

MM's Story

August 8, 2016

Editor's note: This article was written by "MM," a student at [William J. Ostiguy High School](#), a [recovery high school](#) in Boston, Massachusetts. MM 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 MM's article with further details from the scientific literature; please see the Footnotes. **Please be aware that this article includes descriptions of substance use and its consequences.**

Woke up feeling like...

Fell asleep looking like....

Went to school acting like....

Came home at 3 o'clock talking like...

I got the call at around lunchtime

I was told my uncle was put on the lifeline

Beep beep beep beep

His heart beat bumping my surround system in the living room

Woke up feeling like...I was a very calm, quiet kid. I was shy but always made new friends; I was disruptive but always on task; I was a class clown but serious at times; I would go from a bad egg to a good noodle. I grew up without a father, and my mother was too young to take care of me; she wasn't mentally ready to be a mother, my father wasn't ready to be a dad... So why get a 16-year-old pregnant, "Dad"? I will never know. My grandmother took me from the hospital into her home in South Boston, and right then and there my amazing journey started. I was the only kid in a Catholic school who wasn't Italian in the North End. For four years, I was surrounded by this environment with kids who I never felt I fit in with, and the kids bullied me.

Fell asleep looking like...When I entered 7th grade, I was bullied once again up to the point where a kid beat me up, and I blacked out. I had a concussion, and I was admitted to the hospital. When I got home, I went to my room and attempted to kill myself. My mother walked in on me, and immediately, I became suicidal. I said to my mother, "I don't want to live anymore, this world will be better off without me." The next day, I spoke with an at-risk youth help group, and the counselors sent me to a facility for youth at risk for suicidal depression. There I would sit in a small conference room with people who had the same problem as me, but did more to deal with it. Some did drugs, some ran away, and some of them just locked themselves in their rooms and cried themselves to sleep.[\[1\]](#) After I did my time there, I went back home, and I was put into therapy—I never liked therapy, I would literally do two sessions and skip the others. After I stopped going to therapy, my anxiety and depression got worse, to the point where I just didn't care about school anymore. I wouldn't do homework, I would constantly get into trouble, and there have been times where I would skip out and hangout with some delinquents.

I went to a middle school in my town for my 8th grade year, and I really enjoyed that school, with kids that I grew up with. I was one of the most well-behaved kids in that school. I played for the basketball team, and I brought my team to the playoffs. Although we were eliminated from the playoffs, it gave me the idea to be athletic in high school.

Went to school looking like...I entered my freshman year at a large city high school, and I struggled in this new environment. I felt left out in a school with 1000-plus kids: kids who came from different towns, families, and different ways of life. I was well-liked, but it didn't last long. When baseball season kicked off in April, I thought I would be the only freshmen to make the varsity team, but I was wrong, I ended up making the junior varsity team, and in the beginning of the season I couldn't even hit the ball.

I was at the point where I was going to quit the team. One day after school, one of my teammates gave me some advice on how to hit the ball more often, so he pulled out a bag of weed and said, "Smoke two blunts of this, and you will hit it out of the park." We had hitting practice that same day, and there I was, up to bat just totally baked, coach had no idea. So I start hitting the ball and it was time to take my skills to the test; it was the best season of baseball I've had in a long time, and it was all because of a little green bag.

That summer, my number one activity was getting high. Eventually, I didn't have money left, so I stole money from my grandma's purse. When she finally caught me, I said to myself there's gotta be a better way to get messed up, so I started to take alcohol from my grandma's liquor box. At first it was nasty, but I eventually got used to it, so I turned it into an everyday thing. My entire sophomore year was dedicated to smoking and drinking.

In February of my sophomore year, I ended up getting a common surgery for high school baseball pitchers: [Tommy John surgery](#) on my left elbow. I was out of work, out of school, and out for the season. I couldn't get high anymore because I was stuck at home recovering from my surgery. After I got the surgery, my doctor prescribed Oxycodone and instructed me to take one every four hours.[2] I had heard about Oxy before, but I thought the pills would be bigger than what I saw. They were these small white pills that didn't do anything for the pain. So I decided the only way I can get high is if I take more than I am prescribed., So I did that, and in about two days I had gotten through about 15-20 of these pills, and I was off to the races.[3]

That summer, I just couldn't stop drinking, and whenever I tried to go cold turkey, I would get the shakes, and face the worst alcohol withdrawals ever, and I would hear my friends Jack, Jose, and Goosie *calling my name*, I remember going to New York for my great grandmother's 69th birthday, and I got wicked messed up to the point where I drunk dialed my ex-girlfriend and told her I loved her. She knew I was drunk, and she decided to hang up on me. Next, my uncle, Mirian, called me from the Dominican Republic. He knew I continued to struggle with depression and thoughts of suicide. I remember he told me, "If you want to make it big keep looking up; if you want no success then keep looking down, but always know that I will be watching you."

Entering my junior year, my dealer wasn't in school. I got mad and decided to take matters into my own hands and smoke on my own. I was really drunk, and I decided I needed to get high, so I get with one of my best friends in school and we go outside to smoke. All of a sudden I hear, "HEY!" Then I saw one of school police administrators approach my friend and me. In that moment, I was scared about what was going to happen, so I just confessed to them that I was a drug addict,[4] and I needed help and was willing to do it. So after I get home from school, I told my grandmother the truth. I was a drug addict and was willing to get help; I told her it was me that took all the liquor from the box, that stole her

credit card money, and that I was willing to get help because I need to stop this habit of getting high for no good reason other than it was fun.

So that weekend, I checked into a detox facility. During my first week, I sat in groups and listened to other patients' stories, and I was surrounded by kids who did worse drugs than I did, and I felt that I didn't fit in with these kids. So I said to myself, "Forget this, I'm going to do my two weeks and smoke weed again like I used to." But then in a group I saw a movie about a guy named [Chris Herren from Fall River, Mass](#) (who was also a drug addict) and his story was similar to mine, but the only difference is he also did more than I did, but he started off smoking weed and drinking, just like I did. He was an athlete just like me, and he also had times where he would get high before during and after

Right after I saw his story it changed my mind a lot about using. So when I was approaching my discharge date and my grandmother called to tell me I had to do further treatment, I hung up, broke down in tears, and punched a hole in the wall. I didn't want to be away from my family for three months.

After I had that crazy conversation with my grandmother, my school called. They told me they couldn't accept me back because they didn't want me to relapse. They sent a referral to an alternative school near my town for young people in recovery from alcohol or drug addiction. At first, I was upset when I heard that news, but I spoke with the doctor and he gave me information about this recovery high school. But at the same time, my family still wanted me to do further treatment because my clinician suggested it. I got really upset, and I flipped out on him. I almost flipped a table at him, and I said so many disrespectful things to him that I did not regret until I realized maybe this is good for me—because you cannot recover an addicted brain in just one month. So I decided to go to further treatment. But both three-month programs were full, and the one halfway house in my town was too close to home, where I had easy access to hit up my boy and get high.

My family, and the medical director at the detox I attended, decided to send me home after thirty-five days, just in time for Thanksgiving, just in time for Christmas, and just in time for my brother's birthday. When I was coming up on one month and a half sober, I started at Ostiguy High School, a recovery high school, and the minute I stepped in, I felt the same way I did in detox, like I don't belong here. Everyone has done more drugs than I have. I'm going back to my old

high school. But one of my old roommates walked up to me and said, "Welcome.", And then another kid walked up to me and said, "Welcome." And then I went to a group, and they all said, "Welcome." After those Welcomes, I felt welcome, like I belong here.

I got the call at around lunchtime:

I'd had the best day at school. I met a girl in the program (we call it 13 stepping). The next day I got three months sober. I go outside to smoke a cigarette at lunch, and I get a phone call from my grandmother saying, "When you get out of school I need you to come home. I got BAD news." And she hung up before I could say anything. I get home at 3 p.m., and I see her packing her bag, so I say, "What's going on?" She said, "It's Mirian...he collapsed and went into cardiac arrest and was brought to the hospital. He's on life support, and I have to go say my goodbyes." I go into my room and I just start balling my eyes out because I just heard the worst news ever.

I was told my uncle was put on the lifeline:

I never felt so stressed out that I wanted to get high so bad[\[5\]](#). That was my plan for the night, after my grandmother left, I saw a bottle of liquor on the kitchen counter. I was going to take a sip when I saw a rat run across my kitchen floor. I got so scared in the moment that I threw the bottle at the rat. I missed, but I didn't ruin everything I worked for during the past three months of my sobriety. When my grandmother was gone, I called the girl I had met at school to come over to my house to comfort me. She came over, and we cuddled on my grandmother's couch watching Netflix, and we had fun. When my grandmother came back from seeing my uncle, she tells me that he doesn't look good, and the doctors are saying he's got hours of life left, and I started to hit my knees and pray.

Beep beep beep beep

His heart beat bumping my surround system in the living room:

On Monday, December 8, 2014 at around 3 p.m., I got the news that my uncle passed away from diabetes and hepatitis. It was hardest thing I ever had to go through, and after all the stress and anxiety that my addiction put me through, I decided to turn my life around and change, so I stayed sober one day at a time.

But that was not easy knowing that I couldn't see him to say goodbye. I bought a necklace with his name and picture on it, and every morning I get on my knees and pray to God to keep him safe. I'd sometimes cry myself to sleep at night, and when that didn't work, I would smoke a cigarette at 2 a.m and always wonder what were his last words to me. One night, I had a flashback of that night we spoke on the phone, and I actually heard his last words to me., He said I need to look sky high, and I will make it big. Those words touched me because no one had faith in me like he did, and I loved him for that.

Ever since my nightmare ended, I now attend meetings, I currently have a sponsor, and I am a senior at Ostiguy High School. I now have over a year sober, and it's all because of the hard work I put myself through; it was an amazing adventure. Although there were ups and downs in the process, I learned to overcome my fears of walking outside to the corner store, go shopping, or even a walk on the beach. Like Chris Herren said, "At the end of the day, all you have is 24 hours."

For more information:

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 \(4357\)](#).

What do you think? Please use the comment link below to provide feedback on this article.

[1] It sounds like MM's childhood included several risk factors for addiction, including a difficult family situation, experiences of loneliness and bullying, and, later, anxiety and depression. Male gender also is a risk factor. These risk factors [are reviewed here](#). Comprehensive mental health treatment at this early age might have decreased MM's risk for future drug use by helping him find better ways to cope with difficult life situations. However, [researchers have found](#) that peer-group interventions like the one MM experienced can *increase*, rather than decrease, adolescent problem behavior and negative life outcomes during adulthood. One explanation for this iatrogenic effect is that peer intervention groups provide an opportunity for "deviancy training," when adolescents are socially rewarded for talking about their delinquent behavior (e.g., doing drugs, running away). MM might have been better served by individual, rather than group therapy.

[2] It sounds like MM's doctor missed an opportunity to screen for and detect MM's habitual drinking and drug use. 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. Physicians who take the time to screen for substance use disorders among their teenage patients can sometimes provide a link to treatment and recovery. The CRAFFT is a behavioral health screening tool for use with young people and is recommended by the American Academy of Pediatrics' Committee on Substance Abuse for use with adolescents. More information about it is [provided here](#).

[3] MM, a student athlete, took more of this Oxycodone than prescribed. This a form of prescription misuse, and his story is all too common. In September 2015, The [BASIS reviewed a study](#) that found that boys who played organized sports were nearly 3 times more likely than those who did not play organized sports to misuse a prescription painkiller.

[4] 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, MM labelled himself "a drug addict." This label might have kept MM 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](#).

[5] People with addictive disorders often report that stressful experiences can trigger their substance use. MM experienced this after the death of his uncle. Turning to alcohol or other drugs to cope with stressful situations is especially common among people who have experienced traumatic experiences in the past and have developed poor coping skills; indeed, having poor coping skills is a risk factor for relapse. This research is [reviewed here](#). During treatment, it is important to anticipate what kinds of situations might be dangerous triggers and how to use healthy strategies for coping with distress and boredom. See this [research-based guide from the National Institute on Drug Abuse](#) for more information.