

Kicking The H A B I T

By ADAM KARDASH

Narcotics Anonymous is a group many people have not heard of and hopefully will never have to attend. But it is the best friend to thousands of addicts that comprise its world-wide fellowship.

I was invited to a Narcotics Anonymous (NA) meeting last Saturday by Tony and Jim, two recovering addicts, who spoke during Addiction Awareness Week activities at York last week.

Unlike most NA gatherings, Saturday's meeting — held at a community centre at Dufferin and Lawrence — was open to the public. Addicts' friends, family, and the media were able to view exactly what takes place at an NA meeting.

Similar in principle to Alcoholics Anonymous, NA is a non-profit peer-support group for people whose lives are controlled by drugs.

And support is the operative word.

Before the meeting began, all I heard was encouragement from one addict to another, and almost all members greeted each other with long hugs. It's "Hugs, not drugs," one NA member said to me.

The entire evening focused on support in one form or another. After a number of addicts recited short introductory readings — such as "Who is an Addict?" and "Why are We Here?" — NA members received key tags in recognition for the amount of time an addict had stayed "clean and serene."

NA members told me that the key tags only have five cent value, but they are priceless to the recovering addict. As each group — whether it be the white key tag group for newcomers and addicts who released and now have come back to NA, or the one-year key tag group — walked proudly to the front of the hall to receive their rewards, they were greeted again with hugs and spirited applause from NA members.

It is impossible to describe the expressions on their faces as they returned to their seats clutching the symbol of their latest achievement.

NA members are also supported by their sponsors. An NA sponsor is a recovering addict who has had experience with NA's distinctive 12-step recovery plan. More importantly, a sponsor is someone an addict can easily talk to any time of the day when problems arise.

But the informal meetings of recovering addicts are where the NA fellowship most strongly reinforces practices that lead to a drug-free life. The 12-step recovery plan is reviewed and discussed, but more significantly, the recovering addict has the chance to overcome the emotional trauma of the disease with people who have experienced the hell themselves.

After the key tags were handed out, I talked to Tony and Jim about NA and their drug-addictions. The following is an excerpt of the interview.

*God grant me the serenity
to accept the things I cannot
change. The courage
to change the things I can,
and the wisdom to know
the difference.*

—The Narcotics Anonymous non-denominational prayer

Excalibur: What brought you to Narcotics Anonymous?

Tony: I started doing drugs when I was in grade seven. It started off with alcohol, pot, and hash. It just went on and many people told me not to smoke up because it leads to harder things and I just said, "Well, I know better. It won't, and I have it under control."

Then I started doing things like acid and peyote and whatever else came along. I was using drugs everyday because I worked while I went to school. So by the time I was in grade nine I was making good money and therefore had a lot of cash.

Then, in grade 10, I started missing classes and I dropped out of high school. But I did keep on working. I've been employed since I was 16. But things just kept on getting worse.

Excal: What drugs were you using at the time?

Tony: The same as I mentioned. But when I was 18 I started using coke pretty regularly. I was just snorting it at first, then I started smoking it, rocks or crack — whatever you want to call it — for about four or five years.

Eventually I just got so depressed and fed up with my life and the way it was going nowhere. I was an emotional mess with a dead-end job. I was pilfering money from the company and other nasty things like that. Everything was getting worse. My home life was never that great — my father drinks — and there were all sorts of problems there.

It got so bad that I couldn't even look at myself in the mirror. I remember one day I was in the bathroom getting high. I had the door locked, I had the pipe in my hand, and I looked up into the mirror and just said, "Oh, fuck." I quickly picked everything up and moved it to the top of the toilet so I wouldn't have to look

at myself. I was a mess. Sweat was running down my face, dripping off my chin.

It just seemed like all I had to do then was get high and not face anything else. I kept on thinking that if I got high everything would be all right. The problem was that you can't stay high all the time.

Excal: Did you have a lot of friends?

Tony: I changed my friends from when I was younger — the

ones who just sort of drank and smoked pot. Some people can do that for a period of their lives and not necessarily have a problem with it. They just stop and get on with their lives. I just got new friends who like to get high. I acquired what I call "lower companions" — daily drug users. By the time I was ready to stop using, I was just hanging out at Ontario Housing in stairwells just getting high, smoking crack all the time.

It got so bad that I got kicked out of my house, my car was taken away, I was losing my job. I had nowhere to go. The depression was so bad, I was suicidal. I eventually just went to my doctor and told him that I have a problem. He placed me into a rehabilitation centre and from there I joined NA.

Excal: NA seems to be an emotional experience for the newly recovered addict. Do you still find yourself moved by the meetings?

Tony: For the first while, the meetings were really emotional. When I got out of rehab I was an emotional mess. I would just start crying at the slightest thing. A lot of times it is tears of joy, you're just so happy that it is all over and that you are here (NA) and that you don't have to worry any more. People aren't after you or whatever the case may be. It is just such a nice feeling sitting in a meeting.

Excal: How have your parents responded to your recovery?

Jim: My parents are happy for me, and I know that my disease touched them as well. I hope one day that they will see the help that they can get for the emotions that I caused and the problems that I caused for my whole family.

My family shut the door on me for six weeks. They didn't want to hear from me because I was so messed up. But through recovery they have taken me back in. Many of my clean friends that I lost during my using have come back and noticed the difference as well.

Tony: My parents were really happy that I made it to treatment, first of all. And they were really happy, of course, that I stayed clean.

One of the steps of the NA programme is to make amends to all the people we have harmed. The only possible amends I could make to my parents is to stay clean. I mean, I did too much to them. I stole money. I didn't talk to them for the longest time and I was living in their house. I would just come in and go



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