

A different kind of cold

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Winter: that dreaded time of year. Most of us despise it for its brutal below-zeros and icy, bellicose breezes, but I hate it for my own reasons. When the wind snakes from the nape of my neck down to the small of my back, I shiver — but it's not because I'm cold. I'm just sad, and the Minnesota freeze reminds me of a much deeper chill: the coldness of addiction and the pain of watching someone that you love lose control. One winter ago, I saw one of my best friends reduce his life to popping pills, polishing off pints, and inventing elaborate tales to obscure his problems. Bitterly, I nicknamed him "Peregrine Falcon." As a bird that can reach speeds of over 200 mph in its free-fall hunting dive, I felt this to be a fitting metaphor for the fast-approaching end to my friend's life.

That same year, I ran into a high school classmate at Coffman. I asked what he was up to and he inquired if I had time. I did. Over coffee, he admitted that he had spent the past three years recovering from an oxycodone addiction. He was better now, however, and starting as a freshmen at the University of Minnesota.

His story gave me hope for my friend (who also eventually recovered) and this winter, when the cold returned to my bones, I knew what had to be done to help others. Now a sophomore majoring in Psychology, Jeff didn't blink when I asked him to spill his soul.

"When I was sixteen, I broke my arm while snowboarding and that got me into the emergency room on a morphine drip and a large prescription of painkillers," he began. "That kind of sparked the fire. It was like a light switch in my head that I never knew was there. Once it was on, I never wanted to turn it off."

Jeff's yearning for the initial euphoria that he experienced while in the hospital never went away. It led to the use of painkillers, particularly oxycodone, on a recreational basis, more habitually, and then finally as a full-blown addiction. According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, the number of new prescription drug abusers, ages 12 to 25, surpassed 2 million in 2000 and continues to grow. Remarkably, Jeff managed to graduate from high school in 2005 and be accepted into The University of Wisconsin despite his self-destructive behavior. By summertime, however, he found it increasingly difficult to keep up his farce.

"I was a slave to the drug," he admitted. "I found myself doing things that were totally against my values and personal character just to feed my habit. It got so bad that I was hiding the fact that I was doing drugs from the people I normally did drugs with. I didn't want them to know how much I was using. Even my dealers were cautioning me against how much I was buying, but I couldn't react."

Yet eventually, Jeff did react. He became so desperate in his own life that he confessed his drug abuse to his parents. "I felt like this demon had been released from me," he said of his confession. There was relief, but there was also overwhelming uncertainty over the recovery that was to come, a process that I will discuss in next week's column.

For now, we remained suspended in silence. Despite the warmth of my coffee pressed against my hand, my snug wool sweater, and the slivers of sun pouring in through the café window, I shuddered. I looked into Jeff eyes and I could only feel one thing: cold.

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