

My Drug Addiction Experience

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Two of the greatest characteristics any coach can have are empathy and compassion: empathy to realize that the suffering of others is real, and compassion to care for those who are in pain. Empathy and compassion cannot be learned from books, by listening to audio tapes, or through the internet. Instead, these are qualities which are infused in us through our own life experiences. Thus, it is easiest to have empathy and compassion for those who have been through similar trials and tribulations as your own. I am a coach who helps people overcome their substance abuse issues, and I have great compassion and empathy for these individuals because I was once an addict, too.

From a strictly medical point of view, it would be improper to call me an addict. Rather, I was what is classified as a pseudo-addict. By medical definition, an addict is someone who uses drugs for non-medical purposes even though they may be harming themselves by doing so. A pseudo-addict, on the other hand, is someone who appears to behave like an addict (buys drugs on the street), but does this because no doctor will treat their medical condition.

My life as a pseudo-addict began in 1982 when I was a research assistant in the Chemistry Department at Syracuse University (Syracuse, New York). I was part of a team working on reactions that involved highly toxic chemicals. During one of these experiments, I accidentally exposed myself to, and was poisoned by, one of these reagents: cyanide. I immediately became very ill, and shortly after that I had seizures so severe that I broke my neck in two places, totally dislocated my left arm from my shoulder, and was completely paralyzed on the entire left side of my body. This was the starting point for my ten year long pseudo-addiction.

Today, if you suffer from chronic physical pain, there are many physicians who are willing to treat you with powerful pain medications like oxycodone. Back in the 1980's, unless you were dying from cancer, almost no physician would prescribe such drugs. It was hard to describe the pain I endured for nearly a decade, as agony is such a small and insignificant word. It was the type of pain that for many leads to madness or suicide. I, for one, was not interested in either of these outcomes, so I sought pain

medications any way I could. I bought from friends I knew, and I bought from street dealers I did not know. I bought from friendly people who seemed a lot like me, and I bought from people who I could not wait to get away from after I scored. I even once bought drugs from an undercover cop who was not so under cover.

In the end, there is nothing particularly strange or unusual about my story, as it is continually repeated every day by millions of people around the world. Perhaps, if there is anything unique to say about myself, then it would be this: after ten years, the pain just stopped. I do not know why it stopped, but it did. Perhaps things have gotten so bad that I am no longer able to feel the pain. Physically, my condition has continued to deteriorate, including another seizure, severe spinal cord disease with neurologic damage, and significant loss of daily function (it is hard for me to do regular daily activities). But, I no longer have severe pain. While I do have pain every day, it is no longer of the extreme kind that requires medication, and every day that I continue to wake up like this, I am grateful.

For over twenty five years now, I have not needed to take drugs for my pain. I no longer go out on the street to buy medications, I no longer make strange calls to strange people for strange sounding reasons, and I no longer have a pseudo-addiction. What I do have, however, is an everlasting memory of what it was like to be a pseudo-addict, and the pain and suffering of those who were going through circumstances similar to mine, pseudo or not. So, today as a coach who assists people with drug addictions, I have great empathy and compassion for their suffering.

Substance abuse is a condition that involves the physical, psychological, and behavioral need for drugs, and affects every aspect of a person's life. The social stigma attached to addiction is so strong that some people will continue abusing drugs rather than risk possible exposure by seeking help. To that end, I express my concern through the special anonymous and confidential coaching that I provide.