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LOCAL

'Recovery is a lifestyle': Local woman describes living in recovery from drug addiction

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Editor's note: To maintain anonymity, Michelle asked The Times not to reveal her last name, where she lives or where she works.

Michelle didn't really use drugs or alcohol much in high school.

In fact, her parents were involved in a 12-Step Fellowship. Her dad was in recovery and her mom was heavily involved in Al-Anon, a support group for family members of people with alcohol addiction.

Recovery was a part of Michelle's growing up life.

It wasn't until she personally faced a traumatic experience that she realized the weightiness of addiction.

Michelle of Beaver County was in her late 20s at the time. She was in an unhealthy relationship, one in which "a lot of trust was broken," she said.

She found out her husband was cheating on her, which sent her spiraling.

"It was an instant feeling of not being good enough. My self-confidence was broken," Michelle said. "Now looking back, I don't think I had that much confidence to begin with."

To cope, she started spending time with people who made her feel good momentarily. Her newfound friends partied, and took a lot of drugs.

"It felt comforting," Michelle said. "These people looked like they were having fun and I was drawn to it."

She began using drugs. Mostly club drugs like MDMA — different forms of Ecstasy and Molly — and LSD, or acid.

Michelle briefly stopped partying when she found out she was pregnant with her son. But after she had him, she went right back to it, and things escalated. She started taking oxycontin.

She experienced postpartum depression and other issues, though she wasn't diagnosed with PPD at the time.

"I didn't know how to be me let alone be a mother," Michelle said.

She believes her mental health issues largely contributed to her addiction, which experts in addiction say is pretty common.

'Addiction is a complex disease'

The relationship between mental health and addiction is well-established, as substance use disorder is a diagnosis in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, or DSM-5.

According to Elizabeth Gregory, inpatient drug and alcohol therapist with Gateway Rehab, addiction is a disease that affects a person mentally and physically.

"Addiction is a complex disease," Gregory said. "Addiction becomes habitual. The brain goes into the feeling that, using would be good right now, even when they know it's not."

Substance use disorder can cause distorted thinking and behaviors, according to the American Psychiatry Association.

"Changes in the brain's structure and function are what cause people to have intense cravings, changes in personality, abnormal movements, and other behaviors. Brain imaging studies show changes in the areas of the brain that relate to judgment, decision making, learning, memory, and behavioral control," the site says.

Gregory calls it a "thinking disease," because substance use disorder affects how people process and make decisions. It changes how the brain functions and, in turn, affects how a person responds to those changes.

"The brain is the one that tries to convince us we don't have it," she said. "It's a battle between the rational and irrational part of the brain."

The complexity of the disease, in conjunction with the social stigma of substance abuse, can make it terrifying to seek treatment at a rehab or other facility.

At Gateway, Gregory said they try to make their clients feel comfortable.

"We try to make them feel as though No. 1, they are not alone. And No. 2, we're going to help them through this," she said.

Leaving the rehab can sometimes be even scarier than coming in.

That's where support systems are essential in the recovery process, Gregory said.

"Support is hugely important because addiction is a mental disease and physical and spiritual disease," she said. "The brain starts to revert back to addictive thinking. But if you can get out of yourself and get someone else's perspective, and even get someone to listen to you and get you out of your own head, you can potentially avert a relapse."

That's where recovery specialists can be a valuable bridge from rehab to other services, like NA or AA meetings. Recovery specialists function partially as a support person until they can get a sponsor at a meeting, and they also house information and resources, similar to a case manager.

"It's a lifelong disease that needs lifelong management," Gregory said.

'Recovery is a lifestyle'

Michelle's parents were the first to suggest she go to a Narcotics Anonymous meeting. She didn't realize just how bad her addiction had gotten until her parents suggest she attend a meeting.

"I didn't know something was wrong until they said something," she said. "It was like, I didn't know my tire was losing air, but thank you for pointing it out."

That was more than two decades ago. Michelle says she's now in a much better place. Those meetings, in part, saved her life.

"I consider myself very lucky," she said. "I got introduced into the program very early into my using. I've seen some of these people use in the past, and I know that could've been me and the path I could've been on."

Recovery is a lifestyle for Michelle. She's dedicated her life to helping other people in addiction.

"I've made recovery a lifestyle," she said. "My best friends are in recovery. My job is getting people into recovery. That's just where my life is surrounded."

It was uncomfortable when she first started attending meetings, she said. She didn't know anybody and felt out of place.

But once she started to participate in activities, she quickly made a new community of people.

"It was awkward at first to meet people, but eventually when I did, it was fun," she said.

After a meeting, people would go out to eat together. Sometimes they would go to amusement parks, games and other local events. Those connections made all the difference.

"That social piece is always what people are looking for. Just having a group of people," she said.

Michelle still attends meetings, sometimes two or three times a week. The meetings still help her, and she tries to be a support for others who may be new to recovery.

"Hope is possible for people who are using," Michelle said. "I strongly believe everyone can recover."

Local resources for those battling addiction

Beaver Valley Alcoholics Anonymous: <http://www.beavercountyaa.org>

Beaver Valley Narcotics Anonymous: <https://www.beavervalleyna.org>

Gateway Rehab: <https://www.gatewayrehab.org>