

## **My name is Tom.**

I am a Wisconsin dentist and a recovering alcoholic. I'd like to share the story of my addiction to alcohol, what happened and what my life is like now, in the hope that another dental professional may be helped.

I don't know when I became an alcoholic. It may have been very early in high school when I tried drinking like so many other kids. I remember the wonderful feelings that alcohol gave me. For the first time in my life I felt whole, confident, and at peace with myself. I found something that removed the terrible feelings of uneasiness, inadequacy and self consciousness that had always plagued me. I had a lot of fun drinking with my friends. Alcohol became very important to me very quickly.

I began college at Marquette University with the goal of becoming a dentist. I worked very hard and entered the School of Dentistry after two years of pre-dental studies. I completed my work, did my assignments on time, showed up for classes, worked to support myself and stayed out of trouble. I drank on weekends to relax and have some fun that I denied myself all week long at school. There were no serious consequences associated with my drinking. Alcohol did what I wanted it to do for me.

I graduated from dental school and married my lovely wife the same year. It was satisfying to finish school, pass the boards, and begin practicing dentistry. The rewards were matched by patient, staff, laboratory, and insurance frustrations. I felt I had ample reason to drink after work and more heavily on weekends. I never drank while treating patients, but there were days when I wanted to so I would cancel my patients and "go fishing."

Some days I had to show up for work with a hangover. I accomplished a lot of dentistry feeling nauseous, headachy, and a little shaky. I used a lot of mouthwash to cover the alcohol on my breath. I was one of the first dentists to wear a face mask for obvious reasons. I did not know that operating with a hangover was operating with impairment.

I tried many things to reduce or hide my use of alcohol. I tried abstinence, then celebrated my victory over alcohol by getting drunk. I tried drinking alcoholic beverages I didn't like but realized it didn't matter what it tasted like because I wanted it for the effect. I stopped seeing my "friends" who I drank with to discover I really enjoyed drinking alone at night after my family was asleep. I blamed the stress of dentistry for my drinking but I found out that I actually drank more when I was on vacation.

During these first ten years of dental practice I believe I knew I had a problem with alcohol but my denial was so strong I simply could not see the progression of my illness. How could alcohol be the problem when the only time I felt "normal" was when I was drinking?

My wife and I had two beautiful healthy children and it was during this time that we began having serious marital difficulties. My wife suspected my heavy alcohol use played a part in our marital problems and would bring this suspicion to the marriage counselor's attention. However, I was always able to convince the marriage counselor that my drinking was controllable and not a serious problem so things would improve for a short time. My wife remained unconvinced.

In 1985 my older brother developed cirrhosis of the liver from his drinking and I took him to a treatment center. This affected my drinking very little. However my brother's near death experience had a deep affect on my wife and her suspicions about my alcohol use. She doubled her efforts to get me to seek help. I refused. Then she sought help from a drug and alcohol abuse counselor with the goal of divorce.

The counselor suggested to my wife that they try to get me sober first and deal with divorce later. In the fall of 1996 my wife sought help for herself by entering an inpatient Alanon program for one week. Two things happened. First, my wife learned about the disease of alcoholism, especially her own survival. And secondly, now everyone knew I had a problem with alcohol. I was embarrassed, confused, angry, scared and depressed.

My own denial of my alcoholism continued. Alcohol had never caused me to lose anything valuable. I had no trouble with the law, I showed up for work and did a good job, and I was in excellent health and doing well financially. I sometimes believed I was mentally ill. I was going to lose my family and I could not accept that fact. My depression stayed even when I drank now. After twenty years, alcohol stopped doing the magic it had always done.

I recall one morning when my six-year old daughter was seated at the kitchen table and couldn't make up her mind what she wanted for breakfast. I had a hangover and became angry and verbally abusive to her before leaving the room. When I returned five minutes later she looked dazed, watery eyed and had a deep imprint between her eyes where she had pushed the edge of a drinking glass. I suddenly had a moment of terrible understanding of what I was doing to what I loved most. I think I became willing at that time to do anything that would help me.

I don't remember why I called the Wisconsin Dental Association. I may have seen or read that our association was willing to help members in trouble. When I called the WDA headquarters in 1986, they gave me the phone number of another dentist who I called and related some of my difficulties to. I remember what it felt like to hear this fellow dentist tell me that he understood my problem and how I felt. He was also willing to jump in his car that day and drive a hundred miles to talk to me.

Subsequently, he gave me the information I needed to enter inpatient treatment at McBride in Milwaukee. I was still confused about my problem but I became hopeful. Anything had to be better than the hell I was going through.

I checked into McBride for a treatment the same day as a psychiatrist and a drug and alcohol abuse counselor recommended it. I found myself among other professionals such as lawyers, physicians, nurses and pharmacists. I felt less ashamed and more accepting by being among other professionals. I was frightened they would find out how crazy I felt and keep me there forever. I was very relieved to have a complete psychological workup and find out I was just a plain old alcoholic. Alcoholism began to look differently to me the more I learned about it.

The dentist I originally contacted through the help of the WDA came to visit me in treatment at McBride and stayed in touch after I returned home. I agreed to comply with weekly random urine screens for two years, see my addictionologist on a regular basis and attend support groups with other recovering alcoholics. As a result, I never heard from the Wisconsin Department of Regulation and Licensing. This was very fortunate as not everyone is as lucky.

What is my life like today as a sober recovering dentist? I enjoy dentistry and some days the worries and stress get to me but I don't use alcohol or other drugs to escape. I continue to belong to support groups that give me an opportunity to talk about my daily frustrations and help others. I've been given the gift of sobriety that I cannot keep for myself unless I continually give it away to others.

I go home to my family and enjoy spending a lot of time with them. I also have real friends today inside and outside the dental profession. I feel truly blessed.

My thirteen-year old daughter and I were sitting at the kitchen table the other day. She was asking me a lot of personal questions as I was trying to eat my breakfast and read the newspaper. Finally, I put down the paper gently and asked her what all the questions were about and she said "Well, I have to do an interview with a person I admire - just answer a few more questions please."