

# One Off's and The Fog of Recovery

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[www.trafn.com/blog.html](http://www.trafn.com/blog.html) - July, 2016

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This past week I got a phone call from the director of a prominent medical residency program at Harvard University. For the past several years I'd been working with Kerry (this is not the individual's real name), a person who had overcome substantial substance abuse issues to achieve and maintain a long-term stable recovery. While we were working together, Kerry had gone on to graduate from medical school and was subsequently accepted into this Harvard residency, so I had participated in transferring Kerry's recovery support to the university's care. A few weeks ago, Kerry had just completed the first year of this program and returned home for a short vacation before beginning the second term. The program director had called to let me know that during this brief time-off, Kerry had shot heroin, overdosed and died.

It's hard to understand how someone who had conquered so many obstacles and achieved so much could end up overdosing on anything. After all, here's a person in stable recovery who knew drug addiction from the inside, had received the best health education possible, was then accepted into one of the most prestigious training programs in the world, yet had succumbed to one of the oldest tragedies on Earth: overdose death. Cinderella/Cinderella stories like these don't end this way, do they? Well, not most of the time, but, unfortunately, a lot more than you would think.

As a former addict myself, I will never be recovered. At best, I can only achieve, maintain, and remain in stable recovery: a never ending, day-by-day, life-long process. After all, relapse is only a day away for each and every one of us. And for those of you who say you wouldn't even know where to score, just remember that your next cop is only as far away as your next N.A. meeting (i.e. - Where do you buy when you're new in town? N.A., of course, cause that's where all the drug addicts are!). With that in mind then, the trick to avoiding relapse is to always stay one step ahead of the stressors and triggers that provoke unstoppable cravings and withdrawals.

Just because you're in a stable recovery doesn't mean that you can't still have cravings and withdrawals. As addicts, we've trained our bodies, minds and souls to turn to drugs whenever we're stressed, and over lives are always full of different kinds and different levels of stress. If we've developed sufficient coping skills during our

ongoing recovery, then we can handle these stressors and stay on track. However, if we are overwhelmed by an unexpectedly severe level of stress, our coping skills can be defeated, and relapse can become a very real hazard. Classically, we think of these kind of stressors as being negative situations like financial problems, relationship troubles, or severe pain. Yet, sometimes even really positive events can be stressful enough to trigger the “party” response which I believe is what happened to Kerry.

Stable recovery is a great thing, but the longer it goes on, the less we remember about what it was like before we got clean. When this happens, just like a bad lover who we can't wait to get away from but then years later reminisce about fondly, addicts can unwittingly enter into the fog of recovery where we recall “the good times” while de-focusing on all the dangers of drug use. Sadly, what happened to Kerry is often the result of unknowingly entering into that fog and, while wrapped in its haze, experiencing an overwhelming stressor which triggers relapse. In Kerry's case, this stressor was an incredibly positive one of having completed the first year of residency training which then provoked an insatiable desire to “celebrate” like in the old days. After all, Kerry wasn't going to go full-blast, pedal-to-the-floor relapse. Kerry had too much to look forward to for that. No, Kerry was just going to do a one off.

One off's occur when someone in stable recovery convinces themselves that they have been away from drugs for so long that they are both immune to relapse and can now use drugs in safe moderation. For Kerry, this most likely meant a one night party of indulgence that would be left completely behind the following morning: a one-time, one use that would not be repeated anytime in the near future. Unfortunately, without our knowing or realizing it, while in stable recovery our bodies quickly lose their tolerance to the drugs we used to use, so that those large amounts we could once do safely in the past have now become death sentences. I believe that's why Kerry's one off ended the moment it started, and that's why Kerry overdosed and died.

We are never stronger than the drugs which used to own us. We are never more in control than the most out of control days we left behind us. At best, we are only making an extraordinary, day-by-day effort to keep our heads above water. We are always vulnerable, we are always susceptible, and we are always at risk of relapse. And hidden within the fog of recovery lies the siren of one off's, waiting to lull us into a false sense of certainty, a false sense of security, and, ultimately, death.

In memory of Kerry.

**Also in this series:**

The Fog of Recovery (June, 2016)  
<http://trafn.com/fogofrecovery.pdf>

**Robert offers anonymous and confidential substance abuse recovery telephone coaching** to help those who wish to stabilize and maintain their recovery from substance abuse. Recovery coaching with Robert is available worldwide to anyone fluent in English who can reach him at **786-262-5750** (USA). For more information, please visit [\*\*http://trafn.com/coach.html\*\*](http://trafn.com/coach.html)