

Denn writes:

When I first read the request for personal essays, I hesitated in writing one as I felt that my experience with alcohol and subsequent recovery may not have enough “drama” about it to hold the interest of any one reading. However, upon additional consideration I came to believe that perhaps my experiences may reflect that of the “average person” who has struggled with alcohol and has decided to do something about it before their addiction brings them irreversible and tragic consequences. As someone who spent a long time in the contemplation stage of change, it is my hope that some one else reading my account will also decide that not only is change possible, it is deeply rewarding, and the best time to start is right now.

My friends at SMART online call me Denn. I am a 39 year old male, I have been married for 10 years, and I am fortunate to have two young boys, ages seven & four.

In discussing what SMART Recovery has meant to me, I should perhaps start with a brief background regarding my history with alcohol use and abuse. I was raised in a functional and loving home, and like the majority of young males in my community, I began to drink alcohol in my high school years. I drank primarily in social settings. Alcohol was primarily a “social lubricant” for me. Although I presently sit on the fence regarding the debate as to whether or not I was hereditarily predisposed to abuse alcohol, I was clearly “hard wired” to enjoy the physical feelings of intoxication. I just liked it, plain and simple. In those early days I did not use alcohol as a coping mechanism, but rather as a social and emotional “boost”. Under the influence I felt stronger, smarter, richer, funnier, and somewhat invincible.

My drinking pattern carried on socially in this way without any serious side effects for a number of years, and then predictably, my consumption in both volume and frequency began to increase. In my thirties drinking had become not only a social activity, but developed as a coping mechanism as well. I had discovered that alcohol served me (in the short term) as a means of dealing with stress, boredom, and general feelings of discontent. In the last few years, drinking had become an almost daily part of my existence. Like many problem drinkers, I began to go underground and protect my little secret. Every one around me would see me drink regularly, but no one really saw how much. Most of my friends and loved ones would see at face value what appeared to be a relatively high functioning Denn. I had become very good at masking or minimizing the depth of my problem, however, “I” knew the truth....and that truth began to slowly take me down - physically, emotionally, financially, and spiritually. At the end, I had become only a shell of my previous self. I was not fooling any one any more. Most of all myself.

Without going into specific details or examples of the countless drinking related mishaps and misfortunes, I knew without a doubt that I had a serious issue with alcohol to deal with, and I knew that this issue was not going to go away on it’s own. Although I was still drinking at the time, I began to read about and study alcohol addiction and recovery options. I read many different books and countless pages of material on the internet. It was during this time that I read Anne Fletchers “Sober for Good” and became aware of SMART Recovery. Although I was preparing to do what ever it would take to recover, finding SMART was like a breath of hope. SMART’s logic and cognitive behavior principles resonated with me right from start. I was very excited to learn that there was an active face to face group where I live. Although I had not quit drinking yet, I began to attend face to face meetings, and I spent many hours reading and occasionally posting at SMART Online. It was very clear to me that SMART was the path I was going to take for assistance in achieving abstinence. On July 10, 2004 I had my last drink (although I don’t remember it). I stopped dipping my toes in the SMART waters and

jumped right in. I began attending face to face meetings regularly and ramped up my participation online.

Forward to today. I have been completely free from alcohol and active at SMART online and at the local face to face level for over 8 months now. In November of 2004 the local SMART group arranged to sponsor our President, Dr. Tom Horvath, to travel here and train additional facilitators locally. I participated in this training, and I now facilitate SMART meetings here 2 or 3 times per month. I also serve on the local group's board of directors (I think I blinked when they were nominating!).

SMART Recovery has helped me to achieve freedom from alcohol and grow personally in so many ways that it is difficult to know where to begin to describe it. Without going into great detail, I have benefited immensely from the work I have done in each of the four points of the SMART program. Perhaps I can best summarize it as follows:

I have learned to completely own the notion that I have ultimate *choice* regarding the use of alcohol. There is power for myself in that choice. It is not enough for me to simply avoid the pain associated with drinking. I have come to desire the pleasure of *not* drinking. I am learning to not just *move away* from what I do not want for my life, but rather consciously *move toward* what I do want my life to be about. I have come to recognize the effectiveness of using the push *and* pull of my cost benefit analysis as twin motivators. SMART has helped me to be aware of my own thinking and beliefs about alcohol, and to adopt revised and more functional beliefs and thinking patterns that serve me. I have found these principles to be strong life skills in general. I am learning to re think many of life's events and circumstances in a new ways by simply not allowing pre programmed beliefs and thought patterns to dictate my behaviors and responses unless they make sense for *me*. This may sound over simplistic, but SMART has simply helped me to mature in the way I think, and feel, and ultimately behave.

To say that SMART has contributed to those around me would be a monumental understatement. I have become very aware of the fact that in order to contribute meaningfully to those around me, I have to look after myself first. I now know that I cannot fill up another's tank if mine is empty. My relationship with my family has grown to new levels of fulfillment since I stopped drinking. I hear my wife say things like "be careful on your trip, I don't want to lose you now that I just got you back". Clients I serve benefit in real ways from my skills and mind being clearer and sharper. Family and friends no longer hurt and worry for my well being. I like to think that I might stand as an example to those in my life who are still struggling. A real life example suggesting that sincere change and a happy balanced life free from alcohol is not only possible and attainable, but deeply rewarding as well.

Although I have read a lot of material on other recovery assistance options, I have no first hand experience in participating in other recovery programs. Thankfully, the first one I felt drawn toward has served me well. The SMART approach in dealing with addictive behavior just seems to make natural common sense to me. The concepts and ideas presented required no giant leaps of faith on my part. I believe the effectiveness of SMART lies in its simple yet profound common sense. REBT - I think or assimilate information, I feel something, and I act in a certain way as a result. If I don't particularly like my actions or my behavior, it serves me well to back it up and identify how I'm feeling, and examine what I am thinking to feel this way. Makes sense to me!

I have found the Cost Benefit Analysis, the ABC, and the Disarm tools especially valuable in managing my recovery plan. Although I was reluctant to participate in meetings or on the boards at first (just shy I guess), I can't say enough about how the SMART *community* environment has helped me through this process. Having people to share with and talk to who have walked a mile or two in my shoes has been very helpful in learning not just about others, but about myself. I sincerely hope that at least in some small way I can give back to others some of what I have taken for myself.

Although I plan on self graduating from SMART at some point in the future, I approach that day with mixed feelings. Graduating will be my ultimate statement to myself and to others that I am "recovered". However, I'm sure that on that day I will also feel like I'm saying good bye to an old friend. I owe SMART Recovery and the SMART community a big debt of thanks. I intend to honor that debt by making sure that others who could use some help know that SMART is a real and effective option.

Denn