

DISABILTIY AND ADDICTION MY PERSONAL STORY

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My personal journey with pain, disability and addiction.

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Recently I was mocked and belittled for being disabled. The person doing the mocking was a step family member who failed out of High School, stayed on unemployment most of the time or didn't work and had moved from wife to wife hoping to strike it rich. So you might say, consider the source. Well I did, but I was still perturbed by his accusation, no matter how unfounded it might be. In order to understand my disabilities you must first understand how I got them. I joined the Army six months before graduating High School as part of their early entry program. A short 10 days after graduating from High School I was off to basic training and obtained skills as a phlebotomist, emergency medical technician or field medic and my primary job as a laboratory technician. I served with a flawless record until I got to my first duty station. The sergeant who was in charge of me and his superiors picked on me from the start and continued until they had driven me completely mad. I always had a fresh haircut, crisp uniform and boots so shiny you could see your reflection in them. I kept to myself and did not associate with the sergeant or the lieutenant in charge of the laboratory since I preferred to be alone. This led to me being under a microscope all the time and a rumor had spread that the Lieutenant did not like me and wanted me gone. I started to develop depression and started to have panic attacks and anxiety which led to a trip to the psych ward which lasted over a week. I was diagnose with a catch all diagnosis of having a personality disorder and was separated from the Army against my will. I stood in front of the company commander and with all the military discipline I could muster pleaded with him to let me stay in, since I was responding to treatment and felt much better. He told me his decision was final, at which time a tear fell down my cheek and I saluted him and performed a right face to leave his office. That moment was one of the most horrid, most hurtful moments of my entire life. It hurt more than the death of some of my relatives, as crazy as it might sound. Most people would have been over joyed to get out of a situation they really had no clue was about in the first place, but I wanted to stay in and retire after 20 years at 38 years of age. Now my dreams and hopes were smashed and gone, but I did receive an honorable discharge and all the benefits that come with it. Upon leaving the Army I had no place to live so I went to live with my best friend and his Mother. One night my friend and I had an altercation which ended up with me falling hitting my lower back on a metal bed rail. I never imagined that fall and slight damage to my vertebrae would have such a profound impact upon the rest of my life. Consequently spinal stenosis in its later stages causes other problems such as neurogenic claudication and numbness in the legs, both of which I have. The spinal stenosis has also invaded my upper spine and now my arms are weak and go numb quite a bit. I cannot distinguish the numbness of spinal stenosis from the numbness of carpal tunnel but it's there none the less. I have other debilitating issues such as depression, anxiety and horrid panic attacks, but I want to focus on the physical and not the mental at this time. I wake up in pain and thanks or perhaps unfortunately for me the wonder of opiates helps me through my day. But opiates are a double edged sword. Back in 1998 when I first started having issues with my back I started taking a COX 2 inhibitor that has now been taken off the market. It worked rather well on my back pain but good things are sometimes too good to be true as was the particular drug I was taking. I moved to West Virginia a couple of years later to spend time with my great-grandfather and grandfather, both dying. It was no time before I had to seek out a doctor to help with my pain that was hindering my work, and my workout routine at the gym. The doctor immediately put me on an opiate pain medication. I remember that first pill, it put me in a kind of warm blanket, all happy and content and most importantly pain free. That lasted for a year or so before once again my stenosis was causing such pain that my usual dosage was no longer controlling my pain. I phoned my physician who said to double my dose which I immediately thought was strange because that would exceed the maximum dosage allowed. The following night I took two tablets instead of my usual one and once again I was on cloud 9, wrapped in a blanket of warmth comfort and all of life's worries seemed to go away. It did not take long before I was going home and taking two of these pills in the morning just to feel good while I sat at my computer pecking away, talking and doing things that I would have little to no memory of the following day. One day while at a

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friend's house there were several people all gathered in a room and apparently they were snorting some kind of crushed up pill. I had never heard of such a thing and I wanted no part in it. I completely ignored them and their cheerfulness and had my own good time sitting watching TV. This happened a couple of times until one particular night the temptations of peer pressure and my own pain overcame my sensibility. I snorted the pill and soon thereafter felt the old blanket again and my worries melted away along with my senses. It was not long before I was buying these pills but swallowing them because in my bent and distorted mind it was not abuse if I was taking a prescription pill by mouth as prescribed, right? The pill happened to be oxycodone extended release, or the famed Oxy. My friends who had tempted me into trying them and cheerfully dispensed them now wanted payment for them. The first time I was told the price I actually laughed because I thought it was a joke. The little yellow pill was 40 dollars. I said to the friend, now dealer that I could fill up my car with gas and buy some groceries with 40 dollars. Having said that you can pretty much date when this occurred since gas was just a little over a dollar a gallon at that time. The following day I was in pain and in addition to the pain I had other symptoms, perhaps I was coming down with a cold. I went to my friend/dealers house and he said you look terrible. I told him that I had the flu and he said no your dope sick and brought out the magical little pills. Before even thinking about it consciously, I pulled out my wallet and bought 4 of them. I continued this cycle for a few months, slowly increasing my dosage until on one particular night a girl was there to get her fix just as I was. She had a needle and a spoon and a bit of cotton with her. I asked what she was doing and she said she was getting ready to bang it. I watched in amazement as she methodically smashed the pill, after removing the coating and placed it in a spoon. She then added a bit of water from a dirty cup and heated the mixture from underneath with her lighter. It started to heat and little bits of pill and water started to shoot up from the base of the mixture. She then dropped a piece of what I thought was cotton onto the mixture, but it was actually a piece of cigarette filter. After drawing up the mixture into her syringe she wrapped a belt around her arm and plunged the needle into her arm and I could see a flash of blood fill the end of the syringe at which time she pushed the plunger all the way down sending the concoction into her vein. It was about 2 seconds later that her eyes rolled up in her head and she lay back on the couch, the needle still in her arm dangling about. I said my God is she dead, in which she replied, no far from it, I feel wonderful. The sight of this first encounter with shooting up not only repulsed me but frightened me because I actually wanted to try it. Well it was not long before I got my chance. Several weeks later I hit a dry spell where I could not find any of my little pills that made life bearable and were absolutely necessary in order for me to feel normal at this time. It took me 4 days to finally find what I was looking for; I took two but took the other four home with me for an experiment. I had access to diabetic needles and was a trained phlebotomist so injecting was something I could do practically blind. I had gathered all the necessary supplies and went into my bathroom so that no one would know what I was doing. I followed the same procedure that the girl did with some exceptions, I used sterile water and cleaned my arm with an alcohol swab in addition to using a new clean needle. I placed the needle into my vein and pushed the plunger home. Almost instantly I felt the drug in my body from about the level of my chest and felt it rise to my brain where it felt like an explosion of ecstasy better than any orgasm or feeling that is humanly describable. I had been standing while doing this in front of the mirror and the wave of euphoria was so strong my knees buckled and I almost collapsed. After that first time I knew how I would take these pills from now on, banging or shooting them was definitely the best way. I also knew that I had taken a step beyond the norm and was now officially a drug addict. It did not bother me much when I was high but as soon as the high was wearing off, all the troubles of the world started to come back and so did the realization that I was an addict which did not sit well with me since I am a character of high morals standards. To counter these feelings and to numb myself of not only the physical but emotional pain I was going through I would shoot up thousands of times within the next 4 years. I had started using the huge veins at the bend of my arm but it did not take long before those veins were so hard and difficult to find that I switched to using the veins on my hands. I did not care at this point that everyone could see the track marks on my hands, I was only conscious of it when the high was wearing off, but I did not allow myself much time in the real world before shooting up again. It did not take long at all before I had made so many errors at work and so many trips outside to my dealer's car that my coworkers started to take notice. I was put suspended from work for three days for leaving my work area too long without telling anyone. I was having a severe panic attack and needed to leave the laboratory immediately. I

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had actually told one of the phlebotomist in the front of the lab that I would be back shortly instead of telling one of my fellow lab techs, so technically they were right I had failed to tell anyone. When I went to work the following day I was suspended for leaving the work area without telling anyone. I tried to explain my panic attack and the fact that I had kept my medication in my car since my fellow coworkers would often ask if I had any nerve pills, which I didn't since they were not on my person. Following my three day suspension I returned to work and within the next few weeks I had made several critical errors when reporting patient's results. My job as a lab technician was to analyze blood or other body fluids and report those results to the doctor so he could hopefully make a correct diagnosis. So my job was a very serious one, but under the influence of a heavy narcotic I stopped thinking about the patient and the quality of my work suffered greatly. Before, if I would make an error it was almost always a simple clerical error, like typing 24.5 instead of 245. Those errors I caught immediately and changed immediately in the computer and alerted the doctor that the corrected result was the right result. This sort of error is a class B error, meaning it is serious but I had corrected it before it had any chance to hurt the patient. The errors I made while under the influence of Oxy were class A and meant that I had reported a result that potentially could have resulted in someone's death. For instance I reported a potassium level of 2.3 on a patient but failed to rerun the specimen as protocol required and the correct result was actually 4.1 which was normal. That patient ended up receiving potassium, not enough that it stopped their heart thank God, but it did not matter my negligence almost killed someone. I was called into the lab director's office and told to go home that I would be contacted within three days to determine if I still had a job. I pretty much knew at that point that my fate was sealed. But once again as soon as I started to feel guilty and sad and all of the reality of what I had done came crashing in on me, I shot up more oxy and all the troubles faded away. Needless to say I was fired and although I tried to get another job I was unable to work because of the ups and downs of opiate addiction. I had just been hired at a new hospital and was out of cash and out of pills. I went to work three days sick and hurting, nauseated and put on a façade of normality the best I could but ultimately I had to tell the lab manager that I had to resign due to medical reasons. I went on to live on unemployment for the next 8 months, which were the worst 8 months of my life. During that period I had gotten so hooked, so down that I would get a pill and I did not care where I was I would immediately get out my spoon and needle, now old and dull and use water from any source, whether it be an old soda bottle or a dirty puddle on the ground. I shot up in bathrooms in fast food joints and gas stations and even in front of the courthouse before going in front of the judge for a warrant that had been issued for unpaid tickets. I had lost my job, my license, my new car; all of my possessions were at the pawn show. I had nothing except my home and my deed to a camp that I owned a third of. I called my uncle in desperation to sell my share of the camp but luckily he did not have the 1500.00 I was asking for and a moment of clarity came over me and I dropped the idea. I am fortunate that I still own my share of that camp, for I have great memories of fishing with my great-grandfather and grandfather there. Finally after much soul seeking and having hit rock bottom and scraping the bottom with bloody nails I went to a methadone clinic. One particular day my back pain was so bad that I had difficulty walking from the bed to the bathroom and was lying on the floor with my knees pulled up to my chest trying to ease my back pain. I had been up for two days and had taken five hot baths the night before trying to ease my pain. My Mother, who had always supported me and who was one of my biggest enablers suggested the methadone clinic and I still feel it was my best option. I began treatment at the clinic and stayed until my Mother's home burned down and she was no longer able to pay for my treatment. I then entered my first rehab and stayed 28 days and went home clean for the first time in years. Addiction wise, I was renewed, as if reborn but mentally I was still a wreck, for the past 4 years of life was catching up to me mentally, not to mention the now worse back pain. It was then that I applied for my disability and finally was granted disability after having to obtain a lawyer. I now receive disability and attend a methadone clinic for different reasons than I did when I first started. The first couple of years I attended the methadone clinic I attended group classes on addiction and recovery and attended 12 step groups weekly. I journeyed about my issues and past and after a few years I had what others might think of as a mini midlife crisis. I reexamined who I was, my place in society and my belief in God. It took a while but I finally figured out who I was who my God was and accepted my place in society. Now I never think of getting high or trying to get that euphoria that I got shooting Oxy. I have gotten prescriptions for pain medicine after medical procedures and threw them away, something that I would never have done

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years before. I can now listen to others talk about their addiction and even listen to details of the shooting up without the slightest thought about wanting to do it myself or of those old feelings that were associated with it. Now I have changed and change is good but difficult at first. Now I take methadone for pain relief only and it works very well for my pain. A single morning dose of methadone keeps my pain at a bearable limit for at least 12 hours out of the day, which is most of the time I am awake, so it is a God send to me. Unfortunately it does not fix my stenosis, nor does it enable me to walk more than 100 or 200 feet without my legs hurting from the neurogenic claudication, nor does it take away the permanent numbness in my right leg. But, it does what it's supposed to do and I can ask no more of it. Methadone is the safest drug used for addicts of opiate pain medication since it has been researched for over 40 years and has no effects on any of the major organs of the body as other drugs do except the majority of people experience constipation which can easily be remedied. Methadone restores the brain's natural chemical balance and enables a person to perceive emotions and be cognitively normal, unlike other opiates. Even Tylenol, Advil and aspirin are more dangerous to the body than methadone. Tylenol can destroy the liver over time; aspirin and Advil can cause bleeding ulcers in the stomach and intestine and can cause death in children. Advil, like Vioxx and Celebrex or other Cox 2 inhibitors can cause sudden cardiac death in people, especially the elderly. Methadone when used properly can radically change a person's life, restoring them to normal and if they are not physically disabled, get them back to work without sacrificing their health. In addition to getting people back to work, which means they are off food stamps, welfare or other government assistance, they are less likely to commit crimes or be involved with others who are committing crimes. So there are many benefits to methadone when used properly and used as needed, which means its use is tailored to each person's needs and problems. Some might be on Methadone for a month or two, some a year, while others indefinitely, but the outcome should be the same, returning the individual to as close to normal as possible while removing the damaging effects drug use has on the individual and society. Unfortunately methadone is stigmatized partially due to its name being closely resembling to meth or methamphetamines, which are completely different drugs, and because it is associated with Nazi Germany due to its origin of discovery. But if a person researches the drug and becomes informed about it and reads the success stories of thousands of people they would change their views and better understand that the benefits outweighs the risks. So much of medicine and pharmacology is a balancing act of risk versus doing nothing, so if you're not willing to take a risk then you're not willing to get better. After 5 years of treatment I am as good as I will ever be, until I take the plunge and have a laminectomy which is a radical and major surgery to correct the compressed nerves in my spine. The surgery is by no means an instant success as say removing a bad tooth or replacing a diseased heart. The nerves that branch off of the spinal cord are very minute and vast in number. Surgery could actually cause more damage than good. But then again, if you're not willing to take a risk, then you may not get better. In some cases people have to have more than one laminectomy and after several they are classified as failed back syndrome. I have put off getting a laminectomy partially because I know the anatomy of the spinal cord through actual cadaver dissection and I have researched the procedure to the fullest of my potential. My decision to have this procedure by no means guarantees success and since it is the very last method or option of relieving my back pain, leg pain and numbness I have waited till surgery was no longer elective but a medical necessity. Pain from nerve damage is permanent, so even if the doctors were to saw my spine into pieces relieving pressure, the damage done would not be reversed, but my pain might be less severe as well as further damage might be prevented. It's a very difficult decision but one I know I must make someday and soon since my leg pain and numbness is getting worse every year. Hopefully for those who believe I am just lazy and don't want to work, or do not understand medical terms such as spinal stenosis, neurogenic claudication, panic attacks, depression, OCD, carpal tunnel, gallbladder disease, fatty liver disease, high blood pressure, and their various treatments will better understand my unique situation. Everyone has issues whether it be mental or physical or both, but everyone's issues are unique and not everyone with a physical or mental problem is disabled either. So do not pass judgment upon someone who is disabled for a particular reason until you know the full extent of their pain and issues.

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