



That Summers Day...

It was particularly hot that summer day. I was lying on a lounge chair next to the community pool, enjoying a brief moment of silence, alone in my own thoughts. As sweat began to run down my body, and the intense heat from the sun began to scorch my skin, I gazed at the water knowing the cool touch of the water on my skin would bring immediate relief. As I rose up from my lounge and dove head first into the water, I felt a sense of euphoria as I had a brief reprieve from the heat. Sinking to the bottom of the pool, I fixed my eyes on the palm trees framed by the blue, cloudless sky that were blurred by the water.

In that moment I found peace, even knowing that the moment was fleeting. As my lungs began to tighten, I knew that I would have to break the serenity to surface and feed my body the oxygen that it was momentarily denied.

As I pushed off and headed to the surface, my lungs began to burn, as my body was starved for oxygen. Reaching the plane of the water, I quickly realized there was, No Way Out! What has happened? I still see the palm trees framed by the blue, cloudless sky, blurred by the water. Why can I not penetrate the surface! My lungs need air! I can't find a way out!

In the frantic chaos, I found a small opening, pressed my lips against hole, filled my body with as much air that my lungs could hold. My feeling of peace returned as I felt the oxygen flood into all my muscles. My fight to find an exit continued with only brief episodes of peace when I could find a small passage to the outside world that I could only see through my bloodshot, chlorine burnt eyes...

After only what felt like days, weeks, years, a hand came crashing into the water, grabbing me under the arm, and pulling me up to safety. Without that person walking by, recognizing my struggle, I may have perished in what I had initially perceived as my utopia.

Now imagine instead of being trapped underwater, you are trapped in drug addiction... You don't have the right to stigmatize what you do not understand.

A person's innate drive for survival is unconsciously driven by evolutionarily conserved brain chemistry and brain circuitry.

I have the right to feel normal...

Although *That Summers Day* is a fictional story, it is meant to be a metaphor in order to bring clarity to the day-to-day struggle for survival that occurs within every individual that is dealing with substance use disorder or drug addiction.

Substances of abuse target an evolutionarily conserved area of the brain that drives survival behavior. This area of the brain promotes behaviors that are seen as beneficial to the survival of the individual, and thus the species. Any drug of abuse, whether opioids, alcohol, marijuana, cocaine, etc., are able to hijack the natural survival mechanism, so that obtaining and using drugs becomes the central drive for survival.

An individual's genetic makeup, as well as how our environment interacts with that genetic makeup (epigenetics) can alter brain chemistry and brain circuitry in a manner that predisposes the individual to developing an addiction. Things like trauma, sexual or physical abuse, and neglect, can be environmental experiences that impact someone's predisposition for addiction risk. Often times, when individuals predisposed for developing an addiction take drugs of abuse, they feel "normal for the first time," they feel "energized," or that they feel "comfortable talking to people for the first time." Drugs of abuse become a type of self-medication in order to feel normal.

Our communities need to commit to de-stigmatizing addiction disease and encourage and support those dealing with addiction to reach out for treatment.

Addiction is not a moral failing, or due to a weak personal compass, but addiction is a disease with known maladaptive brain chemistry. Long-term treatment can help individuals put their disease in remission, and restore health to themselves, their families, and our communities.

- Richard M. Gustin, Ph.D.

Richard Gustin, Ph.D. is a pharmacologist who studied brain mechanisms and circuitry underlying learning and memory, and how behavior is altered with genetic variation, environmental stress, and drug intake. Dr. Gustin is the co-founder of The Recovery Research Network, which is a substance use disorder treatment and research institute created in 2016, headquartered in Lake Worth, Florida.

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