

Purpose

First Name: Anonymous

Role: Staff Member

*A purpose in my life is to maintain my sobriety and to help other struggling/recovering addicts and alcoholics. By practicing these indispensable principles of recovery, **Honesty, Open-mindedness and Willingness**, I am living a life beyond my wildest dreams. This does not mean I am rich, famous, or perfect in any way. A life beyond my wildest dreams involves inner peace and serenity, the ability to trust others and to be trusted, no longer being afraid of people or of financial insecurity, and self-pity has disappeared from my life. I live for today. I don't try to control outcomes or worry about the future. My whole attitude and outlook on life has changed for the better.*

Being in service is a key component of my recovery. In order to keep my sobriety, I must give away what was so freely given to me. That means loving newcomers until they learn to love themselves. It means sharing my experience, strength and hope by telling my story of addiction, describing how I got clean and sober, and giving others confidence that they too can maintain a happy, healthy recovery. I participate in daily 12-Step meetings, helping by setting up chairs or making coffee, acting as a co-host on zoom meetings and greeting others, and sharing my story at local treatment centers and the prison. When I focus on being in service to other people, the selfishness that embodied my addiction slips away and I become a useful, productive member of society.

“You Never Have to Hurt from Drugs or Alcohol Again”

One UD Employee's Story of Addiction and Recovery and Tips for Getting and Staying Sober During a Pandemic

“You Never Have to Hurt from Drugs or Alcohol Again”. This was one of the very first things I was told when I attended my first 12-Step Meeting. I am an employee at the University of Delaware, and I am a recovering alcoholic and drug addict.

People in recovery and people who are currently struggling with drug and alcohol problems are facing extra challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic. I am sharing my story with you in hopes that it can help you or someone you know who may currently be battling addiction or trying to maintain a healthy recovery program during this challenging time.

I grew up in Delaware County, PA (a suburb of Philadelphia) the third out of four children. My childhood was fairly “typical” lower middle-class upbringing. I lived with my parents and my siblings, and was an extremely shy child. I was terrified of adults, literally hiding behind my mother when introduced to new people. I always felt different from other people, including my family. I was the skinny kid who couldn't gain weight no matter how hard I tried, while my family all struggled with their weight. My family

teased me, calling me “the mailman’s kid” because I was so physically different in appearance to them. When I was I seven years old, we moved from Delaware County to Los Alamos, New Mexico. Now, I was the new skinny kid with a weird accent, which combined with my extreme shyness and fear of people made making friends extremely hard. Then, we moved again when I was in 6th grade. We lived in New Mexico long enough for me to develop a new accent, so when we moved back to Delaware County, I was once again the strange new skinny kid, who spoke differently and dressed differently than everyone else. I was bullied in 6th grade by an 8th grade girl and her “posse”. They followed me in the halls and at lunch, pulling my hair and knocking my food tray out of my hands. I was also regularly teased by strangers (some of them adults) because I was so painfully thin. I used to hear whispers of “Look! She is anorexic” when I walked past people. These hurtful comments and actions pushed me deeper into a well of self-loathing and low self-esteem.

I did make a few friends eventually. I had my first drink with those friends at 13 and my whole life changed. Now I was outgoing, no longer afraid of people, felt like I could talk to anyone and that people liked me! ***I felt like I fit in for the first time in my life.*** Every weekend was now a pursuit of parties, boys and booze. I would go anywhere with anyone if I knew I could drink. From very early on, I realized I drank differently than my friends. They would drink a few beers, get all weepy and cry about boys that didn’t like them, then go to sleep. I was the girl who kept on drinking, and I drank until I vomited or blacked out.

My brother was not a good influence on me, and he introduced me to marijuana when I was 14. By the time I entered 9th grade, I was selling marijuana for my brother at the high school to maintain my habit. I very nearly got caught, and stopped selling but continued using. The following year, I took a babysitting job for a friend’s uncle, who turned out to be a drug dealer. I agreed to be paid in drugs. As I progressed through high school, I was trying harder and harder drugs, unknowingly looking for the magic pill that would fill the hole in my soul and make me feel like a normal, outgoing, likeable person. I never thought I had a drug or alcohol problem, I thought I was just having fun with my friends!

I graduated from high school and started working full time. My family did not encourage college. In fact, I don’t even remember it ever being an option or a conversation in my home. I was expected to work, get married, have babies and take care of my family. Now that I was working and had some money, my drug and alcohol use increased. I remember going to work extremely hung over many times. Calling out sick was a regular occurrence, and I was laid off from my first good job. Of course, I didn’t see my part in things, and blamed the company I was working for. I thought they didn’t see what a great employee I was (I did get good performance reviews, but I was not reliable). I was on unemployment when I met my first husband. For awhile, marriage and having children somewhat curbed my drug and alcohol use. But I was always unhappy. He was extremely jealous, controlling, verbally and emotionally abusive.

We moved to Chester County PA when I was pregnant with my third son. After my son was weaned, and as the marriage wore on, I became more and more unhappy and my drinking increased again. I wasn’t using drugs anymore (primarily because I didn’t know where to get them), so I drank instead. Playgroups with the moms and babies always included wine. I had a neighbor with children the same age as me. We would meet at the bus stop after school, beers in hand, and then hang out together drinking until dinner time. She was a two-drink limit kind of girl. But I would drink at home after our

“happy hours”, switching to vodka because the beer was no longer giving me the effect I was looking for.

I finally left my husband in 2011 after 12 years of marriage, my kids were now 8, 11, and 14. Our custody arrangement was one week with me, one week with their dad. I continued drinking heavily, especially on the weeks that I didn't have my children. But having my children with me never stopped me from drinking. I also suffered from chronic neck and shoulder pain as a result of a car accident in my 20's. Around 2012, I went to a doctor for acupuncture, and he recommended I take narcotic pain killers. He prescribed Percocet, and I felt like Wonder Woman. The pills gave me energy I didn't know I had, and relieved the pain so effectively I could do many things I couldn't do before. I got a job working at a University in PA in 2013, and started taking college courses. It was sometime during this job that I began to realize I couldn't stop taking the pills, even when I wanted to (I didn't yet realize I had a problem with alcohol as well). When I tried to stop taking the pills, I became violently ill with flu-like symptoms. I used all of my sick-time, and even some vacation time to deal with the multiple withdrawals I went through.

In 2016, I accepted an even better position at the University of Delaware and continued my coursework (which finally began to suffer as a result of my drinking). As time went on, my drinking and drug use increased. A month's supply of prescription painkillers was gone in a week or two. I was already a daily drinker, usually having 6-8 drinks per night. I couldn't sleep well, and often woke up needing a drink. That quickly progressed to having lunchtime drinks, going out to my car and drinking before heading back to work. My body had become adjusted to the high level of alcohol, so my body physically needed alcohol to stop the shakes and from feeling ill. I tried many, many times to stop drinking. I would pour alcohol down the kitchen sink, only to go to the liquor store the very next day to buy more. I would feel shame, guilt and remorse for drinking again, then pour the booze down the sink again that night. Then, back to the liquor store the next day. In the final year of my drinking, I was a 24/7 drinker: keeping straight vodka in a water bottle on my desk and drinking all day & night.

I contacted the UD Employee Assistance Program (Health Advocate) from time to time. They provided me with options for drug and alcohol treatment: either a 28-day live-in program or Intensive Outpatient Treatment 3 times per week for several hours. I told myself “I can't go to rehab! My job will find out”! While I was making these excuses out of fear that I would lose my job, my work began to suffer. My supervisor wrote me up several times for making mistakes and being uncooperative. In my deteriorated mental state, I became angry with my supervisor and blamed him for “being out to get me”. I was a complete mess. In desperation, I finally reached out to UD's Employee Relations staff. They spoke to me confidentially, letting me know my options to go into treatment (providing me information on FMLA, use of sick/vacation time, and short-term disability). They informed me of the process for starting FMLA. I did NOT need to reveal to my supervisor or anyone other than HR that I was going to a drug and alcohol treatment center. They were so extremely loving and supportive; I broke down in tears. This was my chance to get well. I finally checked into a treatment center in 2018 and my life changed.

In treatment, I learned that I had a progressive, fatal disease called “Addiction” that affected me mentally (obsessive thinking, cravings and self-isolation) and physically (alcohol is a highly addictive drug that induces withdrawal symptoms when stopping after extended continued use). I did NOT have a moral failing, which is a common misconception about addiction. I started attending 12-step recovery

meetings (Alcoholics Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous), where I heard the promise that I never had to hurt from drugs or alcohol again.

I was what they call a “high-bottom” drunk/addict. I still had the car, house, job, family. I accumulated 90 credits towards my degree, received promotions, paid off my debt, and I drank and took pills the entire time, so it was very hard for me to see that I had a problem. Some people would apply the term “functioning alcoholic” to someone like me. I believe there is no such thing as a functioning alcoholic. Alcoholism and addiction are progressive and fatal, and there are only “Yets” (things that haven’t happened to me yet). By the time I entered treatment, I was malnourished, my liver enzymes were through the roof, I had developed astigmatism in both eyes, I bruised extremely easily, my skin was flushed, and I was constantly sweating even though I felt cold much of the time. Addiction is cunning, baffling and powerful. Despite all these physical symptoms, I simply could not stop on my own. Addiction is also isolating. The guilt and shame of addiction made me withdraw from my friends and family. By the end of my drinking, I rarely left the house except to go to work or to the liquor store. I was neglecting my teenage children, rarely cooking dinner or even food shopping. They were driving, so I sent them to the food store and said it was “their chore”. But this was my excuse to stay home and drink. I stopped caring about their schoolwork and if I attended a school function, I was drunk. We’ve all heard the term that “There is Nothing Stronger Than a Mother’s love”. I can tell you from experience, addiction is stronger.

I wish I could say I stayed clean and sober from the first time I went to treatment. It took me another two years to fully concede that I am powerless over my disease. I am currently 10 months clean and sober. I have realized I cannot stay sober alone and that I need to surround myself with a community of other recovering people. I am happily married to a wonderful man I met at my home group meeting. Sharing my recovery with my spouse is a priceless gift I wouldn’t trade for anything. I attend 12-step meetings daily, sometimes 2 or 3 times per day. Zoom makes this possible. I am also in service, helping other recovering people. I take 12-step meetings to the local prison and local treatment centers, sharing my story of experience, strength and hope with others. I am the secretary for my county Intergroup Association, taking minutes at monthly meetings and distributing information to several hundred recovering people. I call other alcoholics and addicts every day, both to check on them and to ask for help. If I am having a bad day, or if I have a craving (which still happens from time to time), I tell someone and get their help and support. My life isn’t perfect, but I am free from the bondage of addiction. I know I will never be “cured” and that means I will always need 12-step meetings and a recovery community. My children have forgiven me and my family is extremely supportive of me. The best part is that I enjoy the meetings! We are not a glum lot. We laugh (at ourselves and each other), we cry (sharing another’s pain is a way to move past it), we read literature and reflect on it, and most of all, we look out for each other.

Recovery During a Pandemic

This current pandemic has caused some real challenges for people in recovery. Self-isolation is a big problem for addicts and alcoholics. And as part of the safety protocols, many of us are working from home or staying home for our personal safety and the safety of others. This can be a dangerous trigger for an addict or alcoholic. It is important to stay connected to others in recovery, or to find a recovery community if you are still struggling. My solution has been to increase the number of daily 12-step meetings I attend (from one daily to two or three) and to increase the number of phone calls I make to

other people in recovery. Texting isn't as effective, because it's much easier to hide your feelings in a text. When others can hear your voice, they have a much better ability to help.

For those who are social or heavy drinkers, I've heard that many are drinking more heavily now that they are out of work, working from home, or otherwise isolated due to lock-down protocols. If you are in this category and feel like you need to talk to someone, you have many resources.

- Your local Alcoholics Anonymous or Narcotics Anonymous chapter
 - Alcoholics Anonymous General Service Office: <https://www.aa.org/>
 - Delaware AA: <http://www.delawareaa.org/homepagewelcome.html>
 - Southeastern PA Intergroup Association of Alcoholics Anonymous: <https://www.aasepia.org/>
 - Northeastern Maryland Intergroup Association of Alcoholics Anonymous: <https://www.nemdaa.org/>
 - Narcotics Anonymous World Services: <https://na.org/>
 - Small Wonder Area of Narcotics Anonymous (Delaware): <https://www.smallwonderarea.org/>
 - Eastern PA Region of Narcotics Anonymous: <https://eparna.org/>
 - Mid-Atlantic Region of Narcotics Anonymous (Maryland): <https://www.marscna.org/>
- Is A.A. for you? Twelve Questions Only You Can Answer: https://www.aa.org/pages/en_US/is-aa-for-you-twelve-questions-only-you-can-answer
- UD Health Advocate Employee Assistance Program: <https://dhr.delaware.gov/benefits/eap/index.shtml>
- UD Employee Relations: <https://www.udel.edu/faculty-staff/human-resources/employee-relations/#:~:text=Contact%20Employee%20Relations%20for%20more,%2Drelations%40udel.edu>.

My personal tips for recovery:

- 1) Withdrawal: Withdrawal from most drugs and alcohol is an uncomfortable or even painful process. However, alcohol and benzodiazepine (Xanax, Ativan, Valium, etc.) withdrawal can kill. It is recommended that you medically detox from all drugs and alcohol. I urge you to contact a drug and alcohol treatment facility or your doctor if you are considering stopping any drug or alcohol use.
- 2) My recovery MUST come first. If I put my job, my family, friends, or hobbies before my recovery, the chances that I will lose ALL of those things increases dramatically. I must always remember that I have a incurable disease, and if I don't treat that disease, I will die. This means I must attend my meetings. I must be in service and help other alcoholics and addicts. I must take suggestions from others in recovery.

Many people worry that they won't have time for 12-Step meetings and other recovery suggestions. The way I look at it is this: How much time did I spend pursuing my addiction? I spent an astronomical amount of time obtaining alcohol or drugs, driving to 5 different liquor stores so the clerks didn't know I was an alcoholic, going to the pain-doctor monthly appointments, hiding my use from others (isolation), lying about where I had been, taking empty bottles to a random dumpster so people wouldn't see what's in my trashcan, passing

out/blacking out, using all my sick time because I was hung-over. Attending a one-hour daily 12-Step meeting is so much easier than the exhausting, time-consuming behavior that encompassed my addiction!

- 3) 12-Step Meetings: This is what works for me. There are other recovery programs, and some medications that can help. I can't offer advice on these other programs, because a 12-Step lifestyle is what works for my recovery. If you don't like your first meeting, don't give up! There are many types of meetings, and you will find the ones that feel right for you.
- 4) I don't hide from my feelings anymore. I no longer need to lie, hide or deceive other people to keep my addiction a secret, and this is one of the biggest joys of recovery. I used to pretend I was ok, when I wasn't even close to being fine. Now, when someone asks me how I am doing, I am honest about my feelings. This takes some getting used to, and it's something I practice every day.
- 5) Progress, Not Perfection: I need to understand that by working on myself, I am making progress daily. I will never be perfect. Self-examination to identify my character defects and working to release those defects is a key part of my recovery. Striving for perfection is asking for disappointment.
- 6) Don't Compare Yourself Out: If you decide to attend a 12-Step meeting, try to identify with the people or with the feelings involved. I still had my house/job/car/family and I never had a DUI. I never used THAT drug! I never went to jail! As a result, I originally felt like I didn't belong at meetings. I wasn't like *those* people! However, I was exactly like those people. Those things hadn't happened to me yet, but if I continued down the path I was on, they very likely would happen.
- 7) Honesty, Open-mindedness and Willingness: These are three primary principles of recovery, and they have saved my life. I had to get honest about my addiction, admitting to myself that I had a problem. I had to be open-minded about treatment, allowing myself to get the help that I needed. Finally, I need to be willing to take suggestions that others make. In addiction, we try to control everything and everyone. We want to control outcomes and make all the decisions. But I don't always know what is best for me and I am certainly in no position to dictate what is best for other people! Willingness to listen and take suggestions from others have allowed me to stop hurting from drugs and alcohol.
- 8) Forgiveness: I needed to forgive myself for the terrible things I've done. And I need to forgive others for what they have done to me. Resentments are an addict/alcoholic's worst enemy, the #1 offender. Holding onto anger and resentment can give us a reason to use AT whomever or whatever we are angry about.