

Nobody intends to become an addict.

Nobody takes his first drink, pops her first pill, or snorts her first line thinking, “I plan on getting hooked on this.”

Instead, people tend to think things like this: “Addiction happens to other people.” “Addicts are homeless people who live in the gutter.” “Only weak-willed people get addicted,” or “If I feel myself starting to get addicted, I’ll stop.”

The three people profiled in this book all had thoughts like that. Even after addiction had begun to control their lives, they told themselves that other people were addicts, not them. There were always

Facing Addiction: Three True Stories

excuses. John Ralston reasoned that as long as he drank and used cocaine only on the weekends, he wasn't hooked. Gwen Byrd told herself that crack wasn't so bad; it helped her get her housework done fast. Miguel Calbillo told himself that as long as he didn't put a needle in his arm, he wasn't a junkie.

Eventually, John, Gwen, and Miguel all had to face the truth: they are addicts, now addicts in recovery. No, they are not stereotypical junkies, panhandling in the street and nodding off in a doorway. Like most addicts, they are ordinary people. They are intelligent. They are educated. They are likeable. They did not foresee their lives heading in this direction.

They are typical as well in the way their addictions progressed. All three experimented with other substances before they found their "drug of choice": the one to which they were primarily addicted. John used alcohol, marijuana, and methamphetamines before developing his cocaine habit. Gwen used pot and cocaine before becoming hooked on crack. Miguel

Introduction

experimented with just about everything before becoming addicted to heroin.

And all three have paid a high price for their years of addiction. John's addiction cost him a marriage, his professional reputation, and his relationship with a person he deeply respected. Gwen's has cost her the custody of a child, her home, and much of her self-respect. Miguel finds himself, at thirty-one, just beginning to live a normal adult life.

To a person who has never experienced addiction, it can be hard to understand, frustrating, even irritating. You may want to ask, "Why didn't they just *stop*? This stuff was ruining their lives—couldn't they see that?" And true enough, it would have been a very good thing if John, Gwen, and Miguel had "just stopped" long ago.

But listening to their stories, a non-addict begins to comprehend the real horror of addiction. Every day further into an addiction, an addict loses a little more—more time, more self-respect, more opportunities.

Facing Addiction: Three True Stories

It's a little like slipping down the side of an icy mountain, a few more inches every day. By the time the addict looks up toward the top of that mountain, the climb back seems overwhelmingly difficult. In order to get serious about quitting—starting that long climb back up—the addict has to honestly face all she has lost to her addiction. Those losses can include time, relationships, jobs, family, health, self-esteem, and more. The pain of confronting those thoughts begins to seem unbearable. And always in the back of the addict's mind is a little voice saying, “But you don't *have* to bear those thoughts! Snort a line! Pop a pill! Shoot up! Take a drink! Smoke a rock! And all the bad thoughts will go away. You can feel good again.”

Yes, the addict can feel good again—for a little while. But then the drugs will wear off, and he will have slipped a few inches further down that mountainside. He looks up, sees the mountaintop even further in the distance, and the cycle continues.

Introduction

But recovery is possible. For every promising future lost to addiction, there is a story of a person who faced his pain and fear, moved through it, and climbed that mountain.

Few people can do it alone. The recovering addict needs the support of peers who understand the pull of addiction as well as the sweetness of recovery. For many addicts, taking the step of asking for such support can be by far the hardest step in their journey toward wellness.

Almost every community in America offers some type of support for people struggling to overcome addictions. A local phone book will have listings (probably under “alcohol and drug abuse”) in its local guide to human services. Any doctor should be able to refer a person struggling with addiction to local support groups or treatment centers. Alcoholics Anonymous, the most widely known addiction support group, offers daily meetings through the United States and world. Its sister organization, Narcotics

Facing Addiction: Three True Stories

Anonymous, offers similar meetings for people addicted to drugs. LifeRing, the organization that John Ralston credits with supporting his sobriety, is becoming popular throughout the country. For anyone looking for a place to begin the road to recovery, the websites of these three organizations are an excellent place to start:

Alcoholics Anonymous:

www.alcoholics-anonymous.org

Narcotics Anonymous: **www.na.org**

LifeRing: www.unhooked.com

In addition, John Ralston, the volunteer leader of a LifeRing meeting in his community, has offered his e-mail address to anyone who wants to communicate with him about a substance abuse problem:

John Ralston: **doinfine@montco.biz**

If you yourself are struggling with addiction, the message of these stories is simple: *It is not too late.* Tomorrow will come. It can be one more day of

Introduction

addiction, or it can be the start of your new life.

If you are experimenting with drugs and alcohol but are not yet addicted, the message is simple as well: Do not invite the horror of addiction into your life.

And if you are a recovering addict: Keep on climbing that mountain. Don't look back. As John, Gwen, and Miguel can attest, every step gets a little easier.