First Year Sober and a Lifelong Journey

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It was around 9 a.m. on a mid September day in 2015, and Leah was on her hands and knees picking at her gray bedroom carpet for cocaine. She was hung over, unemployed and had spent all her money from the past few months on drugs. She needed to get high.

The night before had been a typical one out that had become routine for the 23-year-old over the summer. Benders with her latest crush, the local dealer, at a dive bar on Third Avenue, a few blocks away from her aunt’s posh Upper East Side apartment that she also lived in. While he sold to clients, she copped one bag from him and snorted lines in the bathroom, drank rounds of gin and tonics or Coronas with lime and chain-smoked menthol cigarettes. They would shut the place down. Both of them would continue partying back at her apartment as they shared three or four bags of coke per night. Leah genuinely liked him and was attracted to his “thugged out” looks, but the free drugs were a major advantage. When the sun was up and he was gone, Nyquil pills and a hot lavender bath around 10 a.m. would do the trick for an all day slumber--followed by binge watching of the “90210” reboot series and a repeat of the previous night’s endeavors.

But Leah just couldn’t go to sleep yet. She was “coming down” and craved more. She looked through empty bags that he’d left on her table to see if there was any residue. One time he had pushed the empty bags into his beer can, which had infuriated Leah—“Why the fuck is he doing that I could sniff the shit out of them.”

The carpet seemed like the next best place to search. As she picked up little pieces of lint, figuring out what was cocaine and what wasn’t, it hit her.

“Oh Jesus, this is not ok. This is bad,” she began to tell herself.

This was a new low. She’d only carpet picked twice before with her friend, but it was more of a joke. This time she was alone.

Leah had done a lot of things for a high, especially when she was younger. She couldn’t remember much from when she was 19, yet there were times and mistakes she would never forget. She couldn’t go back to the way things were and overdose again. Her usage was bad now, but it had been much worse back then.
She got off the carpet and instead looked on her phone for meeting times at the 46th Clubhouse, a nearby 12-step recovery and Alcoholic Anonymous center in midtown. A former classmate from high school had told her about it at a block party, and Leah had taken note despite lying to her classmate about being sober. She’d been high during their conversation.

The first meeting was starting in a few hours. She texted a friend she’d fought with the night before when he confronted her about her drug use outside the bar: “I know you’re trying to help. I need help and that’s why I’m going to this place.”

Leah had tried going to meetings in 2012, her first attempt in getting sober or at least slowing down her drug use. But she would go to a meeting and get drinks afterward. It didn’t seem that bad since she was a drug addict, not an alcoholic.

Leah was the first one at the Clubhouse and she waited outside with Daphne, her brown longhaired Chihuahua, for the doors to open and the meeting to start.

“You know you can’t have a dog in here,” said Eddie, the Clubhouse owner.

“She’s a service dog,” Leah replied, though it technically wasn’t true.

“What does that mean?” he said.

“It means she’s allowed to be in here!” she snapped back, grilling him with a squinted glare.

Leah was fuming. All she wanted to do was to be sober, and this guy was already irritating her. When she began to leave Eddie begged her not to go, realizing how he had offended a newcomer. She told him she would be right back even though she had no plan to return.

As she headed down the block she came to a halt and sighed.

“Leah don’t let this shit get to you. It’s so stupid, just go back.”

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The first year of sobriety is a daunting life change and difficult journey. Addiction isn’t a choice but a disease that requires treatment for substance dependency.

“Addiction is a behavior that’s chronic, progressive and fatal,” says Gary Whyte, recovery management specialist for Hazelden’s My Ongoing Recovery Experience program in New York. “It takes you outside of your normal lifestyle and you become obsessed. You can become psychically addicted to something, and psychologically addicted.”
In a 2013 survey conducted by the Substance Abuse & Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), an estimated 22.7 million individuals aged 12 or older required treatment for illicit drug or alcohol use, and about 2.5 million of those people received treatment at a specialty facility.

SAMHSA also found that New York has one of the largest numbers of facilities and clients in treatment. For every year from 2003 through 2013, New York State had at least 713 clients in treatment per 100,000 people aged 18 and over.

Whyte explains that sobriety, also called recovery, is more than just abstaining. While abstinence means putting down the substance, recovery is a learned behavior that requires changes in attitude and lifestyle. It’s an identity and a personal effort that everyone deals with differently. And as difficult as it is for someone to submit himself or herself to sobriety, the days that follow are just as tough.

“It can be very challenging the first year, or 18 months, of sobriety. You don't understand the urges you get and how to go through something without medicating,” he says. “You’re learning one day at a time and it becomes something you're going to be doing for the rest of your life.”

Leah did return to the Clubhouse that morning with Daphne in tow. Even though she wasn’t an alcoholic, the 12-step model can be used for other addictions. It was the first time she’d been serious about “working the program” and she began attending meetings daily.

She had relapsed the night of her fifth day of sobriety when she had a craving and wanted to test the waters, noticing that “the rooms” (AA) always accepted people back after relapses. She had gone out to the bar like usual for drugs and regretted it immediately, and went back to meetings the next day.

Some in recovery put emphasis on how long they consistently maintain their sobriety. In 12-step programs, individuals keep track of their days and recognize each milestone, 30 days sober, six months sober, a year sober, double digits and beyond.

Whyte says that there are many reasons for relapses and no one can determine what will trigger it. For some, relapsing is part of the recovery process, while others chronically relapse. But a relapse can determine the next step for an addict—do they continue sobriety or go back to using?

An eight-year study, featured in Psychology Today, of about 1,200 substance abusers found that only about of third of people who are abstinent for less than a year would remain sober, and less than half will relapse out of those who reach a year of sobriety. According to the results, chances of relapses decrease the longer
someone is sober, but that’s not to say that someone who hasn’t touched a drink in two decades can’t relapse. Relapses can happen at any time.

“Everyone [in AA] keeps telling me you’re smart and you’re strong for realizing it right away and just coming right back,” says Leah. “I was just looking at myself in the mirror like I can’t fucking live like this anymore. It’s really not worth it.”

Growing up in Brooklyn, Leah lived a “totally normal happy life.” She was adopted as a baby from the Ukraine and went from being the shy one who hid behind her mother’s legs, to a bubbly child who wanted to try everything at least once—ice skating, instruments, ballet and taekwondo. She got drunk for the first time in high school off cans of Sparks and faked smoke cigarettes during lunch. A lot of her friends smoked marijuana, and she tired it to look like a badass but hated the taste.

Her real weakness was introduced in the summer of 2011 while she was working as a photographer for Circle Line Sightseeing Cruises in Times Square. A co-worker was a cocaine user and had asked her to try it with him. Leah had always been curious, her friends had their weed and this was her time to get high. After snorting her first line off “Go Ask Alice,” a drug fueled novel from the ’70s, she was eager to do more.

“With drinking you get out of sorts. You get stupid,” says Leah. “Doing coke is like, alright I’m still here. I know what’s going on. I’m ok.”

Being “ok” had turned into back-to-back highs with her co-worker, who she briefly dated. Their hangouts had consisted of six hours of doing lines, chain smoking and talking about life in his bedroom in Queens. Leah was fired from Circle Line after showing up to work late, or not at all, too many times.

Doing coke meant doing it hard and however much she could afford. It ranged from getting high at parties with dealers, to getting high in the bathroom at a family Jewish holiday dinner. She had experienced her first withdrawal, waking up in pools of sweat and scratching her legs until they bled, that same year. In order to afford cocaine, she had sex with guys she knew for money, and was nearly pimped out by a dealer once when she was high. That plan was disrupted when the client had robbed Leah and the dealer at gunpoint, a blessing as Leah calls it.

And doing it hard meant overdosing, by herself on a sidewalk in Brighton Beach after a party. To this day, Leah still doesn’t know what fully happened. What she does remember is being on the ground of the sidewalk for a while, waking up with scratches on her hands and bleeding knees, getting herself in a cab and realizing she urinated on herself. Her guess is she had a seizure.
Her overdose scared her enough so that she’d slowed down, taking cocaine occasionally at parties. But gradually she’d got back into it and then the summer of benders in the Upper East Side came and went.

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“Welcome Class of 1989,” read the banner.

Rick walked below the sign and was already having a terrible time. The 43-year-old thought he was ready. It was a ‘80s prom-themed anniversary party for his neighbors, John and Diana, at the Polish American Club near his house on Long Island. It was a small crowd of about 30 friends and neighbors, and everyone was decked out in retro prom attire, but he was reluctant to join the group of neon colors.

Everyone seemed to be drinking expect for Rick. At 90 days sober, he was proud of how far along he was but it was hard being at the party because he felt like an outsider. He tried outpatient rehab once in 2013 and went to meetings sporadically earlier this year, but these 90 days was the longest he’d ever been in recovery.

He watched from the side as his wife Kristine danced out on the floor, she looked like Madonna with her blonde curly hair and lacy black gloves. She’d bought an “atrocious” teal satin prom dress just for the night. She tried to convince Rick to dance but she could tell right away he was off. After 23 years of being with her college sweetheart, and two sons and a daughter later, she knew when there wasn’t anything she could do that would cheer him up.

Rick couldn’t help but feel sorry for himself. He and Kristine were separated and in couples therapy regularly since February. Over the summer, he had moved into his cousin’s apartment in Times Square and would visit the kids at the house on weekends.

For the first few weeks of recovery, Rick had been obsessed with his sobriety. It was all he ever thought about, counting each hour. In his first month he had a dream that he’d taken a shot, and woke up in tears and was scared that it had actually happened. But the more AA meetings he went to the more comfortable he became. Hearing other testimonies made him feel like he wasn’t alone.

It wasn’t like that here. He approached the bar and ordered a seltzer with lime, while someone else ordered a round of shots of blueberry vodka. As Rick gazed over at the bartender chilling and pouring the shots, a slight longing for the liquid came over him. He began to miss the glasses of vodka or bourbon he’d pound straight with ice.

“When I used to go to these social gatherings my mission was to get messed up, consume as much as possible. Whatever happens throughout the evening was
secondary,” says Rick. “Now it’s really to make connections and genuinely have a good time.”

It wasn’t the first party Rick had attended since becoming sober. Two weeks earlier he was at a 50th birthday party at a bar when someone had handed him a shot of Fire Ball. He thought those situations would scare him, yet saying “No thank you” to the whiskey was easy. And he was proud to be his wife’s designated driver, instead of being passed out in the passenger seat.

But this time it was different and much harder. He felt left out and seeing Kristine having fun gave him the impression she was moving on with her life. Isolating himself made it worse and he needed to leave, even if it meant walking home.

Kristine refused to let him walk and told him to take her car instead. It was too far of a walk and walking home meant going through Port Jefferson Station by the train tracks, which was a bad neighborhood to be in at night. There were also drugs everywhere, a recipe for disaster Kristine thought—because for Rick, any drug he could get his hand on would feed his addiction.

“Pills, cocaine, you name it. The only thing I’ve never dabbled in was heroine,” says Rick, “but just about everything else, if someone had it I was going to consume it.”

There were two substances in particular that were his weakness, and they were the easiest for him to find.

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Rick was born in Miami, Florida, and raised by his single mother. He was popular at school and played sports, the only thing he liked about school. He got drunk for the first time when he was 14, and his drinking progressed into high school and at the University of Florida, where he barely passed the last semester with a GPA below 2.0.

He drank, he says now, due to repressed trauma and sadness.

When he was 2-years-old, Rick’s parents had separated and his father moved back to Venezuela, only seeing him one or two days out of the year. Between the ages of 7 and 9 he saw his older sister raped by his brother-in-law on numerous occasions, when the man crept into the living room at night where she and Rick slept.

He didn’t understand what had happened until he was older, and at 20 he became depressed and started to see a counselor. He was self-medicating with alcohol and marijuana. Rick had began to reflect on his life, and opened up to his mother over dinner about a reoccuring nightmare he had growing up, about a man coming through the window and raping his mother in front of him when he was a child. His
mother confirmed the nightmare was actually reality, a hidden memory locked away in his mind.

Rick’s childhood pain transformed into anger in his adulthood, and while alcohol escalated his temper, daily marijuana use would calm him, as the slightest thing would set him off.

Kristine knew he smoked since they met, and once they were married it wasn’t a big deal when he went out partying with his friends or came home drunk. Rick was a stay at home dad for three years, after their twins Briana and Hudson were born, and she thought he needed an outlet away from home.

Once they moved to New York from Florida, about seven years ago, she had become more critical of his marijuana use and wanted it far away from the house. The twins were getting older and she thought he needed to set a better example, and now they also had their youngest son Christian. She’d realized his recreational activity was an unhealthy and costly one.

“It became a real rut within our marriage. It became what I called his mistress,” says Kristine. “No matter how hard I asked, or cried or begged, rationalize against, it just would never go away.”

It became a pattern; Rick would promise he’d quit smoking and then Kristine would find evidence. In the beginning of 2015, she gave him an ultimatum, either their marriage or marijuana. He stopped smoking, but continued drinking.

Rick was living a double life. He worked as a middle school history teacher in the city and immediately went to a liquor store after school, or got drunk at Penn Station before going home to his family.

“I just wanted to feel outside of myself. Maybe I was sad,” says Rick. “When you get messed up or intoxicated you kind of step outside of yourself. I really just wanted to get ‘effed up.”

Briana, then 13-years-old, started to notice he was drinking a lot. She had been learning about alcohol in school and knew he shouldn’t drink and drive. She would call Kristine to pick her up because she didn’t feel comfortable with Rick driving, and one time she called hysterical crying because he was home drunk and it was upsetting her.

Kristine was wearing thin. She was tired of his angry outbursts—once he so angry on a family trip that he opened the door while she was driving 30mph, threatening to jump out.

But the real breaking point came on July 25.
Rick and Kristine were at a neighbor’s party, where Rick downed shots, started belittling Kristine, and finally dumped his drink into hers, told her to “Go fuck herself,” and left. Kristine was mortified. She followed Rick out to their garage, and he placed his arm around her and tried to kiss her.

“Don’t you dare touch me,” she exclaimed.

“What?” Rick replied, as he was shocked by her reaction.

He had no recollection of what had just happened and thought his wife was just rejecting him.

Rick wanted to drive off and Kristine was scared and tried to wrestle the keys away from him. But she failed to get them from his grasp and he walked away instead down the dark block.

About 30 minutes later, Rick called Kristine slurring that he was in the woods. She couldn’t understand where he was and told him the door would be open and he could come home whenever he wanted. At 3:30 a.m. she woke up to find that he still wasn’t home, but at least the car was still in the driveway. She didn’t know what to do, if she should call the police, or what to tell her children.

Rick woke up around 4 a.m., in the woods between two houses in the neighborhood, covered in poison ivy. He couldn’t remember anything or how he got there. In that moment he came to terms with a great fear.

He felt like his stepfather, one of the worse drunks he’d ever seen, who would open a beer the second he woke up if it wasn’t for Rick’s mother. His mother had divorced him when Rick was a kid, but he’d still kept in touch with his stepfather. He ended up dying of cancer and Rick never forgot what his mother had said, that his stepfather died alone—reaping what he sowed.

“I didn’t want to be that person,” says Rick. “I want to cherish my children, cherish my family relationships so I don’t die alone. I’ll always remember that last drunk.”

That night Rick had finally hit his bottom, the point that usually drives people to start on the path of sobriety.

Whyte, from Hazelden, explains that since sobriety is a lifestyle choice, an individual won’t commit until they’re fully ready and no longer enjoy the high from the substance. If they still enjoy using, they’re going to continue. He says he always lets his clients in treatment know they have a choice.

“It goes back to having a mindset, and being sick and tired of it all,” Whyte says. “Some people don’t reach that point and there’s no gage. People chronically relapse
because there’s something that’s drawing them to the substance they’re abusing and the mindset hasn’t hit rock bottom.”

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During the first month of Leah’s sobriety she got a new job as a receptionist in a vet office and was going to meetings everyday at the Clubhouse, where she also met her latest boyfriend.

In “the rooms,” spirituality is used a lot in reference to the 12-steps and everyone is encouraged to find a higher power, whatever that may be. Leah was raised Jewish but wasn’t religious. Still, every morning she would thank her “higher power” for her sobriety and remind herself that if she relapsed, her hard work thus far would have been for nothing.

Although she relapsed on the fifth day the first time she tried the program, on the fifth day of her second attempt she was able to take one of the most challenging tasks, according to her peers in AA, for someone in recovery—her first wedding completely sober.

She went with her friend Mike, and he agreed to abstain with her. They still had fun dancing throughout the night.

“If I was alone I would of wished I was drunk,” says Leah.

But on the 29th day, a Wednesday night, she had a panic attack when she passed by Third Avenue, which is where she had used to take drugs and her old dealer still works. It was one of her first triggers she experienced.

“I can go into a bar, eat lunch and have soda instead of drink, and be fine,” says Leah. “Alcohol is all over my kitchen and it doesn’t tempt me. But on Third Avenue, I’ll be looking back every three seconds.”

Leah and her boyfriend had a ritual of walking back to her apartment after a nightly AA meeting and they would choose a new avenue every time. He asked her if she would be ok with walking on third. She had avoided it in the past but ended up passing by the block the night before without a problem.

As they walked up the avenue approaching 60th Street, Leah started to feel funny.

“God, it’s really hot out here isn’t it?” she asked. Suddenly she was getting dizzy and had to stop for a moment, sitting on a large plant pot on the sidewalk.
Her boyfriend nervously handed her some water. Leah couldn’t help but laugh about it.

“Why do I feel this way?” she asked.

“Probably because we’re on third,” he replied.

“I didn’t even remember we’re on third. I wasn’t even thinking about it,” she said, as she was distracted by their conversation.

“Yeah but your brain knows.”

It was her first panic attack and it went as quickly as it had come.

Then, on her 55th day sober, Leah accidently drank alcohol. She was at a bar with a friend, and the bartender mistakenly added rum to her Diet Coke with lemon. Leah took a big gulp and instantly tasted the rum. She started to panic, wondering if that gulp of alcohol meant she would have to start her sobriety from scratch.

Leah called her sponsor outside the bar, and to her relief the sponsor reassured her that everything was fine, she didn’t have to start over. It was an accident and Leah was still committed to her sobriety.

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Rick had the date of his first day of sobriety tattooed on his arm as a reminder.

“I think it’s a life long process for me and I always need to be remembered of this date on my arm,” he says. “I know today I’m not going to drink. I don’t know about tomorrow, but today I’m good.”

Now looking down at the tattoo, he’s at 134 days, had moved back to Long Island in a studio apartment to be closer to his family and got a seasonal job at Target, where he worked nights after his new teaching job. It was extra money and more importantly it kept Rick busy. But a downside to a busy schedule was there wasn’t always enough time to attend a meeting, which he hadn’t gone to in two weeks.

Rick also found guidance by going with his family to church, a non-denominational Christian church that packed the venue with their opening rock band. The days of him fighting with Briana turned into weekends of them bonding, “daddy” was the best she’s ever seen. Every weekend in October, he loaded up his Honda Pilot with Briana and her six friends, and took them to haunted houses throughout the island.

He was still working on reconciling with Kristine, as their 24th wedding anniversary is approaching in January and his first birthday sober. Kristine was proud of him, but his sobriety didn’t fix their marriage. She didn’t have a set day and Rick wanted
He wanted to move on with his life with whatever came his way, so he gave himself a personal deadline and ultimatum for Kristine for April--either continue with the marriage or get a divorce.

Now at about 80 days, Leah is also taking recovery day by day. When she lost a family friend who was like a grandmother to her, she relied on her family and friends as her support system instead of taking drugs as she once might have.

She’ll be spending the Christmas holiday in Mexico with her mother, aunt and a friend and plans on attending AA meetings there, marking her 90th day of sobriety. Her family is worried about Leah making her meetings and avoiding alcohol, but she is more than happy to just lie on the beach.

“I mean it's always going to be hard no matter how long you got,” she says. “People in AA got like 10 years and they struggle. They still have to come in every day.”