Unedited Stories from OARS Posters
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The first time I did harm reduction, I didn't know that was what it was called. My best friend Chris needed syringes, so I figured out how to get them. Chris was a printer enthusiast with a very specific take on the world, HIV positive, and an HIV rights advocate—someone who knew what it meant to fight for your own community while living inside the thing you were fighting about. When I sold my childhood home and the last of everything was gone and I was alone in that empty house, he called so I wouldn't spend the night by myself. He died years later from a GHB overdose, and I have never stopped carrying what he taught me about showing up.

Showing up is what got me through the years that followed. I have been homeless—couch to couch, doorway to doorway—and eventually I hit the kind of despair that brings you close to ending your life. I survived, and it wasn't because of a dramatic rescue or a perfect program; it was because I had somewhere to be and something to do that mattered to someone else. And I need to say this plainly: **all recovery is valid if it's valid to the person living it**—if it reduces harm, increases stability, or helps you keep choosing tomorrow, it counts.

That's why, for me, the only consistently redeeming quality in NA and AA isn't the steps, the slogans, the chips, or the meetings themselves—it's the **persuasion to engage in community service**. Service turns recovery outward: you become useful, you become accountable to people, you learn how to show up, and you stop waiting for someone to become "acceptable" before you help them. That is harm reduction, and it's also just decency. If you're struggling, I won't promise it gets better; I'll tell you it gets different, and sometimes that difference is big enough to become a whole life.

- **Daniel**

I (50+ F) am a survivor of parental and partner addiction, and have been in recovery for 25 years. My journey began at a young age. A parent drank a lot and we never had a lot of money to support ourselves except for the alcohol. The alcoholic parent was abusive toward me when the other was not around.

When I was 20. I had a partner who was addicted to crack, coccaine, and pain pills. He was very abusive and made me prostitute myself for his habits. I got out of that situation when he died from an overdose.

A couple years later I needed surgery and ended up addicted to pain pills. It took a few years and a couple sexual assaults to hit rock bottom with my habit and get myself to meetings.

- **Anonymous, Hoover**

I (31 NB) have never been addicted to anything but I've tried a few things. My best friend had been in and out of treatment. Once she was finally successful, she innocently thought someone was safe to get a ride from, and that person murdered her by injecting a lethal dose of heroin.

My ex boyfriend has been addicted to Fentanyl for 6 years now. He says he does it to mask his schizophrenia. He was very abusive and put me in many dangerous situations. I got out of that relationship but he is still in addiction and gets his fixes by

prostituting himself.

My aunt has always been addicted to
various drugs ever since I can remember.
Knowing what she's done, I think it's why
I've always been scared of drugs.

- **Anonymous, Hoover**

The lights felt hazy like a dream. I didn't know who I was, where I was, or why I was surrounded by paramedics. They asked me who the president was. My first thought was Obama. I didn't know what year it was, much less that we had already cycled through two decrepit white dude presidencies since.
"You had a seizure. You're going to be okay. You're going to come back to yourself."
Even these words of reassurance from professionals didn't make me feel better. I didn't have a clue what was going on. And then, slowly, I remembered. My name, the year, the massive dose of mitragyna speciosa I had consumed a couple hours prior.
I'd OD'ed. Had a seizure at the hand of a substance that was fully legal in the state of Alabama just a few years prior and remains legal in many states across the US to date. Kratom, as it's more widely known, could have killed me that night.
Had I been eating, standing, doing literally anything other than simply sitting on the couch where I just so happened to be when everything fell apart, I could have aspirated, hit my head, died. Right there, that night, I could have died.
My relationship with kratom started in graduate school, but my propensity for external relief came much, much earlier than that.
I was diagnosed with ADHD as a child, fed ritalin and adderall that made me sick yet fostered the belief that there was something terribly wrong with me that required medication to "fix." I was broken, and the only way to have a normal life, they told me, was to reconstruct my brain chemistry with external chemicals.

These meds altered my teenage years, kept me on a roller coaster of sleepless nights and foodless days, and I'm not convinced they didn't land me on the lifelong disordered eating train as well as set me up for a future of substance abuse. By the time I went to college, I had chosen to ditch the meds. However, as so often happens when we correct behaviors later in life, the damage was done. I could not shake the idea that the only way I could succeed in my studies was to consume some kind of stimulant that would help me focus. At first, this just meant full pots of coffee, but once I started having panic attacks, for which I was prescribed additional meds, I began to seek out alternatives. I was never one to get into the hard drugs long term, but herbal supplements? What could go wrong, right?
In graduate school, where nearly all my friends were on adderall to complete the mounds of heady research work, I still refused to get back on the meds train. It was terrible. Have you ever tried to read academic writing? I could read a paragraph ten times, yet only a few words would register.

There's no way I can do this, I remember telling myself as I sat down with a stack of journals to pour through.
And then, a friend introduced me to this helpful leaf she had discovered that makes it easy to sit and read flat language for hours. Just a leaf. Not a chemical or synthetic substance, not even an extract. A whole plant LEAF that could fix me.
I tried it, and it WORKED. And I'm not saying just took the edge off, I'm talking hours of full focus, full attention, and the only side effects were that I felt a little jittery if I took too much. I could pay attention during 3 hour seminars, I could read and retain information, I could make connections between pieces of literature that would never have been made with my sober, broken brain.
But just like any substance, those effects only last so long at low doses. I found myself taking more and more of it, building my schedule around "tea time", and losing myself and my social life in the process.
Then I got pregnant and cold turkey quit. I had a handle of it, I thought. No biggie. Four years and two kids go by without the help of any tea. And then, once I quit breastfeeding, I decided to give it another go. I had started a new career and was balancing raising small kids full time with a brand new career.

"If I drink some tea after the kids go to sleep," I thought, "I can be present for them during the day and work to help support the household at night." And I did. For years. I never drank it in their presence, I never operated heavy machinery under the influence, and I never took anything but the whole, unadulterated plant leaf. I thought it was a bulletproof plan. I thought I was doing everything right. I thought it was safer than the prescription alternatives.

And then I woke up, surrounded by paramedics at 10pm on a Tuesday.

Turns out, kratom leaf is filled with alkaloids that, at the doses needed for my years-developed tolerance, cause deadly seizures.

I had read about this happening, but the rarity of reported occurrence allowed me to convince myself it was still a safer, better option than the pharmaceuticals that started it all.

In the following weeks, I had withdrawal symptoms akin to opiate withdrawal. Shakes, sweats, flu like symptoms, gastrointestinal distress that lasted much longer than I would ever wish on an enemy.

But I got through it with the help of doctors, friends, and my incredibly understanding family members. I'm lucky that my hubris and trauma didn't take me out. And despite it all, I'm finally discovering that my brain is just as capable of success as anyone else. I might need a different environment, different strategies, and different outcomes of success, but that is less of a medication balance and more of a curation of experience.

And for this and many other reasons, I'm so, so glad I didn't die before I realized we are not broken just because of our trauma, our chemistry, and our circumstances. Even those we impart upon ourselves. Sometimes, it's not us that needs changing. It's our curated environment. Our expectations and reactions to the expectations of others. It's our careers and the boxes society encourages us to fit within.

To embrace your so-called flaws, to reject the box, to JUST BE YOURSELF, unadulterated and unashamed, is healing for me. Because I'm not broken, and I don't need substances that diminish my natural strengths just to improve those that don't come so naturally. And now, I often wonder what the world might look like if all of us ADHD-diagnosed folks learned to operate with our own deviations from the norm. Would there be chaos? Or would there be some kind of beautiful diversity of lived experience we have yet to realize as a society? We may never know :)

- Anonymous, Hoover Alabama

My daughter Kristen broke her neck in a car accident in November, 1997, at age 19, while a sophomore at Emory University. A surgeon repaired the damage as best he could the next day, but throughout the remaining 20 years of her life she was in constant pain, with frequent neuropathy in her arms and legs. She gamely tried to carry on with her life, earning a bachelor's degree from Nova Southeastern University in Ft. Lauderdale in May 2001.

She moved to Tampa, got a job and began taking graduate courses at the University of South Florida. I bought a condo for her in Lutz, a Tampa suburb. I spent Christmas there in 2006; things didn't seem quite right, and over the next few months my concerns increased. In April 2007, I flew down unannounced and confirmed my worst fears: she had lost all control over her life. At that time, Florida had no central database to record opioid prescriptions; Kristen had learned to see at least two different doctors (each unaware of the others), and thus was consuming way more opioids than she should have been. I put the condo on the market the next day and gave her the choices of living on the street with no support from me, or I'd move her, her dog, her car and all her stuff up to my house in Birmingham.

In June 2007, I flew back to Tampa, and we drove her (badly neglected) car home to Birmingham. She was not happy about this, but at least I could keep a much better eye on her than I could from 600 miles away; maintaining one household is way more economical than maintaining two. She had no money, no job, no decent work experience. We found her a pain doctor, but Alabama did have an opioid-prescription database, so the multiple-doctor ploy wouldn't work here. She stole a prescription pad from one of her doctors. In October 2007, she was arrested for passing forged prescriptions. She briefly enrolled at Bradford, but they were chaotic and no help (besides being extremely expensive); and I now learned the sad fact that rehab is useless unless the addict buys into it wholeheartedly.

Soon after Christmas 2007 she disappeared and did not reappear until the following June. While she was gone, she missed court appearances , so the Shelby County Sheriff's Office immediately arrested her when she returned. She spent some months in the Shelby County Jail, followed by

many months in the Tutwiler Women's Prison in Wetumka. In June 2009 she was released to the Lovelady Center, and finally returned home in October 2009. While in Tutwiler, she attended rehab sessions which she took seriously for the first time.

For the next few years, she appeared to stay clean, but her ill luck and ill health continued. In June 2012 and August 2012, she had emergency abdominal surgeries, and at some point her gall bladder was removed (during which surgery the damage to her neck was carelessly worsened). She was now a convicted felon, to go along with her long history of short-term employment. Her criminal record prevented her from ever being hired at the sort of brain-work jobs she could do well, while her disabilities prevented her from working the available jobs, like retail clerk, waitress, etc.

She gradually started hanging out with "friends" she'd met in jail and prison, getting in trouble, and abusing drugs again. The good conservative Christians in the Alabama Injustice System made it clear that they had the solution to her problems: prison. She was arrested again in November 2016, spent some months in the Shelby County Jail, and then Tutwiler. She was released in September 2017.

On December 18, 2017, she woke up in respiratory distress. The Brookwood Hospital ER pumped fluid out of her lungs all day, but her heart stopped multiples times. She died in the wee hours of December 19. No one at the hospital said anything about drugs being involved, but to my mind she'd managed to weaken her health from the years of opioid abuse, such that the pneumonia had an easy time killing her. Many of her friends also died in their late 30s or 40s, most commonly falling asleep and not waking up the next morning.

- **Tom Jacobs, about his daughter Kristen, Pelham**

I come from a very abusive upbringing and started running away at age 11 and tried committing suicide a few times before age 13. That's when my addiction started because my parents committed me to a psych ward and

from there started my journey with the ever powerful valium and numbness. Of course that led to so many other drugs I can barely remember all their names. This was back in the late 60's and lasted a lifetime it seems.

I could argue with the best of them that I was definitely not an addict because some of the drugs were prescribed and if it came from the Dr it had to be okay. My life became a never-ending search for the ultimate numbing drug I could find. That led to a lot of overdoses and hospital stays throughout my life and a lot of running away of what I allowed to control my mind.

I finally took a good long look at myself in the mirror one day and had no clue who I was looking at. I went to rehabs and would relapse as soon as I left. I was losing my children because they believed I could change my life if I really wanted to. I got help for my past traumas and found a Dr who didn't play when it came to addiction and mental health. I am 6 years completely clean and have the most amazing relationship with my kids and my siblings. I'm not proud of where I came from but I am forever grateful for the love and support I am given each day.

Thank you for reading my journey and remember there is a most beautiful life for even the worst of us.

Anita Dugas, Irondale