

I'm a Dentist and a Drug Addict

Following is a true story of one dentist's struggle to overcome his drug addiction, and the help he received through the Well Being Program of the Missouri Dental Association. The dentist has requested that his identity be kept confidential.

Growing up, I watched alcohol destroy my father's life. As a result of his drinking, my home life was volatile and unpredictable to say the least. As a very young man, I vowed not to follow in my father's footsteps.

In high school and college I did experiment with alcohol. I was very careful to control my intake of alcohol because the few times I actually got drunk, I became violently ill.

I thought this was a good thing and I would not follow in my father's footsteps.

During dental school, alcohol was always at social functions but it was rare that I actually got drunk. I did however greatly enjoy drinking a few beers with my classmates after class. Prior to a very stressful day in dental school, one of my classmates gave me a few 10mg Valium tablets. The feeling I had after taking the Valium was far better than any effect I had previously from alcohol. I had never felt so good! I also discovered that drinking a few beers with the Valium potentiated the wonderful feeling I had experienced.

After graduation, I began solo private practice in a small community. I was married and had a little girl. The practice took off quickly and I found myself working six days a week. To relax after a long day, I would occasionally take a Valium and have a few beers. I justified my drug usage rationalizing that if I worked hard, I could indeed treat myself to some good feelings.

It was also about this time, I became a workaholic. My second child was born and my home life deteriorated to the point I was in an extramarital affair. I found out later, this is one of the early indicators of an alcohol or drug problem. Being involved in an affair and working to excess created even more stress. I handled the stress by increasing my use of Valium. I found however, that as I increased my use of Valium, the wonderful feeling I first had never quite returned.

The Missouri Dental Association held a continuing education course on alcoholism and addiction geared toward helping dentists with these types of problems. I went because I wanted to help my colleagues that were suffering like my father was. At the time, of course, I did not believe I had a problem. I did learn that alcohol and drug addiction are diseases. I also learned that growing up in an alcoholic home made you a co-dependent and that co-dependency is a disease. I learned how the mechanism works to help dentists that were suffering from these diseases begin to recover.

I learned that I was at very high risk to become addicted to either alcohol or drugs because the disease tends to run in families. This fact did not slow my drug use at all. I felt I was in control and I would certainly not become addicted. I learned this was my first symptom of the disease – denial. I denied I had any problems with drugs.

I was having some deeply distressing personal problems. I headed for the office in search of some Valium to help me cope. I could not find any and the pharmacy was closed. I did find some Demerol that I had in the office for over a year. I drew up 50mg and injected it into my thigh. Within minutes I had the most wonderful feeling; far better than Valium and it lasted even longer. As the drug took effect, my problems seemed to leave my mind.

I would “treat” myself to a Demerol cocktail at the end of my working day. Then after a few weeks, I would not only “treat” myself to one after work, but one just before bedtime. I did not think I had a problem because I did not use during the day and my technical abilities had not suffered.

I needed to keep taking more and more of the drugs just to maintain an adequate feeling.

By this time, I realized I needed to quit taking these drugs. I tried to quit on my own, and did actually quit for nine days; then I started right up again.

By this time I had begun using both Valium and Demerol during the day just to maintain a certain feeling of being normal. My office staff certainly knew something was wrong, but did not know how to confront me. My colleagues who knew me well also knew something was wrong, but again did nothing. Later I learned not saying anything is called “the conspiracy of silence.”

Finally one night I attempted to end it all. I said goodbye to my sleeping children and attempted to take a fatal overdose. Much to my surprise, I awoke the next morning and was finally able to ask for help. At last I stopped denying I had a problem; I had just gotten sick and tired of being sick and tired.

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I sought the advice of a nearby psychiatrist thinking he could help me. He told me there was very little he could do for me other than detoxify me. He suggested I contact a treatment center. At this time, I remembered the continuing education course the Missouri Dental Association had put on. I called the “hotline” number six times before I left a message with my name and number. I reached a member of the Well Being Committee who was a recovering alcoholic himself and he helped me lessen my fears about being an addicted dentist. I entered a treatment center within a few days.

While in treatment, I learned more about the disease I had – a chronic progressive and fatal disease if not kept in remission. This helped me to realize I was not weak-willed, crazy or evil, but just plain sick. I also learned that I had followed in my father’s footsteps. The disease was passed down through the generations. I became acutely aware that I was not responsible for my disease – but even to this day, I am responsible for my recovery from this disease. Keeping my disease in remission means not taking any mood altering drugs.

Another eye-opening fact was that I was poly-addicted to both Valium and Demerol. I can never return to social

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drinking since drinking even moderately could cause my disease to reactivate. Following my 29-day stay in the primary treatment center, I was treated on an outpatient basis for several months.

Times following the initial treatment were very trying. I had to deal with problems with the State Dental Board, the State Bureau of Narcotics and the DEA, but through the help of the committee members I was able to face these trials sober. I successfully completed my probationary period with all the regulatory agencies.

Life has been much better since I have been in recovery. There have been setbacks, such as a divorce, severe financial pressures and the death of my father who at the time of his death was still untreated for alcoholism. I have faced each of these trials sober.

Perhaps the greatest part about the journey into recovery is learning to deal with life on life's terms. When I was in dental school and early practice, I blamed dentistry for my stresses and my disease which justified my drug usage. It

took some time, but I am at peace with who I am and I actually really love practicing dentistry.

I have remarried and have a wonderful relationship with my wife and my children. I have a support system through Alcoholics Anonymous and other recovering health-care professionals who I can turn to for assistance. I have a relationship with my higher power, God, which is the cornerstone in my recovery.

Also, I try to carry the message to those in our profession and in my practice who still suffer from the same disease. I would urge anyone reading this article who thinks he or she might have a problem with alcohol or drugs to get help. It is only a phone call away. To those who know colleagues with a problem, help them get some help because they cannot reach out on their own.

Today, I am very grateful to the Well Being Committee with the Missouri Dental Association for helping begin my recovery. Again, I can deal with life on life's terms without the aid of mood-altering chemicals. I do this by living one day at a time and following a simple program. ■

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