful awareness and love of

nature when I hike, taking in sights, sounds, and smells both familiar and new. I've come to appreciate the rush of adrenaline when I've accomplished something difficult. And I love feeling strong and healthy: it is just so much dang fun!

Of course, I sometimes make mistakes. When I work too much, sleep too little, or eat in a way that sends up red flags, I've learned to be gentle with myself and make sure I address the underlying emotional issues by working my 10th Step. One thing I don't do is focus on food or weight: these are just distractions, and heaven knows I have spent enough time in my life obsessively focused on those!

One of the greatest freedoms of recovery is that I enjoy food for what it is. But when I'm not eating I don't spend much time thinking about it unless I'm preparing some kind of fancy dinner, which happens about four times a year. Then, I'm thinking about the process and logistics of preparation and delivery, not about food as an object of desire. During times of the month when hormones make things somewhat unpredictable, I tend to eat from the "use sparingly" section of the USDA Food Pyramid. I have learned to accept this rather than question it. My body is a lot smarter than I used to think! I eat when hungry and stop when moderately full, regardless of whether I am eating "healthy" or "junk" food. If I have eaten too much, sleep works best to reset my equilibrium.

Though I am happier when exercising regularly, too much physical activity can interfere with getting a better perspective on whatever is going on in my life that I need to address. Doing my 10th Step is the best way for me to restore peace and balance, but anything that brings me gratitude is a boon to my recovery. At a physical level there is much that brings me joy!

Mental/Intellectual:

When I am in balance, I am grateful to have a calm mind that can focus on the things that are important to me. In part, this includes intellectual stimulation, which takes many forms: reading, working, keeping up with the news, technological investigation and innovation, learning new things that pertain to my work, organizing and packing for hiking treks and family outings, and making presentations to volunteer groups.

I generally love activities that stimulate my mind, so if I am having trouble focusing or getting motivated it is usually because I didn't get enough sleep (physical), or because I am resentful or fearful about something (emotional).

It is helpful to take a closer look and identify the real issue that is holding me back. Through working the Steps regularly, this has become relatively easy. I know I will feel better immediately if I seek to understand the issue (4th or 10th Step), admit my error (5th or 10th Step), let go of the situation and my feelings about it (6th and 7th Step), make amends if necessary (8th, 9th, or 10th Step), and turn my attention to whatever I can reasonably and responsibly do at that moment (11th and 12th Step). Sometimes an awful lot of mental energy is required just to keep myself emotionally balanced, but I figure that it is as good a use of my capabilities as any!

Emotional/Social:

As a recovering alcoholic and bulimic—even with many years of recovery—I am usually most vulnerable and awkward in the social and emotional realm. Admitting that I can easily become self-pitying and angry is

embarrassing, but I can honestly say I spend very little time hanging out in that space; to do so means embracing danger, and that no longer feels good to me. I am aware that it is silly and arrogant to get frustrated with those who do not share my perspectives; I am grateful I can usually laugh at myself!

Yet, even after all these years, my first response to practically everything life presents is still some form of fear. Luckily, there is always a clear solution: *perspective* that comes from humility and *gratitude* for the opportunity I now have to be of service to my family, friends, community, and humanity. My emotions, whatever they may be, exist to ensure that I take reasonable care of myself and am attentive and compassionate with others—all so I may be of service.

I have learned to be grateful for my emotional nature even if I still do not like some of my innate responses to the natural provocations of life. I have learned to love and trust. I have learned to be patient and tolerant—most of the time. I have learned to be quiet and flexible, though I am not always graceful. I am still very much a work in progress, but there is joy and humor in being fully human. I am grateful for and delighted with the relationships that recovery has made possible with my spouse, my children, friends, colleagues, and fellow volunteers. Today, I am gratefully free to feel and express the depth and breadth of all the emotions of which I am capable. I am unafraid to feel and unafraid to express myself, because I now trust I can do so without causing pain and suffering. Also, much of what I feel is now positive: sharing love and joy with passion and delight—what could be more amazing?

Spiritual/Purpose-oriented:

For me, balance means organizing my thoughts and actions around the idea that I am here to serve the greater good. I am happy that my long-standing difficulty with the idea of spirituality has turned out to be a non-issue in my recovery; I decided that I do not *need* to make it an issue. Like everyone else, I am just a human being here on Earth for a very short time. My limited ability to accept much on faith need not stand in the way of my understanding of what I am here to do. I cannot bring myself to believe that a Higher Power has any personal interest in me, my family, or even humanity as a whole—except as expressed in and through me and through those I see around me. Praying a certain way or believing any particular credo does not seem to be required, but I do sincerely and firmly believe (as stated on page 77 in AA’s “Big Book,” *Alcoholics Anonymous*) that, “Our real purpose is to fit ourselves to be of maximum service to God and the people about us.” To me, service to God means service to the ideals of truth, justice, fairness, and equality for all; service to EDA; and carrying the message of recovery. My belief in the power of these ideas, and my commitment to upholding them, is enough to reel me back from lapses into self-pity, resentment, and fear. I am here to serve as best I can, and that is all I really need to know. When I remember my place, I am simply grateful to be here. When I remember my purpose, I am restored to sanity, and my equilibrium returns.

All I need is to stay accountable for what I am thinking and feeling, address my basic needs, and find gratitude for what I have. I do this when I spend a few minutes on Steps Ten and Eleven every day. It’s that simple!

To take Step Ten, I jot down the *events* that happened in my life over the last twenty-four hours. Then I write about the *issues*: areas where I've made a mistake, feel upset, or anticipate that I may encounter difficulty. Usually, I don't focus too much on these because, thanks to my 4th Step, I already know what I should do. But when life gets to be a tough slog, I take the time to write about each issue specifically: the source of the disturbance, the cause, what it affects or threatens, my part in the situation (my errors in thinking), and my resolution (what I am willing to do about it that day). This process is amazingly quick and effective. And the more often I follow it, the more effective it is: practice is such a key idea! I don't spend *too* much time on issues, however, because rebalancing by finding gratitude is so important.

So next, I write about what I am grateful for that day. This can be a challenge when my basic needs haven't been met, so I always re-check these when I am feeling out of sorts. But usually, once I've spent a few minutes thinking about what I am going to *do* to address my issues, it is pretty easy to let my heart fill up with love as I write about who and what I appreciate. I can breathe again. I feel hope and excitement when I consider how lucky I am to have the awesome opportunity each day to do things that matter in the long run, and to do them authentically—as myself. Although I am not an exceedingly graceful person, I can laugh and I can behave with integrity and dignity. That feels terrific.

After writing about gratitude, I spend a few minutes on Step Eleven, thinking about and jotting down a couple of goals: little things that could make a difference in someone else's day, as well as an action I can take that day that could affect the bigger picture. I try to think of something

I can say or do (anonymously) that would make me proud to be a human being. Setting out with a perspective that embraces humility not only gives me peace, but also frees me to bring energy and focus to what I think really matters. It's a great way to start the day!