Dose Encounters

She got clean with a little help from her meth.

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Heroin is hip again. And until the consciousness of the world changes, dope will be around for anyone with the nerve to think they can handle it. But whether you're "given your wings" (first injected) by a friend or seek them out yourself as you would the perfect lover, heroin addiction is for life.

Sure, I've met some people who tried junk and then decided it wasn't for them. But for me and many others with the disease of addiction, a shot of dope is like coming home. How to describe the power of that relief? I could liken it to the feeling of food in a starving belly, but that wouldn't even come close.

Because heroin is *sooooo* good, I wanted it all the time. This is how it usually goes: First you try it (you're in control), next you like it (still in control), then you love it (isn't this great?), spend all your money to supply your ever-increasing need (you can stop anytime you like), beg, borrow or steal (fuck anyone who gets in the way), and finally your sense of humanity rolls downhill to keep pace with your raging habit, leading to the corruption of your morals, criminal behavior, jail, illness, AIDS or death.

This was my process, and I don't know any dope fiend who hasn't gone through it. Some take longer than others, but in the end you go down. And when that happens, the chance to get a break from active drug life becomes attractive.

For me it happened years ago as I sat on a stoop on the Lower East Side at 4 a.m., broke and alone, thinking, "I was supposed to die from this shit already." Then it dawned on me: *I was going to live*. This scared me more than the thought of AIDS. (I didn't know then that I already had HIV, and if I'd continued using, odds are I would have died pretty quickly.)

Determined to break from the lifestyle, and since I couldn't stop using heroin without chemical support, I enrolled in a methadone maintenance program. I was familiar with the clinic from purchasing meth illegally outside when no dope was around.

Getting used to a life without dope takes time. The urge to supplement a dose of methadone with other substances doesn't fade overnight. To my "blocking dose" of meth—which keeps you from

getting dope-sick (going into withdrawal) and from getting high if you choose to use heroin—I added coke, alcohol, pills and pot.

After two weeks I stabilized on my dosage and—when not mixing in other substances—felt as close to “normal” as a dope fiend on meds can. Methadone, taken as prescribed, doesn’t get you high after the initial adjustment period. But it *is* highly addictive, and once hooked, you get very ill if you don’t have it daily.

Trust me, your body knows when it’s meth time; there’s no skipping a day and feeling OK. I’d get on my motorcycle and ride 30 miles in 40-degree weather to get to the clinic. For quite some time I couldn’t think of traveling far from New York City for fear of being kept from my dose.

After 90 days I got take-home privileges (methadone-to-go) because I’d met certain criteria, such as regularly passing pee tests. I admit, I “swung” with mine (switched my drug-laced pee with a clean jar of someone else’s, at $5 an ounce) a few times. But eventually I could follow most rules: I got to the program when I was supposed to, drank the pink liquid and showed up at my scheduled doctor and counselor appointments.

It took me years to settle down. Like most dope fiends, I was stubborn. Being clean held no appeal until I began to build a life using only my daily prescribed methadone dose. Therapy became a possibility, then a fact, of my life. I went into physical and emotional training with my program counselor as coach. I never faltered or relapsed, but it took two years to detox and become drug-free, as I slowly decreased my meth dosage and prepared for a life with no crutch. It was the hardest thing I’ve ever done.

At the end of my program I was diagnosed with HIV. Who knows what I would have done if I’d found out before getting clean? But I do know this: With a sober state of mind, I was able to take care of my health and find a support system. A decade has passed since that first day off methadone. Now, when faced with illness or other challenges, I use an expression I learned from my best partner ever: “It’s nothing for a player.”

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