

FROM ADDICTION TO RECOVERY: TWELVE EASY STEPS?

Nic Sheff, an American who gives lectures on his recovery from methamphetamine addiction was confronted by an angry listener who said he made it sound so damned easy. And it made him think.

Since the publication of my first book, *Tweak*, four years ago, I've been travelling around the country speaking to different groups and organisations about addiction and recovery. I've spoken at high schools and colleges and at fundraisers for big name rehabs like Hazelden and the Caron Foundation. Usually these events consist of about a 45-minute share of my basic story, followed by 15 minutes of question and answers. And, for the most part, the talks I give are all fairly similar and the questions people ask are pretty similar, too—although of course, the specific details tend to be different.

Recently however, I was speaking at an event on a Native American reservation just a few miles outside of Saginaw, Michigan when an older man from the community stood up and asked me a question that made me have to re-think my entire presentation.

He was shouting and I could see that he was angry. Not with me, exactly, but with addiction in general. He spoke about watching his kids and then his grandkids struggle with this disease. And

then he went on to say that he listens to people like me speaking about how bad things were and how the drugs destroyed our lives but then suddenly we seem to jump to talking about how we're sober now and how we are all happy and everything. What he wanted to know was: how did we get from being strung out and miserable to being happy and sober? How did we get from A to B? I wasn't totally sure how to answer.

I know that for some, getting from A to B is a fairly straightforward process—which isn't to say that it's easy. Though perhaps it's easier to explain. They use drugs and destroy their lives, then they go to AA, where they get a sponsor, take commitments, work the steps and go on to live lives that are happy, joyous, and free. But that wasn't the way it worked for me.

I'm envious of people who get recovery like that. I remember back when I was first getting clean, I was in a Sober Living house and going to meetings with these kids my age, and a lot of them are still sober today. They followed that path and it worked for them. I was the one

that continued to fuck up over and over and over again.

I went to AA just like they did and did everything that was suggested, but then I still went out and relapsed. Maybe I just didn't do it right. I don't know. And there's no easy explanation for what finally worked for me. Every time I thought I found the answer, I'd end up relapsing again.

At one point, I went to this new agey treatment center in the desert and spent a lot of time talking about childhood trauma and releasing the memories from my body and stuff like that. I did Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR) designed to alleviate the distress associated with traumatic memories and Somatic Experiencing and got into blaming my parents. I did meditation and got in touch with my feelings and then I thought, "Okay, awesome, I've fixed myself now."

But then I went out and started drinking so much that I was soon waking up in the morning and downing mini-bottles of flavoured vodka 'cause they



were only 79 cents on sale from the local liquor store.

After that, I pretty much decided I was done with rehabs and AA but would try outpatient and just good old-fashioned therapy and psychiatric medication.

But here's where I did something different: in the past, I'd always gone to whatever psychiatrist was recommended to me. I decided that this time, I would try to find one that I could relate to and respect. It took some time and I met with four different doctors, but I finally did find someone who was young and super knowledgeable about addiction. She got me on different meds and I started seeing her once a week.

That was also the first time I'd ever tried outpatient, and the program I'd enrolled in here in LA seemed like it had really started working for me. When I'd been in inpatient rehabs before, I'd get close to the other clients when we were in there together, but as soon as we got back out in the real world, we'd discover how little we actually had in common. But that didn't happen with outpatient, probably because we incorporated what we were doing together into our daily lives, rather than make it our entire lives. And as a result, the friends I made there are still some of my best friends today—nearly five years later.

So that's it then, right? Outpatient and psychiatry, the magic combination? Is that what I should tell that old man on the reservation? Actually, no. Because I relapsed again.

I HAD TO HAVE FAITH.
NOT IN GOD, BUT
JUST FAITH THAT IT
COULD AND WOULD
EVENTUALLY WORK.
AND IT HAS.
FOR NOW, ANYWAY

My ex-girlfriend had a bottle of Vicodin left over from the time she broke her arm, and I thought one couldn't hurt me. Three bottles later, I had a pocket full of cash and was heading downtown to go cop heroin when I suddenly, and inexplicably, had some sort of moment of clarity—or however you want to describe it. Basically, I just saw how I was about to throw everything away that I'd worked so hard to get. I saw how my life was going to spiral completely out of control again and I was going to lose everything and destroy myself and I thought, "No, no, I don't want to do this again. I don't want to go back to the bottom again." And so I didn't.

I went home and called my doctor, got on Suboxone and just basically locked myself inside for a week. And that was it. That was my last relapse. I've been sober ever since. Over four years at this point. So what's been the difference? What's gotten me from point A to point B? How do I answer that old man's question?

The only thing I can figure is that I guess it must have all kind of worked. That is, I don't think it was any one treatment that got me sober. But each one gave me a little more by teaching me more about myself and my disease and recovery. None of it was a waste. I kept falling but eventually I started to learn how to not fall so far down, and how to pick myself up a little sooner. It was a lot of trial and error. I had to find out what fit for me and what didn't.

Because there is no one answer for anyone. We are all different. What worked for me may not work for you, and vice versa. So I guess I just had to be open to trying—and then trying again.

Of course, a lot of it is luck, too. I have plenty of friends who fell down and never could pick themselves up again because they overdosed and died. So to simply say it doesn't matter how many times you fall because you can always get back up isn't exactly true. People die from this disease. It happens all the time.

But what I want to tell that old man in Michigan and what I want to tell anyone who hears my story in the future is that really, getting from point A to point B is, like I said, all about trying. Trying. That's it. I had to try. And I had to be open. And, yes, I had to have faith. Not in God, but just faith that it could and would eventually work. And it has. For now, anyway.

**This article first appeared in
The Fix, 23 February 2012.**