Hope Sick

June 10, 2016

Editor's note: This article was written by "JG," a student at William J. Ostiguy High School, a recovery high school in Boston, Massachusetts. JG shares his experiences with a substance use disorder and other challenges. We are grateful that he has chosen to share his story with readers of The BASIS. In some places, we have supplemented JG's article with some details from the scientific literature; please see the Footnotes.

Please be aware that this article includes descriptions of substance use and its consequences.

Just another chapter in the pathetic story of a heroin addict.[1] The sun creeps through my window and the misery begins. Yet again, I wake up in my bed that has the appealing appearance of a heavenly suite, but the feeling of discomfort and unease. I know I'm only uncomfortable because of the poison exiting my body like a thorn from my foot. As I arise from my waking dreams the feeling of pain creeps up on me like a bath slowly filling with water until it overflows. I can wait this out, I promise myself. *I will only smoke weed today, maybe a few benzos to ease the discomfort. I'm never shooting dope again*, I tell myself as the dope sickness expresses to me that even the hair on my head hurts. I lie in bed for another hour or two, staring at the ceiling entertaining the thought of pulling the plug. *No, not today*, but it's only a matter of time that the impending doom will wash over me.

Finally, I roll out of my bed and slowly make my way to the bathroom. I look at the mirror in disgust as I see a picture I wouldn't wish my worst enemy to look like: cheekbones protruding, hollowed eyes, scabs everywhere. The horrible image looks like a zombie from *The Walking Dead*! I can't even look myself in the eyes. *I can't live like this anymore, I can be a better person; I have to change.* My morning routine usually consists of this routine; as I tell myself lie after lie so that I can believe it. When I believe a lie, it's so much easier to lie to someone else, building a snowball of lying. Nausea-pain-aching, all these feelings are present. I need to make it stop. A cold shower could help. I turn on the ice cold water and start touching the water with my hands to check the temperature.

Finally I can feel something. The ice cold water sends chills down my spine; finally I can feel something that isn't pain. I timidly crawl into the shower and stand there as long as I can take it, allowing my body to go through hot cold warm

hot cold. I exit the shower feeling somewhat closer to normal. Oh, wait, I've forgotten what normal feels like. The sense of impending doom creeps back into my mind. I go to my room and examine my clothes. *If I wear these comfy sweat pants, this tank top, and my favorite underwear, I won't get high today.* I might look just decent enough to pass as an average citizen. Another white lie. As I make my way downstairs, every step hurts. *I need to do something about this. I have to wait it out. I must not use again else the process will repeat itself tomorrow*. The thought of picking up races through my head.

I turn to my mother and with much concern in her voice she remarks, "Jimmy, are you ok? You look sick."

I muster up the strength to reply and mumble, "I'll be alright Mom, I'm just feeling a little sick today. I promise I won't go out tonight."

Looking her dead in the eyes telling her this, I thought it was true, so it was so much easier to tell her this with honesty if I honestly believed it. (At this point my mother knew I was injecting heroin, it was just a matter of time before she sectioned me, just another reason to clean up right?) I try to force down some food as my stomach screams rejections. I manage 2 bites before I realize if I eat anymore I will throw up. I can't throw-up in front of my Mom, which would blow my cover. *Something needs to be done about this feeling*.

"Mom?" I beg meekly, "Can I have $10 to go get some food up at the store down the street?"

"Absolutely not." She replies sternly and briskly walks up stairs. *Well, I guess I can't get a suboxone today*. Looks like I'm waiting it out.[2] I slowly lie down on the sofa and begin a movie marathon. Minutes seem like hours, and hours seem like days. My legs tremble like I had the flu. Hot, cold, hot, cold. I continue putting on blankets and taking them off as my body goes from ice to fire in the matter of seconds. If only I had SOMETHING in my house I could sell, then I'd be able to stop the sickness. My shoes? Gone. My phone? Gone. Bowls, Bongs? Gone. Nothing left to my name, and just a dirty needle in my room and a cotton shot.[3]

My mind is instantly racing, a cotton shot?! *I can reduce the madness; I do not want to kill myself for some time*. My mom is out shopping, and I race upstairs into my room. I scramble to find where I put my rig last night. After a minute of searching, I find it with my spoon and cotton in a notebook in my drawer. Like a

puppet, I load the rig and use. I look down and see the needle in my arm.

A sense of regret and remorse washes over me. *What did I just do? I was supposed to stay clean! How did this happen?* I ask myself as my anger rises and rises. My actions were no longer mine, as if I was a puppet and the devil was commanding the strings. I had no intention to try and get high but there I was, doing the grimiest of things to get the smallest buzz. Millions of thoughts are racing through my head as I try to sense what had made me try to get high. This didn't make sense to me. I had made a solid decision to stay sober that day, and it didn't have any effect on what I did. At this moment, I decide that I'm hopeless, and I will be forever living in misery. *I might as well try and get some money to get a bag*. I walk downstairs and plop back on the couch for my movie marathon. Searching through Facebook and texting yuppies, I am unable to find someone to take money or drugs from. I ask my dealer to front me a bag, and he obviously doesn't. Today seems like a failure, and I doubt I will get high. I look at the clock, and it's 7 pm already. As I'm trying to devise a new plan to get money, my buddy calls me up and says he can get us a bag, and I would have to play some kid for his money. The kid just happened to be one of my best friends. I just didn't care at this point, though. I get my shoes on and force myself out of my house, taking my rig and spoon with me. As I begin to walk the mile walk, I start to feel a little better already. I don't know if it was the fact that I was going to be able to get high or the fact that some blood was pumping through my veins. As I walk I realize how beautiful a summer evening it is. The sun is setting and the rays are gleaming through the trees like jewels in the sun. I just want to lie down and rest, but the unexplainable drive to get high keeps me going.

I arrive at his house and my two friends are sitting at the table in the back. They don't look dope sick, but they are trying to buy. I wish they knew what they were getting into, but I wasn't going to tell them because I needed my fix. They hand me the money to go buy them a bag. I go with another friend to buy a bag, then return to my friend's house. My friend is waiting at the end of the street frantically calling me. I run over to him, and he takes out a fake bag. We break off a tiny bit of real dope, and mix it in with the cut. With the real bag in my sock and the fake one in my hand, we make our way over to the buyers. After handing them the fake bag, we tell them they have to leave. They reluctantly leave because they wanted to get high with us. Finally we can get high. We make our way into the basement, and I'm starting to feel less sick. Finally I am able to use in safety, and I do, feeling so indescribably satisfied that I'm no longer dope sick. Little did I

know this was going to be my last day getting high.

I wake up again and I can feel the dope sick creeping up on me. After my trials of trying to get clean over and over, I give up on trying to stay sober. I'm hopeless. Just another day, I tell myself; I'll manage to get high today. I have a doctor's appointment, however; I have to go to that before I make my moves for today. My mother's waiting for me downstairs, and we head out to the doctors. I'm thinking to myself that I will just get this over with and then go home and manage a way to get rid of the sickness. We walk into the doctor's office. The appointment I have is about my stomach problems, which I knew were because I was dope sick all the time. But the doctor didn't know, so I just kept going along with the lie that there was something abnormal about my digestive system. Midway through our conversation, my doctor asks me,

"Has your stomach been bothering you lately? You seem to have lost a lot of weight since we last met."

I reply, "No, not really, I think I have been getting much better actually." My mother butts in and retorts, "I think my son has been using heroin actually, and this is why he has been having stomach issues." My heart stops. I feel a pit of guilt in my stomach and anger coursing through my veins. *How could she say that! I can't believe this is happening right now!* However, I sit there very calmly and say that I don't think this is true. The doctor asks my mother to leave, and now the doctor and I are alone in the room. The doctor looks at me and asks if I have been using. 99% of me wanted to deny, but the littlest spark of hope came from within, and I truly think that this was God talking, and myself watching in horror as I quietly reply, "Yeah, I have, but I've only done it a couple times." I lied, of course, but at least I admitted that I was using. After a series of questions, the doctor asked me if I wanted to go into detox.

This started a chain of events I never could have imagined.[4] I went to detox, where I learned that it was possible to get sober. After that I went into a youth recovery house, and it has truly taught me how to be a normal person in society. Recovery treatment helped me in ways that are unimaginable. I went from a depressed, hollowed shell looking for an easy way out. I was able to climb out of my mindset of impending doom by having faith in my life. Taking it day by day, I was able to slowly lift the gorilla off my shoulders and keep him walking beside me because it's always there to jump right back on if I pick up. I now have real

friends in my life, and no urge to take their money. I've learned to be grateful for what I have and not crave what I want. I am content with my life as it is today even though I go to a school with twenty people in it and live in a youth recovery home. I can look my parents in the eyes now, and tell them I love them. These are all the results of me putting down my need to live my own life and let God and others run it for me.[5] The results have been unimaginable. On the outside, I am almost unrecognizable from what I used to be. On the inside, I would look like a complete stranger. All those feelings of self consciousness; the fears, doubts, and insecurities I have about myself, have receded to a point where I can be happy in my own skin. I can now allow God inside me to remove me of my character defects and shed his light upon others. I have not yet achieved complete serenity, but I can have moments of peace and quiet while I sit with myself. The obsession to use has been lifted off my shoulders like a gorilla taken off my back. When I want to stay clean, I can do it today as long as I follow the rules provided to me by AA and the youth recovery home. These programs have saved thousands of lives, including mine, and hopefully thousands to come.

Do you, or does someone you love, struggle with substance use? Help is available. Consult the SAMHSA Treatment Locator or call 1-800-662-HELP (4357).

[1] Many of the terms we use when discussing addiction are stigmatizing and promote discriminatory behavior and policies. Consider the labels "dirty," "junkie," "stoner," and "crackhead." At this stage of his life, JG labelled himself "a heroin addict." This label might have kept JG from recognizing that he deserved acceptance, support, and care. We should recognize that addiction is something that people do, not who they are, and use the term "a person with a substance use disorder" instead of "an addict." Readers interested in the push for a less stigmatizing "addiction-ary" can learn more here.

[2] Suboxone is a medication that contains buprenorphine and naloxone and is used to manage opioid dependence. It helps prevent the opioid withdrawal symptoms JG was feeling, including muscle aches, nausea, anxiety, and overwhelming pain, while simultaneously limiting the intoxicating effects of opioids. It sounds like JG was trying to use this medication to reduce his withdrawal symptoms, not to get high. This is consistent with research on this topic, reviewed here. When people like JG are provided supportive, professional

treatment that includes medication for withdrawal as well as behavioral treatments (e.g., cognitive behavioral therapy, 12-step attendance), they have real hope for recovery.

[3] Injecting the remnants of a drug (most commonly heroin) that was filtered through a cotton ball.

[4] JG's path to recovery began with a visit to his doctor for a seemingly unrelated condition—his stomach problems. Even if they do not specialize in addiction, physicians and other health professionals are often positioned to detect substance use disorders and encourage patients to seek further assessment and treatment. For example, new research shows that many teens hospitalized for nervous system disorders, nutritional disorders, and other illnesses have co-occurring diagnoses of mental health conditions and substance use disorders. Physicians who take the time to screen for substance use disorders among their teenage patients can sometimes provide a lifeline to recovery, as in JG's case. The CRAFFT is a behavioral health screening tool for use with young people under the age of 21 and is recommended by the American Academy of Pediatrics' Committee on Substance Abuse for use with adolescents. More information about it is provided here.

[5] "Let go and let God" is a part of the spiritual message of Alcoholics Anonymous. Many people find solace in the spirituality of AA and Narcotics Anonymous (NA). A recent large-scale randomized controlled trial found that AA promotes recovery, in part, by enhancing individuals' spiritual practices and beliefs. However, there are alternatives for people who want to draw upon the social support and recovery strategies of 12-step programs but in a secular context. A qualitative study of one such alternative is described here.