

Moving Through withdrawal

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toll free : 844-523-8575, ext 10827

SCA -Sexual Compulsives Anonymous
International Service Organization
P.O. Box 1585
Old Chelsea Station
New York, NY 10011

USA (800) 977-HEAL (toll free)
International +1 (212) 606-3778

<http://www.sca-recovery.org>

WITHDRAWAL

The word brought up hideous images: addicts curled up in a fetal position, writhing in agony, or crying out in pain. We feared withdrawal and desperately tried to avoid it. As the book *"Alcoholics Anonymous"* says: *"We thought we could find an easier, softer way. But we could not."* The only way out of withdrawal, we found, is to go through it.

We discovered that the withdrawal process was four-fold. First came a physical withdrawal. Second was a process of emotional withdrawal with storms of feelings blasting through us like a hurricane. Third, as we took the Twelve Steps of Sex Addicts Anonymous, followed the Twelve Traditions of the group, and used all the SAA tools at our disposal, the lust and fantasy of the mind slowly began to drip away in a gracious act of mental withdrawal. Finally, we then underwent a spiritual withdrawal, where we no longer treated sexual compulsion as our higher power, but instead we turned our will and our lives over to the God of our understanding.

Sometimes we cycled through these four withdrawal stages repeatedly and sometimes they overlapped. For some of us certain stages of withdrawal were less dramatic than others stages, or what we saw other members in program moving through. But no matter what the withdrawal process was for each of us, it was unique to our own recovery. Our sponsors and fellow members of SAA shared their experience, strength and hope with us, but ultimately the outcome of our individual withdrawal process was the re-birth of our relationship with ourselves and our Higher Power, then to others. It was a journey no one else could make for us.

When we first came to SAA we were relieved to learn that our goal was not to repress our God given sexuality, but to learn how to express it in ways that will not make unreasonable demands on our time and energy, place us in legal jeopardy, or endanger our mental, physical or spiritual health. With the help of our sponsors and the fellowship, we began to abstain from these destructive activities. To make this abstention (partial or total) more tangible, we created written Sexual Recovery Plans. Many of us chose a multi-column format for designing or plans.

In the "left" column, we wrote out those behaviors we wished to abstain from. As beginners, we often thought to fill this column with "shoulds," items we believed others might want us to include. Our sponsors and our fellows gently led us to include only the "musts," in other words, prohibitions on those people, places or things that would surely lead to jail, institutions or death. These behaviors we called "acting out".

We took note of the warning signs or behaviors that could tell us when we were on the road of slipping into the activities in the first column. For instance, if *"public sex"* appeared in the first column, we became strongly aware that hanging around a specific, named place was a danger sign that a potential slip was in the making.

In the "*right*" column, we listed those people; places, and activities we wanted to bring into our lives, to fill the time and mental space we had devoted to acting out. At first, some of us could not think of what to write in that third column. We found that "*Easy Does It*" was a good guide for this section of the Plan, and that leaving it blank at the beginning was perfectly all right. As our recovery progressed, we realized there were dreams we had shelved to pursue our addiction, and we could add these to the third column: seeing a ballet, learning the guitar, or visiting a dreamed of foreign country, for example.

Upon entering the fellowship, we often developed an interim Sexual Recovery Plan before formally working the Twelve Steps. We needed to stop - and stop quickly our most dangerous behaviors and thus enter withdrawal. If we suffered from romantic obsessions, we prayed that from now till midnight we would not call, stalk or drive by the home or workplace of the target of our obsession. It was only in hindsight that we discovered that the first column of our Plan was an essential part of working our First Step: here was a written record of our powerlessness. After completing our First Step, we reviewed our Plan in that light and adjusted where necessary, adding to the first column those items we admitted we were powerless over, and moving from the first column to the second those items that merely tended to lead us to acting out. We found that only through working the Twelve Steps did we receive lasting recovery from our obsessions, compulsions and addictive behaviors.

We were not ready for withdrawal until we truly hit bottom. In the past, we may have been temporarily able to abstain from behavior though we eventually acted out again. We could not even admit that we had a problem - that we were powerless over sexual compulsion and that our lives had become unmanageable - let alone accept that we must abstain from certain behaviors. Yet at some point, the bottoms kept getting lower, causing even greater pain, such pain that we come to realize that the pain of withdrawal could not exceed the pain we had already endured through acting out. When did we reach bottom? When we finally stopped digging.

Although some of us could start recovery by abstaining from all acting out behaviors and could maintain this sobriety indefinitely, many of us had slips, falls, crashes, and restarts. In fact, we found that falling down did not make us bad, only human; just like learning to ride a bicycle. We found that scrapes and bumps are part of recovery. The ability to do what it took to pick ourselves up after a slip was gained through many actions. We collected telephone numbers at meetings and stayed in contact with our fellows in the program, read and reread program literature, took on service commitments, committed to attending 90 meetings in 90 days, remembered the Slogan "*Meeting Makers Make It,*" went for long walks in safe places, or even watched bad television or played mindless computer

games - whatever it took not act out that particular day.

We committed to going to any lengths to stay on our Sexual Recovery Plan until midnight, and the next day woke up and made the same commitment to not act out until the day was complete - one day at a time.

Many of us decided we needed to undergo a period of total abstinence to fully withdraw from sexual compulsion and romantic obsession. However, we did not have to make this decision alone, and in fact, we were encouraged to reach out for support. We looked for sponsors and program Friends we could turn to and find support from as we moved through the withdrawal process. We went to meetings, made program calls, and took advantage of the support of the program. We also found that being of service and supporting others through their withdrawal process made our withdrawal process easier to move through.

PHYSICAL WITHDRAWAL

We were often surprised to discover that our disease had a physical component from which we had to recover. We had become used to the "*rush*" of endorphins and adrenaline created by acting out. We might have also used substances in concert with our addiction like

- * alcohol
- * food
- * nicotine
- * narcotics
- * caffeine
- * or sugar.

These discoveries sometimes led us into other Twelve Step fellowships. However, unlike alcohol or narcotics, it was the chemicals within us to which we became addicted.

In withdrawal, we experienced a variety of physical symptoms, such as drastic changes in sleep patterns or appetite, sexual dysfunction, aches and pains, even hallucinations.

Some of us endured periods where we felt so sexually charged that we felt we just had to act out. Some of us considered the role that masturbation played in our lives - whether it was a healthy release or simply a delay in the physical withdrawal process. Some of us learned to be comfortable with physical arousal and not act on it.

Physical withdrawal meant sleepless nights for some, seemingly endless drowsiness for others. As part of our recovery, many of us developed more regular sleep patterns that better served our jobs, our relationships, our bodies, and ourselves.

Withdrawal- SAA ?

My withdrawal is getting pretty serious I can't go anywhere or do anything without wanting some kind of fix. A quick fix on my phone or to just light up the phones of my guys. This is bad I can't sleep. While everyone else is wearing shorts and a tank I'm sitting in fleece pants and a hoodie. I can't sleep. I get triggered really easily to the point where my hands are shaking. Triggers in my meetings are more common now that I've been sober for a week. I'm losing the respect of friends, family, I am much more cranky and bitchy than ever. I need time I guess but for now I'm just starting to feel the effects of my addiction. The feelings I pushed away while I was getting high are all coming back and full throttle. I even cried today and I don't know why. I think I was watching Hannah Montana with the girls I babysit. This is my world now full of emotions what should I do, say think to stay sober. Especially when I've been told point blank if I need a fix I can get it whenever. Its taking everything in me not to say yes. Plus I talked to my sponsor but sometimes I feel like I'm too whiny like this is even too whiny. Sobriety has made me a whiny little bitch!!!

Kristin

<https://www.soberrecovery.com/forums/newcomers-recovery/253428-withdrawal-saa.html>



The process of physical withdrawal can shed new light on how we relate to our bodies. Sometimes in our addiction we had forgone good meals, exercise, or even a decent nights sleep for weeks, months or years. In recovery, we learned to pay attention to our medical and dental needs. Some of us confronted sexually transmitted diseases or had our first STD tests. If we had resentments about contracting any diseases, we wrote them down when it was time to work Step 4. If we knowingly transmitted a disease, we wrote that down in Step 8. We took up sports, yoga dance or other exercise. We committed to turning off all computers televisions, radios, phones and lights by a certain time at night to ensure we got enough sleep.

Along with taking better care of our bodies, we started paying better attention to where we took our bodies. We learned we could not keep going to the same old bars, parties, or other triggering places (like wet areas at the gym) with the hope that we could simply *"handle it."* Conversely, some of us sought a change in neighborhood or even city to stay sober, only to find that our addiction was just as portable as our bodies, and that we took the addiction with us when we tried the *'geographic cure'*.

We took a fresh look at our living spaces, which had suffered as well from the unmanageability of our lives in addiction. We had to clean house, literally as well as figuratively. We went shopping for groceries or redecorated as signs of caring for ourselves. We committed ourselves to creating home for our new life in recovery and not for our addiction. Those we lived with could see us begin to recognize our own side of the street and to keep it clean, figuratively and literally. We rearranged the furniture or tossed away clothing. We began to let go of clutter.

We look a good look at our money and our careers and started to make mature decisions. Whenever we felt the urge to obsess over sex we could turn our attention to our long to-do lists. However since as addicts we can go overboard - even in a *"good direction"* we found it best to keep two slogans in mind:

"Keep it Simple"

and

"Easy Does it."

We lived one day at a time, trusting the new routines of our life in recovery. Instead of trying to conquer the world by painting the living room, installing track lights in the den, and re grouting the tub all in one day - we decided that filling our empty refrigerators with groceries was a more realistic goal.

We realized that merely showing up to work on time and doing *"an honest day's work for an honest days pay"* could be a victory in itself. We avoided the temptation to *"compare and despair,"* setting our accomplish-

ments against those of others, a behavior which had served to sabotage our self-esteem and perpetuate our downward spiral of shame.

We remembered **HALT** - not to allow ourselves to become too
Hungry,
Angry,
Lonely or
Tired.

We tried to spend time on third column of our recovery plans, rekindling the boredom killing hobbies and interests we had lost to addiction and discovering new ones.

EMOTIONAL WITHDRAWAL

With the physical aspect of withdrawal under way many of us started feeling a wellspring of emotions previously kept down by our addiction. Overcome by sadness, for example, we found ourselves breaking down in tears at work for no apparent reason. As withdrawal made it increasingly clear that the "*happiness*" we found acting out was indeed a fantasy, many of us became overwhelmed with grief. We realized that sexual conquest could not heal our inadequacies (real or perceived), or that using sex to feel validated and complete was a passing illusion. In fact, we came to realize that such actions pushed us further away from family, friends, and the possibility of new friends and lovers, and even healthy relationships with ourselves and our Higher Power. Many of us felt anxiety or even anger about our acting out and wished we could rewrite our past. This caused us only more sadness and frustration.

The repressed emotions often rushed over us like a series of relentless waves, almost drowning us in the process, or so it seemed. As we considered our careers, finances, and relationships, we often felt the despair and futility of time, energy, and money wasted. During this stumbling, sometimes painful process, it was far too easy to fall into the trap of comparing our "*insides*" to other peoples "*outsides*", with the result being a feeling of "*It's too late, I give up*" - regardless of age. In the past, these faulty comparisons - the perception that others successes were eclipsing our own - drove us into envy, resulting in the low self-esteem needed to act out. All the time, we failed to realize that we are on our own paths and receive little reward by judging ourselves or others.

Among our many fears during withdrawal was "*what happens when I'm no longer caught up in my addiction?*" Facing this fear improved our ability to face the unknown and to see life as a challenging series of adventures and opportunities - a concept once foreign to us. We started to realize that we are not our addiction. Although we fully admitted to having an addiction, we realized that as creations of a Higher Power we were

perfect, whole, and complete always.

As we experienced these bundles of once dusty, neglected emotions, we found the bright side of untangling them - that our acting out had also stuffed away our sense of joy. In withdrawal, we prayed to our Higher Power for the willingness and ability to feel joy - to let peace into our hearts, to understand serenity, and to let real love enter every area of our lives. Learning to feel all of our emotions was an important part of our recovery.

The honesty that came with emotional withdrawal helped us stop playing mind games with ourselves and our Plan. In our hearts, we learned that when we followed our Plan, we could pray for the willingness to allow fewer gray behaviors in our lives. We often found it helpful to keep a recovery journal, to attend as many meetings as possible, and to make calls when we were overwhelmed. If we went to a meeting and did not get the opportunity to speak, we chatted with someone after the meeting or socialized with a group, thus avoiding a resentment. In fact, we needed to work the steps with all our resentments if we were to find lasting serenity and peace of mind.

When we started to feel serenity, we knew that recovery from sexual compulsion was happening. When we stopped obsessing about sex or romance we recognized this recovery. We no longer tried to sexualize every aspect of intimacy or tried to make others fulfill our emotional needs as we defined them. We often adopted pets for companionship affection and unconditional love - and maybe learned a new sense of responsibility from these commitments. We could not stay out all night if the dog needed to be walked or if the cat needed to have the litter box changed.

When emotional withdrawal felt like a torrential storm, we reminded ourselves: *"Thus too shall pass."*

MENTAL WITHDRAWAL

Many of us found that *"euphoric recall"* about our old lusts, fantasies and romantic obsessions took some time, even years in some cases, to drain away. Even as the lust of the mind receded, we found ourselves seeking out music that reminded us of our cruising at bars, bathhouses, or other locations, flirty, wearing suggestive cloths or seducing co-workers with the unconscious hope of romanticizing - or rewriting our acting out past. We walked past old acting-out locations just to get a whiff of the old days, just like someone trying to give up smoking. We listened nonstop to songs and dined at restaurants that reminded us of our romantic obsessions.

We sometimes even left the fellowship for a time to re-enter those acting out places or re-visit those relationships. Some of us thought we

found the *"relationship cure."* - that having a partner meant we could skip going to meetings. But we discovered that the past behaviors just did not work anymore. Even if we found temporary relief from pain, we knew that whatever our problems were, acting out would never solve them and could only make them worse, not better. The knowledge we gained in SAA had *"ruined"* our acting out for good.

We found that that even as our compulsion subsided, our obsessions lingered or even multiplied. Some of us became newly obsessed with finding a partner and signed up with innumerable dating services or answered countless personal ads. Others, craving the attention dressed suggestively or provactively with their blouse open a bit more than before or wearing the high heels from previous exploits. We learned that our obsessions and compulsions could lead us straight to a slip.

Some of us rationalized that it was okay to slip once in a while, because after all, we were doing better than before. All this did was make the addiction a river of misery in the background of our lives. Our sexual compulsion fed like a parasite on our hearts, minds, bodies, and souls. Knowing this we had a decision to make - ***"should we keep on living with the dull ache of addiction, or grapple with the sharper, shorter pain of withdrawal?"***

It was not uncommon for some of us to feel an overwhelming sense of boredom that made us feel very restless and anxious. Nothing seemed interesting to us when compared to stimulating thoughts and images of sex and romance. This was, however, a great opportunity in disguise. Many of us used this newly released mental energy to go back to school to finish or attain new degrees and to find new hobbies and interests to occupy our mind. Whatever anxiety or restlessness we felt, it we took actions like deep breathing, meditation and redirecting our mental energies into something constructive, that restlessness and anxiety would always pass eventually.

As our obsessions, compulsions, and fantasies drained away, we began to be able to identify *"stinkin' thinkin'"* as it occurred. We labeled our *"addict thoughts"* and said to ourselves, *"I don't have to follow that downward spiral."* When confronted with someone we found particularly alluring, we followed a three-second rule, allowing ourselves to appreciate God's creation fully for three seconds, then redirecting our thoughts to something else.

That something else could be as simple as recalling a Slogan or reciting the Serenity Prayer, or as comprehensive as plunging into creative pursuits advanced education or a new career. We found new time for relationships and other areas of our lives. We began or continued our Step work. As a result, we became clearer channels of our Higher Powers' will. When the obsessions returned and seemed to be overwhelming, we threw

ourselves into service, knowing that to keep our sexual sobriety we have to give it away.

FROM WITHDRAWAL TO SPIRITUALITY

As we went through withdrawal, we eventually realized that in our active addiction we had been involved for years in a low-level search for a power greater than ourselves. We acted as if we found it in sex, romance, or relationships. But deep down that never rang true. The final process of withdrawal was letting go of sexual compulsion as our higher power and the discovery for each of us in our own way a faith that works.

As we began to follow the Twelve Steps, we started to grasp the concept of God as we understood God. This was not a god that wanted to enslave us through lust or fantasy, but a Higher Power that could restore us to sanity. We slowly began to notice what we might once have called coincidences. When we would find ourselves in a situation that once invariably led to having sex with a stranger, we would find ourselves alone. We were in a position of powerlessness, but did not act out. How? When we fully accepted the first Step, we admitted we were powerless over sexual compulsion - that our lives had become unmanageable. Nothing we did or didn't do would have any effect in keeping us sober. We concluded that a Power greater than ourselves was acting in our lives.

We began to trust that Power a little bit at a time. When confronted with the void within, we decided not to act out, at least not today. We trusted that if we did not act on our addictive urges, this too would pass. A burden lifted from our shoulders, and we were able to let ourselves relax even in the face of uncertainty in the world around us. As things began to improve in our lives, we found it easier to trust outcomes to our Higher Power, and at the same time we began to gain understanding about God's work in our lives. That growing trust became the basis of our Third Step, when we turned our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understood God.

Surrendering our will was not easy. How many times did we make demands - a new or better lover more money or respect on the job, greater control over the lives of ourselves or others. But working the Third Step led to a paradox:

It was only when we allowed our Power to be our Divine Matchmaker (even if this meant no match for now) that we became relaxed enough to become attractive to others instead of coming off as desperate and needy.

We surrendered to it that if we did not have a life partner, this was not a punishment or deprivation, but God's will letting us know what was right for us at the time.

Some of us, perhaps for the first time, discovered prayer and meditation. We discovered the humility of praying "only for knowledge of God's will

for us and the power to carry that out". The word "only" in Step 11 was difficult for some of us since it precluded praying for the perfect lover (let alone a winning lottery ticket, a penthouse, or world fame). Yet, our earlier Step work helped us realize that our Higher Power was about love, not fear. If we had a fearful conception of God in the past, we found the program much more difficult especially when practicing Step 3, so we sought an understanding of God more suitable for us.

Because God created our sexuality, approved of it and made a gift of it to us, we found it possible and however miraculous, even inevitable to reach this new understanding. And this new understanding in turn, made it easier for us to ask only for the knowledge of God's will for us and the power to carry that out.

Some of us longed to create more silence and empty space in ourselves and in our lives for a Higher Power to fill. Spiritual retreats, new commitments to a house of worship, or other spiritual paths helped fill that void within. We realized we were not empty; in fact we had always been whole. Our character defects were wounds to be healed, not something insane. We understood Steps 6 and 7 as acts of devotion that let our Higher Power reveal our true nature to us. We spent at least a few minutes praying and meditating in the morning and in the evening, and as often throughout the day as necessary. We looked at our morning prayers as a chance to align ourselves with our Higher Power for the day and our evening prayers as a good time to do a Tenth Step inventory:

when were we selfish, fearful dishonest, or resentful that day?

Even within the busiest and noisiest of neighborhoods, we found silence. Because our minds, hearts and bodies were clear we heard our intuition and our Higher Power. We trusted in a Power greater than ourselves that loves us and wants us to be happy. We developed patience and trust for our healing process.

We found spiritual renewal through doing acts of service within SAA and beyond. Working with newcomers took us further down the path of sobriety. By sponsoring others, we articulated thoughts and feelings about life and recovery that we did not realize we knew. We benefited from every act of service we performed, and we prayed for the willingness to serve as our Higher Power would have us serve.

At no point could we become complacent. We knew that sexual compulsion is **cunning, baffling, powerful**. We realized we were always one slip away from an even lower bottom than our last. Many of us sadly hit many bottoms - each worse than the last - before we were ready to go through withdrawal.

COMING OUT ON THE OTHER SIDE

As we attended meetings, we continued to benefit from witnessing others recover. We saw others endure being laid off, grieving a loved ones death, going bankrupt, or confronting HIV, all without acting out. We grew to understand how flimsy our excuses for acting out were in light of these responses to adversity - how we acted out simply because we were sad, angry, bored or happy. We acted out, in the final analysis, because we were addicts. We stopped seeing ourselves as victims instead we learned that we could take responsibility in our lives with the help and grace of our Higher Power.

We sought spiritual progress, not perfection, comparing ourselves not to others but to the people we used to be. We stopped pursuing those who were unavailable, or who would reject or abuse us. We lost our fear of other people and our fear of our own sexuality. We learned to recognize the difference between sex, love, and affection. Our lives gained new meaning whether we were in a relationship or out of one. We discovered ourselves our souls, and our connection to our Higher Power.

Because we underwent withdrawal and saw it through to the other side - while rigorously working the Twelve Steps, collectively following the Twelve Traditions, and maintaining abstinence as defined on a Sexual Recovery Plan - we were able to experience increasing serenity and recovery. We finally found peace with God, ourselves our loved ones, our fellow human beings and our sexuality.

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