

Pat McDonough writes:

Picture a dilapidated house, in disrepair and all but abandoned. What has happened to this absentee property owner? Why has she neglected and ignored her residence? Unfortunately, she has become consumed with the procurement of, the use of, and rebounding from the use of, an illegal drug. So great has become her psychological need for this substance that she no longer attends to the maintenance of her home or enjoys the comforts it offers. No other of life's pleasures can compare to the mind-altered state she attains by blasting this substance into her brain; and not one of life's duties is as important as obtaining the instant gratification inhaling this drug brings.

Through the use of this drug, the homeowner has morphed into a different person; but a shred of her former self remains. When she approaches her house and looks at it from the outside, she sees what she is doing to it. Inside, she feels the decay. She is beginning to understand her dedication to the drug is a one-way loyalty. It is robbing her not only of all her money, but it is stealing her mind, her body, her life and her very soul. The short-term trips to oblivion are over more and more quickly. The time that lapses between her taking hits of this powerful drug is becoming ever shorter. And the intensity of the effect lessens in each time she uses it. Still, she persists in trying to recapture the feeling she got with the very first hit. The shard of life left in her knows she wants to reverse this degenerative process. But how can she reverse it when she doesn't even know how to stop it in the first place?

After some trials with mainstream methods of addiction and recovery counseling, the homeowner realizes she must start at the foundation to once again solidify her house. Through use of the amazing tool that is the Internet, she finds a program based on self-management. She joins a group whose members rely on examining their beliefs in order to develop rational thought processes, and to dispute the type of distorted thinking that leads some people to turn to addictive, self-destructive habits as a way of dealing with life.

Now look at our homeowner; more than ever before, she takes care of her residence. The foundation consists of unconditional self-acceptance; the walls are insulated with rational thought. Large double-pane windows lend a view to a realistic sense of purpose and her place in the world. She opens wide the windows to allow irrational, self-defeating thoughts to escape. Only quality materials and attractive furnishings go into this home. It is maintained using specially designed tools to map out changes, to compute the cost and benefits of proposed alterations, and to analyze activating events and predict the consequences of choices. Once again, the home is open to guests. Yet the owner guards what is hers and isn't overly generous or inviting to those who would harm her or take away her new life.

In the same way the homeowner above rehabilitated a dilapidated structure, I rebuilt my life participating in and using the tools of SMART Recovery<sup>®</sup>. Finding SMART Recovery<sup>®</sup> was a turning point in my life. When I read about its methods, it occurred to me for the first time that there might be a recovery program that made sense to me. How could SMART Recovery<sup>®</sup> not make sense? It is based on rational thought.

Some of the changes my participation in SMART Recovery<sup>®</sup> brought to my life include:

- No further need or compulsion to engage in a drinking and drugging lifestyle as a coping mechanism. Now, I face problems, try to overcome them, or just accept that they are a part of life.

- No more blaming others for my feelings. This is a huge change for me. I now know that it is up to me how I think and feel, and that I can change my thoughts and feelings at any time, if only I make the effort to do so.
- A sense of inner peace knowing that things are the way they should be with me, with others, and with the world.
- A strong feeling of empowerment, the idea that it is me who manages my thoughts and behavior. I know that changing deeply engrained habits and ways of thinking takes time and work; but the results are well worth the effort. The benefits seem to reproduce automatically and perpetuate geometrically.

SMART Recovery® tools and techniques are useful to me in all areas of my life, especially in creating a healthy, balanced lifestyle. I used rational thinking and the three Ds of “disarm, distract, divert,” to cope with urges and quit smoking cigarettes. I continue to use positive self-talk and unconditional self-acceptance in the areas of weight management, physical activity, and maintaining good health.

Besides the improvement to me, the most important area in my life where SMART Recovery® has had an impact has been on my relationship my family members. When I changed, my children’s lives got better. They have a mother who is always sober, never drunk or under the influence of drugs. I know SMART Recovery® teaches participants to avoid the use of “always,” and “never,” but in this case, the words accurately describe the situation. My children don’t avoid me now; they know they can come to me with a problem and I will be there to help work it out. We can have fun together without me sneaking off or going to buy another beer.

I don’t avoid looking in their beautiful brown eyes anymore. When I was using, I was ashamed for them to look into my eyes, big and brown like theirs, but glazed over and unfocused, the brain behind them not really listening to what they were saying. I can’t get back the time I lost while using drugs, the weekends I stayed away and did not even call my children. But because of my participation in SMART Recovery®, I have the present with them and I am focused on their lives.

I have four sisters, two brothers, a mother and several friends who were extremely worried about me at the height of my using days. I shudder when I think about the hell I put them through. I regret that because of my actions, they worried about me overdosing or winding up dead in an alley. They all tried to help me. They booked and took plane flights, traveling across time zones to try to stop me from engaging in self-destructive behavior. They researched recovery programs and encouraged me to seek treatment, understanding my aversion to any type of 12-Step program, and knowing that alternatives were few.

Finally, I attempted to enter a psychiatric hospital for inpatient therapy. However, I was denied entrance into the inpatient program because the substance I was using was not deemed to have a physical withdrawal. It was while attending an outpatient program at this facility that I first encountered a fanatical espouser of 12-Step programs. Quite soon, I was back at the dealer’s door. After another week of living hell, I tried a different hospital and was admitted on an inpatient basis for three days. Following discharge, I participated in the facility’s outpatient day treatment program. Luckily for me, the facility had a policy of being open to all types of recovery methods, even though it promoted 12-Step groups. The counselors there stressed that it was up to each individual to design a recovery program that would work for him or her. I attended several 12-Step meetings at the facility, and also participated in an “alumni” group there after I completed the outpatient program.

While I won’t go into all that I think is wrong with the 12-Step philosophy, I will say it was not for me and I felt frustrated in trying to fit into its expectations. Nor did I care for all the clichés. I experienced a relapse into old behavior after about five months sober, and that started a 15-month journey of long periods of abstinence peppered with episodes of use. It was about six months after the

first relapse that I found SMART Recovery Online, and began utilizing that program in conjunction with LifeRing Secular Recovery online.

The thing I really like about both these organizations is that they are based on science and logical thinking, not on some magical or religious notions. I also like that they place the responsibility for both using and abstinence on the individual, not on some disease or "higher power." Both groups view addiction as a maladaptive behavior that can be changed.

I like the fact that I can state my opinion and agree with the tenets of the programs or not. Most of all, I like the people. They are all so much like me yet the groups are so diverse. The members knew what I was going through and they were there for me every time. With the groups being online, I had supporters there for me any day, any time; and I didn't have to leave home to go to a meeting. Corresponding with these folks through forums and email was a great method of support in my quest for sustained abstinence. Meeting some of them in person and spending time with them, however, was one of the greatest experiences of my life. I learned I could laugh and have a good time without having to drink or get stoned. I learned I could share my feelings without being under the influence. Mainly, I learned that I am a nice person who people want to be around, even if I am not giving them something. They like me for who I am; and now, I do too.