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The Indignity of Sobriety

As if my cramped and boiling intestines surrounding my limp, nauseous tummy wasn't enough, now I have to be shamed and judged by this asshole. Great. Through the eyes of someone that has no experience with addiction, it's easy for them to zero in on what they know from stereotypes and media to keep their mind set on the "addict" part. They picture someone sneaky and dishonest that will steal your wallet, pawn your mother's pearls, and raid your medicine cabinet. They imagine a scabby villain with no morals or integrity, waiting for the opportunity to rip you off. Sure, some addicts are like that, but a lot of them are just regular people that found an unfortunate way to deal with their pain. What they don't understand is, when you can't separate the person in recovery from their addiction, you dismiss the entire person, and you erase their humanity and reduce them to their past.

I am proud of all the efforts I've made to make changes in my life. I don't even recognize the person I was when I was actively using, and I definitely don't want to be seen in that way anymore. I'm still growing, so it hurts to be reduced to one of the worst periods of my life, and to have my best efforts and hard work overlooked and ignored. My past experiences and choices are only part of my story, a piece of how I came to be who I am now.

Let me rewind back several years ago when I'd been sober for a little while and was doing things "right." I had a therapist, psychiatrist, and an addiction counselor. My marriage was good, I was rebuilding relationships with friends and family, I was volunteering and fostering dogs, and I had a job at a doggy daycare where I had a lot of responsibility in a supervising role. I put my all into this job and felt a lot of pride for my new work ethic and putting my dog handling skills and experience to good use. After working at the daycare for a couple years, one day the owner and I were talking and sharing more personal information with each other than we had before. We discussed our younger years, trading stories of wild youth, regrets, and mistakes made. At this point I felt comfortable and brave enough to open up and share my past substance abuse issues with him. The conversation seemed to go well and the response from my boss was encouraging, and I didn't walk away feeling anything negative. In fact, it was a bit of a relief to get it out and to feel good about being vulnerable and open with someone that I worked so closely with.

One morning I woke up before work with a shocking, mysterious pain. I was sweating, weak, and my abdomen felt like it was boiling inside of me. Nothing I did gave me any relief and I felt trapped. There was no way I'd be able to work that day, so I called in sick, which is something I hated doing and rarely did, but that's how awful I felt. I ended up missing five days of work and in that time, I was absolutely miserable. My husband took me to urgent care one day where I was given IV fluids but sent home with no diagnosis or treatment. Two days later, I was taken to the emergency room where again, I was given an IV of saline, but was told that I probably had the flu or a virus. Maybe it was food poisoning, [or](#) maybe it was a symbiotic parasite building little fires to sauté my stomach lining for a fine dining experience. Either way, I had no answers and no special treatment, other than the instructions to stay hydrated and rest.

The entire time I was home sick from work, my boss was on top of me, calling, texting, checking in, and asking when I'd be back. It most certainly wasn't being done out of concern for my wellbeing. I could tell he was pissed off and annoyed with me. I heard the frustration and anger in his voice as his responses to me got shorter and louder. That just made it all so much worse and my guilt and shame began to settle in under the layers of physical discomfort. I'm already camped out in the bathroom in agony, and having my boss pressuring me to get back to my completely physical and stressful job did not ease my anguish. The pain finally began to lessen, and on the morning of the sixth day of my mystery illness, I felt like I should try to get back to work. I still wasn't in the best shape, and absolutely did not have all my strength back, but I felt like if I took it easy, I could try to be useful.

I'm weak and shaky, but I make it to work. I'm barely clocked in before my boss is right in front of me, all tall and stern and wants to talk. He walks me to the break room, and I can absolutely feel his smug contempt toward me as he asks how I'm feeling and looks skeptically at the doctor's note I handed him from the E.R. I tell him that the past week has been a nightmare and it's the sickest I've been in years, yet for some reason I get the feeling that I'm in trouble, like I'm going to be punished. Absent of any care or concern, the man I work so hard for tells me that he figured I was at home, blowing off work to get high. I can feel my body droop and my thoughts turn static. What a nasty slap in the face. Everything I had shared with my boss about my past addiction and current recovery was both dismissed and used against me. He saw me as nothing more than a disappointing drug addict. Forget that I work my ass off handling the dogs and cleaned with high standards. Forget that I foster relationships with the clients, share my experience and knowledge training the staff, and create new protocol. All for his business. Forget that I take my sobriety seriously and continue with aftercare therapies and programs. I

was thriving in life, but an illness I had no control over made this person assume the worst of me. Would he have had those same thoughts about someone else, or is that only reserved for the outcasts and undesirable? It was a painful shot to my self-worth, and if I weren't in a good mental place, or didn't feel strong in my recovery, I could see that kind of shame sending someone right into a relapse. I didn't understand why he felt the need to bring it up at all. Asking me how I was and welcoming me back would have gone a long way. Saying nothing at all would have been preferable.

For many years of my life, I had a nasty substance use disorder, but now I've been sober and in recovery for over 10 years. A decade! I didn't see that one coming. As an active addict, I already faced the shame and stigma of being an untrustworthy person that had no control of their life, and rightly so because I wasn't, and I didn't. Once I got to the point where I wanted to get help and make serious changes in my life by getting sober, I learned that the judgements and stigma didn't end just because I was no longer using drugs. After all the suffering and anguish of withdrawal, the pain of facing myself in therapy, the slow and humbling process of gaining back trust, and working to find myself and my place in the world again, I found that I'm *still* looked down upon. I'm *still* seen as a fuck-up and a junkie time-bomb. Once you feel safe enough to share that vulnerable part of your life with someone, or they find out somehow, it's as though all the work I've done to get where I am disintegrates and I'm back to "just a drug addict" to them. It takes the air right out of me, and I feel small and ashamed all over again because someone else can't see me for anything more than my unpleasant past.

People that struggle with addiction and people in recovery aren't all that different from anyone else, we're doing our best with what we have at the moment. We deserve the benefit of the doubt, and none of us want to be stuck in and remembered for the worst period of our lives.

People with substance abuse in their past work really hard and have overcome a vicious affliction. We've got a lot to offer, and deserve the same opportunities, compassion, and understanding as the next person. At the very least, don't insult me as I pick up dog shit with a scorching tummy ache.