

## MY BEST THINKING GOT ME HERE

The most important thing I've learned in my recovery is that addiction is really just a symptom of deeper problems within a person. I have come to realize that unhealthy thinking and unhealthy personality characteristics are the underlying problems that need to be changed in order to arrest the compulsion to use. I found this to be true for myself when I was unable to quit using marijuana on my own. I made a couple of unsuccessful attempts before I found Marijuana Anonymous. In those efforts the only thing I changed about my life was that I didn't smoke pot. I went on with all the same distorted thinking and behavior of the practicing addict that I was, including drinking alcohol. If pot was my only problem my life should have gotten better, but it didn't. When painful feelings and uncomfortable situations came up I went right back to using. Because I had never acquired any coping skills, I had no clue on how to live life on life's terms. My best thinking got me here, to this fellowship and the Twelve Steps.

I was brought up in what most people would think was a fairly normal family environment, and for the most part it was. Neither of my parents were alcoholics or addicts, I was not abused or neglected, and my mother was home with my brother and I until we got into high school. What did happen is that in our household we kept up the happy facade that everything was OK, no matter what was really going on. The only feeling that was ever really outwardly expressed was that of anger. I seemed to have gotten the message that it was somehow wrong to feel

anger, when in reality it was the behavior caused by the anger that was inappropriate. That, along with the fact that no other feelings, good or bad, were ever really talked about or expressed taught me that it was somehow wrong to feel, or that to have feelings was something negative. I was also brought up with a punishing type of God that I have never thought I was good enough for. I came to think my worth, and God's acceptance of me, were conditional upon my good behavior and faultless performance. I believe that my unhealthy thinking patterns most likely started here. I don't put the blame on anybody for this; I know there was no evil intent. Understanding where it came from helps me in changing my future by taking responsibility for myself in my own recovery.

Adolescence was an especially hard time for me. When I was in my early teens my parents got divorced. Their breakup left me with a lot of confusing and unresolved feelings that were never talked about. I also went to a different high school than my close friends which only helped to amplify all my fears and insecurities. I'm sure these feelings are pretty normal for any teenage boy — wanting to feel like you fit in, wanting to be popular, and wanting to be accepted by your peers. I never told anyone about how I felt, therefore, I was never reassured that these kinds of feelings are perfectly normal. By my sophomore year more and more of my behavior began to revolve around my feelings or more accurately around my not wanting to have to feel bad, especially about myself. I avoided taking healthy risks. I avoided after-school activities. I didn't even try to talk to girls or make any attempt to fit in, all the while blaming them and the school for my shortcomings. Then at age 14 I discovered marijuana.

Even though I didn't enjoy it at all that first time I learned to love it because of what it did for me. It numbed away a lot of the fear and self-doubt I was feeling. When I was loaded, the pot gave me a temporary and false sense that I, and everything in my life, was OK. Being a "stoner" and being "cool," I now finally felt like I was a part of something. This was in 1975, and there was still some of the '60s mentality of acceptance of marijuana use to reinforce my unhealthy needs. I knew that when I had pot I was popular, I had friends, and people liked me. I thrived on how this felt, so from a young age I made sure that I always had a bag in my pocket. Who I hung around with and who I let into my life all rotated around marijuana. I think I was addicted from the very start.

Although my use of marijuana had immediate negative effects on my life, I chose to ignore them and refused to think about what my usage would cost me in the long run. Before I started using I always did pretty well in school, not so much for myself but out of fear of disappointing my parents. By my senior year I was getting the worst grades I had ever gotten even though I had never gone to school under the influence. Spending my time working to support my habit, pimping beer, hanging out with my using buddies, and getting loaded became more important than studying. I had very little social life aside from getting loaded. I was very much afraid of people and of not being liked and didn't go to parties or events where being loaded wasn't acceptable. My socializing was done with a small group of guys who were a lot like me. None of us dated girls, even though I would have liked to, but it seemed OK because I was not the only one who was like me. We all lived at home with our parents and used to drive

around looking for places to get loaded where no one would bother us. I only ended up getting in trouble with the law once over my marijuana use and it turned out to be only a “slap on the wrist” due to the laws at the time.

After graduation, I made an attempt at classes at the local junior college, mostly because college was always expected of me. Things were different now. I was almost 18 and my addiction had progressed to the point where I no longer waited until after school to use. I started using first thing in the morning and going to classes stoned, with the rationalization that it helped me be a better listener. As my addiction progressed so did my lack of motivation. I ended up dropping all but the easiest classes and was put on academic probation. During this time I was also working nights and weekends pumping gas and fixing cars. Even though I was using heavily, I was able to perform my duties responsibly and my employers gained trust in me. This was the start of the “facade of functionality” in a working world that aided me in the dishonest thinking that I had things under control. How could a person possibly have a drug problem if they were progressing up the employment ladder, getting promotions and raises, and never missing work because of drug use? I just liked to smoke pot. Little did I realize how much my compulsion to use was affecting my ability to make healthy decisions.

That spring I met a girl, or more precisely she met me. I was what is usually described as shy. In truth I was already somewhat socially and emotionally retarded. I had never really even talked to a girl. While my non-user and “normie” peer group were out going to social functions and starting to develop into young adults, I was always loaded and making no attempt at emotional or social growth. I

avoided facing my fears and insecurities by not facing the real world. I don't know how she could have known the only way I would have been able to talk to her, but she found it by offering to smoke a joint. This was heaven for me. I didn't have to do anything — the pot did it for me. We had sex (my first time) on the first date, and I had moved in with her within 3 months. We had almost nothing in common aside from getting loaded. It was great at first. I was out of my mother's house and I could get loaded at home anytime I wanted without having to hide it from anyone. A bong and rolling tray were a regular fixture on our coffee table. She was dealing at the time and lots of pot and people were always around. I felt like I had it all. My behavior continued to rotate around my selfish desire to feel good all of the time. I didn't feel good about my poor grades and having to live on a student's budget, so I quit school and went to work full time. I quickly moved into a management position at the service station with no direct supervision.

I was 19 years old and my addiction and unhealthy thinking continued progressing. Without me realizing it, all parts of my life were already on a downward spiral. I just kept on using at every opportunity while totally oblivious to the fact that my behavior was going out of control. I began dealing to support my habit. I used my work to make dope deals. I stole by trading goods and services for money or pot when I was out. I had become skilled at covering my tracks, all the while keeping the intended business running rather smoothly. I'm sure I seemed the model employee but I was leading a double life. My ability to produce positive results in some areas of my life only kept me from realizing the depth of my problem.

I passed up several career opportunities in related fields to stay where it was easy and I could get loaded during working hours.

Anger, and my behavior when angry, began to get out of control at work and at home. Disagreements with my girlfriend sometimes became physical. I wasn't developing emotionally and anger became the result of any feeling I couldn't understand or control. I did other, harder drugs along with smoking pot, trying to enhance my reality, but all it did was further distort my perceptions. The negative effects became obvious in a short time and I was able to quit, but when I did my consumption of alcohol went up. I just traded one drug for the other without ever slowing down on my use of marijuana. It was not a very healthy relationship and we had several breakups and reconciliations during our time together. I was not functioning emotionally as an adult but was nevertheless trying to carry on an adult relationship. She finally ended it after giving up on me marrying her and starting the family she wanted. I realize today I hurt her real bad, but at the time all I was aware of was how rejected I felt.

Because I could not cope with the painful feelings of our breakup in a healthy way, I wallowed in self-pity. I started drinking even more heavily, went back to using the harder drugs I once swore off and of course smoked pot every minute in between. I could not stand the way I felt and was using anything I could to change that, but now it was more on a conscious level. To make matters worse my best friend got divorced at the same time, so once again I was hanging out with someone just like me, furthering the illusion that my behavior was somehow justified. I lived like this for another 6 years and nothing much changed in

all that time. It was a long, slow, miserable journey towards my "bottom".

The First Step has two parts. I lived with being powerless over my compulsion from almost the beginning, but I had to get real miserable before I was finally able to admit that my life had gotten unmanageable. I still had a job, a car, a place to live, etc., but on an emotional level I was a mess. I finally became totally aware of this fact when, after many years without even one date, I tried going out with women again. I even quit using temporarily a couple of times "for them." I was so empty inside that I could not smoke and drink away those old feelings when a woman did not want to continue dating me. Some uncontrollable behavior behind these feelings really scared me. I had finally become aware that I was unable to function emotionally as an adult. That was my first "moment of clarity." I went to a therapist to fix me. That is where I first found out about Marijuana Anonymous. I was so miserable that I was willing to try anything.

It was here that I first learned of the First Step, and how it fit me and my life. I heard myself in how other people described their experiences and feelings. I was welcomed with open arms and felt at home from very early on. I was again among people very much like myself, but now with a healthier motivation. They had something I wanted. I went to a lot of meetings in the beginning and just listened to how lives like mine had changed because of this fellowship and the Twelve Steps of recovery. I became teachable. My misery convinced me that things had to change and I had nothing to lose. I learned how unhealthy my thinking really was and how the Steps are a process, a series of actions performed in a specific order to heal my

unhealthy traits and distorted thinking. I was told that you can't think yourself into the right actions, you have to act your way into the right thinking, and the appropriate actions were working the Steps.

The first thing I did (and continue to do) is what my what my sponsor describes as "working the fellowship." I find this an essential part of my recovery. What I did was to seriously limit the time I spent with people who were not supportive of the changes I was making in my life, especially people who were using. I went out for coffee or to eat with other members before and after meetings. I went on clean and sober camping trips, to program parties, and events. I surrounded myself with people who were also in recovery. I used the phone and talked to someone in the program every day. This served a couple of purposes. It was a lot less tempting to use when I wasn't around drugs and I started forming some adult relationships maybe for the first time in my life. I found unconditional love from members of this fellowship. I became aware of the principle of "One Day at a Time" and put it into practice. Going from the way I liked to use to never using again was a scary thought, so I focused on just not getting stoned for that day. As suggested, I got a sponsor to guide me and started to put this process to work for me. By power of example, these people got me through the detox and its rough spots without my having to use. There was a lot of talk of a "Higher Power" and God which I was not sure of, as I had spent most of my adult life avoiding any thoughts of this type. I was told that a lot of newcomers experience this and that a "Higher Power" was one of my own understanding. I was willing to try anything and, as a start, I accepted the fellowship and the program as a power greater

than myself. After all, it was. These people were able to do something I was unable to do on my own: quit using marijuana. I came to believe that this power could change me and turned my life and will over to it. I got real honest and listed out my character defects. I found that all of my defects lead back to one thing: my ego. I was the cause of most of my own problems. This is when I first realized how me not wanting to have to feel bad, especially about myself, had affected my behavior for most of my life. I saw how egocentric and selfish I really was. I realized that although I had low self-esteem, I was selfish at the same time. I saw that what I once believed to be unselfish acts were really done with unhealthy motivation and were really about me craving approval. I saw that because of my fear of rejection I didn't let anybody know who I really was or what I was feeling, even people I had known for a long time. My feelings had been my Higher Power — they made the decisions and controlled my behavior.

Here is where I realized what this program is really about—the deflation of my ego. The program taught me that humility is the solution and learning to be humble was the answer to my ego problem. I better understood why I was turning my will and my life over to the care of God, as I understood God. I gained an understanding of accepting God's will. I accepted that, in reality, I am powerless over pretty much everything outside of myself, no matter how much my self-will tells me otherwise. I learned that complete surrender of that self-will was essential to the process of becoming truly humble. My sponsor taught me that humility is not thinking less of yourself, but thinking of yourself less. I became aware of how imperative a spiritual awakening was going to be if I was to lose my

compulsion for mind-altering substances. I admitted my defects of character to my sponsor and my Higher Power, and asked it for removal of my shortcomings. I listed out and began to practice new behaviors to replace the old ineffective actions. I said I was sorry to those I had harmed in my past. I learned that making amends means more than just apologizing; it also involves making things right (by repaying financial debts for example) and, most importantly, correcting my behavior in the future.

After admitting Step One, I understood the rest of the Steps as goals to be worked towards. There is no complete perfection. This is a lifelong process for me; I know that I will only get better if I continue to work towards it. I strive to do an honest daily inventory of my behavior and its motivation, admitting when I am wrong and learning by my mistakes. I work on gaining a more spiritual existence. I pray often. I was spiritually bankrupt when I got here and still have a long way to go. I don't understand much of the "God of my understanding" but the most important thing I do understand about it is that it is not me, or my feelings. The good news is that I don't have to be some kind of spiritual giant to remain drug free. All I needed was the willingness to make the start that has kept me clean and sober for some time now. I have a whole cabinet of spiritual tools to get me through the rough spots life gives me without having to medicate. It's been a long time since I've had a serious urge to use, but not that long since a character defect showed up. If I apply the spiritual principles of the program, I receive a daily reprieve from my defects. The better I apply these principles, the more recovery and serenity I have.

The Twelfth Step talks of a spiritual awakening, carrying the message to others, and practicing the principles in all our affairs. For me, I don't know exactly when it happened, but I've begun that awakening. It has been slow and subtle and continues to increase as I work the program and seek spirituality on a daily basis. I see and feel the changes in myself on a conscious level today. Although it is part of the Twelfth Step, I believe spreading the message of recovery begins the first time we attend a meeting, identify as an addict, and share our experience, strength, and hope with others. I am so grateful for what MA has done for me. I am more than happy to give back to it by helping to carry the message of recovery to the addict who still suffers.

One way I give back is by being of service to the program and it can always use the help. I have done this at many levels, all of which are equally important. I have made coffee, led and spoken at meetings, been a secretary, treasurer, and literature person. I have been of service by representing groups at district meetings, maintained meeting information telephone lines, copied literature, and even acted as district chairperson. I also keep what I have by giving it back on an individual basis by making myself available as a sponsor. Sponsorship really keeps me up on my program. I learn as much from the men I sponsor as they learn from me. It is truly rewarding watching others grow and their lives improve through working the Twelve Steps.

I have come to live this program daily, as I used daily. I have found the spiritual principles and tools of the program just naturally became useful in every area of my life. The Steps are my way of living. I didn't plan it that

**My Best Thinking...****Life With Hope**

way, it just kind of happened. It is now pretty much automatic for me to look at my part of whatever I am experiencing and to put my focus there, the only place where I do have the power to change things. I recognize my dishonest rationalizations and reject them as such. I ask my Higher Power for the strength to change the things I can. I strive to do the appropriate footwork to bring about the changes and I accept the fact that not much will change without my taking action. I accept the things I cannot change. I practice humility by letting people know who I am and what I am feeling. I am beginning to take healthy risks. I ask for, and accept, help when I need it. When I live these principles one day at a time, I experience real serenity.

In closing I would like to express my gratitude at being able to share my story with you. I hope you read something you can relate to, either in helping you to decide if you are an addict or to aid in your understanding of the program. I can't really say enough about how much this program has changed the life of this addict. I have evolved from a person whose biggest ambition in life was to be old and retired and sitting in a rocking chair on the front porch of my marijuana plantation rolling one-handed joints, to a person who is striving for humility and personal growth by living spiritual principles and by being willing to be of service to others. Thank you Marijuana Anonymous for the life I live today.