

The following article was published in the MDA Journal (Michigan) in January, 2005, and is used with permission.

MY BEST FRIENDS: Beer and Marijuana

So what was the big deal if I had a few beers after work?

I deserved it. Dentistry is an intense, challenging occupation. It felt good to drink three or four ice cold beers; it felt real good. Beer was like a magic elixir. It gave me a euphoric feeling and washed away the burdens and stresses of my day. It made me forget about the squabbling between my receptionist and hygienist, the slightly open contact on the posterior composite, or the over-filled root canal.

Alcohol was also a reward for some of the good dentistry I did. The crown prep on tooth number 15 that I did on the person with the nasty gag reflex, or the six maxillary veneers I placed that looked magnificent. Dentistry is a rewarding job, yet stressful. Alcohol just seemed to fit at the end of the day. I had a work-hard, play-hard attitude; I've come to discover many alcoholics have that similar trait.

Once that last patient was out of the chair, it was time for me to "play hard," and so every night a few beers and a little marijuana would send me off on an instant vacation. Since my back was often a little sore, I could also justify taking a Vicodin at the end of the day. The combination of beer, marijuana, and Vicodin made all the pain go away in a hurry.

I was feeling no pain, physically or mentally. Of course, I wouldn't go straight home. I went to golf league in the summer, or bowling in the winter. I would go to dental society meetings, or maybe just meet my buddies at the local pub for a little male bonding. All of these activities were reasons to continue drinking.

This was my lifestyle for over 20 years, and I saw no problems with it. I was doing some quality dentistry. My practice was growing. I was respected by my peers. My bills were paid. I'd never been arrested for drunk driving, or public intoxication. I exercised daily. My health was excellent. My life was great -- or so I thought.

I'm also married, with three young children. But not surprisingly, my wife had become disenchanted with my lifestyle. I'd come home at whatever hour, slurring my words, smelling of booze and marijuana. I certainly wasn't interested in discussing any of the events of her day or mine. I just wanted to eat, watch TV, and fall asleep. I snored like a chainsaw. I was *not* someone you wanted to be married to. But, I felt my wife had nothing to complain about. In my very superficial, materialistic view of life, I thought we were living the perfect life. After all, we lived in a big house in a pleasant neighborhood. We had new cars, took numerous vacations. We were members of the country club, had a maid, even a lawn service. No, I thought our lives were enviable.

Well, my wife certainly didn't think so. The truth was, our marriage was going downhill fast. She was embarrassed and resentful of my drinking. I couldn't be trusted with our children. She was scared to death of the possibility of me driving with the kids in the car.

She recognized the fact that I'd rather be drunk or high than be a functional husband and father.

After a hard night of drinking I'd wake up in the morning and with a vicious hangover -- and I didn't sleep very well due to my alcohol-induced sleep apnea. I'd go to work in the morning smelling like a brewery. I was probably was still legally drunk, and probably I was in no shape to do dentistry on anyone.

My substance abuse problem was ruining my health, destroying my marriage, and endangering my patients' dental health. Although I was never arrested for drunk driving, I can't imagine how many hundreds of times I drove drunk, threatening my own life and everyone else on the road. And yet even with all these problems, I somehow remained oblivious to them. I didn't want to stop drinking, not at all. Drinking to me was synonymous with having fun. Parties were more fun. Golfing, skiing, going to sporting events, and so on were just that much more enjoyable if I was drinking, and I certainly didn't want to stop having fun. Therefore, I had no plans to stop drinking. But more importantly, I *couldn't* stop. Twenty-some years of drinking and drugging made me physically and psychologically dependent on alcohol and drugs.

I had become an addict. It took more and more alcohol to obtain the effect that I was looking for. I didn't admit that I was an alcoholic, because I wasn't a stereotypical skid row bum. I was a well-educated, upper-middle-class dentist, a functioning human being in good health. But you see, alcoholism is a cunning baffling disease, and its most insidious symptom is the alcoholic's denial that they even have the disease. This denial is even more prevalent amongst us health professionals. We're used to being the healers; we aren't used to being the ones that need to be healed.

Frankly, I was obsessed with my drinking. I planned my day around when I could start drinking. I hated being sober. I'd gone from enjoying a few beers after work to *needing* a few beers after work. I needed to drink to make my life tolerable. Many times I wished I wasn't a dentist. I dreamed of being in an occupation such as a musician, a playwright, or a journalist. That way I could justify using mind-altering substances all day long, because it would enhance my creativity, or so I thought. Beer and marijuana were my best friends. Nothing else really mattered to me except catching a buzz.

After tolerating me for nearly 16 years, my wife had had enough of my self-indulgent behavior. She became quite upset, began seeing a psychotherapist, and eventually asked me to leave. She said that if I don't sober up, that she wanted a divorce. That scared me. I didn't know where to turn or what to do. I didn't want to lose my wife, my family, or my perception of a perfect life.

I went to my wife's psychotherapist, pleading for her help to some way save my marriage. The psychotherapist told me something very interesting. She said, "Don't worry about saving your marriage. You first have to save yourself." No, she didn't mince words. She pulled within 10 inches of my face and said to me, directly: "You are an alcoholic, and alcohol is screwing up what could be a wonderful life for you."

She emphasized how difficult recovery would be: How I would have to recover for myself and not to save my marriage or for my wife or for my children. She suggested that I go to a treatment center, and she suggested that I start going to Alcoholics Anonymous meetings. Well, the treatment center involved leaving my practice for a month, and I wondered how I would be able to explain to my patients or to my employees where I was and why I went away for a month. Plus, I'd lose a month's worth of income and perhaps quite a few patients. I didn't go to the treatment center, but I did agree to start going to Alcoholics Anonymous meetings. The therapist said I needed to go to 90 meetings in 90 days, and then continue to go to AA meetings on a regular basis for the rest of my life. She said that my alcoholism is a permanent disease and I would never completely recover, but would only keep it in remission. I was willing to do anything to help save my marriage, so I agreed. But I couldn't understand how AA meetings were going to help. How would listening to a bunch of grizzly old men in a church basement help me stop drinking?

Well, two days after my session with the psychotherapist, I went to an AA meeting. It wasn't what I expected. These people weren't wretched drunks or grizzly old men. I found a pleasant mix of approximately 30 people, men and women from the ages of 19 to their mid-60s. They were well groomed, they were upbeat, and they all seemed happy to be there. Each of them spoke about how much better their lives had become since surrendering to their alcoholism. They seemed content.

It was explained to me during that first meeting night that I didn't need to stop drinking for the rest of my life. I just needed to stop drinking for the next 24 hours, and then go to another meeting tomorrow night. They also said that stopping drinking wasn't going to change the world, but that it would change my perception of the world. My recovery would be hard; it is very hard to quit drinking. I had to make it my highest priority. Sobriety had to be the most important thing in my life.

I went to a meeting the next night. Most AA meetings start at 8 p.m. This is a strategic time, because alcoholics usually start drinking well before 8 o'clock and it's pretty embarrassing to go to an AA meeting when you're drunk. So, in the early days of my recovery I had to "white-knuckle" it through those two to three hours between finishing my last patient and finally going to that night's meeting.

Those first few weeks and months were very hard. Drinking was a way of life for me. It was nearly 60 days of going to at least one, if not sometimes two meetings a day before I noticed a slight decrease in my desire to drink. About this same time I also realized I LIKE going to meetings. I always felt better after a meeting. I began to understand the benefits of group therapy, the concept of sharing my failures and successes of each day and then listening to others share their experiences. It gave me an appreciation of my life, and sense of gratitude that I'd never felt before. I developed a respect and admiration for my fellow recovering alcoholics, as many of them had been through a lot more troubles than I had ever imagined. Yet, many were very much like me. Some didn't necessarily hit rock bottom; they were never in jail, they were never mentally or physically seriously ill,

and in fact most of them were quite intelligent. They were college professors, attorneys, businessmen, soccer moms, nurses, physicians, musicians, journalists, and other dentists. These people were from all walks of life, from all socio-economic strata, from Yale to jail, from Park Avenue to park benches. But the one thing we all had in common was that we all recognized the detrimental effect that alcohol and substance abuse had on our lives.

What an education I got from the people who were from dysfunctional families -- how many of them were brought up by alcoholics, and how alcoholism and drug abuse affected their entire family. Alcoholism is genetically and environmentally passed from one generation to the next. This legacy of alcoholism is very difficult for many people to overcome. It made me realize how lucky I was that I had come from a loving family, that I had the opportunity to go to college and dental school. It made me appreciate the fact that my parents were not alcoholic and that they loved me very much. It also made me realize that I will do everything I can to make sure that my children do not become alcoholics.

Alcoholics Anonymous meetings and the AA way of life have been very therapeutic for me. AA has changed me in many ways. It's not just about not drinking. It's taught me the coping skills I need to live comfortably in an often uncomfortable world. AA has helped me comprehend how much I love my life, how much I love my children and my wife. I've have grown to appreciate what a privilege it is to be a dentist. Dentistry continues to be a challenging profession, and life can still be difficult, but I've learned to be humble. I'm only human, and I make mistakes, but instead of hiding from them in a beer bottle, I now face these mistakes head-on. I learn from them, and do everything I can to correct my mistakes.

I've also learned that I don't need to drink to have fun. The friends I've made in Alcoholics Anonymous can have an awful lot of fun without drinking. I have also discovered that many of my old "drinking buddies" really didn't drink as much as I thought they did. They would stop after one or two beers, or they didn't drink at all. They didn't get drunk at every opportunity like I did.

I have also learned what a great feeling it is to wake up in the morning without a hangover. It's been said that no one ever has woken up in the morning wishing he had gotten drunk the night before.

If any of my story sounds familiar to you, and you think you might think you might have a problem with alcoholism or with drug abuse, or that someone you know may have a problem, feel welcome to call Dr. Care at the Michigan Dental Association. That number is (517) 881-4224. You could also call your local Alcoholics Anonymous phone number. That number is in your local phone book. The advantage of calling Dr. Care is that it is nice to talk with a fellow dentist, someone who has been through the same stresses you have. The Michigan Dental Association's Dr. Care committee understands alcoholism. Its members are supportive. They don't want to get you into trouble. They want to keep you *out* of trouble.

Recovery is very hard. It was hard for me; it's hard for most people. If you're an alcoholic or an addict, you need all the help you can get. It's nice just to talk with someone who has experienced the same problems you have. A problem shared is a problem cut in half.

I've gained a lot of spirituality going to Alcoholics Anonymous, and I don't mean that I've become a better Catholic or more religious. I mean that I have come to realize how precious life is, and that I don't want to waste it. If you are experiencing any financial, marital, legal, emotional, social, health or spiritual problems in your life, and you think that drugs or alcohol are contributing to these problems, then seek help. Call someone. Give it a try. Sometimes having a few beers after work may not be as innocent as it originally appears. As in my case, it may lead TO a life that spirals out of control.