

After relapse come terror, hope

- Story Highlights
- Author Nic Sheff wrote to CNN producers trying to convey the pain of addiction
- Sheff had written a memoir of his journey to sobriety
- Says Sheff: "I know there is a beautiful life to be had in sobriety"

By Nic Sheff
Special to CNN

Editor's note: Nic Sheff, an author and recovering drug addict, wrote this letter to CNN producers, describing his drug relapse in May 2008. He has been clean since December. His letter contains profanity.

My head is all static like a TV not turned to any working channel. There is a sadness in me that crawls up from my stomach and out my throat and screams so loud my ears bleed from it. I feel emptiness. I feel a great swallowing hole at my center. I feel pain twisting in like glass spirals. I feel leeches sucking at my spine -- around my rib cage -- at the backs of my eyes. I feel it come on me for no reason -- for no reason at all. I'll be at the beach with my dog and my girlfriend and we'll be walking there as the sun is setting and the sky is smudged with toxic colors. The wind will be blowing and there'll be nothing I have to do but go get something to eat and maybe watch a movie, or something but, still, out of nowhere, the darkness will come up on me, grab me by the throat, tighten, pull me down, down, f---ing down. It's this grave opened up for me -- this tomb that closes around me and is cemented solid shut. My voice is silenced. I curl into myself, fetus style, shrinking until I am almost nothing at all.

My head scares the s--- outta me. I'm scared of the darkness there. I'm scared of the places it takes me. The feelings come up on me and I have to run -- I have to escape -- I have to get away or I'll drown in them. Most of the time I can't even acknowledge that they're there. Just admitting their existence is way too f---ing scary to face.

It sucks.

It f---ing sucks to have a head like mine.

I wish I was normal.

I wish I could get lost in simple things like others seem to do.

But I just think about everything too g----- much. I pick the world apart and it all seems so defeating, so depressing. I feel like I'm an alien dropped off here by mistake and surrounded by a species I can't even begin to relate to.

I am isolated, alone, disgusted with everything and, most especially, myself.

I am filled to overflowing with pain and torment and weight, so much f---ing weight.

The pressure coming down is never ending.

Everything in me cries out for relief.

And so I turn to drugs, yeah, and f---ed up relationships. I look to these things for distraction from my reality. I've been doing that since I was little.

But beyond just my addiction s---, I've become more'n more aware of all this dual diagnosis stuff my doctors say I have. I've been diagnosed bipolar as well as having some kinda possible personality disorder.

I guess because of the severity of my [addiction](#), I've never paid much attention to my other mental illnesses.

But, recently, I've been forced to confront these other diseases.

I mean, they've just about taken my a-- down as hard core -- or almost as hard core -- as my alcoholism did.

I was first diagnosed bipolar by a doctor over three years ago, but I didn't start taking medication regularly 'til I got into my last treatment center. The thing was, a doctor prescribed me meds the second day I was there -- when I was still going through detox. Since that time -- for over two years -- I'd just been taking those same medications at the exact same dosage. I did have a psychiatrist when I moved to Savannah, but he processed patients like a herd of cows going off to be slaughtered. I swear he wouldn't even look at me. When I complained of anything, he just smirked and suggested I get one of his wife's meditation tapes -- conveniently for sale in the waiting room.

So I'd been abstinent from drugs for a good amount of time and had recently moved back to L.A. I was taking daily doses of Prozac and lithium.

What happened was I had this severe manic episode. I'd had 'em before, but I'd never been able to necessarily identify it so intensely. And, the other thing, was that the mania coincided with this totally tumultuous time in my life -- so I acted out more extremely in it than I normally would've.

Mania, for me, is this feeling like hyper-compulsive, heart racing energy just coursing through me so my breath is short and staggered. I feel high, grandiose, but scarily out of control.

I was living with my girlfriend, but I started carrying on these two concurrent phone relationships. One was with this girl who met me at the airport and had prayed over me 'cause she was part of some weird cult up in Northern California. She was very beautiful and I felt this incredible, instant, body shaking, universe exploding connection traveling between us as we spoke to each other. The other phone obsession was with my ex-girlfriend. She'd been recently released from a lock-down psych ward in the Valley. Damaged women have always been a huge turn on. Show me cutting scars on your arms and I'll love you forever.

Something like that.

So I was constantly sneaking away to talk on the phone and text message or whatever. My phone bill that month was literally over \$800.

Obviously I found that out later.

All that time my mind was going, going, going so fast it made no sense at all. I thought maybe that there was a God and he was telling me to run off with that cult girl. I thought that maybe I needed to get back together with my ex who is, by all accounts, the obsession of my life.

And then my mom, who lives in L.A., suddenly left her... husband of 20 years.

...My whole life my mom had been making declarations and even plans to leave him -- but she never followed through with them.

When my mom finally left, though, I was taken totally by surprise. She moved into a house in Venice and I had the insane thought that I should leave my girlfriend, since we were obviously having problems, and help my mom in this scary ass time for her.

Thankfully, someone did talk some sense into me about the cult girl and the illusions around my ex-girlfriend just kinda faded out on their own.

But I'd left my girlfriend and was living with my mom....

Still, I couldn't help the feelings driving me forward with the force of an elevator falling free from the top floor of a skyscraper.

I hardly slept.

Of course, I wasn't going to 12-step meetings or participating in any kind of therapy. Mostly I was alone with my head and the razor blades of craziness cutting in.

So I was looking for toothpaste in my mom's bathroom upstairs and instead found three prescription bottles.

Two of them were interesting -- Klonopin and Darvocet. I took one of each without even thinking twice. There was maybe the tiniest whispering of guilt and fear, but I pushed those away like everything else.

That night I was very patient and kind and calm. My girlfriend's cat had started ripping his own hair out and had gone mostly bald between his legs and at the base of his tail. Cortizone shots hadn't helped.

The reason we'd come to L.A. from Savannah in the first place was so she could intern with a designer here for three months. She knew no one in L.A. or how to get around or anything.

So I took the cat, Moose, to the vet for her while she was at work.

The vet prescribed him Valium tablets we were supposed to break into little pieces.

Needless to say I offered to share them with Moose.

Just randomly I ran into an old friend of mine at that time who was dating this guy who lived at one of the medical marijuana dispensaries here in Venice. He got me a bottle of weed called "Blueberry."

It smelled like blueberries.

It was really f---in' good.

So I was taking pills and smoking pot and, that weekend, I was scheduled to go to speak at this boys' rehab in Washington. I would get paid \$4,000 to talk to them about the memoir I'd written and being sober and whatever.

I took a hit of the Blueberry before taking the taxi to the airport.

Actually, I think it was that trip to Washington that saved my life.

First of all, it forced me to get sober again for at least a couple days. Also, I had to take this ferry out across the Sound to get to the little island where the rehab was. The water was just shimmering with sequins and glitter sunlight. Dense forest rose up in every direction. Boats passed rocking with the swells as the wind started picking up strong and constant.

The beauty and quiet brought clarity.

Well, some clarity, at least.

I saw myself going down.

I saw myself going down again f---ing hard.

And the thing was, I'd started to value myself -- even sort of love myself. I could've never said that before.

I know there is a beautiful life to be had in sobriety -- I've seen it, grabbed hold of it for a moment, maybe more.

Plus all this s--- inside of me -- this pain and craziness and blah, blah, blah -- it's always gonna be there 'til I f---ing face it. The longer I run, the more f---ed up I'm gonna get and the harder it'll be to look at. I have a chance to get well if I stay sober. I have a chance at healing.

But, coming back to L.A., the Valium and the weed was still there and I didn't have the power to stop. The obsession had already taken hold of me.

So, somewhat f---ing miraculously, I called and asked for help.

I got myself into a seven day program in Minnesota.

Being in treatment I was actually really inspired to make mental health my absolute first priority. I mean, it can seem like a luxury, or something, but without it I have absolutely nothing.

So I completed my time there and I moved back in with my girlfriend. We're trying to make it work after everything. I've gotten hooked up with this totally cool, amazing therapist/psychiatrist woman who's expensive, but what the hell else should I be investing in? I'd rather not want to f---ing kill myself than to own a car or a g----- iPhone.

Also I got into this great outpatient group therapy program that meets twice a week and includes an additional once a week one on one with my counselor.

And I'm trying to get back into 12-step stuff, even though it drives me f---ing crazy.

Still, I'm trying.

I'm working with new medications and getting all this blood work done and covering the "basics" as my shrink put it.

The thing I'm working on maybe most of all, though, is being authentic. My whole life I've worked so hard to make everyone like me and I've completely lost sight of who I am.

Maybe I've never really known.

I've always tried to be so nice and perfect.

Using was the only time when I got to just be an a--hole.

But we're all a--holes, right?

At times.

So I'm trying to let myself just be.

And not worry about what ya'll think and whether I'm pissing ya'll off, or what.

I'm still not very good at that.

But I'm clean 45 days today -- July 14.

I'm terrified of everything.

But I'm working f---ing hard to face my s---.

That's all I can do.

And between bouts of wanting to throw myself off a tall building, I have some, what? Hope, I guess. And that's something I can hold on to.

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