

Admitting Powerlessness: Dog Food Confessions of a Sex Addict

Hi, I'm Stan. and I'm a sex addict.

It took me a long time to be able to say those words. By my count, it has been 8 years since I first dabbled in self-help for porn addiction. I slowly came to the vague realization that I had, what I called at the time, a "porn problem" or a "bad porn habit."

No way was I *sex addict*- that's a step too far! I made up many lies to myself about my addiction, preferring to rot deep in the swamp of denial. I'm clever; I used to brag that I could "rationalize anything." Now I know that's the very character defect that could end my life.

It's been 8 long years of relapse after relapse, hitting new bottoms, failing ever more in relationships, work opportunities, social life, friendships, financial matters - you name it. I blamed the world for these failings time and again, never considering (or rather, rationalized away) that my compulsive and ever-escalating bouts of acting out on computer screens could be a major cause. Eventually, my compulsion with solo Internet pornography could no longer scratch that "itch" - so I escalated to sex chats and Internet phone sex. I convinced myself that since Covid-19 had made me isolated, that this was necessary therapy and social connection. My fetishes and deranged behavior were "healing traumas", or so my disease told me, never strengthening them. A whirlwind of falsifications in my plastic reality swirled about my head, writing the script of insanity, day in and day out.

However, after each escapade into the drug, after each new depth of depravity and moral bankruptcy, I encountered another feeling that was all-too painful and familiar to me: Pitiful and Incomprehensible Demoralization. After almost every binge of insanity the clouds of lust would part and I would experience a brief, crystal flash of sober clarity. In a few short moments, all my repressed feelings would flood to the service, slapping me in the face with a deluge of shame and despair. "What have I done?" "What have I become?"

Before I committed to SAA and 12-step programs, I refused the faintest suggestion of powerlessness. I have always been an atheist and so I controlled my destiny I thought; after all, hadn't I done so before? I'd beaten addictions to alcoholism and drugs, so surely I could handle this. All I needed was more discipline. Better habits. More self-punishment. I just wasn't trying hard enough. I didn't employ the right tool or strategy, or so I told myself.

Most of all though, there was the belief that I must do this recovery in isolation, sharing as little as possible with anyone. The feeling of shame was absolutely overwhelming, and the consequences of exposure weighed heavily on my calculating heart. I became convinced that I could never come out and tell people what I had become, and certainly could never ask for help from a higher power. I rationalized that if I could "cure" myself, then I wouldn't *need* to tell anyone, ever. I could just forget about the whole thing. Drink a tall glass of "unsee juice."

On this road came to me a suggestion from an online self-help group. I'll always remember it as my final failed act of foolish willpower to free myself from this addiction: *eating dog food*.

Someone shared with me that whenever they relapsed that they would eat from a can of dog food as a punishment. Another person said they would rip up money for the same reason. "Brilliant!" I thought, "I just needed to be doing something more tangible for my recovery!" Being the ever "in control of my destiny" stubborn type that I was, I said to myself, "OK, I'll do both!"

True enough to my word and my new vow to sobriety, I drove to the grocery store near my house in search of dog food. I laugh with my fellows about it now, recalling how anxious I was at the time, fraudulently browsing the canine treats section when I don't even own a pet. I looked for the most expensive "organic" dog treats I could find, read their ingredients and then thought, "How much should I buy?" This question had me stuck for a bit, because I believed this would be the final thing to keep me sober, while also knowing that nothing else had.

As I cautiously proceeded through the checkout line (flirting with the cashier, of course), I had a creeping feeling of suspense, like security would grab me at any moment, cuff me, and drag me out of the place. But my heist was not so dramatic, I paid for my new punishment and drove back home.

It wasn't long before I found myself gnawing away at the tough, crunchy, plastic-y food. I acted out again a few days later and remembered my deal with the devil of addiction: I paid my dues and stomached what I could (two "treats" at first, then more) and proceeded to rip up money as well. Always \$1 bills because, who would want to take things too far and do something crazy?

I remember wondering if I should donate the money to the homeless. Why should it go to waste? There was a person in the neighborhood, who I avoided, that could benefit from my new arrangement. I decided against this though, simply because it would make me feel good about myself. And if there's one thing my addiction never wants me to do, it's to feel good about myself. I absolved to rip up dead presidents on my own.

Did it work? Of course not. I only embarked on these self-punishment behaviors a few more times before shoveling my own grave further, and reaching my most recent bottom of erectile dysfunction. It was a wake-up call, and hopefully the last. This addiction was no habit, no "porn problem." What I had was very serious, and was killing my physical self. I needed help. I was finally ready to try anything. Even - and this was the most important part - coming out of the secrecy of my double life to tell others what I had done.

That's when I searched for online SAA meetings. That's when I discovered the fellowship, revisited the 12-steps, and all they had to offer. That's when I discovered that there wasn't just a meeting a week. Something I could never white-knuckle my way to through the long days of insanity.

As it turns out, the very global health emergency I had exploited to act out and "socialize" had actually helped to usher in a new era of the program, where meetings can now be joined from all over the world, at *any time of the day*. Virtual meetings have revolutionized my recovery in every way and have helped me deepen my commitment as well as support me in my most trying moments. I attend meetings every day now, sometimes as many as 4 in a single day.

Knowing I can reach a room full of fellows at 3 a.m. (when my binges were at their worst) means that I no longer have an excuse to indulge in my destruction. Over time, I have developed the strength of getting honest with fellow addicts, sharing things I've never told another soul in my life. And I can do this simply because these are people who understand the havoc and despair this addiction has brought me. They create space for that honesty by allowing anonymous shares and support without judgment, pressuring, unsolicited "cure-alls" or (most importantly), shaming.

I also have the hope and beauty of hearing from those for whom recovery has become a living reality. People with a lasting relief from this addiction for years, even decades. Thoughtful, committed people who share their most intimate lives with each other, every day, in order to be better human beings. To heal relationships with friends, spouses, their children, and themselves. People who have been to prison or treatment centers. I've met fellows who are technicians, pastors, policemen, college students, teachers, and therapists. The one thing we all have in common is this addiction. Subsequently, we also share a common bond in our commitment for self-improvement, and fixing the harms that our actions and behaviors have caused ourselves and others.

In the 5 months since I joined this program with a full commitment, I have acted out a total of 30 minutes. It was not deep inner circle, but still something I don't wish to repeat. That accumulated sobriety time is astonishing, something that was previously unobtainable. I've been an addict for over 25 years; it's all I've ever known. I feel like I'm stepping into a new phase of my life right now, and while I know there will be bumps along the way, no one can take away the successes I've had so far. I keep my 30 day SAA sobriety token close to me on my nightstand now, and I meditate and pray every day. If someone had told me I would be doing such a thing six months ago, I would have laughed at them.

I describe myself now as a "spiritual atheist," because my higher power is not a part of any religious denomination. I know now why it was essential for my recovery, and why things get better only when I admit that I don't have the solution. It is the great paradox of this program that only by relinquishing control over this addiction, can I finally have manageability in my life and my sanity restored. When I was running the show I was still acting out, I was ripping up money and I was eating dog food. Today, by the will of my higher power, I am sober, and I use money to buy human food. It is said in the Green Book that we must be willing to go any length to achieve relief from our compulsive sexual behaviors. For me, that meant checking my ego at the door, asking for help, and perhaps most of all, finally admitting powerlessness.