

## Why Addicts Need Drugs to Cope With Life

The use of drugs to cope with life's problems is clearly demonstrated by voice messages a forty-five-year-old client named Denise left on my answering machine.

A marijuana smoker who also had other addictions including alcohol, Denise left me two voice-mail messages on the same Sunday morning some years ago. Here is her first call:

*Good morning, Michael. It's Denise. It's about ten a.m. I'm just giving you a ring because, oh my gosh, I'm wrestling with it today. I have no feeling of self-worth and can't find any hope. Stupid suicidal thoughts are flowing through my mind. You know, "What's-the-use," that kind of thing. It's really awful when I'm in this sort of place. I just don't know what to do. I get the sense that my higher power's telling me, "You really aren't worth much." I keep praying and asking for the perfect plan to help me, but I just can't seem to get an answer. So here I am managing my life and the world by myself. Yeah, I can call my AA sponsor, but it all looks pretty stupid, these little support groups, right now. When it's all said and done and I get done talking, I still have to live with myself. Why bother? An hour after the talk, I still have to deal with the same thing I had to deal with before the talk. I just don't understand it, and it isn't helping. Anyway, as you can tell, I'm really wrestling with it today. I'm down to my last fifteen hundred dollars — that's all I have separating me from, well, I don't know what's next, and I don't see any hope of that changing.*

Her second call came two-and-a-half hours later:

*Michael, Denise again. It's about twelve-thirty. By now, you've gotten my earlier phone message, and how I was feeling. Since then, I stopped by a friend of mine's house, got a dime bag of pot and smoked a joint. Now my attitude about life is: Wow! This is exciting. I've got more than a thousand dollars in the bank. My higher power cares about me, and I feel totally inspired to tell myself to go out and make some money. That's the thing with pot. I was practically suicidal two-and-a-half hours ago. Now I feel like I can deal with it all. I called you back because I want you to see the contrast, this crazy paradox I live with. When I haven't been smoking any pot, I get into that downward spiral. I'm telling you this so that you can see both sides of it. This is how it is for me with this pot in my life, this addictive behavior. Also, in the past two days, I just felt driven to go to a bar and go home with some guy. It's like I'm acting out, but thanks to the pot, I managed to stop myself from that. Anyway, I'm just giving you a view from my perspective so you can really see where I'm coming from. I just want you to see how I experience this.*

## Why Pain is so Often Necessary

This conversation is a dramatic example of how quickly an addict was able to feel better about herself and her life, by using drugs, in this case marijuana. Denise went from hopeless to hopeful in a matter of minutes.

This story helps illustrate the challenge you can encounter when trying to “talk sense into” a son or daughter using drugs or alcohol. Most people are using their drug of choice to cope with life’s ups and downs. It is a challenging task indeed to talk an addict into giving up something that not only makes him or her feel better but can feel like it’s necessary for their survival.

Remember that old saying, "People usually don't change when they see the light, they change when they feel the heat."

Another example of demonstrating this point can be found in the book *Smoke and Mirrors* (Dorothy Marie England, Forward Movement Publications, 1995):

"Extreme consequences are necessary if reality is ever to break through. The pain of consequences must outweigh the relief the addictive behavior brings. In our society, we do not handle pain well. We are taught to be sympathetic; when others hurt, we hurt with them, so it is in our own interest to prevent others from hurting or to ease their pain as soon as possible if they do hurt.

We are taught that pain is bad; if someone hurts, we should help him or her get relief. While this teaching was helpful in the case of the Good Samaritan, it is not helpful in the case of addicts. In this paradox-filled disorder, preventing or lessening pain is the most dangerous, destructive thing one can do.

Addicts need to be jailed when they break the law. They need to be confronted when they violate trust. They need to be left where they are when they pass out, even if it is in the car on a cold night. They need to reap any mental, psychological, biological, and spiritual consequences of their behavior short of death. Only through extremely painful or multiple painful consequences does reality crack denial, giving addicts an opportunity to see their disease and make movements toward recovery. Pain is what gives addicts and those who suffer with them a spiritual edge."

Yes, addicts need motivation so they can get help, and we are beginning to see why they need so *much* motivation. From their standpoint, they are giving up some tremendous benefits from their drug or alcohol use. As mentioned above, in most cases, the pain from their drug or alcohol use, must be greater than the benefits derived from that use.

## Growth Pain or Wasted Pain?

There's going to be pain if a person makes changes, or, for that matter, if a person doesn't make changes.

There is a lot of pain associated with addiction because of all the areas of life that are negatively affected by it. Family members will also be going through their own pain as a result of trying to help their addicted loved one.

As a parent, if you keep trying to help your adult child the same way you always have, you will have the same type of pain that you have already experienced. If that pain motivates you to seek help, then that was not wasted pain. It provided the motivation for positive change, which makes it **growth pain**.

**Wasted pain** just keeps coming around, and no positive change occurs as a result of it. Sometimes this is called "squirrel cage pain" or "hamster wheel pain" because there is movement, but none of it moves you forward. If you are going to feel pain, it might as well be productive.

Take a moment and think about the pain you have felt regarding your addicted loved one. What kind of pain has it been? What kind of pain would you prefer?

Growth pain provides motivation both to parents to fine tune their parenting habits, and to addicts to change their lives.

It's still important to understand that addicts will need to be clean and sober and in their right mind so that they can accept much needed help. Further, they must be willing to be guided in their changes by other people who have the skill to help.

Such guidance is best delivered from someone outside of the family, and this can be a very bitter pill for parents to swallow.