

## Addiction and Recovery Patiently Wait

Hello, my name is Jeff, I am a recovering alcoholic, addict and codependent, I guess that's a good place to start. Looking back I was a wide-eyed fun-loving kid, intent on exploring my world. I didn't know it then, but I've come to learn that I grew up in a family surrounded by and entrenched in, the family disease of alcoholism/addiction. Both my parents are children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren of alcoholics. On my father's side, my great, great grandfather and his brother started what continues to this to this day to be a thriving Berks County business. My great, great grandfather's alcoholism was responsible for his slow but steady deterioration to the point where there was no choice but for him to relinquish the entire business to his brother. As the successive generations were born, not only was his alcoholism passed on in the family's genes, but their shame, regret, lost opportunities of "what could of been if only" was also passed on. At that time no one had any understanding that the prime culprit for all of this was the family disease of alcoholism. At that time there was a lack of treatment for this family disease. Eventually in the 1930s Alcoholics Anonymous was born, followed by Al-Anon and then as we know today, many other 12-step programs. Just to be clear for the sake of the traditions, this story is not affiliated with any particular program. It is a recovery story; my recovery story

My parents are two of the finest people anyone could ever meet, but little did they know that they were passing on this same all-encompassing family disease to me. Around age 4 or 5, two things happened that would forever change my world. I had my first drink, wine-soda at my grandmother's house on Christmas Eve. This was an Italian household, on my mother's side, and social alcohol use was the norm. It was the kids version of partying with the adults. I can still remember after that first drink, all I could think of, was more (*this is akin to as the physical allergy to alcohol*). Even at that age the cycle of by any means necessary began. "Can I have another?" "Why not?" "Can I have some of yours?" "You're not going to finish that, hey let me help you out." "Hey, you put it down and walked away, you must not want it, so I'll finish it." On and on the justifications and rationalizations developed. Yes by the age five I was already beginning to adjust my world and those around me to accommodate my desire for more. That internal yearning that told me the only thing that would be better than this is more. From that moment forward I can recall experiencing mental obsession, one of the fundamental cores of the disease of addiction; more is better.

The second thing that happened somewhere around that same time was that I was abused by a family member. This experience began teaching me that my safety and well-being is solely in my hands. Clearly I can't trust anyone, so I must be vigilant and above all else be in control of my world. Somewhere in here, I began using the philosophy of, if I only had more in all areas of my life. If I only had more: baseball cards, hot wheels, perfumed erasers. Just fill in the blank with whatever came next. If I only had more, my world would be better. I wouldn't have to think about, how terrified I was, how alone I felt from age 5. I was becoming solely

responsible for my inner well-being. Of course I didn't know it then, but this was laying the groundwork for avoiding reality at all costs. It was addiction at its roots. Clearly as you can see, this was a foundation of beliefs and behaviors that was developing to support my physical disease of addiction. Long before my active drinking began I developed an innate knowledge and belief system that there are many ways to avoid my feelings. I found many avenues to avoid taking personal responsibility for what was already becoming, my truly unmanageable life.

My active regular drinking began around age 12. A friend bought a six pack, a few of us drank it, acted like idiots and threw up. The next day we said, wow that was great, when are we going to do it again? I know now that this was a sign, but as I said earlier I/my disease had developed a foolproof system of avoiding logic. Over the next three years it was more drinking, somewhere in there came pot. By age 15 my drinking and pot use was daily. I also began experimenting with PCP and LSD the list goes on. My social network was also changing to accommodate all of this. By age 16 I had found a like-minded girlfriend and this relationship would exponentially compounded the insanity. For several years prior to this time, my friends and I would insist that we would never use a needle, (*"We were never going to be like them."*). Well guess what, I started using needles. My arrogance and delusional thinking fueled by my disease of addiction was shifting into full gear.

Constant drinking and pot use was my baseline; any other drug use was a bonus. By age 17 came the IV PCP use. I found my way up the ladder to the PCP labs. One fateful evening the whole thing came tumbling down which lead to the arrest of myself and two of my friends. (*"Were things starting to get bad?"*) Luckily for me I was six months shy of my 18<sup>th</sup> birthday. Juvenile institutions, no problem, just a slight detour. In hindsight it was another glaring example of my growing arrogance and denial about the true effects of my disease of addiction. About a year later came IV cocaine use, (*down the rabbit hole we go*). At this point it was clear - I'm out of control. But by then I truly didn't see any way out. It is at moments like this, that I feel such deep sadness for the pain and losses that addiction caused for myself, my parents and loved ones. No words can describe, the sadness that comes up within me during these moments, the harm that this disease has caused not only to me, but also for the ones I supposedly loved and cared about; it's just very sad. That's where I utilize recovery in my life today. It's a game changer. It provides the tools and a complete support system to experience that sadness in a healthy, self-caring way today.

Unfortunately the insanity continued. Around age 20 my parents moved into the suburbs and ask if I wanted to move back in with them, thinking a geographical change would help me. Actually it was only 3 miles away from my stomping grounds, but somehow we believed this would change everything. Within six months of living here I "borrowed" my dad's car at 3 o'clock in the morning after drinking and taking many barbiturates throughout the evening. That ended with a DUI, Needless to say the geographical change, had not changed anything, I had brought along me with me. My disease of addiction continued to be in full control of my life. The next three years continued unabated, same "stuff", different day. I became lonelier, felt more hopeless and helpless than ever. Each day I would try to repair a few things from the day before, only to screw

up 10 other things. As far as I could see, I was just too far gone, I could see no possible hope of continuing this futile effort to try and fix everything that I/my disease of addiction had destroyed. It was no use, I was irrevocably broken, there was no way back. So, it seemed like a good idea that this was the time to end it all. *(This decision was based on the fact that my thinking had worked so well thus far.)* In my infinite wisdom on the evening of May 31, 1981, at the age of 23, I/my disease decided to end my suffering. Needless to say it didn't work. The next morning I found myself in the intensive care unit where I remained for the next five days. This was followed by a stay in a psychiatric unit for the next seven days where it became somewhat clear to me that the only insanity I was suffering was as a result of my addiction. This was the beginning of my journey through recovery. I reluctantly agreed that it may be in my best interests to go to a drug & alcohol rehab center. *(Progress)* All I can think of at this time is how much pain I must have been in to do this to myself. The intensity of hopelessness and helplessness I was feeling at that time was beyond words. I believe something with which many of us addicts can relate, someone reading this may even be there at this very moment. This is where I can say without reservation, that no matter where we have gone, no matter how far down the rabbit hole we have fallen, recovery offers a way back, a pathway to sanity, hope, love, acceptance, hopefulness, choice, and dignity.

*(Here we go, out of the rabbit hole, a whole new ride, down a whole new path)* Here I am, 23 years old sitting in a drug and alcohol rehab in Wilkes-Barre Pennsylvania. I had Fresh bandages on my chest and left side, with wounds still oozing and my breathing was labored. However, all I could think of is just one cigarette. Just one hit. That's all I need to make my life okay. Was this insanity? I would say so. The good news is that I walked around the rehab for 42 days with that cigarette in my hand unlit. Progress. That one word, progress, seems to be one of the most important words throughout my recovery. I tend to be a perfectionist; somehow my twisted mind seems to think that via perfectionism, I can outrun my shame. That last sentence would become a common theme to reckon with throughout my recovery, including today as I write this. Recalling and writing my story brings up a lot of feelings. But today I have a healthy way of experiencing these feelings. It truly is a beautiful thing.

I believe one of the most important things they told me before I left the rehab is that statistics show that people who attend a 12-step meeting their first day out of rehab have a significantly higher success rate in recovery. I was willing to go to any lengths to not feel the way I felt prior to recovery. In the rehab center I never left a group, not even to go to the bathroom! *(Hey I'm an addict, I wanted it all.)*

I showed up at the 6<sup>th</sup> Street clubhouse in Reading for a meeting the same day I left the rehab center. I was willing to do my part. Step one - show up! As long as I continue to be willing, along with my sponsor, support system and higher power the rest will take its natural course. There's no way to share or fully express the impact of 32 years of experience, strength, hope, turmoil, tragedy, the roller coaster of life on life's terms, disease influenced decisions, recovery influenced decisions, rewards, births, deaths, tragic losses, discovering my dignity, surrendering my dignity, reclaiming my dignity in this short story; but I am doing my best.

This disease of addiction is powerful. It comes at us in a myriad of different disguises. For some reason at that time I had a firm belief that all I needed was a woman in my life to make me okay. I was once again looking for something outside of myself to fill that vast cavern of emptiness. I worked hard on myself and went to two or three meetings daily. Years went by and my life improved. In fact, life was great. Progress was clearly evident in all areas of my life as a result of regular meeting attendance, working the steps with my sponsor, gaining an understanding and acceptance of a higher power, doing a written fourth and fifth step, working steps six and seven, a written eighth & ninth step, daily tenth step, weekly eleventh step meetings and sharing all of this with others.

Over those first five years of my recovery I came to begin to scratch the surface of understanding and acceptance of my disease of family addiction/codependency. This came through therapy and Al-Anon/ACOA meetings. After a number of failed relationship attempts I followed the direction to stay out of relationships for a minimum of a year; this lasted about 10 months. Ok, so I didn't fully follow direction (*progress not perfection*). First and foremost, I remained clean and sober. That being said I was starting to learn that there are many new, and sometimes not so new, dangerous avenues that I can travel to harm myself and others without even picking up a pill, fix or drink. I believe this is the ultimate goal of my disease; to get me back to chemical use and to accomplish total self-destruction. This is one powerful disease and I have to be vigilant of this fact, each and every moment of each and every day. My responsibility is to accept this fact along with my powerlessness to change it. It is what it is. I must respect the powerfulness of this disease as it is far stronger than just me. However, I understood that a power greater than myself provides me with all the tools that I need combat my addiction.

So here we go, I'm in a new relationship, we have a child; life was good. I continued with my program and started a business of my own. Actually the foundation of the business was based on spiritual principles. All was well. My primary focus became family, which then became work, which then became compulsion, to obsession and then survival. Somehow slowly over the next 10 years I lost sight of my primary purpose - contented recovery. My life was unmanageable with no pill, fix or drink. The current addiction was power, property and prestige. It became a primary goal, disguised as self-responsibility, family, security. I guess I wasn't paying much attention to the traditions at this point because clearly they could've told me where this was going. The answers are always there. All I have to do is open my eyes, ears, mind and soul and all will be revealed. All I need is the willingness to embrace it.

Needless to say it all came crashing down; the business, the marriage, the family, financial security, a burning heap of wreckage. Somewhere in here a doctor gave me and my wife mild tranquilizers to help each of us through different medical problems. I took them sporadically over the next year or so until they were gone. Not realizing until years later, how significantly dangerous that was, even though it was prescribed and occasional.

I'm still in the game. Recovery (not just abstinence) is still patiently waiting for me, just as patient as my addiction. The question always is which way will I turn. I turned to my sponsor, my support system, my higher power who are always there and available to me. All of us together picked me up, dusted me off, and I continued on my journey.

I returned on a daily basis to what I always loved, the basics. Trust God, clean house, help others. I found a new job, one foot in the front of the other, progress. When I got to around my mid-forties, I met someone new. A woman who seemed to be a like-minded individual, focused on the positive aspects of life. She was striving towards the same aspirations as me, a loving family and a wholeness of the soul; someone to share her life with in a healthy way. It's funny how life seems to have many ways of reminding us what we have to be grateful for. I had struggled with medical problems for many years and shortly before meeting her I was diagnosed with what would eventually become a serious medical condition. Over the next year I became seriously debilitated with the residual effects of the medical treatment. During this time it became necessary to take mood altering medications. For the first six months I was somewhat able to function, by the end of the first year in spite of my efforts it was no longer possible to work. This was another trip down the rabbit hole. This affected me in so many different ways, it kicked off my shame and feeling of inadequacy. "If I was just stronger I could bare the pain." "If I was just smarter." "If I was just perfect." Over the next 3 years I took the medication as prescribed, but I have a disease whose primary goal is total destruction. Without the medication the pain and nausea were destroying me physically and mentally. However, using the medication even as prescribed was destroying my soul.

The nausea became so severe, I could barely eat. I had discussed medical use of pot over these years, I finally gave in, even though it wasn't legal in Pennsylvania. It worked well, I could eat something once a day. This was one hell of a dilemma. Use the medication and pot, but feel compelled to jump off of something because I'm completely losing my freaking mind. Or stop all of it, attempt to do whatever is necessary to live with the pain and nausea and jump off of something because I'm completely losing my freaking mind. I'm an addict, I can't use pot and I can't use mood altering medication. No matter how well intended, mood altering substances, destroy my mind, body and soul. There are times when mood altering medications are a necessity in our lives. That being said, for me personally use of these drugs is dangerous and will eventually lead to my self-destruction.

It was time to get off the fence, which is a painful place in itself. As I approached my late forties I jumped. I jumped off the cliff of trust, once again into the loving arms of a power greater than myself. I took the leap of faith. Faith that a solution would be revealed if I was willing to trust. While I was willing to jump, I'm not sure how trusting I was, because the next few years were excruciatingly painful. So much so that words cannot begin to describe. But at least I was again experiencing progress... I was slowly able to find incremental relief for the pain and nausea. I was trusting the principles of recovery once again. If I show up all will be revealed. One thing that became crystal clear as I redefined my path of recovery; my codependency, my all-

encompassing family disease of addiction, which has been an integral part of me, long before I actively began drinking at age 12, was just as destructive as my active addiction. In some ways it's even more destructive if left untreated. Without addressing this via Al-Anon, along with, other types of therapeutic assistance, I will inevitably and unquestionably spiral back down the rabbit hole.

I returned to Al-Anon to focus on those beliefs I internalized that were there long before I began my active addiction. Addressing my codependency has been my primary focus over these last seven years. I've learned it is vital for me to treat my codependency in conjunction with my dependency. They work hand-in-hand. I have a choice today. They can either destroy me, or by treating them both as equally important, I can have a life beyond my wildest dreams.

This may sound simplistic, but again here are some of the essential tools which have helped me: regular meeting attendance and participation; maintaining a core relationship with my sponsor; service work including sponsorship; diligently working the steps by maintaining an understanding and acceptance of a higher power; completing the fourth and fifth step (updating as needed); trusting in steps six and seven, a written eighth and completed ninth step (updating as needed); daily tenth step inventory; daily conscious contact via prayer and meditation; sharing all of this with others on a daily basis; and applying the principles of recovery in everyday life. This has been my experience. Much, much more will be revealed to me by following these simple steps.

The last seven years have been some of the most painful, yet rewarding years of my life. I have dear friends, a loving family, amazing children, all provided by a gracious higher power who waits patiently for me to be willing to accept the gifts that have always been available to me. I receive never ending Love in all of its forms. I live in a beautiful world, full of colors, wonder, hope, beauty beyond description. The question is, will I embrace it on a daily basis.

As outlined in this story, I have a proven set of tools, which provide me with all I need to experience all the magnificence that this universe has to offer. I believe in me today; it is a priceless gift. I also believe in you. I believe together we can accomplish anything. We may have never met, but your story, along with mine, shared one to another, will somehow allow us to accomplish what has always been impossible to do alone. Recovery has allowed me to experience true dignity, self-love, self-acceptance, love and acceptance of others, patience, tolerance, the ability to embrace the abundance around me, and more importantly, the ability to embrace the abundance inherently within me.