

Surviving the vicious cycle of shame

There is a way out

B Y D R E X E L

John called me from the hospital. He had taken an overdose of sleeping pills, but friends had found him in time. "I decided I just wasn't worth it," he said.

When I asked him what had brought these feelings up, he told me what had happened. After being "clean and sober" for two years, he had fallen. He did drugs, and he felt defeated and despondent about his life.

Was this one fall off the wagon enough to explain John's self-destructiveness? No. The self-destructive impulse was there before John ever began his downward cycle of self-medication. His years of drug abuse were merely symptomatic of his feelings of low self-worth (really no self-worth). These feelings had led him on to a path of slow suicide. His overt suicide attempt was in reality the logical end of a path that John had been on for many long and painful years.

In my years of working as a therapist with gay and lesbian people, I've seen an enormous amount of compulsive/addictive behavior. Not that gays and lesbians have any corner on compulsiveness in our compulsive/addictive society, but we do have an additional burden to deal with: a burden of what psychologists now call "shame."

Shame involves the messages that we internalize from our shaming culture, messages that constantly tell us: "You're no good." Growing up in this culture, we absorb cultural values that tell us that, as gays and lesbians, we are defective and worthless. These cultural values often reinforce feelings of low self-worth that have resulted from neglectful or abusive parenting. Most of our parents were carrying their own burden of shame, and all too often they have passed this legacy on to their children.

Low self-worth, rooted in internalized shame, results in spiritual and emotional isolation. When we feel deeply inadequate, we learn to hide from others. We strive to conceal

what we experience as our basic worthlessness and inadequacy.

The problem is that no one can "see" us, no one can love us with the unconditional love we all crave. So we become more and more isolated, separated from others by a wall of shame.

Unable to break out of the prison of self-isolation, many of us have pursued compulsive/addictive behaviors that have given us temporary relief. Compulsive sex, habitual use of drugs and alcohol, and other compulsive patterns of behavior lessened the pain of isolation and often created a false sense of camaraderie as we associated with others who shared our compulsions.

The compulsive behaviors set us on a downward path that only adds to our feelings of inadequacy. This creates what psychologists recognize as the vicious "cycle of shame." As a gay male I've had to look at, and deal with, my own compulsiveness and the destructive effect that it was having on my own emotional and physical health. At the core I constantly run up against the shame, the sense of low self-worth, that was so deeply etched into my consciousness as a child.

Fortunately for many of us, there is a way out of this self-destructive cycle. First of all, there are many programs, even in the gay community, that can help us deal with our compulsive behaviors and bring us out of isolation. And there are healing paths where we can learn self-love and root out the self-hateful conditioning of our childhood. In coming months I'd like to look with you at the process of recovery and share with you my own experience of the healing process.

As a service to the community, and to introduce his work in the Portland area, Dr. Exel is offering a free one-day workshop on emotional healing and recovery. All are welcome, but space is limited. Call 226-3814 for more information.



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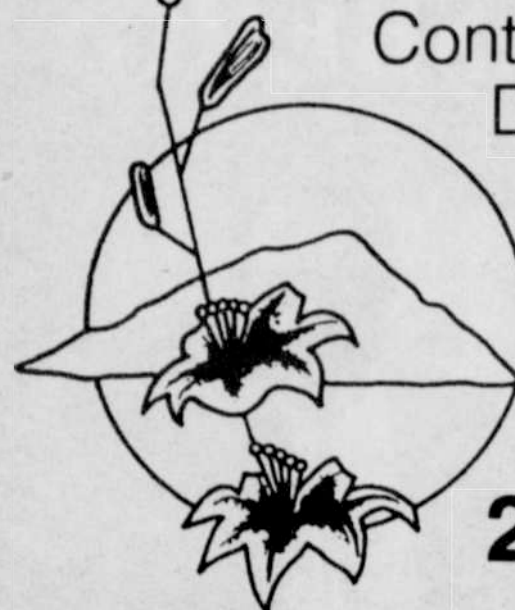


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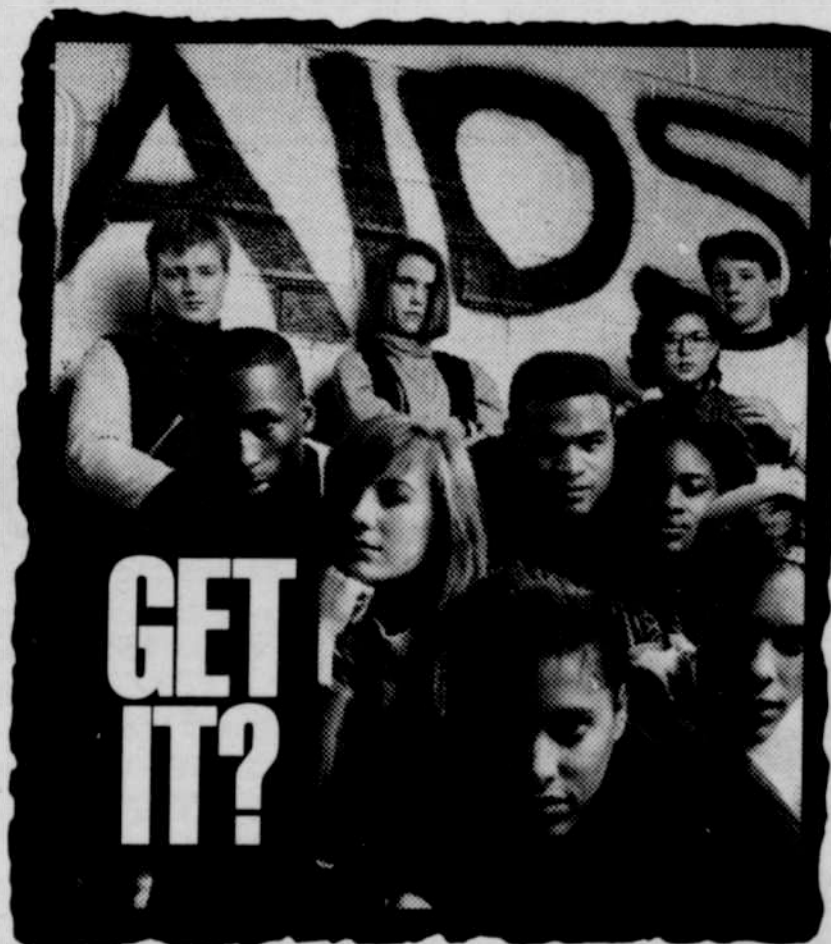
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