Addicted to Life

I have HIV and hep C, but addiction is my major disease.

October 1, 1999 By Lillian Thiemann

Once an addict, always an addict" goes the saying. Even though I am HIV and hepatitis C positive, my major disease is addiction. Over the years, I've been hooked on relationships, success, exercise, and food bingeing and purging. But my longestlasting addiction has been to drugs—for 17 years I couldn't kick the habit.

My disease of addiction constantly reminds me of its presence. It works under the surface infiltrating my thoughts and actions so that I'll pick up heroin and cocaine, suffer and die.

Paranoid? Melo-dramatic? Nope: This concept of "disease as entity" is common to 12-step members like my-self. The phrase This disease wants you dead is one I've heard more than a few times. As fear-based as this may sound, it is better to know your enemy than not. As with my HIV, I had to get as much info as possible in order to make an informed treatment decision. There are other ways to get clean, but none worked for me.

The one thing I have learned in my career as a dope fiend is that the price of sobriety is daily work and eternal vigilance. I didn't always believe this.

When I was diagnosed with HIV and hep C in 1989, I had been drug-free for a couple of years—a long time for me. Instead of breaking down and shooting up again, I devoted myself to this business of staying alive with a vengeance. I began each day at 6 am with exercise, followed by an organic vegetarian diet and supplements. I started my own business, went to school, got a handsome and successful HIV negative boyfriend, took up rock climbing and won back the respect of my family. (Never mind that my man was an active addict and my mom was the only family member who knew I had HIV.)

I was doing great—except for the black hole inside me. All my activities were about achieving things on the outside so I could feel worthy and attractive. I needed constant stimulation—otherwise, the fear I felt was like withdrawal without the physical symptoms. Into that black hole I crammed my accomplishments and the love from other people. But still, I ended up feeling nothing. This is addiction at its dry best. And while you don't have to be an addict to have these feelings, if you are—and don't deal with the black hole effectively—chances are you'll turn to drugs again to fill it.

Chemical addiction to narcotics is a process that ultimately shuts down the production of endorphins, those natural painkillers that keep us from feeling every little thing that our nerves experience—such as bones grinding together when we walk. When an addict goes into withdrawal, there are no replacement endorphins. During the five days it takes for an addict's body to start making them again, withdrawal symptoms are intense. Behaviors that run counter to self-preservation instincts erupt, making you want to use again—now!

After almost six years clean, a back injury landed me in the hospital, robbing me of the ability to exercise. Devastated, I was all ears when my addiction whispered that this would be the perfect time to get that recommended liver biopsy. When the doc said, "I'm going to prescribe Demerol for your pain," I hesitated a mere nanosecond before saying, "Yeah!" The next day, I scammed a higher dose and woke up every three hours so I wouldn't miss a shot. I went home from the hospital with a pocketful of codeine.

In two weeks I had a needle sticking out of my arm. Knowing that speedballing (shooting heroin and cocaine together) could accelerate the progression of my HIV didn't deter me. Yet two months later, when I somehow realized I was about to throw away all I'd worked for, I sought help. That was five years ago last March. After a hospital detox I became a dedicated 12-stepper and remain so today. I fill the black hole with healthy and spiritually enriching practices. When people say, "But you're addicted to 12-stepping!" I say, "So what's your point?"

My ex never liked recovery much. He says his fear of me dying of AIDS made him use drugs again after 11 months clean. The night I found him shooting up in the bathroom was the night our relationship ended. Today I can say that, of the two of us, I am the happier and healthier person—HIV, hep C and all.

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