

Hooked On Recovery

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“Take Your Medicine! (As Prescribed)”

“God has abundantly supplied this world with fine doctors, psychologists, and practitioners of various kinds. Do not hesitate to take your health problems to such persons.” – Alcoholics Anonymous, pg. 153

As I descended into the Valley of Cancer, I didn't really think about the pain. Yeah, the doctor said they were “going to put me through the wringer”, but I thought I'd just tough it out. To a person in recovery, pain medication is extremely dangerous and not anything to mess with. I have heard, and heeded, many stories of people in long-term recovery who relapsed because of pain medication. My defenses were built. I felt...prepared.

With this mind set I waltzed into my first chemotherapy session. I didn't want to know about the specific chemo drugs, the side effects, the duration of the duress or anything else. Tell me when to show up and I'm good. The rest I would take “one day at a time” or smaller increments if need be. Sandy said she would have handled it differently, educated and prepared herself. She would have made videos for the kids in case things went bad. Sad to say, that never occurred to me. Naively, I never doubted that I'd be OK. Until that first chemo.

After being prepped for several hours with a bunch of fluids and anti-nausea meds, the nurse wheeled in three bags of chemicals and an anaphylactic shock kit. She donned a rubber hazmat suit and two sets of gloves, just to handle the plastic chemo bags. This was the stuff they were going to drip into me for ninety-six hours straight. I remained optimistic, yet a little piece of me whispered, “uh oh.” Over the course of the first regimen, I gradually felt worse. When I was sent home I thought “OK, that wasn't so bad.” Until I kept getting sicker. And sicker. For the next week and a half. Just when I climbed out of that hole, it was time for round two.

I'm not sure when my mouth and throat became so sore that I HAD to take something. I kept resisting. I could handle it. What has become apparent is that I waited way too long. I never caught up with the pain and therefore had a real tough time swallowing. Anything. Soon thereafter, I lost my sense of taste and food held absolutely no interest for me. None. I barely ate or drank. The weight melted off me. The doctors became concerned. Nutrition was vital to help my body respond and heal. I ended up in surgery to have a feeding tube put in. That did not go smoothly. A week later I was in the hospital again because the hole into my stomach became infected. Plus, I had a hard time using the feeding tube properly. It was not pretty.

As the treatment grew in intensity, I needed a combination of strong narcotics. One of them, Dilaudid, induced “the horrors”. Every time I closed my eyes I swam in a sea of melting, morphing faces and body parts. When I opened my eyes I was back in the hospital room. Contrary to the name “horrors”, I was never scared, just annoyed (and a little intrigued). Hard to sleep with all those faces. I stopped asking for Dilaudid. As I came down off that medicine, my emotions ran rampant. I lost control. I *knew* if I didn't get home and see my son Matthew that very day, I would never see him again. (Why it was Matthew, who is one of my five children, still remains a mystery). I convulsed with sobs and emotion. I demanded to be discharged

immediately. They took me seriously and sent in a pain specialist who switched around my medication.

It worked. The prescribed medications managed the pain and my emotions. I was discharged later that afternoon. I have not had to stay in a hospital room since. I recall never being so glad to sit on my back deck, outside and gaze at the trees. When Matthew came and sat with me, well...all was right in my world.

I was destined to have even more complications with that damn feeding tube. Don't get me wrong, the tube saved my life, so maybe "damn" is too strong. Sandy didn't like it either. Especially, the rainy morning, when the tube's anchor stitches let go and was mostly sucked into my belly. She drove me from Rhode Island to Hartford Hospital. They were considering putting me back in surgery, and we strongly resisted. After assuring the ER docs that we could get enough nutrition in, they checked with one of my doctors and they took the feeding tube out.

So what's my point?

I feel I made a mistake by resisting the pain medication. I would have been better served had I taken all the medication as suggested.

Yet this tussle with medication has a flip side, the side I was repeatedly warned about. Oxycodone (a strong narcotic), set a trap for me. I could have easily been snared back into addiction. And for me to become addicted again is to die. I will write about this in the next piece.

Hooked on Recovery is a blog from CCAR Executive Director Phillip Valentine, person in recovery since 12/28/87, devoted husband, father of five and just another surf fisherman. These thoughts, views and opinions reflect on his personal recovery and are not meant in any way to speak for the entire recovery community. He welcomes all your comments and suggestions on this column, email him at phillip@ccar.us. Visit the website at www.ccar.us to read the entire series.