

Sobriety in Retrospect: The Benefits of Quitting Weed

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WeeHurts.org | November 27, 2014

In my personal story of marijuana addiction, I describe the unexpected struggles I faced following my decision to quit cannabis. At the time, this decision came easy, as I was experiencing many problems – anxiety, panic attacks, and depression – directly related to my smoking habit. What I didn't know at the time, however, is that my life had taken a turn for the worse long before these problems arose. It took months of sobriety for me to realize the years spent prior – as a 'happy stoner' – were, in fact, some of the saddest years of my life.

Circling the Bowl

Smoking weed regularly is akin to living in a fish tank. From the interior, the world appears grand and expansive. It's only by stepping outside that you see how cramped and lonely it's become. As a daily smoker, I saw myself as functional, outgoing, and content. But the reality of my existence was quite different from what I perceived it to be. Slowly but surely, the quality of my work suffered, my motivation and drive diminished, my stress levels increased, and my relationships faltered. Marijuana became my only real interest, and though I felt happy, I rarely wore a genuine smile unless I was high, thinking about getting high, or remembering the last time I was.

Standing outside those glass walls, it's hard for me to believe I could confuse the numbness I lived in constantly for true joy I know today. But since putting in the hard work of making myself happy, there's no mistaking the difference. My life is honestly better in every way imaginable. Don't get me wrong... attaining this level of life satisfaction didn't happen overnight. Beyond the acute stages of withdrawal – a very real phenomenon for a small percent of heavy users like me – repairing the damage done by years of poor self-care took some doing. But I've found the benefits achieved have far exceeded the effort expended in changing my world for the better.

Life Rediscovered

While I could literally fill a book with the upsides of sobriety, a handful of positive changes I've noted after quitting weed include:

- **Improved focus, concentration, & memory.** I had absolutely no idea how great an impact marijuana had on my cognitive abilities until I quit. In fact, while I was using, I'd be the first to tell you weed was harmless in this regard. It was only after being clean for a few months that I began noticing the difference.

No longer was I re-reading the same passages over again in books or magazines, struggling to absorb the content. No longer was I stumbling over words or searching for the right things to say in conversations with my peers. People, places, and events once important to me – lost in the fog of inebriation – returned to memory with striking

vibrancy and detail. Mistakes made at work and school, once common occurrences, began to lessen and fade.

I can't say marijuana made me stupid. The effects are more subtle than that. But it definitely held me back from achieving my true potential, even in 'recreational' amounts. Mental clarity is a gift you can't fully appreciate until it's been taken away.

- **Resistance to stress and depression.** While I didn't start using marijuana as a crutch to handle the unpleasant realities of daily life, that's exactly what I found myself doing in the end. Unfortunately – as with all drugs of abuse – the band-aid fix intoxication offers is only temporary, leaving our untended psychic wounds to fester and grow.

Cannabis is commonly thought of as something that 'chills you out', and for a while, it usually does. But chronic use causes compensatory changes in brain structure and function; changes which ultimately leave us more susceptible to stress-related insults, and less able to deal with them. By the time I quit, I was depressed most times I wasn't smoking, depressed half the time I was, and living in a constant state of nervousness and anxiety.

Fast-forward six months from that date, and I was back to living a drug-free life with confidence and strength. I stopped facing my problems with anger and tears, and started approaching them with planned solutions. And as I did so, my anxiety and depression began to fade. Marijuana was never a cure for my mental challenges. It was the cause. And now that I'm done with it, I'm 'chill' more often than not.

- **Strengthened relationships with friends & family.** I used to believe the lie that 'everyone' smokes weed. But that's only because potheads don't make a habit out of hanging out with those that don't. And when they do, there often isn't that much to talk about.

Getting high every day not only cut me off from friends and coworkers who didn't use marijuana, but also from my own family at home. When I was forced to socialize outside my circle of stoner friends, I'd put on a good show, but the entire time I'd be thinking of little more than getting my bake on afterwards. Still, most nights were spent at home, warming my sofa with a stupid grin on my face, blissfully detached from those I cared for most.

Now that I'm free of marijuana's lonely embrace, people once again matter to me. Instead of filling the need for human companionship with a chemical substitute, I find myself working to maintain relationships with others. And in return, I'm loved. Not loved as the funny guy at the party with red eyes and a goofy smile, but as someone who gives as much as he takes, is present in the moment, and appreciates the importance of intimate connections.

- **Renewed passion for living.** If there was only one thing marijuana took from me, it would be 'me'. As a daily user, the skills and interests that previously defined me slowly

vanished – as if in a puff of smoke. Before my habit became problematic, I was outgoing, energetic, and adventurous. But it didn't take long before the activities I used to enjoy lost their lustrous zest. My road bikes gathered cobwebs in a garage corner. My writing devolved to grocery lists and twitter posts. Nature hikes were replaced by nature shows – most of which I slept through.

My earliest experiences with cannabis made everything more interesting. Colors popped, sounds resonated, emotions were magnified, and arousal was heightened. Before I knew it, however, marijuana graduated from a well-matched side dish to life's main course. Instead of occasionally supplementing real-world experiences with a friendly buzz, I began replacing these same experiences with a heavy stone. Why bother working for a dopamine rush when you can inhale one?

Since achieving independence from pot I know the answer to that question. Intoxication is a poor substitute for a life well lived. Now I approach activities I used to enjoy – activities I find myself enjoying once again – with passion and enthusiasm. The same passion and enthusiasm I had forgotten the feel of in my self-medicated daze. With the benefit of hindsight, I can say with absolute certainty: Experiencing life sober beats the hell out of remembering life high.

Breaking Out

It took quite a lot of suffering for me to eventually change my ways. Before I realized the devil on my back was the angel I desperately clung to, I had lost some of my best friends, failed in my career, and developed temporary, yet troubling, mental health issues. But looking back now, it's obvious the quality of my life was deteriorating long before I wore the label 'dependent'. I was never a happy stoner. There simply is no such thing.

You don't have to experience addition or withdrawal to taste the loss I've experienced. Every hour spent high, living in your mind instead of the world around you, is an hour you'll never get back. From inside the fish tank, this might not seem so bad. But from the viewpoint I've grown to appreciate, it's a terrible waste of the beautiful life awaiting all of us who dare to approach it from a sober perspective. Don't allow yourself to be held hostage in a prison of your own making. Existence shimmers brightest when seen through non-bloodshot eyes.