

Guide to Early Sobriety

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Contents

1. Traditional Recovery Was Not For Me.....	2
2. The Witching Hour.....	7
3. It's All in Your Head.....	14
4. You're Not as Strong as You Think You Are.....	18
5. What You Eat Can Cure You.....	23
6. You Are A Victim.....	27
7. Exposed.....	31
8. Coming Out.....	33
9. Where Does God Fit In?.....	37
10. It Is Worth the Wait.....	40

Chapter 1

Traditional Recovery Was Not For Me

Early sobriety for me was hell on earth. The shame and debilitating misery I endured was equaled only by the despicable trauma of the mornings after [overconsuming in my last year](#) of drinking alcohol. I didn't want to live. I was completely overcome by remorse and hopelessness. I wanted to close my eyes and never open them again.

Sure, there were times when my early sobriety stirred feelings of relief because I was finally taking steps to address my drinking, but I had [tried unsuccessfully](#) to get sober before, so my hope for the future was muted and fleeting. Mostly, I wandered through life like a zombie overwhelmed by shame and doubt.

I needed help, but traditional methods of achieving sobriety were not on my list of options. My perception of Alcoholics Anonymous had been forged by society, movies, books, television and all forms of pop-culture since I was old enough to understand the concept of addiction. I pictured sad losers who lacked motivation or hygiene sitting in cold, damp church basements on metal folding chairs drinking shitty coffee from styrofoam cups while chain smoking cigarettes and whining about their patheticness. That is what I believed AA to be, and no one was going to change my mind (not that anyone was trying). I didn't understand the message of hope and understanding shared in loving fellowship that lives in, "The Rooms," as AA members call their meeting spaces. I know now because I have come to respect and admire so many recovery warriors whose lives were saved by Alcoholics Anonymous. I know now that which was beyond my comprehension in early sobriety. Let me be clear.

I was not going to an AA meeting under any circumstances when I was in early sobriety. End of discussion.

A traditional 30 day rehab program was even less of an option for me than AA. My wife, Sheri, and I owned our own business in which I was a very active daily participant in all facets from customer service to accounting to inventory management to payroll to production. If I disappeared for 30 days, the hardship on my wife and our four kids would have been unimaginable. I actually fantasized, at times, about a future where my attendance at a 30 day inpatient rehab was court-ordered as a result of something I did while drinking. That fantasy brought relief. Alas, my drinking was without legal calamity, and thus, my choices were still 100% mine to make. And there was 0% chance of me checking into a rehab facility for the burden it would have placed on my family.

My outlook on what I saw as my only two options for help when I stopped drinking - Alcoholics Anonymous or inpatient rehab - are quite different now than they were then. While I still see [serious flaws in AA](#) and the 12 step model for recovery, I have tremendous respect for the people I have grown to love who work the program and enjoy a peaceful and healthy life. Traditional recovery methods have saved a lot of lives, and that is truly joyous.

But there are still tens of millions of people who suffer who will not find salvation through AA or the 12 steps. This guide is for those people. Millions of them who are just like me - in desperate need of help to end the cycle of destructive drinking but without hope to find resources that will work for them...for us.

I was a high-functioning alcoholic. I was never charged with a DUI, my marriage remains intact and my family is stable and healthy. I spent a lot of money on booze over the years, but my habit did not plunge me into debt or erode my financial stability. I never lost a job or wrecked a car or faced legal issues. I drank heavily but not obnoxiously in social settings, and saved the real, unrestricted drinking for when I was alone. [My wife suffered from my drinking](#). On several occasions, [my beloved children suffered](#) from my drinking. Other members of [my family worried](#) about my drinking and fretted about how they could help. And that's it. No one else knew the serious nature of my affliction nor the collateral damage that resulted.

Because of my high function - because I kept my predilection so well hidden - it was easy to deny the notion that I needed to quit. *Alcoholics live in the gutter,*

beat their wives, and spend time in jail, I thought. I'm just not like that. Sometimes I drink too much, but I'm not an alcoholic. My blindness to the reality of my life was as much a part of the problem as my high function.

Nothing was broken, so why would I try to fix it. Nothing was broken, except my very soul.

And so it goes for tens of millions of heavy drinkers who manage to hold our lives together. We drink to be social. We drink in celebration. We drink to manage stress. And we drink because our society expects it. Our drinking results in regrets, poor sleep, underachievement and alcohol induced depression, so we drink to self-medicate. And the cycle rages on.

We recognize our drinking is out of control, so we try to reel it back in through moderation techniques. We set rules for our drinking. We only drink on the weekend or we drink a glass of water between each glass of wine or we swear off hard alcohol or we limit our drinking to a certain number of beers. Sometimes we follow our rules with success, but our rules are made to be broken. Alcoholism is a progressive disease. No amount of moderation can change the fact that our affliction will get worse - even if our decline is ever-so slow - and we will never get better as long as alcohol is in our lives.

The internet has no shortage of 20 question tests you can take to self-diagnose an alcohol abuse disorder. For me, it is quite a bit simpler than that. There really are only two questions.

1. Do you think about alcohol when you are not drinking - either regrets from a prior drinking session or anticipation of drinking yet to come?
2. Does drinking alcohol cause problems - major problems or minor problems - in your life?

If you answer those two questions in the affirmative, your life will benefit from sobriety. You can spend inordinate amounts of time on mental gymnastics agonizing over questions like, *Am I an alcoholic?* or *Do I really need to quit drinking?* I can remember days and weeks where these tortuous queries

dominated my thoughts. In the end, I was looking for a solution that doesn't exist - anything but abstinence. My drinking had progressed to a point of no return.

And that brings us to the most important decision of our lives for us serious drinkers. We can admit that we are in trouble. We can seek help and dig ourselves from the pit of despair. We can lead a satisfying, joyful and peace-filled life free from addiction. Or we can deny the reality of our predicament, and crawl through life on the desperate brink of destruction all the way to our graves. Millions and millions of people have suffered in silence to the ends of their unsatisfying, regret-filled lives.

You are reading this guide. You know what you need to do. Maybe for similar reasons to mine when I was in your position, AA or a 30 day inpatient rehab are not options for you. There are alternatives. You can recover on your terms, as long as you accept that your terms include the complete elimination of alcohol from your life now and forever. Sorry to harsh your buzz with such a dramatic statement, but that's an indisputable fact of your life. Admit it and get busy getting better, or deny it at your ultimate peril.

I sat in my bathroom and swore that I would never drink again on too many mornings to count. I looked in the mirror and saw my puffy face and red, droopy eyes, and made a commitment to sobriety. The problem with that pledge - the problem that I didn't understand until I suffered at least a half a dozen [relapses](#) - is that sobriety in and of itself is unsustainable. Sobriety is simply abstinence, and it does nothing to repair the damage done by years of drinking. What we are looking for is recovery.

Recovery is smart decisions. Recovery is limiting risk. Recovery is dealing with conflict. Recovery is a brain-repairing nutrition plan. Recovery is spiritual. Recovery is hard work. Good news - recovery is also totally and undeniably worth it.

Through this guide, you will learn techniques to survive early sobriety and begin the process of recovery. Let's face it. Even if you were high functioning and hid your overconsumption from most of the world, you've done a lot of damage. You've damaged your body. You've damaged your brain. You have no idea how

to naturally deal with human emotions. And you've done damage to the most important relationships in your life. That sounds despicable. You probably feel somewhat hopeless. But believe me when I tell you this:

It is *not* your fault. You *can* recovery from the damage done by alcohol.

But some things are going to have to change. Going through life the same way just without a drink in your hand is not going to work. Trust me. [I tried that many times](#) without success. Sobriety without doing the work to recover eventually leads to drinking alcohol and unimaginably powerful depression. Every. Single. Time.

Enough about what you can't do. Let's get started on your recovery. I'll lead you down my path to ascending the elusive and invisible hump to permanent sobriety. One final word of caution before we get started. Just like AA and 30 day rehab were not going to work for me, my recovery plan might not work for you. I hope it does. It is definitely worth your effort. But in the end, you might find another recovery method to be more effective for you. If that's the case - fine.

Just don't give up!

We humans are a strange lot. We have as many personality differences and unique learning requirements as we have similarities. If this isn't your bag of cats, find something that works for you. After a century of a one-size-fits-all approach to recovery, there are now lots of energetic recovery warriors sharing what worked for them. It's a good time to be alive. Keep searching. Your solution is out there.

I'm hopeful you will find the solution you are looking for right here. Maybe this guide will lead to a peaceful end to the chaos. I'm rooting for you!

Chapter 2

The Witching Hour

Some people drink once their kids are tucked into bed. For others, five o'clock is cocktail hour. Still others would never think of drinking in the morning, but they crack that first beer at high noon. Now that you've decided to get sober, the clock on the wall has a new meaning. Whatever time you started drinking when you were a drinker is now the *witching hour* of your sobriety.

We are going to talk more about brain chemistry and the power of our subconscious minds later, but for now, please understand that we humans are creatures of habit. The patterns of our lives equate to safety and security for our brains. If you were in the habit of drinking a scotch at 5pm, it's going to take your brain a long, long time to forget that tradition. This has nothing to do with physical habit. This is all in your brain. But it is in there like it's chiseled in stone. Don't think you are stronger than your brain. You aren't. You are going to need a technique to deal with your witching hour.

Nothing brought me comfort in early sobriety when evening rolled around - my witching hour - like reading books related to my disease. I mostly read memoirs written by alcoholics in recovery. Their stories had remarkable similarities to my story. I found that we all come under the spell of addiction for different reasons and at different stages of our lives. But there is nothing unique about the progression of the disease and the feelings of shame and depressions that result. In the words of fellow alcoholics I found companionship, understanding and hope.

My nightly reading habit is called bibliotherapy, and while not often touted as an effective sobriety strategy, it was an integral part of *my* recovery. I read dozens of books. I read books electronically downloaded to my phone so I would always have access to them no matter where I was.

Reading memoirs did nothing to quash the shame I felt as a newly anointed member of the alcoholism club, but it did wonders for my feeling of community

and my confidence that there were people out there - lots and lots of people, in fact - who understood what I was going through. My books brought me a sense of peace and comfort I had not experienced in many years. I still felt like a creature of the underworld, but I felt like the underworld was a popular place to dwell.

My reading list was filled mostly, but not exclusively, with memoirs. I also read clinical books that explained the effects of heavy alcohol consumption on the systems of my body and what was happening in my chemically-damaged brain. While these medical and neurological facts were far less comforting and peaceful than the memoirs, they were necessary components of my recovery. I needed to understand how alcohol works in our bodies. I needed to understand why my desires differed from those of the occasional take-it-or-leave-it drinkers in my life. I needed to know why I was the monster I had become.

While brain chemistry texts did nothing to provide me with the peace of camaraderie, they helped reduce the shame I felt from my inability to get and keep my shit together. When I began to understand how my brain reacted to being poisoned, I started to feel more normal and less like a moral pariah. I wasn't born a cretin. Society and its ever present elixir rewired my circuits. My brain's survival instinct was alive and well. My booze guzzling was not about a lack of willpower. It was about my brain doing what I had trained it to do. As my understanding grew, my shame diminished. They say knowledge is power. They are right.

It is reassuring to always have access to my books on my phone. I refer back to the clinical ones to refresh my memory about dopamine release or the power of the subconscious, and I reread my favorite memoirs when I need a hug from a friend. I have read a couple of my favorites at least ten times at least in part. I feel like I have a relationship with the authors. I feel like they blessed me by writing my story for me when I was too fragile to write it myself.

Here is a brief review of ten books about alcoholism. It is not meant to serve as a top ten list. I actually didn't resonate with some of the books on this list. I chose these ten because they provide enough variety to scratch the different itches of different readers.

In my opinion, the first two and the last one on this list are required reading for anyone who incorporates bibliotherapy into their recovery plan. Caroline Knapp and Sarah Hepola are the writers I hope to be when I grow up, and Annie Grace pushed me over the finish line to a permanent belief that alcohol in any quantity is poison. I am not overstating to say I owe my life to these three women.

***Drinking: A Love Story* by Caroline Knapp**

This is the all-time best alcoholism memoir written by the godmother of the genre. I've read it easily ten times, and I get chills just thinking about how it changed my life. Caroline is a magnificent writer. Her descriptors, scene setting, humility, vulnerability and complete honesty drew me in like I was reading my own story. Even the section about her eating disorder was transfixing, and I didn't even know how to spell anorexia before I read this book. While it is brutal in its honest reality, it is also tender and chicky. If you are overly masculine, it might not hit the spot (although it's so good, that I bet, secretly, it will).

***Blackout: Remembering the Things I Drank to Forget* by Sarah Hepola**

If Caroline Knapp is the godmother, Sarah Hepola is her godchild. Her writing is edgy and graphic and descriptive and painful, and her story resonated with my soul. The first half of the book is about her drinking, while the second half is about the challenges of her recovery. Right in the middle, there is a tiny section of transition where she describes crawling into her closet with a blanket in the middle of the night - night after night - and curling into a ball with her hopeless, dismal discomfort. Her bottom was my bottom, and I cry just thinking about how those few desperate pages jammed between misery and hope saved my life. Sarah is quite a bit more brash than Caroline (the book opens with Sarah coming out of a blackout, naked on top of a strange man in his unfamiliar hotel room), but the same warning about the chicky-ness of this book applies.

***A Drinking Life* by Pete Hamill**

Toward the end of his career as an accomplished and acclaimed writer, Pete wrote this memoir about how drinking - heavy drinking - was intertwined throughout his life from childhood until he finally quit cold turkey. It is interesting, and very well written by an excellent storyteller. My only beef with this book is that it ends abruptly when he quits drinking. I wanted - no - I needed to hear of a

recovery warrior overcoming shame and other challenges in an alcohol soaked world, and this book was unfulfilling in that regard. But if you might benefit from the story of a life of adventure floating on a river of ever-present booze that left the writer with enough damage done to leave the drink behind, this book might be the one.

Dry: A Memoir by Augusten Burroughs

Like Caroline, Pete and Sarah; Augusten is just a master of his craft. This book is a detailed and entrancing tale about an advertising executive and his fall from grace at the hands of the drink. The greedy and obsessive way he drank in the depths of his addiction is sad and riveting. If you might enjoy getting wrapped-up in exceptional prose, Augusten delivers.

Unwasted: My Lush Sobriety by Sacha Z. Scoblic

Sacha tells the story of going to a bar for *a drink - as in one drink* - and emerging at 7:30am with the sun burning her eyes and barely enough time to stumble into work on time. Sacha is the fifth in a row on this list of purely exquisite writers. She was a wild adventurer in college who never matured as long as booze was there to stunt her growth, and that is a quality that is most definitely relatable for me. Like Caroline's and Sarah's work, I have read this one many times because Sacha is the female version of me, and I love her for telling our story.

The Sobering Truth: What You Don't Know Can Kill You by Dr. Jeff Herten

The incident Jeff considers his bottom took place when he disciplined a rambunctious child at an adult party by grabbing the kid's shoulder to get his attention. He wasn't drunk, but beer was definitely in control of the situation and Jeff's life. When Jeff was confronted by the child's mom in the morning, he was devastated and decided enough was enough. This book is a well-written blend of clinical information of how alcohol poisons the various systems of our body and Jeff's personal experiences both as a drinker and a medical doctor who treated alcohol abusing patients. It provides valuable, factual information with a personal, vulnerable twist. This is an excellent, well rounded book for the heavy drinker who needs facts to back-up emotional feelings.

Understanding the High-Functioning Alcoholic by Sarah Allen Benton

Much like Dr. Jeff's book, Sarah's contribution to the genre twists her personal struggles with alcohol addiction into a clinical description of the stages of high-functioning alcoholism. While Sarah bravely shares many very personal details for the benefit of her readers on a topic to which she has dedicated her life, much of the explanation is medical and somewhat dry. If you value clinical knowledge over the touchy-feely stuff, this is an outstanding first read on a complicated and emotional subject.

Living Sober Sucks (but living drunk sucks more) by Mark A. Tuschel

This was the first book I ever read about alcoholism, and it deserves a place on this list even though I struggled to resonate with Mark's tale of outwardly obnoxious drug and alcohol abuse. This is a manly man's tale of getting wasted while mowing the lawn and doing projects around the house, wrecking his boat into his dock and having an affair in Las Vegas. Mark turned from proud and brazen drunk to weeping, suicidal shell-of-his-former-self in an early recovery that included a divorce from his wife who considered him weak for giving up the booze. If you make no attempt to hide your party 24/7 lifestyle, this is the book for you. Mark's open and unapologetic tale will hit home for drinkers who wear public drunkenness as a badge of honor.

Drunk on Sport by Tim Cowlshaw

Tim is a sports writer in Texas who argues his opinion regularly on ESPN. In his pseudo-celebrity tell-all, Tim explains how drinking opened doors in his journalistic career and made conversations, and thus sports scoops, available that would not have been had he been unwilling to belly-up to the bar with coaches, players and team owners. This was the second book I read about alcoholism, and it was a bit confusing. While Tim admits that sobriety saved his uncontrollable life, he also tells us he could not have reached the pinnacle of his writing career without his willingness to drink. While this book was far less helpful to me than other books on this list when my goal was survival in early sobriety, I include it on this list for one reason. If you are a sports nut, you surely know and likely respect Tim Cowlshaw. When we are trying to help troubled drinkers, we have to meet them where they live. If you live on ESPN, buy this book.

This Naked Mind by Annie Grace

This is the single most impactful book for my permanent sobriety. And while I endorse it, I have one huge problem with it. Annie sells it as a book that will teach the drinker to take back control of our drinking and choose to take alcohol or leave it. It sells like the other books on moderation management that I now know to be utter bullshit. But that is a sales pitch so Annie can sell more books, and nothing more. This book doesn't teach us to moderate, it teaches us to despise alcohol. While I respect Annie's right to make money from her work, and bend the truth to sell it to alcoholics who believe their cure can include social drinking, I hate the bait and switch. Enough lecturing. This book saved my life.

When I finished reading Annie's book, I was convinced on a conscious level, and - very, very importantly - on a subconscious level, that alcohol is a poison with no redeeming qualities. Social, moderate drinkers just don't consume as much poison, and thus, their damage is less noticeable. I believe there is an amount of Drano or antifreeze you can drink without dying immediately. Thanks to Annie's book, I think of alcohol as diluted antifreeze.

This book gave me lots of detail on brain chemistry at precisely the time in my recovery when I needed it. Timing is everything. If you are a closed-minded drinker who longs to be in control of your drinking, you might not understand this book. But if you are a struggling drinker who is searching desperately for the reasons for your predicament, you might find everything you need in Annie's book.

I've heard it said many times in the recovery community that the opposite of addiction is connection. I feel a deep and spiritual connection to the authors who were brave enough to tell their secrets so I could recover from my despicable disease. They are my heros. If you give bibliotherapy an honest and hopeful try and do not feel connection, my techniques for navigating early sobriety are not going to work for you. Connection is a requirement, and if you don't find it in the pages of these books, you are going to have to find it somewhere else.

However, if you find comfort in these pages - if you look forward to a comfy chair in a quiet room with soft reading light when the witching hour approaches, I have great news for you. We are a lot alike, and the rest of this guide will likely help

you thrive in early sobriety. It's not going to be easy, but you are on the right path. Congratulations! Let's keep going together.

Chapter 3

It's All in Your Head

The brain is the final frontier of anatomy. It is our most complex and least understood organ, and it is where addiction lives. Need a new knee? No problem. Is your ticker failing? You are one matching organ donor and a skilled surgeon away from a new heart. Want to understand exactly what's going on in your cranium? Good luck. Neuro-research is making great strides, but there is a lot that's not yet understood up there.

In a way, this is really good news for us because the future holds promise. The more we learn about our grey matter, the better equipped we become to battle things like, say, addiction. One thing is for sure. Alcoholism is not a moral failing or lack of willpower as was believed for a few centuries. Addiction results when our pleasure center in our brain is hijacked by a substance or activity that takes control of what gives us the little jolts of happiness that make us feel good.

Dopamine and the other neurotransmitters in our brains are chemicals that move around up there and control our movement, responses to stimuli and our moods among millions of other things. When we have a good experience, our brains give us a little spurt of dopamine and other pleasure chemicals. For many of us, drinking alcohol feels so good that our brains begin to connect ethanol with dopamine release. But, here's the catch. Our brains are constantly trying to reach a state of equilibrium. In other words, our brains want to limit or meter the release of the neurotransmitters of pleasure. So, if we drink a lot, our brains will be reprogrammed to reserve dopamine release for ONLY the times when we are drinking. When that happens, we have entered the addiction zone.

Imagine that watching your toddler take her first steps brings you no joy. What if an exhilarating roller coaster ride or a big win for your favorite sports team left you feeling numb and joyless? What if none of these experiences or other passions of your life made you feel good? What if the only way you could relax

and feel a happy calmness was through consumption of alcohol? What exactly would that mean neurologically?

It means your brain has PERMANENTLY associated alcohol with pleasure. Since our brains associate pleasure with survival, your brain is now going to require you to consume alcohol to ensure your survival. Give it what it requires, or no joy for you. So drinking becomes the only thing that will release dopamine and bring joy to your life. Your sober hours become dreary and depressing while your brain requires more and more alcohol to reach the same dopamine high. The more you drink in order to feel good, the more stupid things you do and say resulting in paralyzing despair when you sober-up. And that's addiction. It is a closed loop controlled by our brain's reward system.

It is widely believed that methamphetamine is just about the most addictive drug plaguing our society. Meth and alcohol work in virtually the same way in our brains. The only difference is that meth takes immediate control of the dopamine release where alcohol has a more gradual hijacking effect. When substances or activities are deemed more highly addictive than others, it is all about the speed with which they take the steering wheel and drive the bus.

Alcohol is a drug, just like meth or opioids. Make no mistake about that. And chemicals like booze or cocaine are not the only things that warp our brains and alter our neurotransmitter function. Pornography, sex, food, electronic devices - all things that bring pleasure to different people to different degrees - can change the way our brains release dopamine. Remember, our brains are constantly seeking equilibrium. Too much of any good thing can force our brains to stomp on the pleasure brakes and change our neuro-function.

If alcohol has exerted more power over your life than you would like, it is not because you are a degenerate or morally weak. It is a simple matter of brain chemistry. The *effects of the damage* can be reversed. Pleasure will return when your kids do amazing things or you have a great evening with your spouse...eventually. You spent years programming your brain. It's not going back to normal anytime soon. Sorry to break the bad news to you, but recovery is a long haul. Several of my relapses resulted from my impatience for the neuro-repair process. I made it to six - even nine months sober, and I still didn't

feel good. I decided to start drinking again because I had given up on happiness. Drinking or sober, my life was basically joyless.

The joy will eventually return. There is a lot of sentiment in the recovery community that things start to get better in a significant way at about the one year mark. And as long a haul as it is to start to return to normal brain function, the damage done to neuro-pathways is permanent. Above I explained that the *effects of the damage* can be reversed, but your brain has made an indelible recording of what to do with alcohol. Have you ever heard a story of an alcoholic who had five, ten, even twenty years of sobriety before feeling cured and trying to drink socially again? Our brains pick up right where they left off and the disease continues its progression. A hibernating bear doesn't forget how to fish, and your brain has an indestructible memory of the survival patterns related to alcohol. There is no cure for the damage done to our addicted brains. Social, occasional drinking will never, ever be an option.

Our pleasure centers are not the only thing to consider when trying to overcome our addiction to alcohol. We need to give our very powerful subconscious mind the credit it deserves. You know it, the part of the brain that keeps the involuntary systems on track like breathing and pumping blood. Our subconscious tells us when we are hungry or cold or ready to wake up in the morning. Our subconscious keeps things rolling along without our awareness in order to leave room in our conscious mind for planning and analysis and learning.

Because the subconscious runs autonomous of our conscious ideas and opinions, our subconscious is kind of a stubborn mind of its own. The patterns and beliefs that get grooved into our subconscious are extremely hard to change, and they are stronger than the conscious part of our cranium that we actually control. What does this mean to you and your drinking? It means that in early sobriety, your subconscious is yet another enemy.

Your subconscious is the part of your brain that nudges you to go pour a drink at happy hour or yearn for a beer when you are watching a game. Just like your pleasure center, your subconscious has its own defense mechanism that manifests in easy recall of great drinking memories like a cold beer on a hot day or champagne on New Year's Eve or cocktails before dinner when out with

friends. Your subconscious has a much harder time remembering your hangovers or shame from overconsumption or alcohol induced fights with your spouse.

To put it simply, your subconscious mind will associate alcohol and good times far longer than your logical, thinking brain will. It takes a lot of time and effort to change your mind. When I explained that I eventually learned to believe alcohol is a poison, convincing my subconscious of that fact was far from easy. Knowing and believing are two very different things. I conceded that the facts were indisputable long before I was convinced to my core.

I recognize that this subconscious talk sounds a little hokey. Before you dismiss me as a lunatic, consider the single digit success rate of traditional addiction recovery programs. Healing this disease isn't easy. If it was - if there wasn't a little voodoo, grey-matter-denial taking place - we might not even know what the word, "relapse," means. But we do know and recovery is the most daunting challenge we will likely face in our lives. And the pixie dust, warlock magic of the subconscious is largely to blame. Be patient with yourself. The spell will wear off eventually, and your subconscious will be on your side once again.

The brain science of addiction is fascinating to me, and I am excited for the neuro-researchers to lay some more knowledge on us as they continue to explore our anatomical final frontier. I hope you found this summary of the cranial happenings of an alcoholic interesting. If you want more information, or if you would like a little validation for my ramblings, plenty is available in several of the books I reviewed in the second chapter, and many other books, too. Be sure to consult a reasonably recent reference as our knowledge of brain chemistry is evolving and ten-year-old science has been proven incorrect.

One thing is for sure. If we poison our brains long enough, we can't possibly be surprised by the resulting chaos.

Chapter 4

You're Not as Strong as You Think You Are

On several of my failed attempts to quit drinking, I tried to go about my normal business - just without a drink in my hand. I still attended all social engagements to which I was invited, and I was still a regular at all events I would regularly attend. Nothing changed. I just did my stuff sober. And my arrogance and stubbornness bought me another ticket on the active alcoholism merry-go-round each and every time.

When I finally attained permanent sobriety, I spent a lot of time hiding and lying in early sobriety. Starting the process of recovering after years of abusing alcohol is a major life event. Think of it like recovering from a major catastrophic car accident. You wouldn't walk around, business as usual, covered in bandages, surgery sutures and broken bones. You would heal. And healing requires immobilized patience. We just covered all the damage you have done to your brain. You have to give it a chance to heal before returning to your normal schedule of activities.

On one of my failed attempts at sobriety, a neighbor invited me to a baseball game about two weeks after my last drink. I accepted enthusiastically. I was eager to prove to myself how tough I was - that I could attend a major league baseball game, surrounded by 16 ounces plastic cups of golden-amber refreshment, and contently drink my water. The evening was a disaster. When my neighbor and his friends ordered their third round of beers before the end of the first inning, I left my seat and went on a quest for a non-alcoholic beer. It took me 45 minutes to find the one vendor in the stadium who had a couple of cans of Coors N/A in the back of the cooler for pathetic, retired drunks like me. I wasted all that time just so people I didn't know who could not have cared less who I was or what I was drinking who just happened to be in the seats around us would think I was a normal beer drinking dude. Pathetic. And that's exactly how the brain of an alcohol addiction sufferer in early sobriety thinks.

The night got worse from there. My neighbor and his friends had about 273 beers each, and became intolerable. It was a glimpse into the behavior I surely exhibited when I was drinking, and it was just the last possible place I should have been while my sobriety was so new and vulnerable. I didn't drink, but the experience sent me to a new low of self-loathing and questioning my decision to get sober.

Now, with years of sobriety under my belt, I can attend any function where massive quantities of alcohol will be consumed free from temptations and completely unashamed. In fact, if the event is too alcohol-centric, I have to hide my disgust for the heavy drinkers in attendance as they dig their pit of despair a little deeper with every sip. There are lots of events I choose not to attend, not because of temptation to drink, but because our society is full of gatherings that are really just thinly veiled excuses to drink.

I used to love house parties thrown in our neighborhood. The kids would retreat to the basement to watch a movie while the parents would stand around the kitchen island and eat and drink. I was usually walking home, and my family was with me and thus accounted for and not neglected. I would find a guy or two at the party who was as thirsty as I was, and we would take up residence next to the beer cooler on the back porch. That was drinking nirvana for me. Now, I cringe when we receive neighborhood house party invitations. I might nibble on some appetizers while having trivial conversations with acquaintances from down the street. "How's your summer going?" "Great, how's yours?" Somehow, knowing of all of my neighbors' vacation plans doesn't fit my need for meaningful connection. Forty-five minutes after arriving, I'm ready to go. My wife still shoots me a knowing glare as a reminder that I forced her to stay to the bitter end on so many occasions as long as there was still beer in the cooler.

The point is, you will get your freedom back. Decisions about attendance at any and all social functions will be your own to make again. But not today. Not soon. It is different for everyone, but that one year mark is probably about when you'll feel comfortable surrounded by booze.

In the meantime, lay low and let your brain heal. Sure, there are functions you cannot miss no matter how new your sobriety is. But be realistic about what makes the, "I've gotta be there," list. If you can decline, do it. Eventually, your friends will understand.

When you do have to attend a drinking-fest in early sobriety, you are going to need something to drink. Declining alcohol when surrounded by people who know how much you love to drink can be the most challenging aspect of early sobriety. The challenge doesn't necessarily come from resisting temptation (although that might very well be part of it). The challenge comes from the shame you will feel because you are not strong enough to control your drinking, and your abstinence announces that fact to everyone else in the room.

I consider myself to be a very honest guy. I really try to always tell the truth even in situations where it might cause conflict or pain. But in early sobriety, I think you have to arm yourself with well-planned lies. When you are offered a drink in early sobriety when you aren't yet strong enough to engage in a conversation about the evils of alcohol or the challenges booze has presented in your life, you need to give a believable reason when you decline. It is incredibly unfortunate that we can't just say we don't feel like drinking, but our society won't accept such an answer - especially from someone known to have such a fondness for the drink.

Tell your friends you are sick or you are finishing a round of antibiotics. Explain that you have to make a run to the airport later or you are chaperoning a church or school function for one of your kids. Maybe you pretend to have a very important early presentation at work, or maybe you create an alcohol-free cleanse you pledged to complete. Whatever. Just do some planning. Don't plan to tell your friends the truth, then get caught without a believable story when the confrontation proves to be more than your injured brain can handle. You'll drink.

You might be adamantly opposed to this piece of advice. I surely would have been in early sobriety. But let me ask you this: Would you rather start drinking and return to the cycle of hell on earth from which you are desperate to find freedom, or would you rather tell a few lies of self preservation? For me, the decision is clear. God and your moral compass will forgive you.

When I was in early sobriety, I was desperate for advice related to ordering a non-alcoholic drink in public at a restaurant or a bar. While I stand by my recommendation to avoid socializing in early sobriety, there are events you simply must attend. My terror from such situations existed on a variety of levels, starting with the server or bartender to whom I gave my drink order. I was so ashamed to think of the server scoffing and laughing at the pathetic teetotaler who was not man enough to have a beer or whiskey. What I learned as my recovery developed was that the opposite was true. I was a refreshing change for the server when I ordered my soda water with lime. At least one member of my group had no chance of turning into a loud, arrogant, asshole as the evening progressed. Servers see the dark side of alcohol consumption all the time. They could not possibly care less why you are not drinking. They are just thankful you're not.

A lot of the advice available when I was in early sobriety about ordering a non-alcoholic drink at a bar or restaurant was from women who encourage those of us in recovery to have a special, fancy, frilly non-alcoholic drink so that drinking still feels special. "Order a pineapple juice with grenadine garnished with a lime wedge and an orange slice with a splash of coconut infused soda served in a fluted flower vase topped with whipped cream and a tropical umbrella," the advice would go. All I could think was, *why don't I wear a neon sign on my head that says ALCOHOLIC in red letters with an arrow pointing down*. I was not in the least bit interested in having a fun and interesting non-alcoholic drink. I wanted to blend in and avoid turning my beverage into a conversation piece.

[My best advice](#) for peaceful navigation of early sobriety is to order soda water with ice and a lime served in a glass. And I recommend that you be that specific. I have been served soda water in a 32 ounce red plastic cup with the script Coca Cola logo on the side that makes me long for the neon sign described above. With the very specific order of soda water on ice with a lime served in a glass, everyone except the people in earshot when you place your order will assume you are enjoying an gin and tonic or vodka soda. You won't get a single question about sobriety as you mingle and converse.

As a drinker, I was an absolute lover of beer. However, I don't recommend non-alcoholic beers for two reasons. First, they don't taste very good. Second,

when trying to blend in and not draw attention to your sobriety, ordering a non-alcoholic beer is much more alarming to your friends than drinking soda water. Lots of people drink soda - not just alcoholics. For the most part, only pariahs with a despicable history with booze drink N/A beer. Besides, who needs the extra calories? Some in the recovery community think the fraction of a nano-percent of alcohol in N/A beer can trigger a relapse. That has not been my experience. I have found N/A beers to be so skunky and unappealing that drinking alcohol is the last thing they remind me of.

Planning is the key to navigating our alcohol soaked society while in early sobriety. Hide and lie and let your brain recover. Order your lime and soda with as much confidence as you can muster, and never apologize for not drinking. Eventually, you will return to attending every event and ordering your non-alcoholic drink with an air of condescending pride while you watch your friends poison their noggins. That day will come. I promise. But that day is not today. Do yourself a favor, and concentrate on yourself. Your friends will understand in due time. If they don't, they weren't really your true friends to begin with, were they?

Chapter 5

What You Eat Can Cure You

The advice has been the same for over a hundred years. When you experience a craving to drink while in early sobriety, eat something sweet to take the edge off. Chocolate, cookies, cakes, pie, a sugary soda or a milkshake - anything - just don't drink. You can transfer your addiction from alcohol to sugar, and deal with the sugar addiction later. It is called harm reduction, and it makes total sense. Except it is totally wrong.

One of the side benefits I expected in early sobriety was to shed my beer belly. When I thought of the calories I would be foregoing by eliminating alcohol, not to mention the calories I would avoid because I would no longer make terrible food choices like a plate of cheesy nachos at midnight after a dozen beers, I assumed the weight would evaporate almost immediately. That was not the case. I can't explain it completely because I really had eliminated thousands of empty alcohol calories a week, but I certainly did snack on sweets erratically and frequently to curb cravings. In any event, my harm reduction strategy actually kept the desire for a drink alive and well as I struggled through early sobriety.

I am hypoglycemic. As much as 90% of alcoholics are. I am not sure if alcoholism causes hypoglycemia, or if people with hypoglycemia are more prone to alcoholism. Whether the chicken or the egg comes first, I am one of millions of sufferers of both alcoholism and hypoglycemia.

Hypoglycemia manifests in blood sugar spikes and drops. The simple carbs in beer or the sugary mixers we blend with our liquor both cause our blood sugar to shoot up when we are hitting the drink hard. This causes our body (which is always trying to reach a state of equilibrium as explained earlier) to release insulin to counteract the blood sugar. This drops our blood sugar to unhealthy low levels. Low blood sugar results in hunger and moodiness. So we eat or drink - probably something not terribly healthy - and the blood sugar spikes again.

This is one of the reasons alcohol is so soothing to many drinkers like me. The blood sugar bump received from that first drink is calming and balancing. Our mood often improves, and we relax because our body stops screaming for sugar.

When we feed the early sobriety craving for alcohol with sugar, we feel soothed in much the same way. However, we are doing nothing to change the pattern of blood sugar peaks and valleys that caused the craving in the first place. Sugar is not really less dangerous than alcohol because sugar stokes the fire of alcohol craving into the future. We might make it past one urge, but we also ensure similar urges in the future. Is it any wonder why it is so difficult to beat alcoholism? Our number one tactic to resist temptation makes sure there will be more temptation in the future.

Proper nutrition will even out the blood sugar spikes. But eating a recovery friendly diet is critically important in early sobriety for another reason, too. Our brains cells are like 60% fat. In order to heal our wounded brains, we need to eat a diet that contains fat. The notion that eating fat makes us fat has done more damage to our society nutritionally than perhaps any other misguided assumption. We need fat to be healthy. In addition to replenishing the contents of our brain sells, fat is also satisfying and keeps us from overeating or eating too often.

We also need protein to heal our brains. Protein from animal sources provides us with the amino acids our body uses to produce neurotransmitters like dopamine. Remember when we discussed the massive damage heavy drinking does to our neurotransmitters? If we want our brains to heal and function correctly, we need to replenish the brain chemicals that we spent years destroying. I am not suggesting you run to McDonalds to become healthy in recovery. I encourage you to be particular about your protein and fat that comes from animal sources. Do some research and choose clean, natural, chemical free meat, milk and eggs. Your brain will thank you.

My good friend, Kelly Miller, is The Addiction Nutritionist. She shares her recovery diet on her [facebook page](#) and [Instagram feed](#) (just search for The Addiction Nutritionist). I began following Kelly's recommendations at the end of

my second year of sobriety, and it changed my life. I had long since stopped having cravings for alcohol, but I was often hungry between meals. The added sugar in my diet was ensuring that my blood sugar spikes were alive and well. When my body's aggressive insulin release would drop my blood sugar too low, I would get hungry and moody and eat something I later regretted. Weight loss was impossible, and I was depriving my brain from the neurotransmitter generation it deserved.

Kelly's recovery diet is pretty simple, really. Each of three meals a day should be comprised of half above ground vegetables (root vegetables are loaded with sugars and simple carbs), one quarter fat and protein (animal sources should play prominently in this area) and one quarter fruits and complex carbs. Added sugars and simple carbs have no place in my new lifestyle. So there is some discipline required, especially when I was accustomed to a bowl of ice cream or a cookie after dinner. White flour bread and pasta is also on the unapproved list. However, I get to enjoy whole grain bread, meats and cheeses along with basically all the above ground vegetables I can eat. The conversion to whole milk from skim (skim milk is basically sugar water - both devoid of nutrition and really good at spiking our blood sugar) took some adjustment, but I drink less milk and feel much more satisfied.

I used to eat fruit for breakfast, a vegan sandwich for lunch most days, whatever I could grab for an afternoon snack, and then go to town eating like a starved hog at dinner (topped off with previously mentioned ice cream or a cookie). Our willpower is the strongest when we are fresh and rested. As the day's challenges and traumas unfold, our willpower wanes. That's why my eating choices went from healthy and sparse at breakfast to thoughtless gorging at the tired end of the day.

With balance that includes animal fat and protein at every meal, my cravings for snacks between meals have all but disappeared. My mood remains more consistent (unless I am sleep deprived), and my cravings from sugar are a thing of the past. I don't view this as a diet. I see it as a healthy lifestyle choice that is particularly beneficial to alcoholics in recovery.

You might be asking the same question that befuddled me when I learned about hypoglycemia and the necessity of amino acids in neurotransmitter generation. If nutrition is such an important component of recovery from addiction, why have I never heard this stuff before? It turns out the information is not new. The founders of AA discussed hypoglycemia a hundred years ago. Why the role of nutrition never found its way into traditional recovery programs is beyond perplexing.

What's important to you and your survival in early sobriety is you are armed with nutritional information that will really help your brain heal and your cravings diminish. I encourage you to listen to a fascinating conversation with Kelly Miller on my podcast called the Untoxicated Podcast. It is our [fourth episode](#), and it goes into a great deal more detail than I have provided here. I know Kelly would love to hear from you as well. She's The Addiction Nutritionist on social media.

Chapter 6

You Are A Victim

Whether you are comfortable calling yourself an alcoholic, or you have yet to make a self diagnosis but know alcohol is having a negative impact on your life, your drinking is likely leaving victims in its wake. Nothing will help you and your loved ones deal and heal more than understanding that you, the drinker, are a victim of this wretched disease, too.

I don't mean to minimize the damage that might have been done to those around you. Sometimes alcoholics cast a wide net of destruction and cause trauma for everyone they encounter. Other times, especially in the cases of high-functioning alcoholics like me, only the closest family members are aware of and impacted by the severity of the overdrinking calamity and chaos. In either case, the people who have to deal with us and are on the receiving end of careless comments or alcohol-induced arguments are most certainly victims and deserve to be recognized as such. Our families, and sometimes our friends, go through hell as a result of our drinking. Their trauma is real and they need to heal from our addiction as well.

But the point that I'm making - a point that is controversial and usually misunderstood in our society - is that the alcoholic is most definitely a victim, too.

Think about it. How did we become addicted to alcohol? We probably grew up with alcohol all around us both at home and out in our communities. For many of us, our parents and other family members taught us to drink by example. In high school and college, our choices were to drink alcohol or face social ostracization. As adults, almost every imaginable social function from after hours work events to weekend birthday parties for our four-year-old children include drinking. Alcohol is not considered socially unacceptable like smoking cigarettes or taking opioids. Alcohol is unavoidable and associated with success and happiness like no other substance. So when we are exposed to one of the world's most highly

addictive substances from birth through our experimental years and into adulthood, why don't we naturally consider those who become addicted to alcohol victims?

So, that's my soapbox rant about the completely backward nature of our societal view of alcoholism. But there's a far more important reason that we have to start recognizing alcoholics as victims of a disease. Our families are not truly able to understand our predicament and support our recovery until they view us as suffering victims instead of treacherous monsters.

There is so much pent-up anger in early sobriety. Our spouses are furious - and justifiably so - for the damage our drinking has caused. Our families and friends have terrible memories seared into their brains. We have said vile and nasty things. We have ignored the needs and pleas of our loved ones. We have earned their hatred with our despicable actions.

But here's the deal. That wasn't us. Destructive behavior is the horrendous side effect of this miserable disease.

If you are the loved one of a person trying to recover from alcoholism, you have needs for recovery yourself which you must address. You cannot ignore yourself and the trauma you have been through.

But it's not your beloved alcoholic's fault. Blame society. Blame your drinker's beverage of choice. Blame the family pattern of heavy drinking. But blaming the drinker who is fighting for his very life is not helpful.

There is so much shame associated with alcoholism. We are ashamed that we can't control our drinking. In early sobriety, we are overwhelmed with shame to be the only teetotaler in an alcohol soaked world. We are ashamed of our despicable actions when we overdrank, and we are ashamed of our inability to control our drinking. Shame is everywhere. Overcoming it is paramount to the healing process. And when our loved ones understand the mountain of shame that we face and support us like disease victims instead of berating us as the

culprits of the destruction, we make faster progress in our recovery. We heal. We more rapidly sleigh our demons.

The two most commonly discussed of the twelve steps to recovery through Alcoholics Anonymous are numbers eight and nine. Step eight is to make a list - an inventory - of all the people our drinking harmed. Step nine is to make amends. The alcoholic is to rehash our drunken asshole-ness and then apologize. Most families dealing with alcoholism know nothing about brain chemistry or recovery nutrition. But they all know about the apology tour. And most of the alcoholic's family members are anxious to hear those words from the alcoholic they love: "I'm sorry."

In my opinion, the amends process is one of the reasons traditional recovery methods have such poor success rates. An alcoholic in early recovery is enveloped in shame. The best thing the alcoholic's family can do to support the recovery process is recognize that those who fell victim to addiction are just that - victims. It is so hard. There is so much pain. But it is my very controversial opinion that blaming the alcoholic hinders the recovery in profound ways.

We do not shame or blame cancer, diabetes or heart disease patients even though lifestyle choices often increase our likelihood of contracting those diseases (just like alcoholism). We pray for cancer patients and offer them rides to treatment. We visit heart patients in the hospital and offer meals for families dealing with diabetes. The outpouring of support for the victims of most chronic diseases is heartwarming and a huge help to the healing process.

Just imagine if we came together as a community to support the victims of alcoholism in our families and societies. Can you begin to estimate how much more successful our loved ones would be in their attempt to stay sober if we eliminated the blame and offered hugs and love instead of scorn while waiting for our apologies?

If you are concerned about your drinking and struggling with early recovery, I encourage you to share this chapter with your loved ones (there is a [free ebook download](#) waiting for them). There is so much that is misunderstood about addiction recovery. I'm sure your family and friends are hurt and have wounds

that will need to heal from this wretched disease, too. But I'll bet they would prefer to be a part of the solution than exacerbate the barriers to recovery. I'm sure they would rather have a healthy, sober you than a shame-filled apology.

Recovery isn't easy. In fact, it's likely to be the hardest thing you ever accomplish. It is a team effort. Your team will be far more successful if you are all working together to heal. Love is better medicine than anger everytime.

Chapter 7

Exposed

I'll never forget the day I got in way over my head attempting to clear a pretty serious drain clog. I made an incredible mess of slimy drain sludge and worked for hours with a hand auger without success. The smell was horrendous, the black goo was everywhere and the stubborn clog got the best of me.

After hours of work, I cleaned-up my mess, burned my clothes (not really, but I probably should have) and took a very long, very hot shower. I brought a beer with me into the tub. About half way through my scrubbing, I yelled for my wife to please bring me another.

I was dejected and exhausted, and I knew precisely how to treat my emotional and physical trauma. I medicated my ailments with my liquid panacea. And it did, in fact, make the pain go away. I still had to deal with the clog the next day. It turns out drinking beer in the shower does nothing to clear a drain (or address any of your problems, for that matter), but it stifled my feelings for the time being. Alcohol was my one and only tool for managing my emotions.

Our emotional immaturity is a serious obstacle to successfully navigating early sobriety. We can't drink away our frustration, anger, pain, depression or anxiety. We have to learn to deal with those emotions - all of those emotions. It might be emasculating to think about this topic, but if you don't address your emotions, they will become a serious threat to your sobriety.

Here's the bottom line: Humans were not designed to be happy all the time. When we manipulate our emotions with booze, we don't learn to manage and respect the full range of human emotions.

Did you have a bad day? Better have a drink. Are you stressed? You deserve some booze. Did your grandmother die? Let's drink a toast to her memory. Is your marriage in trouble? Surely drinking will make that go away, too.

When we use alcohol to change all of our feelings to a disconnected ambivalence, we are defenseless when the booze is gone. It is like standing naked in an ice storm. We have no way to protect ourselves, and the pain is excruciating.

Early sobriety is a great time to practice embracing all of our emotions. If you are depressed, don't make it worse by dwelling on how long it has been since you felt joy. Rather, learn to let the sadness wash over you confident that the pain will pass eventually and be replaced by whatever emotion the world has in store for you next.

This isn't an easily learned skill, especially for those of us who spent many years stunting our own emotional growth. It requires patience and a firm understanding that emotions are just our brain's natural reaction to the stimuli around us. When you embrace the fact that a full range of emotions are just proof that your brain is working properly, feeling bad won't feel so bad.

Happiness should not be a goal. It is something for us to appreciate when it is with us, and something to remember fondly when it is not. Don't worry - it'll come back around again soon. The key to happiness might just be to lose our unnatural fixation on happiness.

Chapter 8

Coming Out

The best day of my life was January 10, 2018. That's the day I sent over 3,000 emails and blasted social media about my alcoholism. My wedding day was magical. The births of each of my four children were blessings that brought unmatched joy and fulfillment to my life. But the day I came out about my addiction was the scariest, hardest and most life-altering day I'll likely ever experience.

The only thing more significant and powerful than the fear that enveloped me as coming out day approached, was the relief and overwhelming support I received as a result of my announcement. Coming out transformed my relationships. It revealed bonds I did not know existed, and resulted in love I never expected. My life will never be the same.

Of course, there is the practical matter of accountability. I was about a year sober when I sent the emails. Telling every soul I knew that I was an alcoholic solidified my sobriety. My friends are not degenerates. My family was not completely dysfunctional. After my coming out, none of my friends or family members would ever drink with me again. [My coming out letter](#) included details about my alcohol-induced depression and the damage done to my marriage. I was fully exposed and praying for understanding. The idea that I could simply start drinking again and chalk my period of sobriety up to a phase I was going through was simply and completely out of the question. I am blessed with a lot of really caring people in my life. Even the heavy drinkers with whom I associated myself were generous, loving people. They would never have considered drinking with me after my admission of pain and desperation. My public drinking career was over the moment I pushed the "send" button.

A few of my loved ones were astute enough to grasp this enormous benefit of my very public admission of alcoholism. They called the move brilliant and enlightened. And while the permanence of my decision that resulted from my

coming out was not lost on me, it was not my main purpose. After a year of reading memoirs and researching about brain chemistry, I was angry.

I was mad about the massive shame I had endured both in active alcoholism and in early sobriety. I was furious that the cure for this disease was clearly a change in public perception, and not much was being done to effect the change in our society. I was distraught to know that more people die from alcoholism than cancer or heart disease, yet we still whisper about and shame the victims of addiction. I was frantic. I didn't know yet what I was going to do about it, but I knew it was time for me to stop hiding and start being part of the solution.

Many, many people have told me with admiration, and even envy, how brave I was to share my story so openly. There is a sadness in their eyes when they compliment my bravery. Their hidden truth is clearly painful and screaming to get out. But for various reasons, they can't quite suppress the fear and push through the terror to let the light of openness shine on their agonizing secrets.

I get it. I understand - really I do. But the life-transforming freedom that awaits us on the other side when we let our truth speak is like nothing I've ever experienced.

Casual, throw-away relationships that I could take or leave suddenly transformed into bonds of love and faith when I came out. Neighbors, fellow church members, business associates and friends of my friends all sought connection with me as a result of my email. Some broke down and told stories of the pain addiction had ravaged on their families. Others shook my hand with a silent knowing tear in their eye. They weren't able to share their story, but my sharing of mine unlocked emotions that bonded us together for life. So many long, squeeze hugs. So many heartfelt nods and pats on the back. My story took hundreds of relationships to a place they simply could never have gone while I suffered in anonymity.

I'm not naive enough to think my openness about my addiction didn't put distance between me and some of my drinking friends. I'm sure my admission caused some discomfort for some of my friends for whom my story hit close to home while they refused to deal with their drinking. But one thing is absolutely

true. Not a single person spoke an unkind word to me as a result of my truth blast. It caused me zero professional difficulties, and I heard nothing but support from friends and family. And if there are relationships that weakened because of my honesty, I haven't noticed. I'm sure there are some invitations to heavy-drinking events that no longer come my way, but my good friends want to spend time with me even more now that they genuinely know who I am.

Vulnerability is a rare and powerful trait. It is completely disarming to the people around us. Everyone is dealing with their own stuff - EVERYONE. When we bare our challenges for all to see, the people around us can't help but feel inspired by our bravery. No one knows what roils below the surface of the calm and put-together personas we are taught to display. We look like life's a breeze while we manage stress and suppress pain.

But when we reveal what's behind the facade, we become invincible.

I'm sure you have reasons why coming out like I did won't work for you. Maybe you are afraid you will lose your job. Maybe you don't think your friends will be as kind as mine. Maybe you are afraid of shining a spotlight on generations of addiction in your family. Maybe your spouse is a heavy drinker and you fear you won't find the support you need.

This is where you probably expect me to tell you that you have nothing to fear - that your dread is unjustified. Sorry - I can't do that. We live in a society that still largely views addiction as a character flaw instead of the deadly and curable disease it is. You might get fired if you come out. You might lose friendships or harm your family if you go public about your abuse of alcohol.

But if you don't admit your truth, you become part of the problem. It's a lot more rewarding to be part of the solution.

Your permanent sobriety becomes infinitely more attainable when you admit your truth to the world, and this wretched disease of whispers and shame gets closer to its cure when you humanize it for all to see.

I don't want to minimize the significance of the decision you face. It won't be easy to tell everyone you know - friends, family and professional associates - that you are an alcoholic. But I can promise you one thing. It will change your life forever. It will change your life in ways anonymous recovery never, ever will.

Haven't you let this disease do enough damage? Haven't you given alcohol enough power over who you are? Isn't it time to let the truth set you free?

The fight to end the stigma associated with addiction is rewarding and meaningful. We could use another brave and vulnerable warrior just like you.

Check out my [Coming Out letter](#), January 10, 2018.

Chapter 9

Where Does God Fit In?

Let go and let God, is the cornerstone of Alcoholics Anonymous. My rejection of this mantra is one of the main reasons AA never worked for me.

Let me be clear: I reject the slogan. I do not reject God. Quite to the contrary, actually. I have been a believer and practiced my faith to varying degrees my entire life. God is everything to me. I just don't believe He wants us to hand Him the steering wheel of our life. I think He wants us to listen to His call and point ourselves in His chosen direction.

I drank alcohol for twenty-five years, and suffered from alcoholism for the last ten. During the period when I knew I was in trouble, I prayed to God a lot. I prayed for the strength to control my drinking. I prayed asking God if I could moderate or if I needed to stop drinking altogether. I was aware on a conscious and constant level of God's commandment that we not worship false idols, and I asked God frequently for forgiveness for the massively important role alcohol played in my life. I prayed for peace and serenity for my wife as she tried to navigate the turbulence of marriage to an alcoholic. I prayed for the wisdom and discretion to keep my antics and alcohol-induced mood swings away from my innocent and impressionable children.

God and I were tight. Perhaps never more so than when I was [deep in the pit](#) of debilitating depression resulting from heavy alcohol consumption. I talked to God incessantly, and I know He listened and laid all the answers out for me to discover. Most of all, I know God loved me when I hated myself and He showed a patience only God could muster.

I drove drunk and never received a DUI nor killed anyone. I [survived nights in college](#) when I took risks and drank so much that my blood alcohol level surely reached lethal heights. I did not destroy my finances nor lose jobs due to my alcoholism, and my marriage and family stayed together in a truly loving way in

the worst hours of my addiction. And even when I lost all hope and sincerely did not want to live any longer, I held on and endured.

There is no question in my mind that every single bit of that is the work of God. He protected me. He guided me. He did it because He loves me. But He also did it because He has a plan for me.

Part of that plan is to share that devout Christians can be alcoholics, too. I have always interpreted letting go and letting God as a coming to Jesus kind of moment. After years of rejecting God while drinking, the alcoholic suddenly finds religion as part of the recovery process. If you don't have God in your life, I think welcoming Him in for any reason is a wonderful thing. But if God is already with you daily, the idea of letting him in is redundant and meaningless.

I don't often write about God because I want my writing to resonate with all people who suffer from alcoholism regardless of their spiritual beliefs. Atheists and agnostics deserve to recover, too, because God loves them whether they know it or not. I often leave God out of my writing because God wants me to do so. I'm sure of it.

So, where does God fit into my recovery? If recovery is my job, God is my boss. I look to Him for guidance and support, and He encourages me to be productive and successful. God is important. God and I are in constant contact. But God doesn't want me to relinquish control of my life and wait for him to take the wheel.

As a Christian, I believe that accepting God and Jesus in my life and praying for Them to forgive my sins is all I have to do to get into Heaven. However, I still look at life as a bit of a tryout for whatever awaits us in Heaven. If we suffer from addiction and never break free while here on Earth, God will have a huge, pain-relieving hug waiting for us when we get to Heaven. However, if we quiet our minds enough to listen to our spirits and decipher the plan God has for us in life, our time here will be infinitely more blessed and God will greet us at the pearly gates with a high-five and a pat on the back.

Spiritual people who have a strong connection to God can fall victim to alcoholism. And spiritual people who have a strong connection to God can fight

their way back and recover. And when we do, if we listen very quietly - if we silence the chaos in our minds and dismiss our carnal desires for wealth and fame - we might just hear what God has in store for us.

I never wanted to be a writer, and I certainly never imagined I would end up as an alcoholic. But it doesn't matter what I want or dream. My mission was up to God right from the very beginning. Understanding that - embracing and welcoming that - that's where God fits into my recovery.

And He loves you and has a plan for you, too.

Chapter 10

It Is Worth the Wait

I am a naturally impatient person. When I make a decision, I want to start seeing results immediately. And this is probably why I failed at sobriety so many times.

Repairing our brains takes a long time. Eating the right foods to regenerate neurotransmitters does help. Avoiding temptation and learning to experience emotions in early sobriety makes the process more manageable, but there are no shortcuts when healing from addiction. You might feel measurably different in a year or more, some things take a lot longer and are more like a lifelong evolution, and some of the damage can never be repaired. The better the job you do of embracing that last sentence, the better chance you have at a successful recovery.

All the times I quit drinking unsuccessfully, I wanted my life to continue as normal just without alcohol as part of my routine. It just simply cannot work that way. There is work involved. There is pain involved. And yes, there is a ton of patience involved.

Eventually, however, recovery begins to be well worth the effort. In fact, I am not a big fan of the word, “recovery.” I prefer to think of my life after alcohol as my own personal enlightenment. Think about it for a minute. I am learning how to feel joy naturally and rejecting chemically-induced pleasure. I am learning to experience and interact with a wide range of God-intended human emotions. I am rebuilding trust with my wife and I am ever present for my kids. I long ago stopped feeling like I am healing from something and started feeling like my life was opening up to unlimited possibilities.

Recovery isn't just about reduced temptations to drink and ending cycles of trauma and depression. Recovery is about experiencing all life has to offer unfiltered. Let's face it. Not many people every reach that pinnacle of freedom. Most of your friends and family members have secrets and skeletons they keep tucked neatly out of sight. Almost everyone you know makes decisions based on

social status and ego. The in-control-social-drinkers in your life use alcohol to lubricate their lives. Rare is the person who lives a life wide open to the possibilities. If you embrace your recovery, your future is unlimited.

Just remember - even if you like the way that sounds and you want a piece of that action, you have to earn your peace and freedom. And earning enlightenment is a long and grueling road.

But the destination is well worth the journey. I hope to see you there. And never forget - I'm pulling for you.

About the Author

Matt Salis is a writer and speaker focused primarily on alcoholism and recovery. He lives in Denver, Colorado, with his wife, Sheri, and their four kids. Matt believes the cure to the epidemic of alcoholism can be found in eliminating the stigma associated with addiction and promoting a healthy lifestyle that includes a loud and proud approach to recovery. Matt writes the blog, SoberAndUnashamed.com and contributes to [various magazines and online publications](#). Matt welcomes your feedback or questions, and can be reached at matt@SoberAndUnashamed.com.

In addition to writing and speaking in pursuit of his mission in life, Matt coaches high school soccer, is active in his church where his wife serves as the director of children's ministry, enjoys all that the Colorado outdoors has to offer and does his best to guide his kids on a path to addiction-free joy in their adulthood.

Matt is thankful for his sobriety, not because abstaining from alcohol equates to happiness, but because his recovery has included an enlightenment of sorts about what is important in life. Matt no longer pursues wealth, power or fame. Rather, Matt seeks the human connections that lead to fulfillment for us all.

We are all in this together. We might as well help each other along the way.

