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How Cocaine Anonymous Saved Me From Hell

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"Simple, but not easy; a price had to be paid. It meant destruction of self-centredness." Alcoholics Anonymous, page 14.

Selfishness was always something I had worn proudly, like a brand name purse, not something I actually thought I was. Looking back, my actions tell a different story.

If you had asked me why I was the way that I was, why I cheated, stole, lied and took advantage of people, I would have told you that I had no choice but to behave that way. I had to look out for myself -- no one else was going to.

And if you had asked my 31-year-old self what my problem was -- why I couldn't stop using

cocaine and drinking even though I couldn't take care of my basic needs, I couldn't work, I had no friends, and I couldn't even stay sober in a treatment centre on an island off the coast of B.C. -- I would have told you that it was obvious. Drinking and drugs were my problem. Duh.

But it wasn't until I walked through the doors of Cocaine Anonymous (CA) that I learned what my problem really was.

For those who are scratching their heads wondering what in the hell Cocaine Anonymous is, it's a 12-step recovery program identical in every way to Alcoholics Anonymous except that it is drug-inclusive and not just for alcoholics. So if you're a frantic and hopeless pill-popping, crack-smoking gambler, you are as welcome in our rooms as an alcoholic is.

And thank God for that, as I landed with a thud at the doors of CA having serious experience in all of the above -- and then some. I shudder to think what might have happened if I hadn't heard the message of recovered CA members. In all likelihood, I would still be blaming my problems on drugs and alcohol, trying with all my might to "just not drink" and failing every time.

The Beginning

I can't remember the first time I drank or got high but I remember how I felt when I didn't do either -- I felt desperate. A constant feeling of anxiety, a gnawing dread of impending mediocrity and general gloom followed me around everywhere I went, though of course at eight-years-old I wouldn't have articulated it that way.

When I found drugs and alcohol I remember thinking finally, as my irritability, restlessness and discontent were temporarily relieved. But that temporary relief just wouldn't do -- I always had to have these magical substances that transformed me into a happy, funny, carefree adolescent. Well, at least I thought I was a happy, funny, carefree adolescent. In reality, I was an angry, rude, rebellious alcoholic and drug addict who had landed in juvenile detention by the time she was 14.

But in my mind, I was a vision. And this tendency of my mind to create a digestible fiction out of my rampant failures was to stay with me until I got recovered.

And let me be the thousandth person to say that it does not get better with time.

Fast forward to my late 20s and the internal condition is the same. The only things markedly different were the externals. I lived in what most people would deem a "crackhouse" and yet I had created it myself through years of neglect and abuse. The paint was chipping, the pictures hung sideways and garbage piled up all around me. I had no friends who were not drug dealers and I saw my family a handful of times a year when they visited me in various institutions or came to cry at my doorstep.

Once I began trying to get sober, I was in for a real surprise. To my complete shock, I was unable to.

Once I even relapsed in treatment. I had white-knuckled it for four months and, on the verge of heading home, I went instead to a bar and accosted people until I found drugs.

So I had this gnawing feeling that I was doomed. I couldn't stay sober even in an institution. But if my problem was the drinking and the drugging, then after detox and treatment, I should have been on my merry way. Why then, when separated from both drugs and alcohol for four months seeking treatment, was I not able to stop using? Why did I think about using all the time, no matter how much I applied myself there?

Enter Cocaine Anonymous

And what amounted to nothing short of a wholesale miracle.

In CA I was told that my problem was me and my selfishness. I was told that the drinking and drugging were but symptoms of a core spiritual malady that could only be treated by taking the 12 steps of Cocaine Anonymous and finding a power greater than myself. I was told to rigorously work with others. I was told to pray. I was told to meditate. I was told to take constant inventory of my actions and examine how, on a daily basis, I was impacting the lives of those around me.

This solution is extreme -- as it should be. Cocaine Anonymous is not one of many options someone has. It is for those of us who have no other options; for whom a life of using drugs and/or alcohol means a life of constant agony or death.

The good news is this: for those who suffer from this chronic pain, this chronic spiritual malaise, this oppressive condition that is seemingly relieved only by the taste of whiskey on the lips or by the effect of drugs on the brain -- for these people, there is a solution. And the life I lead now is incredible from the moment I wake up until the moment I go to bed.

Every moment of the day, including those moments of pain, are beautiful because they are real. There are times when I am walking my dog and watching him play in front of me, so perfectly alive and in the moment, that I feel like dropping to my knees from gratitude because I am so thankful to be relieved of the pain that I was in. There are times when I look into my daughter's eyes or laugh at my husband's terrible jokes that I am stunned by the sudden physical sensation of love and gratitude in my heart and in my soul. The recovered dope is better than the best dope around, as my friends in CA say.

If you are reading this and thinking this is me, then please reach out. Cocaine Anonymous has a number of meetings in the GTA and in Southern Ontario more generally: www.ca-on.org.

In fact, the weekend of October 23-25, the Southern Ontario Region of Cocaine Anonymous (SOCA) is having its annual convention at the Radisson Hotel Admiral in the Harbourfront area of Toronto. Hundreds of addicts and alcoholics at various stages of their recovery will attend to hear speakers, go to workshops and celebrate the pure joy of being alive.

I hope to see you there and walk hand in hand with you in the sunlight of the spirit.