

Life After Death

Jim Henry

CHILDHOOD OF PREDISPOSITION TO ALCOHOLISM AND DRUGS

Forty years of life I spent struggling with addiction. My childhood consisted of a lot of neglect and abandonment. My dad left when I was six. I did not have much family at that time. My grandparents and dad were alcoholics, and alcoholism seemed to run in my family. So, I was predisposed to alcoholism, especially at a young age. My mother raised me independently and I was the only child. She supported me in any way that she could. My mother was never around since she had been working full-time at the Royal Bank of Canada and she had also been an alcoholic, as far as I am concerned. I was often bartending for my mom's parties at a young age. I grew up in a small town. It was okay for younger kids to drink back then. It was the 1970s, so it was a different mindset back then.

I did not have a lot of friends growing up. I was a loner and did not pick up on social cues very well. I had spent a lot of time looking out for myself, which led me to start drinking at eight. At that age, I was medicated with wine to help the babysitters since I was incredibly dependent on my mom. I always got super angry when she would leave for work and when she was not around. I used to get convulsions, anxiety, and panic attacks whenever she left for work or went on trips. It was almost like an epileptic seizure. My mom would let me have these seizures and then go on as if nothing had happened. Not long after, I was smoking marijuana, doing acid, and taking mushrooms. This was when my active addiction occurred, but it was not full-time. By the time I was 13, I was using cocaine. All my participation in illegal substances had a lot to do with me being alone all the time. By the time I was 15 years old, I was a career alcoholic or a high-functioning alcoholic.

PRISON AND HOMELESSNESS

By the time I was 18 years old, I was charged with possession of an illegal substance. And by 24, I had a DUI. At 26, I had spent three months in jail for drug charges. From this, I decided to quit drinking and doing drugs but continued to smoke pot for 20 years. While some may not consider smoking marijuana an addiction, I do. Since I quit everything but marijuana, it has fed my addiction and kept it alive. I eventually relapsed in 2014 and during

my relapse I was homeless in Vancouver for a while. I was doing crack cocaine and my addiction took off, so people I knew no longer wanted to be around me. Being homeless was not my choice. I was addicted and it took over my life. I decided to live close to my dealers, so I did not have to drive an hour back and forth to work and my dealer's place.

Eventually, I began living in a small town in Manitoba. I stopped going home and just lived out of my car while also going to work. I have always been a high-functioning addict who always had a job. However, it got to the point where I was spending all of my money on crack and alcohol. Eventually, my attention turned toward methamphetamine, which took over everything. I was spending about \$3,500-\$4,000 a month on drugs, living in my car, and going to work while using. I could not afford to live anywhere since I was spending all my money on drugs. I had all my belongings in my care and it was a rough time. That went on for about three years and then I was arrested for possession. I would get out on bail, and then a week later, I would get caught breaching my release conditions. This cycle continued for a couple of months as it does with so many (see John Howard Society, 2022). I also faced a few other charges, like home invasion, although I never actually committed the acts that were alleged. My lawyer told me that if these charges went through, I would face two to three years of prison time. I eventually was charged and spent five months incarcerated in a provincial facility. When I was incarcerated, I weighed 145 pounds. Usually, I was 185 pounds, but I was dehydrated primarily through all my withdrawals. The doctors there told me that I was lucky even to be alive. At that time, I was married to my now ex-wife, had two children, and had my own business. But that had all fallen apart. My ex-wife had served me divorce papers while I was incarcerated. I had to learn how to manage that, all while being imprisoned, going through withdrawal, and dealing with the boredom and isolation from prison.

RELEASED, RELAPSED AND RECOVERED

Once I was released, I immediately relapsed. The first thing I did was head straight over to my dealer's place. This continued for a couple more months. Eventually, I decided I was getting too old to deal with addiction and constant relapsing. I was tired of life at this point. So, I began living in an emergency

shelter to get my life back on track. I eventually connected with Housing First, which helped me find a place to live since I had a criminal record and no references to apply for housing. I spent all of 2019 in recovery, but it had not been working. I was on welfare assistance and went to treatment. I did not do anything but work on recovery.

In the early days of my recovery, I was terrified. I realized on my first day of recovery that it would be tough. The hardest part was constantly being scared. I had cleaned up my phone of all contacts, specifically my friends who were dealers. That was when the loneliness started to kick in. It was challenging because I had to learn how to live again (Marshall et al., 2019). Since I had no friends, I had to learn to be social again. Drugs had shut my emotions off, which was a big reason why I continued to use drugs; now once I was off them, I had to learn how to manage my emotions.

I never could use my voice. I struggle, even to this day, to actively use my voice. Even with how I speak, I cannot recall specific words and I greatly attribute that to long-term drug use. I will be mid-conversation and completely forget what I was referring to. I still struggle with social cues. If I upset somebody, I may not realize it right away. So, finally, my current partner, who is also recovering from alcoholism, has helped me find and use my voice. I have told my story three or four times and find it hard to get all the information each time. I constantly think, "I should have said this, or I should have said that". But that's another piece of my life too. I don't have a lot of recollection of my childhood. I get little snapshots every once in a while. When I do think about my childhood memories, it is always the bad things. There were a few pleasant times too, but I always remember a lot of disappointment from when I was young.

When I started using meth, I said out loud, more than once, that I knew I would be going to jail or prison at some point. Once I was incarcerated for the first month, I found it very difficult with the bail process – I would be arrested, spend a few nights or a week incarcerated, then be released on bail and return to using when released. This all, once again, led to my arrest. I found this cycle extremely hard on my mental and physical health – a constant roller coaster. Then, on my way to another bail hearing, I was arrested for another crime that carried more weight, which I had not committed. My lawyer said if I were convicted of this crime, I would be looking at a minimum of five years. Once my bail was revoked due to many breaches, I decided not to appeal and started doing my time.

At this point, I was beaten down and broken. Meth, for me, had shut off any emotion of caring or any desire to fight. So, once I was incarcerated full-time for the first month or so, I was detoxing on my own. I had no idea how to deal with the fact I could not use it for what I thought would be a minimum of five years. I only got out of bed for head counts and the odd meal. There was no concern from corrections regarding my mind or physical state. Once I started being released from the grip of using meth, I started going out for yard time walks, jogging and getting fresh air. I started bugging the guards to try and get involved in whatever programs I could take or get paperwork done, like birth certificates, medical cards, income tax, and dealing with medical issues. I just needed something to keep my mind busy because I was always a high-functioning addict who always had a job and worked long hours. I even began looking at getting a grade twelve diploma, as I only had a GED.

While incarcerated, I saw a gap between First Nations prisoners and corrections. Being Caucasian and having some knowledge of how to make the wheels turn, I could get what I needed or wanted to be done, whereas First Nations people were stigmatized long before their incarceration. This stigma created much tension for guards and prisoners alike. The programs provided inside felt like a joke. Just a way to fill time other than the schoolwork I did, felt worthwhile. At the time, I wanted to take some courses to eventually become a bridge in corrections for First Nations people, to allow them the same treatment as others. All the while I was incarcerated I thought of using meth, which drove me every day to try and get my mind to do other things so as not to think of using it constantly.

I am now three years clean and am incredibly grateful and proud of myself for achieving this. This is the longest I have been clean in my life. My entire life revolved around drugs – it was the only time I could be social and feel somewhat in control of my life. However, I never got into injecting drugs into my system via needle. That was the only promise I made to myself and I kept it.

FINAL INSIGHTS

From my experiences, I want people to know that it does not matter how long you have been addicted to drugs or what has occurred in your life – there is always hope. Of course, there is a lot of hard work to be done (Ross-

Houle & Porcellato, 2023). You have to want to be in recovery, and you have to want to be clean and sober. You might miss out on some great things if you do not get sober. If I were not in recovery, I would not have been able to be a part of my son's, daughter's or grandson's life. The benefits outweigh the hardships of being in recovery. And as much as recovery is a lifestyle, it brings about lifelong change. It does get easier if you stick with it. I always tell people that my worst days sober are nowhere near as hard as my best day using drugs and that is why I do this for myself. I did not just get sober for my kids or my grandson. I did it for myself. If something happens to them, then my foundation is gone. I would end up relapsing again. I knew I was done using drugs because I was tired and exhausted from life, and I knew I needed to change. I was lucky enough to be able to do that. I have to work as hard on my recovery as I did in my addiction. If I had to walk 1000 miles to get drugs, I would have to double that for my recovery and I would not change getting sober for the world.

REFERENCES

- John Howard Society of Ontario (2022) *No Fixed Address: The Intersections of Justice Involvement and Homelessness*, Toronto.
- Marshall, Carrie Anne, Daniel Keogh-Lim, Michelle Koop, Skye Barbic & Rebecca Gewurtz (2020) "Meaningful Activity and Boredom in the Transition from Homelessness: Two Narratives", *Canadian Journal of Occupational Therapy*, 87(4): 253-264.
- Ross-Houle, Kim & Lorna Porcellato (2023) "Recovery Capital in the Context of Homelessness, High Levels of Alcohol Consumption, and Adverse Significant Life Events", *Drugs: Education, Prevention and Policy*, 30(2): 173-184.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jim Henry is a journeyman carpenter who has worked in construction for thirty years. He lives in a small community in northern Manitoba, Canada. Retired from full time construction, he is the housing maintenance manager for a First Nation community. He is grateful for the opportunity to give back, as he had so many help him on his recovery journey.