# Learning to Live Drug-Free Isn’t Easy—Especially If You Ride Mass Transit

A life lesson, excerpted from my new memoir *Recycled Human: The Reality of Re-Entry*

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The following “Subway Madness” is a sneak peek chapter from my new memoir Recycled Human: The Reality of Re-Entry, which deals with anxiety, phobias, HIV, sex work and other topics. You can order it on Amazon here, and you can read my poetry and other musing on RecycledHuman.com.

Silence and noise feel like torture to me but subways are the ultimate battle. I put on my headphones, trying to block out the situation, or play games on my phone—but when my battery runs out, I almost feel the anxiety of someone being held against their will.

The claustrophobia of subways has only worsened over the years, with space becoming overcrowded to the point that people do not even turn around when they are blocking the entrance. I have been driven to just rebel and say, “Yo, can I get on the fucking train?” or, “Stop breastfeeding the fucking door and wean yourself off to the middle of the car.” I would continue to mumble, “Motherfuckers are probably going to the next borough but still have to stand in the fucking door.” Mind you, I said this loudly but indirectly. I never made eye contact, since I rode the trains before everyone had phones and it was all about eyeball wars. The usual altercation started with, “What the fuck are you looking at?” and all of the other one-liner, like, “Why you all in my mouth?” (for those eavesdropping on a conversation). We also had the infamous Guardian Angels who stood in the doors of the subway, not to block traffic but to be a security measure. They would not be able to stand in the doors of the train now since nobody fits and gets to pose anymore. I remember I used to always stand against the door, not wanting to be close to anyone but also wanting to be seen. My drugs made me feel important and aloof at the same time.

Now the game has changed. There is no longer an arm's reach rule where someone cannot come within striking distance while arguing because that would be considered a fight. Everyone is now on top of each other, and totally self-absorbed, relying on their phones like oxygen. At first, I made fun of people on phones, but eventually, I followed suit. I came to recognize that these behaviors come from discomfort and not knowing how to cope. I have also grown up a little, realizing that I am not the only person in NYC who feels like they are having a nervous breakdown.

I was now drug-free and like a child, learning to walk again. The basic norms of society, which I had never wanted to learn, had evolved while I was self-medicating. I had even lost my street slang from being sedated for so long. I did not fit in anywhere anymore, not even within street culture. When you feel powerless like this, you must do something powerful, so tantrums are right up an addict's alley. Addicts like myself make a whole lot of noise as an illusion of winning when everything in life feels like a loss.

My ego lived off fumes supported by "fuck this, fuck that." I really did not know how to process the world and my environment. I also did not know at the time that I had PTSD, which probably did not help matters. PTSD is Post Traumatic Stress Disorder and was not even recognized as a condition that could affect civilians until recently—as if the streets are not another battleground. PTSD can be found at home, too. Look at all the children who have been traumatized by struggles in their own homes, and—I hate to say it—by poverty, too, which has been proven to add to domestic violence and addiction. While I was growing up, nobody looked at what happened at home. If you were dysfunctional at school, it was your fault, and you were labeled a problem child. I am glad people are now looking closer into what children are exposed to in their home environments. Now I was back in the "real" world and trying to operate within it—yet even watching the news was so disturbing that it could have made someone want to jump off the planet (fuck the roof). I had been on and off methadone for about 20 years. When you are on methadone and doing what is called "harm reduction," it means that you take your sip of methadone and it blocks the urge to get high. I consider this bullshit; methadone is just a legal drug. My hands-on experience tells me that "harm reduction" is a dangerous game to play; it can be misused and enables drug addiction and stagnation.

It was scary to face life without drugs, but I knew that drugs cost money and that a person had to go to extremes to get them. It is like burning yourself to earn the right to get a day of relaxation.

It had stopped making sense.

Facing the subway without drugs was an added source of stress. One night I was coming home from school after a three-hour Friday night class. It was going on 10:00 p.m. My train went express to 125th Street in Harlem, and I needed to get the downtown local since I lived on 110th. There seemed to be a hold-up, so I put my back to a pole and observed. Before gentrification started in Harlem, I remember people getting on the A train by accident at 59th Street and panicking when they saw they were going directly to Harlem. Now, due to gentrification, white people are walking around like they are untouchable.

A black gentleman was walking around with one crutch he did not need. My radar went off as I watched him pace. He finally went and hit an Asian man on the head— not that hard, but he still hit him. The Asian man went to defend himself, but his friends defused the situation and got him to walk away.

When I got on my train it was fairly empty but for a lot of young people looking like they were dressed to go out for a Friday night.  Again, I saw the man with the crutch. He was walking up and down the car, stopping at various women sitting alone, and jabbing his crutch within a few inches of their faces.

I said to myself, “This motherfucker ain’t crazy. He’s picking his victims and they’re all the easy ones.” He did it to a young black woman and then to a young Puerto Rican woman on the other end. He had the nerve to go by a group of young men and try to fist bump them; so far, they had remained neutral. I was only traveling two stops and I was pissed, looking at the rest of the people on the train and thinking, “For real?” I purposely walked down the car, stopping near where the man with the crutch was standing and waited for my door to open. I assumed he had gestured towards me, so I went right into a fighting stance, planning to block the crutch and try to take it. To my surprise, when the train door opened at 110th and I walked out, he came out the door with me—not by choice, but by force. The whole car had just needed a green light; he got punched, kicked and thrown out the door with his crutch.

Now it was just me and him as the doors closed and the train left the station. I said, “How does that feel? You still feel dangerous?” I hoped he did not, and I walked up the stairs while keeping an eye over my shoulder. He came up behind me, following me out of the subway, but he just walked off into the night with his one crutch. I watched him walk into Central Park and realized he was a man without a destination. I wondered what had happened to him in his life to make him like that. I almost felt bad for him. Though I had a place to go,  I still knew how it felt to be a nomad. I had been couch surfing in someone’s condo for 15 years, so it was not my home. I had just met someone who thought my piece could fit their puzzle, so I became part of it. I told him I was HIV positive when we first met, and he put me on the couch and never touched me again. I know that must sound horrible to some, but it felt safe to have a place where I knew I was not desirable.

Being a subway vigilante did not always have such a good outcome for me. When I was 21 and living with my boyfriend in Newark, New Jersey, I would go to NYC every day to work. One day, I was on a bus due to problems with Jersey Transit, and I heard a commotion in the front. A black woman a little older than I was had begun ranting and cursing at someone. Finally, I said from the back, “Would you shut the fuck up?” Do not ask me why I have these impulse issues. I know that when I was a child, my mother was prone to tantrums and this made me feel powerless. I never forgot that feeling, and when people became out of control, it acted as a trigger for me. After I yelled at the woman on the bus, she stopped ranting and grew very calm. She forgot the person at whom she was yelling and told me that since I was a tough guy, she and I were getting off at the next stop to see how tough I really was. I saw the crowd watching and said, “Okay, no problem.”

The bus pulled over. We both got off very calmly like we were going to a business meeting. She and I were facing each other, so I started to put up my hands, but before I knew it I was on the floor with a busted lip, black eye, and sore nose. “Aw fuck, that’s embarrassing,” I told myself, “but I have to get up and try again.”

Before I could stand, she said, “Do you know what I do for a living?”

I responded, “No, what’s that got to do with anything?”

She continued by telling me that she was a trainer in hand-to-hand combat for hostage takeovers, then gave me her hand and helped me up.

I have a problem with someone being picked on and nobody caring, maybe because I feel that they are me in some way, but she told me not to recklessly play the hero like that in the future because I did not know what I might walk into.

As we waited for the next bus, she showed me a few locks and holds, and we actually enjoyed each other’s company. We parted with a goodbye and she made me promise that I would mind my business in the future. We both laughed. She felt like a big sister, using her upper hand to show me what I did wrong in a caring way. It was a rough lesson, but luckily one with a happy ending.

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