

## Fast Food Addicts Anonymous

Hi, my name is Adreon Patterson, and I'm a fast food addict. The greasiest. The saltiest. The teeth-rotting sugariest food I can find is always around the corner. Like many men, my health hasn't always been a priority as a combination of naivete and stubbornness wouldn't let me give up on my old friends: greasy, salty and sugary. The hold on me was so strong that I put my cravings before my health. Men, health and emotional connection to food were overlooked by society for a long time. So, I wanted to be the first to come clean about my addiction.

I've been battling this since childhood as I maintained a diet of pizza, fried chicken, French fries and gummy bears. As a chubby black boy growing up in South Carolina, finishing my plate and going back for seconds was encouraged due to the starving children in a third-world country who would give anything for a daily meal (Thanks, Sally Struthers). But eventually, this mentality and lifestyle caught up with me. As I entered my thirties, I felt now more than ever was the time to get back on track and slay the fast food dragon once and for all. So, I decided to become more disciplined with my food choices and lay off fast food and sugary snacks for two weeks.

### ***Day 1***

I began my day with a decent breakfast before starting my early morning shift at Kohls. I prepared a beautiful bowl of multigrain apple oatmeal and two pieces of jelly toast. The creamy, warm oatmeal tasted splendid in conjunction with the crunchy, strawberry goodness of the toast. I knew that beginning my wellness journey would be fun. As I walked through the parking lot at the end of my shift, the temptation of the

quick fix hit me harder than I expected. Usually, I would get a second breakfast from somewhere like Chick-Fil-A or Bojangles'. Not this time. Even though I hated McDonald's, it took everything in me to avoid running across the parking lot and yelling through the drive-thru speaker that I wanted to eat the greasy food known as a McChicken Biscuit. But I had to be disciplined. Seeing the electronic billboards and huge restaurant signs on my drive back home didn't help either. All I wanted to do was quiet the rumbling of my stomach.

Eventually, I made it home. But as commercial after commercial on television taunted me, I felt drawn to all the unhealthy options around me. *Come on, Adreon. You know you want some.* I was so tempted to throw the remote at the tv. Around lunch time, I warmed up my homemade chicken parmesan in the oven. It was delicious as the tomato sauce, whole wheat noodles and grilled chicken created a harmonious symphony in my mouth.

I spent most of the day working on assignments, but my mind wandered to visions of food I wanted to devour on Saturday. Usually, the fast food dragon was my friend. But, this time, not so much. I was frustrated frustrated that my goal for better health was impeding on my usual pig-out Saturday. After the initial frustration, I found solace in snacking on my fiber snacks, fruit bars, and raisins. As it filled the sugar void in my brain, I enjoyed the fruit bar's strawberry and granola combination. Oh, man! This "no fast food" exercise was going to be a little harder than I thought. Whenever I thought about my Saturday, the idea of avoiding fast food made me sad.

As afternoon turned into evening, I popped a grilled burger and homemade fries in the oven for dinner. The one-two combination of juicy ground beef and crunchy potato

made their way to my volcano-like stomach. This resulted in me crying out in pure ecstasy. Afterwards, I decided to buy some chopped cantaloupe and apples so that I could avoid chewing on the sofa. The juices of the melon hit my tongue and satisfied my sugar cravings. For now, the fight was over. I'd made it through my first official day without fast food and tooth-rotting snacks.

When I began this journey, I noticed a recent Norwegian study to linked childhood emotional feeding to adult emotional eating. The study followed a group of students from age four to ten and monitored their diet to see the effects over time. In the end, the study concluded that parents' use of food as a reward or comfort for children could lead to the adverse consequences in the form in emotional eating. The study rung particularly true in the case of how many in the Black community viewed food. In our culture, when it came to dealing with emotions, food was a gateway to healing, coddling, or rejoicing (depending on the occasion). My family was not an exception to this rule.

As I thought about the study and my first day void of nutrient deficient meals, my first foray into fast food came to mind. The smell of Hardee's fries filled my nostril as I thought about my lifestyle change. With few eating options in my early years, my mom didn't have time to cook and my father was cooking-challenged, fast food was the best option for a picky child refused to eat meat, fruits, or vegetables. Our quaint two-bedroom apartment was situated behind a Hardee's, which made it easy for me to beg my dad for an order of fries. This was something that occurred almost every day in the afternoon. Like clockwork we would ride or, on a beautiful sunny day, walk there. I followed my father through the black and glass door. Then, I would toddle across the

terracotta-tiled floor to the register. Because of our frequent visits, and my chubby cheeks, I would get a free drink with my fries. As Dad placed the bag of fries into my little hands, joy filled my four-year-old body. Usually, I would wait to get home and eat my fries; but, sometimes, those fries were in my belly before my dad and I got back home. The fry cravings became so common that my dad would go back pick up a second order to satisfy my salty cravings.

## ***Day 2***

Today's battle was mixed. Still drowsy, I dragged myself out of bed and prepared a breakfast of grits, French toast, and egg whites. Making my breakfast had never felt so good as I gathered energy from the rich syrupiness of the French toast, fluffiness of the eggs and creaminess of grits swirled in my mouth. Traveling on MARTA to school was a little challenging as the aromas of McDonald's breakfast wafted in the air. Man, the temptation was real. By the time I arrived at school; my stomach was moaning and groaning; it was telling me that I needed to feed. My midday snack, a fruit bar, kept my sugar cravings at bay. The apple-meets-cinnamon taste danced in my mouth and allowed me to push my worries away.

By lunch time, I squelched my fast food anxiety by filling my stomach with homemade chicken parmesan and yogurt. The yogurt with its banana yumminess made my mind go crazy. I smiled as the creamy texture slid from my esophagus to my stomach. But, even after feeding the beast, I still wanted my Saturday treat. The feeling of eating it nagged at me. I could almost taste the gooey cheese, juicy processed meat, and delicious bun melting in my mouth. Luckily, the feeling was slightly curbed due to the tart lemon flavor of my Fiber Now bar.

Walking to and from the bus stop didn't help much. Whether breakfast, lunch, or dinner, I smelled the pungent odors from Arby's or the escaped aromas of the Mediterranean restaurant wafting from the plaza in front of my apartment. Part of me wanted to roll down the hill and run to the Arby's as though we were two long lost lovers being reunited for the first time in years. God, I just wanted some fried chicken tenders. However, that would defeat the purpose of the experiment, which was to better my health. I kept that in mind as I savored the wet juiciness of baked chicken, tender green beans and the cheesy goodness of homemade macaroni and cheese.

A study done in 2009 wanted to find out if there was a correlation between emotional status and eating and, if so, which emotions affected students most. The results showed that, out of 600 California middle-aged male and female students, males were more affected by confusion than stress, tension, or anger. This did not surprise me considering that there is a stigma attached to black southern families and emotional and/or mental health issues. In the black community, it is thought that religion and food are the only things needed to help your emotional state; going to a psychiatrist or psychologist is looked down upon. However, even as I write this, I remember growing up with a mother who championed seeking outside help when needed. She hated that the black community perpetuated the stereotype that seeking professional help for your issues makes you weak or broken in some way.

Like many of the students in that study, my emotional battle with food began in middle school. It was a cyclical nature. I would become depressed, then my food intake would decrease. This did wonders for my waistline, but not for my self-esteem. When I was no longer depressed, and my home life was safe, my appetite would come roaring

back. No food was safe from my carnivorous appetite. This was something that I struggled with at my alma mater, Brewer Middle School, and the local burger joint, Burger Inn. At Brewer, when I was depressed, I would spend my lunch hours in the white and maroon cafeteria pushing around food on my tray. I attempted to muster up energy to place the cold metal fork to my lips and take one or two bites. On the complete opposite end of the spectrum, when I felt good about life, Burger Inn was my salvation. I would sit in the brown leather and wood booth gorging on crispy fries and juicy, moist hamburgers while sipping sugary sweetness of the Southern tea. (If it's not sweet, you're doing it wrong.) Of course, my weight would balloon, and then I would become obsessed with every morsel that I put in my mouth.

