

An Addict Clean and Sober

Peter Huggins

Writer's comment: Like many UCD college students, I begrudgingly signed up for English 101 during my senior year, because I needed an upper division English course in order to graduate. As it turns out, it was one of the classes I enjoyed the most—which is no small praise coming from a math major. The essay assignments were refreshingly open-ended, which allowed me the opportunity to tell this story about addiction. Some of the people very dear to me strongly objected to the personal nature of this account; they said that I was damning myself by telling this story. But if I am to be damned for admitting that I am a drug addict in recovery, then that is the very reason I must risk it by owning this essay. Until the antiquated beliefs stigmatizing addiction are challenged and overthrown, the stigma will always linger. I owe countless thanks to Jayne Walker—for her support, encouragement, and suggestions along the way that were so helpful and appreciated. Without her, I very well may have never written this.

—*Peter Huggins*

Instructor's comment: “Being an addict doesn’t come with many perks,” Peter Huggins writes, “but one benefit is that we have an uncommon gift for helping other addicts find recovery and stay clean.” In this essay, Peter chronicles his own addiction and recovery with relentless honesty, remarkable emotional precision, and the restraint that comes from mature insight and strong purpose: He wants to change minds, to save lives.

It was a pleasure and a privilege to watch him develop the essay, from three stunning paragraphs I read in email through a shorter, purely first-person piece to its final form, and then begin sharing it with other students, one of whom requested a copy to give to a friend who had a meth problem. Now I’m thrilled that “An Addict Clean and Sober” will reach a wider audience of *Prized Writing* readers.

—*Jayne Walker, University Writing Program*

Every drug addiction has a beginning. I call it the birth of the addict, that fateful first experience with a drug. It seemed romantic to begin a story such as this by recalling my first experience. And I would have begun as such, if I could remember it. But I can't. It was either alcohol, pills or pot, and it was sometime in eighth grade—that I know for sure. The rest of the memory is faded, slowly washed away by time and heavy subsequent drug use. So much for being romantic.

The true romance, anyway, didn't come until I found methamphetamine. "Crank" is what it's commonly called, undoubtedly because it cranks up both the mind and body until the dials are well past eleven. Routine users call it "dope," which is a term of endearment, really; whereas "dope" is a generic term that can refer to any drug, when we said "dope" we automatically meant crank and nothing else. It's common to go two days without food or sleep while on a crank binge, and once I stayed up for nearly an entire week. As a 5'7" sixteen-year-old using the drug routinely, I weighed a pitiful hundred and twenty pounds.

Before finishing my sophomore year of high school, I dropped out and became a dope fiend. I lost my job. I lost the respect of my friends and family. I lost damn near everything. But I eventually managed to clean myself up. I got off dope. I got my GED. I started community college. I found a new job. Then I started using drugs again. I lost the new job. I dropped out of community college. I descended once more.

The cycle of relapse and rebound would continue. Eventually I was sent to a long-term treatment facility. There, I was told by the staff that I was an addict. Unlike many of the other residents, I already knew I was addicted to various addictive drugs. But what I didn't know was *why* I was so susceptible to being sucked back in to using drugs even after being clean for months. A lot of people could control their drug use. I couldn't. A lot of people tried dope and got sucked in for a while, and then they quit and never went back. I always went back. I knew dope would destroy me, but somehow I was hopelessly powerless against it, even when I was clean. Somehow I was different than the social or recreational drug users. Different than those who temporarily fell under the spell of an addictive substance and then broke free. A different kind of user. An addict.

Someone I used with once said, "Drugs take us somewhere we're not supposed to go until after we die. And after we've been there, regular life just isn't the same anymore." I know exactly what he meant.

For us, discovering drugs was like putting on badly needed prescription glasses for the first time. Try making cookies without the salt. Or take a shower with the water temperature ten degrees below what you normally prefer. After finding drugs, that's what life without them was like—a constant sensory letdown. Drugs delivered us into a new heightened experience that made it painfully clear that life without them seemed somehow incomplete. Chasing an elusive sense of completion and finding it for six hours at a time became a lifestyle—one that eventually led to addiction. Of course, aside from that one conversation with my using buddy, I didn't really think about the "deeper psychological and emotional aspects" of my drug problem at the time. Hell, I didn't like to even think that there was a problem.

Apparently neither did anyone in America until around the 1930s. Before Alcoholics Anonymous was founded in 1935, there were no widespread support groups for addicts and alcoholics seeking help. Before 1951, alcoholism and drug addiction were not even recognized as medical problems. Now, the American Medical Association itself acknowledges that alcoholism and drug addiction are bona fide *diseases*. In fact, the prevailing view among doctors today is that addiction is a brain disease as real as schizophrenia or bipolar disorder.

Contrary to the archaic view of addiction as a mere "lack of willpower," research over the past decade has shown that addiction is caused by actual physical changes in the brain. According to Dr. Alan I. Leshner, former director of the National Institute on Drug Abuse at the National Institutes of Health,

Using drugs [or drinking alcohol] repeatedly over time changes brain structure and function in fundamental and long-lasting ways.... Addiction comes about through an array of neuroadaptive changes and the laying down and strengthening of new memory connections in various circuits in the brain.

It seems that some people are particularly susceptible to such changes in the brain, while others are not. It is believed that genetics somehow play a role, but the specifics are as of yet unknown. I myself come from a family plagued with alcoholism and drug addiction, as do many addicts and alcoholics.

Besides genetics, there are also psychological and personality traits that tend to predispose individuals to heavy drug use and subsequent addiction. Persons with borderline personality disorder, for example, are very prone to substance abuse as a form of deviant behavior. Also, there is a tendency for persons with clinical mood disorders, such as

bipolar disorder or clinical depression, to “self-medicate.” And, more generally, people who are unhappy can use compulsive behaviors as a form of escape.

I was certainly in that lot. Without drugs, I constantly felt unhappy and incomplete. That sense of incompleteness, for me, was there before I ever touched dope. It remained after my body’s physical addiction to methamphetamine was gone. It was, as best as I can describe, a hole begging to be filled. When I was eleven, I read every single Steven King book, over the course of a few months. When I was twelve, I went to the local arcade every Saturday and spent up to eight hours playing video games. At thirteen, I bought Dungeons and Dragons books, and I memorized them from cover to cover. I was always shoveling something into that hole in mass quantities, desperately trying to fill it. Drugs filled it better than anything I had ever found before, and methamphetamine filled it better than any other drug.

I now know that the “physical addictiveness” of a substance has little or nothing to do with its ability to cause addiction. Cocaine and methamphetamine cause only mild physical dependence and withdrawal symptoms, but they are among the most addictive drugs, because they very quickly induce the changes in the brain that cause addiction (Leshner, Berke). I have known many addicts whose drug of choice was marijuana, which has no physically addictive qualities at all.

In fact, addiction is not just a disease of drinkers and drug users. It can be induced by just about any repetitive pleasurable activity. Gambling is a notable example (Fiorillo *et al.*) and there are many others. As Leshner puts it, “many of these brain changes [believed to cause addiction] are common to all chemical addictions, and some also are typical of other compulsive behaviors such as pathological overeating.” The emerging view is that the brains of addicts can be altered in many of the same fundamental ways, independent of their particular compulsive behaviors.

And the alterations seem to be irreversible. No reliable cure has ever been found to undo the brain changes that cause addiction. Years of research and clinical observation indicate that like schizophrenia, addiction is a progressive, incurable disease. That means that even now—or twenty years from now—if I were to start using drugs again, my drug use would immediately return to the uncontrollable state in which it was when I quit. I can never revert to “normal” or “recreational” use. Every drug addict I have ever known who has relapsed has confirmed this to me. Through our substance abuse, we have been

irrevocably programmed to seek out drugs and use them until they destroy us.

That's what the staff at rehab meant when they told me I was an addict. They meant that the circuitry of my mind was wired up in such a way that I was bound to return to drugs again and again. Certainly my repeated failed attempts to stay away from dope supported what they were telling me. My only hope, they said, was to complete their treatment program and then practice recovery on a daily basis. And so that is what I did.

Recovery from full-blown drug addiction is a long hard road out of hell. The first baby step is wanting to get clean, and getting away from the drugs and alcohol. Then comes the really fucking hard part—learning how to stay clean and actually pulling it off. Most addicts have complex emotional and psychological issues interwoven in their substance abuse. Drugs and alcohol are wonderful emotional anesthetics, so it is no wonder that many of the people who get sucked in are in desperate want of such anesthesia. Thus, in many cases, addiction is not only a problem in its own right, but also a symptom of deeper problems lurking beneath. Getting clean often means having to deal with all kinds of fucked up shit that used to be subdued by substance abuse. Approximately a third of the residents I met in rehab admitted they suffered sexual or physical abuse when they were young. About a third were diagnosed (after getting clean) with various psychological disorders like borderline personality disorder, generalized anxiety disorder, clinical depression, and bipolar disorder. More than half came from broken homes. And no one ever came into the program happy.

The treatment facility I attended used a six month program that incorporated traditional 12-step recovery (used in Alcoholics Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous groups) combined with individual and group therapy sessions. The facility also helped us reestablish healthy lifestyles in a structured environment free from drugs and alcohol. We brushed our teeth in the morning, we ate three good meals a day at regular times, we attended our scheduled meetings, we kept normal sleeping hours. For many of us, these things had become foreign after years of substance abuse. Simply relearning the good daily habits of a functional lifestyle that addiction had displaced was very therapeutic in and of itself.

Having successfully completed the treatment program, I am now an addict in recovery, which means that I am not using drugs and that I have a daily strategy to help ensure that I do not relapse. But I am still

an addict. I will die an addict. I can only hope that I will die as an addict clean and sober. That begging hole still lingers, although I now fill it with healthier things, such as zealously pursuing a Ph.D. in mathematics, and spending time with friends and family. Still, ever faithful it remains, my unwavering companion, whispering in moments of uncertainty and weakness, inviting me to feed it again as I once did. When it gets too insistent, I tell it to shut the fuck up. I remind myself of all the things that I am grateful for, that I would lose if I returned to drug use. I ask my Higher Power for help. If that doesn't work, I seek out a family member or close friend, or a Narcotics Anonymous meeting. I somehow find a way to escape relapse until that day is over. And so it goes. Drug addicts in recovery spend the rest of their lives steering themselves away from drawn-out suicide on a day to day basis. Our price of admission into the world of drugs is that, in a sense, we can never truly leave.

Without the help that I received at rehab, it would have undoubtedly been much harder to find recovery and stay clean. It is true that through the Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) and Narcotics Anonymous (NA) 12-step programs and local meetings, many addicts and alcoholics can achieve recovery without the help of a treatment facility. That does not mean that AA/NA alone can work for any addict, without the initial help of rehab. Besides the books and the 12 steps, AA and NA have only the advice and good will of fellow recovering addicts and alcoholics to offer.

In contrast, most rehab facilities have licensed social workers, medical professionals, and intensive treatment plans that go far beyond a couple one hour meetings per day. More importantly, rehab offers a haven from familiar triggers and old using buddies. And most important of all, rehab offers a haven from drugs and alcohol. Any recovering addict will confirm that the first several months of recovery are the hardest. Many who achieve long-lasting recovery solely through the help of AA/NA have had many "false starts"—attending meetings and staying clean for a couple days or weeks before returning to substance abuse. Most treatment centers protect against such relapses, by not allowing residents to leave until they have completed their programs. Thus treatment centers offer the means to guarantee that an addict will make it through the crucial initial phase of abstinence, with professional psychiatric assessment and treatment of the underlying disorders that so often accompany addiction.

Unfortunately, many health insurance policies provide little or no coverage for comprehensive alcoholism and drug-addiction treatment. If some other disease such as diabetes or heart disease were so neglected, surely there would be a public outcry. But in fact, according to a recent national poll, over a third of the American public does not think insurance coverage for addiction treatment is as important as coverage for diseases like diabetes and heart disease (Hazelden National Overnight Poll). There lingers a stigma against those suffering from addiction, and the archaic view that addicts simply lack the “willpower” or “moral character” to quit still stands fast in the face of science and reason. Meanwhile, every year most of the drug addicts and alcoholics who need and want treatment do not receive it. I was one of the fortunate exceptions. *A fortunate exception because I received treatment for a disease in America?* Surely we still have some serious progress to make. Addiction is a treatable disease, and we should start wholeheartedly treating it as such.

Today, I no longer drink or use drugs. I have found a certain sense of serenity that I haven’t known in a very long time. It is a small ongoing miracle—one that would have never been possible if not for the immeasurable care and support that I received from the rehab facility staff, most of whom were addicts in recovery themselves. Being an addict doesn’t come with many perks, but one benefit is that we have an uncommon gift for helping other addicts find recovery and stay clean.

And in that, there is hope.

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