

I had the unique opportunity to join a 12-Step workshop with Harvey, one of the founders of SA (Sexaholics Anonymous)... He's sober for 26 years from a raging sex addiction that was completely out of control. Harvey is not so religious (he says his Yiddishkeit is "evolving" - and he puts on tefillin every day) but he said that he definitely believes in miracles, because splitting the Yam Suf was "easy pickin" compared to G-d getting *Him* sober :-)

I took some notes from the talks, and I'd like to share some of the wisdom that I heard from him:

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### How Can You Tell An Addict?

A Buddhist Guru was once walking with his disciple down the street. A beautiful woman was standing near a puddle of rain water and she couldn't cross because she was afraid to get her colorful robes wet. The Guru picked her up, carried her over the puddle, and placed her down on the other side... The Guru and his disciple continued walking for a while until the student couldn't hold back and asked, "Master, have you not taught us that we are not allowed to look at or touch a woman? And you actually carried her!". Answered the master, "I put her down on the other side of the puddle, but five miles later and you are still carrying her!"

Three guys are walking down the street, one of them is an addict. They pass a beautiful woman and the two non-addicts whistle and say to each other, "wow, did you see that woman? I'd love to be in bed with her... ". But five minutes later, they've forgotten completely about her. But the addict will still remember this woman (and his friend's triggering comments) FIVE YEARS LATER.

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The 12-Step Program

The 12-Step program is (le'havdil) sort of like Torah she'bichtav and Torah sheba'al peh. The 'bichtav" part of it is the [Big book of AA](#) and the [White Book of SA](#) (which is a supplement to the Big Book geared towards lust addiction). The "Ba'al Peh" part of it, are the things my sponsors shared with me, and I, in turn, share with my sponsees - and with you here today. Many things we do in the program are based on the oral traditions. They are passed down from sponsor to sponsee.

The program is there to protect **me** from **me**. I'm an important person to protect. G-d loves me.

One of my sponsors in AA told me that if they'd invent a pill that would cure alcoholism, he wouldn't take it. Why? Because then he might think he doesn't need the program. You see, Alcoholism, Sexoholism, etc... all these "ISM's" stand for "I", "Self" and "Me". A pill might stop the acting out, but it won't stop the insanity. Addicts think only about themselves.

Making Fences

There's no such thing as "technical sobriety". I'm either sober or I'm not. And I need to make my own bottom-line boundaries. If I walk in to a porno store, then **even if I don't look at anything**, I've just lost my 26 years of sobriety. If I walk into a locker room in a health-spa, I've lost my sobriety. If I have sex with my wife twice in one day, I've lost it. Because it means I am using her. Each person has to define their own boundaries. If we know that certain places or behaviors lead us to act out, then we have to make those places or behaviors our bottom line sobriety (meaning that breaking any one of those boundaries means losing our sobriety).

The Disease

We can't do the first step before we believe "The Doctor's Opinion", and that's why it comes *first* in the Big Book. The Doctor's opinion says that this is a **physical allergy** accompanied by a **mental obsession**.

If we don't believe we have an allergy, how can we be powerless? If it's just a sin, well, we know right and wrong. If I'm a **bad** person who needs to get **good**, I'm not powerless. However, if I'm a **sick** person trying to get **well**, I'm powerless and can be helped by a power greater than myself.

What makes it a physical disease? There are four chemicals in our brain that are related to addiction: Endorphins - which are like a natural narcotic, Serotonin, Dopamine and Norepinephrine. These chemicals are released through the acting out, and they ingrain addictive pathways in our minds. Patrick Carnes says it takes a full year of not acting out before the brain can begin rewiring healthy pathways. It can take sometimes *many* years for things that used to be triggers to stop being triggers, and for us to stop noticing everything around us as we used to.

(The program helps us learn what to do about our mental obsession, not about the physical disease.)

We don't necessarily get "drunk" once we're acting out already. Once we decide to open the computer and view porn, we're already "drunk". By the time we get to the porn or mast*, the dopamine in our brains is already being released. Dopamine is a memory-reward chemical that causes us to remember only the good parts of what we did last time. It blocks out the smells, money wasted, time wasted, trouble we caused, etc. from our memory...

It's never enough. In addictions, the dosage needs to get bigger and bigger for us to get the same effect. And that's why it's a progressive disease. In the early days of SA, one of our members had a relapse and began erotic phone calls with a woman. He ended up going down to her house, and when he discovered that she was an old lady, he cut her heart out (murdered her). He was in prison for the rest of his life. This disease is deadly. I have gotten calls from frantic women whose husbands just hung themselves. It will kill us if we don't make recovery our #1 priority.

Relations

Even though we are called "sexaholics", we are not powerless over sex. We are powerless over **lust**. When I'm with my wife, I can't allow any fantasies into my head if I want to remain sober. But if I don't have any fantasies, I can't be sure it will work. So before relations, I say the 3rd step prayer and give it over to G-d. If it works, it works, and if not, not. And all throughout relations, I am talking to G-d. I feel him in my body, flowing through me.

I don't have the powerful climaxes that I used to. I hardly feel it sometimes. But that's Ok. Because if I go up a mountain, I'm going to have to come down. But if I start calm and end calm, I am there for my wife afterward as well, instead of turning around and going to sleep.

One Day at a Time

If you need the bathroom badly while you're driving and you see a sign that says "1 Mile to Rest Stop", you'll be able to hold back. But if you see a sign that says "15 Miles to Rest Stop", you'd better get out of the car and do it on the side before you have an accident in your pants. Sobriety works the same way. With the help of the group, we don't act out **even if our tush falls off** - just for 24 hours.

This is not will-power. It's the *opposite* of will-power. When we get the thought of acting out, we admit our powerlessness. We know we can't do it ourselves, so we pick up the phone and make a call to a fellow member and tell them the truth about what we want to do: "I want to see porn", or "I want to do so and so". But we do this BEFORE we act out, not AFTER.

Sharing with Others

The disease lives in secrecy. The more secrets, the more insanity; the less secrets, the less insanity.

In religious circles there's a lot of shame, because we think **we should be better**, so "if I still do these things, I must be bad". We need to understand that although we do shi*y things, we're not sh*t. There's a big difference. We do sick things because we're **sick**, not bad. We're sick getting well, not bad getting good.

We're so used to shame, that if we try to let go of shame, we feel uncomfortable. Like someone who is used to folding his arms one way, if he tries folding them the other way, he'll want to put his arms back the way he's used to. But if he folds his arms the new way for long enough, he'll get comfortable with that, and the *old* way will become uncomfortable. It's easier for us to call someone AFTER we fell because we're so used to shame. We're so used to saying to ourselves, "oh, I'm such a bad guy, such a loser, etc..." Instead, we need to get rid of the shame and call BEFORE we act out and admit "I want to look", "I want to act out", etc... That's a lot harder, because **we're not used to letting go of shame**. We are used to "poor me, poor me... pour me a drink", as they say in AA.

The book "Recovery Continues - The Joy Response" explains that we have a disease that is connected with temptation. We want to drink it in with the eyes. When we call someone and admit that we want to act out, we get a joyous feeling. We are able to **transcend** the temptation.

All humans have sexual desires. But an addict's natural instincts have gone WILD. When we share our obsession with someone else, it stops it from going wild. A burden shared is half as heavy. My thoughts are so heavy, but once I share them, they are much lighter and not as hard to carry, and then they just leave...

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### **Truth & Falsehood**

My disease lies to me with the truth. It tells me lots of 'true' reasons why I need to do various things that I know could lead to relapse. But I'd rather die than live the way I was living before, so I have to recognize those "truths" as lies.

The disease lives in our heads. When I'm "thinking", I'm behind enemy lines. We need to turn off our minds and listen with our hearts. The truth is not what I tell you, it's what **you** tell **you**. When we listen with our hearts, we will hear what G-d wants us to hear.

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We Have the Tools

In Yiddish there are two words for eating, "Essen" (eat) and "Fressen" (Pig out). In the religious community, we are taught from youth to transcend the "Fressen" by making a Bracha before eating. The Bracha helps us take the animal instinct to a new level. And the Bracha for us is automatic, we don't even need to think, it just comes out of our mouths before we take that first bite.

In the same way, an addict needs to learn to **automatically** say a prayer each time he gets a lust hit or sees something triggering. It needs to be **automatic**: "G-d, may I find in you what I seek in that woman", or "G-d, let her be freed from her lust", or "Thank you G-d, for reminding me I'm still an addict".

The religious community has these tools already. We grew up with them. But for some reason there's a "block" that tells us "these tools belong in Religion, not in Addiction". We need to learn to use those same tools in our addiction.

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### **Keeping It Simple**

This is not Talmud. There's no need to figure out our addiction with our heads. We need to listen with our hearts and keep it simple. The disease lives in our head, but the program doesn't work unless it enters our hearts.

The legendary football coach, Vince Lombardi, once gathered his team at half-time when they were doing very poorly and said: "Guys, we need to get back to the basics". And he bent down and picked up a football and said, "**This is a football**".

Don't think too much. **Keep it simple**. Just for today, don't do things that lead you to act out - NO MATTER WHAT.

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## Euphoric Recall

When we have a lustful memory of something we've seen or done, it's called euphoric recall. That's bad for our disease. But we tend to remember only the good parts. We need to try and remember the bad parts as well, and associate the memory with the bad parts. And the bad parts are the **real** truth, because if it was so good, why did we need it again so soon afterward? When we eat a good steak, we don't feel desire for another good steak for at least a few days! So why do we need it again so fast? Because the bad parts, like the time we wasted, the smells, the money, the damage we caused, that is the REAL truth. (Remember the smells of the feet, the smells of the semen, the smell of the floor cleaning agents they use in those porno stores)...

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## The First Three Steps

**Step 1:** Powerlessness. When I get a thought, I need to act on it. I can't stop the action.

If we don't admit powerlessness, we think that **WE** have to stop it. So we don't let G-d help us.

**Step 2:** A power greater than ourselves can restore us to sanity. "I can't stop, but I can pick up the telephone and call someone." The power of others **outside of us** can help us stop.

**Step 3:** Once we learn how to let the power of **others** help us, we can learn to let the power of G-d help us. "I'm lost. I can't do this myself. I give it to you G-d".... "Relieve me of this bondage of SELF".

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## When Lust Attacks

Wear a rubber band on your wrist. If you feel a lustful thought come on,

- 1) admit powerlessness,
- 2) snap the rubber band on your skin (ouch!)
- 3) report your lust to another person

The addiction loses its power when we share with others, and when we hear from others that they too have the same thoughts. When we see this is normal, it lightens the power of the obsessions.

## Talking to the Disease

I often talk to my disease. Like if I wake up in the morning thinking, "I'll get some from my wife tonight", I tell my disease, "If you think that one more time, I'll refuse even if she asks for it!" Or if I get an erection in the shower from soaping there too much, I tell my disease "If you don't leave me alone, I'll walk out of the shower right now, even with all the soap on me!"

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## Erections

We are powerless over erections. Erections are normal. G-d made them so we can have kids. Addicts are convinced that they have to put the erection somewhere. When we get an erection, we need to tell ourselves, "I am powerless over this, this is not about sex, it's just the body's reaction." We addicts are used to putting every feeling of ours into our "member" since we're young. It's just this crazy energy. Close your eyes and imagine that this energy is going down through your legs and out into the ground... Or that it goes up into your heart and out of your body... Spread out that energy or call someone...

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## Too Late

We often get disappointed in G-d when He doesn't help us. But by the time we ask for help, it's usually too late. We can't walk around a seedy district at night alone with lots of money in our pocket and expect G-d to save us. They say in AA, "*G-d is so powerful that even if the alcoholic lifts the bottle to his mouth, G-d can knock it out of his hands. **But statistically, He doesn't do that.***"

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## To Any Lengths

We have to be ready to go to any length to stay sober. For my first year of sobriety, I would not enter any store by myself. I would not go to the city center by myself for *two* years. I went to three meetings a day for two years! Because I know that I'm so sick that if I don't go to any length, I'll quickly end up in jail or dead! As they say in AA. "*There are only three choices: Covered Up (buried), Locked Up, or **Sobered Up.***"

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## Progressively Sensitive

Even as we're sober, the disease progresses and we get more and more sensitive to lust triggers over time. It's like a smoker. While he's smoking, he doesn't smell anyone else's smoke. But the longer he's quit for, the more he'll be able to smell smoke in the room, on people's clothes, etc...

I can't watch most movies. I was recently watching a TV series about vampires that I really enjoyed, and two seasons before the last, there was a kissing scene. And I called my sponsor and decided I can't watch this anymore. And that was very hard for me, because I had watched the whole series and this was the last two episodes. Letting go of something we want feels like **death**. But I erased the recordings I had, and as soon as I had let go of it, I felt a joyous feeling.

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## Acceptance

We can't accept G-d's power to help us (step 3), until we first accept the power of the group (step 2). In the groups, we see that we can share all the crazy things we did, and people still accept us. That gives us a vision or a glimpse of how G-d, who is so much bigger, can accept me as I am. After all, He made me! He knew what I would do even before I did it!

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## A Decision

If there are three frogs on a log and two of them decide to jump off, how many are left? Three! Deciding to jump is nothing *unless they jump*. In step 3 we make "a decision" to give our will and our lives over to the care of G-d. But a decision means nothing without *action*. So steps 4, 5, 6, 7 and 8 are **how we do step 3**.

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## Making Amends

Step 10 says, "*We continued to take personal inventory, and when we were wrong, we promptly admitted it.*" That means doing steps 4 through 8 **every day**.

When my wife says something hurtful to me, even if she's wrong, I make amends and apologize for having talked to her in that "tone of voice". And when we disagree, even if I'm sure she's wrong I'll tell her, "you might be right". This helps me not to get upset at her.

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## Letting Our Will Go

Through the steps we learn how to let go of our will. Lust is not our real problem. Our character defaults are our real problem. As we work through our resentments, jealousy, dishonesty and greed, we see that our addiction stems from our character defects, (and most of our character defects stem from "Fear").

In step 6 we tell G-d, "Take this sh\*t away, I don't want it. I am entirely willing for You to remove these character defects".

Many times we are not really ready yet for G-d to take it away. We say, "G-d, take the masturbation away from me, but don't take the porn". That's like saying, "See

the cancer on this arm, G-d? Please take it away. But the cancer on my *other* arm, I'm not ready for You to take away"...

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## Not My Will, But Thy Will Be Done

In step 1 we are powerless. "*We admitted we were powerless over lust.*" But in step 11, **we get the power back**. As the 11<sup>th</sup> step states: "*We sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God as we understood Him, praying only for knowledge of His will for us and the power to carry that out.*" We get the power back, but it's **His** power, not ours. My Will will kill me.

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## Download a recording of Harvey talking about the 11<sup>th</sup> Step [over here](#).

The recording is not so clear, but I transcribed what he said below. The reason I found it so moving was because twice, while talking, tears filled Harvey's eyes and his voice broke (once at 2:45 and once at 4:02 in the sound file). That is how **real** our relationship with G-d needs to be.

The 11<sup>th</sup> Step says: "*We sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God as we understood Him, praying only for knowledge of His will for us and the power to carry that out.*"

### Here is a transcript of the recording:

Let's do the 11<sup>th</sup> step. This is a very tough step for this group (*Harvey was talking to a mostly religious group*). You're professional "prayers". It's what you do. For you, meditation is going to be very important (*see below for some notes on meditation from Harvey*). Many of you have learned to pray without necessarily having a connection. You've been doing it since you've been children... It's like learning 2 X 2 is 4 ... 4 X 2 is 8. In my case, I can't hardly understand the prayers. So I've had to make it alive. And how, for me, do I do it? I spent at least two years finding every thought I can in the prayer book and in the Torah that proves how much G-d loves us. That's what I did to make it alive. So when now I'm reading the Amidah, I'm not seeing a lot of things except words like "Loving Kindness".

No religion I know do you have G-d telling us so clearly who He is. And He tells us what AA tells us in the traditions. The traditions say, "We have a loving G-d". And where does He tell us? In the – *I don't know the Hebrew* – in the 13 Attributes. And when you read the 13 attributes and meditate on them, you will get the true flavor of Love, and what Love is. And for all of us who were talking before about these layers of forgiveness, it (*the 13 Attributes*) talks about every type of forgiveness.

Each one of us need to find a way to make G-d alive in our lives. And it's so interesting for me to watch how so many people derive their spiritual quest from the Bal Shem Tov. And here was a man trying to tell us how to get this personal relationship to G-d. You know, through Psalms, through talking to him... What gets me the most is that *beautiful* story of that prayer of Erev Yom Kippur and the



illiterate shepherd boy who couldn't speak Hebrew, he was illiterate, and he juggled the balls – if you know the story – he was a juggler, and that's all he knew to talk to G-d that day (*Harvey's voice breaks*), and the Rabbi was able to say, "we've been saved this year. He has opened the gates of Heaven".

We each have to find in the 11<sup>th</sup> step the method of talking to Him. My sponsor said that I need to talk to G-d like he is my best friend. And as if he is sitting next to me in the car, and talk to him all through the day like I would talk to a friend. And the way I do it, is through prayers my sponsor taught me. He said, "G-d has a lot to do. He is very busy. He doesn't need very long prayers all the time. He loves little prayers. The smaller they are, the more He loves them." The one He especially loves is very small, "Help me", you know, "Helf mir"... "Help me. I can't do it myself G-d, Help me". And another one he just "kvells" over is, "Thank you".

And that's my prayer throughout the day. I talk to G-d throughout the day. I tell Him about the green leaves (*Harvey's voice breaks again*), about the sky, about walking on the streets in Jerusalem... I'm having a constant talk with Him, thanking Him that I got up alive...

Now, this is not unique, different things, I'm telling you. Most of you all wake up in the morning and you're supposed to say - *you're* supposed to, I don't know, I put on Tefilin, that's about it - but you're supposed to say, "Modeh Ani"... that's how you start your day – **in Gratitude**. And so you want to... for me, I need to keep this constant conversation in gratitude...

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Meditation

Meditation is where we try to quiet our minds. Like the Pasuk says in Tehhilim, 37:7: "***Dom LaHashem Ve'Hischolel Lo***", and in 131:2 it says, "***Im lo shivisi ve'domamti nafshi, ke'gamul ali imo, gegamul alai nafshi***".

Silence the mind.

I often tell people, "shut it off, it's over time". The disease lives in our heads.

The word "spirituality" comes from the Latin word "Spiritus", which means "Breath". "***VaYipach Be'Apav Nishmas Chayim***". The word Neshama and Ruach both come from "breath". When we meditate, we breath deeply and we count our breaths.

Anger and resentment have to do with the PAST.

Fears have to do with the FUTURE.

Breathing is a way to **stay in the moment**.

G-d lives in the **NOW**.

Rest your brain and just breath, or meditate on a line of prayer and internalize it deeply. This helps us learn to live in the NOW.

Harvey ended his talk with the following message:

When We're Willing to Lose It, We Get to Keep It

It is true that we can lose everything by sharing our secrets with strangers in the groups. But chances are it will happen a lot faster if we don't get sober.

Our addiction is a disease, like diabetes. If the wife of a diabetic would tell her husband not to take the insulin because she doesn't want to be married to someone who takes insulin all the time, well, she won't have a husband for much longer!

If we don't put our sobriety first because we're afraid to lose what is precious to us, we will probably end up losing it all anyway. **But when we're willing to lose everything and put our sobriety FIRST, we often get to keep everything precious in the end.**