

Back to the current caller: I explained, “You don’t have to tell me your situation; I don’t need to know why you called. In many cases, actually, that’s best left unsaid. I’ll talk, using alcohol addiction as the model, and you can see if this method makes sense to you.”

The caller agreed.

I continued, “Everything you need to quit an addiction is already between your ears. I can demonstrate to you that you’ve been in control the whole time. The first question I ask is, ‘Do you think it is in your best interest to quit forever?’ Never mind whether you want to because that’s not the question, and don’t think you can’t because you can. Anybody can. Albert Ellis says, ‘You can refuse to do anything.’”

She said that in her case, the answer is yes. She needed to quit.

“We can modify the technique for other addictions,” I continued. “Normally, we recommend complete abstinence for drugs and alcohol, but that’s not a realistic option for food or sex.”

She chuckled.

“So, with drinking, we make what is called ‘THE BIG PLAN.’ We say five words: ‘I will *never* drink again.’”

With this, she just listened.

“First, an addiction is not the same as a chemical dependency or habit.” I explained how everyone has habits and chemical dependencies, and many of these are healthy. “I am chemically dependent on air,” I said, “but it’s silly to think I’m addicted to it. An addiction is a chemical dependency or a habit that is unwanted by the individual. Addiction is purely subjective. In the case of alcohol, the addicted person hears two voices arguing in the mind:

“‘I wanna get loaded!’

“‘I should quit.’

“‘But I need a drink!’

“‘Well, alright.’”

I told her, “It is this argument — and this argument alone — that defines addiction. Physical withdrawal is not addiction; that thinking is outdated. Withdrawal is an added ‘surprise’ that some but not all addicted people experience. Meanwhile, drinking is a legal and legitimate pursuit of pleasure. Many

heavy drinkers enjoy exploring that fine line which distinguishes responsible drinking from irresponsible drinking. For some, though, the side-effects, costs, and risks involved are much greater than the benefits. They start to have doubts and regrets, and thus the mental argument.”

She said, “I am experiencing a similar argument.” Still, she refused to go into more detail. I continued:

“The part of your mind that wants to get loaded — or whatever — is in a different region of the brain from the part that knows better. The part of me that wants to get loaded is just a bump on the brainstem, if you will, and is working mostly on memories. At one time, I liked to get loaded. I’ve changed and it hasn’t kept up with the times.

“The urge is related to the appetites and is not working with all the facts. On the one hand, You, the conscious, aware ‘Self,’ know the consequences of further indulgence; on the other hand, the urge knows only one thing: desire. The good news is that the urge is not connected to the arm muscles, it must appeal to you in order to have its way with you. Being related to the appetites, though, it usually works in terms of the threat of pain and the promise of pleasure. Sometimes it implements survival signals, thinking, ‘If I don’t get this, I’ll die!’”

I continued talking about other stupid parts of the brain. “The adrenal system, for example, deals in glimpses and shadows — and it’s working properly. If an armed man burst into my office, my adrenal gland would immediately dump a load of psychoactive chemicals into my blood stream. These chemicals would reach my nervous system long before I had a chance to get a good look at the guy.

“Imagine, however, that you’re watching a movie. You’ve got your arm around your sweetie and suddenly, armed men burst into the office of the main character. ‘Woah,’ you say, as you drop a handful of popcorn back into the tub, ‘this is a wild movie!’ Then you realize something: your heart is pounding. Your adrenal system has just put you into fight-or-flight mode. All this in the safety of a movie theater?”

“You see, the adrenal system works very quickly. It must. It doesn’t think things through, but reacts on the slightest hint of danger. If our ancestors had waited long enough to determine how real the

danger was, they’d never have lived long enough to procreate.”

She pondered, “Yeah, I can see that.”

I said, “Okay, now suppose I offered you a hundred dollars if you could hold your breath for four minutes — on your own. It costs you nothing if you fail, so let’s say you decided to try. What would happen after about two-and-a-half minutes?”

“I’d probably pass out.”

“Precisely! At first, you feel very powerful urges to start breathing. This is your survival appetite: ‘Start breathing or die!’ After a few minutes, the part of your brain that understands what a \$100 bill is, if you make it that far, loses oxygen and goes to sleep. The mid-brain, which kick-starts your breathing for you, without you even being conscious, knows nothing about money or its benefits. ‘You’ are no longer there to veto its urges to start breathing, so you lose the bet.

“You see, there are several different functions in the brain, and not all of them have the same agenda. In most instances, you — the Self — have veto power over the urges. People have gone on hunger strikes throughout history and have starved themselves to death. Priests, nuns, and monks practice lifetime celibacy. People quit drug and alcohol addictions every day. Breathing is one of the few exceptions. You can’t veto the urge to breathe.”

She said, “That makes a lot of sense. I can work with those concepts. Tell me more.”

“With ADDICTIVE VOICE RECOGNITION TECHNIQUE,” I explained, “the key word is *recognition*; I learn to *recognize* the ADDICTIVE VOICE. I recognize two things: First, I recognize that the ADDICTIVE VOICE is not really me — not really part of my conscious, aware Self. It is me, to be sure, because it’s part of my body in the same sense that my hand is me, being part of my body. But it’s not ‘Me’ — it’s not part of my Self. Can you see the difference?”

“Yes. That makes sense.”

“In Rational Recovery, the region of the mind where the ADDICTIVE VOICE originates is nicknamed ‘THE BEAST.’”

“Hah! What a way to describe it.”

“The other thing we learn to recognize is when the ADDICTIVE VOICE is doing the thinking. You can

tell THE BEAST by its agenda. We are dealing entirely with ideas, here; that is what’s rational about RATIONAL RECOVERY.”

“You mean ‘rational’ as in Rational-Emotive Therapy? I studied that in college.”

“No. The word ‘rational’ simply means thinking. Ellis uses a unique definition: by ‘irrational’ he means ‘absolutistic’ and ‘unconditional,’ among other things. This is quite different from what we teach. Remember THE BIG PLAN? ‘I will never drink again?’ THE BIG PLAN is very absolutistic and unconditional — very irrational.”

“I would have thought the ADDICTIVE VOICE is irrational.”

“We don’t even think along those lines. To identify when it’s doing the thinking, I define the ADDICTIVE VOICE using three distinct ideas: First, any idea that advocates any future use of alcohol — ever — fifty years from now — is the ADDICTIVE VOICE. Secondly, it’s any idea which challenges my decision to quit forever. Finally, it’s any idea which tries to undermine my confidence in my ability to remain sober as a stone for the rest of my life.”

“So,” she asked, “how do you get THE BEAST to shut up?”

“That’s not the goal,” I answered, “you simply recognize it. You recognize when it is doing the thinking, and you recognize that it’s not really ‘You’ who is coming up with these ideas. Remember, THE BEAST is not connected to your arm muscles. If the VOICE becomes too uncomfortable for you, you might try some thought-stopping techniques, but THE BEAST is not in control and will eventually calm down or even shut up. It can’t hurt you. But it will entice you or bluff you in trying to have its way with you.”

“And you must go along with it in order to complete the action,” she added.

“Exactly! Three separate things must happen before an addicted person indulges: First, THE BEAST says, ‘I want some!’ Next, the Self says, ‘Okay!’ Finally, the individual physically procures and ingests the substance.”

“Okay,” she pondered, “so we cannot indulge unless we decide to first.”

“You got it!”

“And that BEAST can just sit there and snivel!” she added.

“It’s not unlike breaking a horse or training a puppy; in this sense, the goal is to convince the animal that you’re the boss. That’s why they say to jump right back on when it bucks you off — to send a message to the animal. We send this message to THE BEAST every time we refuse to indulge.

“With AVRT, though, *you* also need to become aware that you’re the boss. That’s a big problem for many people; they think they’re powerless and that addiction is some big, mysterious, insurmountable bogeyman. Much of the powerless idea comes from within the mind; the ADDICTIVE VOICE is exploiting a long record of failure. The rest of it comes from without. Our culture has some very warped attitudes toward addiction. How many times have you heard something like, ‘Hide the bottles! Uncle Buzz just pulled up!’”

“So, you think our cultural mind-set compounds the addiction problem?”

“Of course it does, but we don’t have to go along with public stupidity or BEAST-talk. The public mind-set often reinforces BEAST-talk. To summarize the *definition* of BEAST-talk: 1) it advocates future use; 2) it challenges the decision to quit; 3) it tries to undermine your confidence in your ability to remain abstinent.”

“That seems to cover it,” she said.

“I’ve known people to view THE BEAST from four different perspectives. We just went over the *definition* again, you can also try to see it *structurally*, *logically*, and *experientially*. *Structurally*, the cravings come from a more primitive part of the brain, the midbrain, near the brainstem. Inhibitions, intuition, and wisdom come from the outer, more complex regions. In the human brain, yes and no are not two sides of the same coin.”

“That’s right! I never looked at it that way before.”

“Other people benefit from seeing the ADDICTIVE VOICE through *logic*. It makes sense that if drinking is stupid or dangerous, the notion to drink cannot be my idea. Therefore, *logic* tells me the ADDICTIVE VOICE must be doing the thinking.”

“Yes. That makes sense when you say it, but it’s easier said than done. When I get depressed, it sure

feels like it’s my idea. That’s what’s so frustrating about this animal — uh, BEAST.”

“You’re way ahead of me. The fourth way to view it — and this is the tough one for me — is to see it *experientially*, to notice from within that some ideas seem to be coming from somewhere else. In other words, to just see it. I have trouble with this one.”

“Oh,” she exclaimed, “I can see it perfectly! I’ve always thought of it as something other than me. I know better than to think little green men planted a chip in my brain, but where is this idea coming from? Me!”

“It is you, in one sense, but it’s not You — not the Self. When people have trouble viewing it this way, I say: ‘You have two eyes, right?’”

“Right,” she answered.

“And two retinas and two optic nerves, right?”

“Yes.”

“Why, then, do you see only one image? Why are you aware of only one field of vision?”

“Well, the brain mixes the two together,” she replied.

“And if it didn’t make this fact transparent to your awareness, you would be way too distracted to function, wouldn’t you?”

“Of course!”

“THE BEAST is similarly ‘transparent’ to our awareness. Understanding this — um, ‘transparency,’ if you will, does not help me to see it *experientially*,” I admitted. “When the urge hits, it still seems as if it’s me who wants to get loaded, so I lean heavily on the other ways of viewing it. And I’m always open to learning or discovering new ways.”

“This has all been so helpful. I’m confident enough to tell you about my problem,” she said.

“Okay, what’s going on?”

“People laugh at me,” she said sheepishly, “but I’m addicted to chocolate.”

My insides jumped. “So am I! And cherry cola, too! My doctor wants me to give them up to see if they’re causing my digestive problems. I’m having a hell of a time! It’s like I’m at Day One all over again. I’m off the colas, for the most part — but that chocolate! And once I start, I can pound several ounces at one sitting!”

“So, what are you going to do?”

“I guess I need to make THE BIG PLAN. That’s the most important tactic.” But I was curious at this point. “By the way,” I asked, “do you think it is in your best interest to quit eating chocolate forever?”

“Absolutely!”

“May I ask why?”

“I’ll be damned if I’m going to let this thing control me!” she shouted.

This response caught me off guard. I gathered my thoughts and said, “That’s an excellent reason! As pure motives go, I think dignity is the most powerful and effective one for quitting an addiction. It’s one thing to be addicted to something that will kill you, that’s motivation enough for most people to quit, but it’s tough to just up and quit an addiction like chocolate, an addiction which has no tangible or obvious consequences.”

“I can’t think of any other reason why I’d want to quit, but the indignity is eating me alive,” she said.

“Any reason is a valid reason, and any reason will work. You don’t need to reach bottom and you don’t have to ‘do it for yourself’ in order to succeed. Besides, many people hit bottom and simply stay there. Some seem to think that if they hurry up and reach bottom, they’ll bounce back, so to speak; that backing themselves into a corner will somehow motivate them to get their act together. They think they’ll hit bottom and go ‘boing!’ All too often, though, they just go ‘splat.’ With AVRT, you don’t need to go that far in order to learn self-control.”

“I think I have some work to do.”

“Rather, you have some recognizing to do. Make your decision, and then live with it.”

“Thanks, goodbye!”

“Bye, now!”

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The Chocolate Easter Beast A Lesson in Dignity

BY CLIFF WALKER, COORDINATOR
RRSN OF PORTLAND

The local RATIONAL RECOVERY SELF-HELP NETWORK phone rings in my home office and we get several calls per day. When I have the time, I will work with someone over the phone.

Recently, I took a call from a woman who saw our ad in the Portland Yellow Pages: “RATIONAL RECOVERY Self-Help Meetings — No Steps, No Traditions, No Charge.” She said she was interested in hearing our spin on things, but refused to tell me her own situation. I’ve dealt with a wide range of people. Many seem to think they are the only ones who’ve been in a particular situation. Patience and acceptance work well in such situations.

This caller reminded me of the time, almost two years ago, that I met an erotic dancer on the Internet. She was on cocaine. I’d made the claim that quitting is a skill, and she challenged me to teach her how to quit and stay quit. Twelve-Step-ers were telling her that she’d need to quit dancing first, but this she stubbornly refused to consider. This complicated her situation, but it was not impossible.

I got her attention by asking, “Is the restaurant industry is any less dope-infested than the tittie-shakin’ joint?”

“Even if it was, I’d know where to get some!”

“So, simply changing your environment isn’t the answer, is it?”

“No, but I can see how staying clean in a place like this could be rather uncomfortable.”

“It is for some, but your environment will never force you to you get loaded against your will. I got clean at the corner of Heroin Alley and Cocaine Lane, and I know others who’ve cleaned up in crack houses. We had no choice; we lived there and had no money to move.”