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Mad for the Moment

How I ended up on SSRIs, and why I am weaning off them after a decade of use. With a sprinkling of acknowledged madness.

Today I am insane. It is the fifth day in a row that I have gone without sertraline, an anti-depressant commonly sold as Zoloft. Sertraline is a selective serotonin re-uptake inhibitor (SSRI), which in layman's terms means that it is a pill one administers orally in order to alter one's brain chemistry in the hope that a moderate to severe depression is relieved. Eleven years ago my mother took me to a psychiatrist. I explained to the doctor that I had been experiencing daily suicidal thoughts since I was in primary school. I told him that I had kept the suicide note that I had written when I was 10 years old so that I wouldn't have to re-write it, which as I type this illustrates to me that even as a child I had presumed that my suicide was imminent. Not just inevitable, but on ice, waiting for a catalyst that seemed a good enough excuse. I felt shame that my material circumstances were not bad enough to explain my suicide, and I felt a deep fear that my suicide would be seen as a symbol of my own weakness. My father had revived his own father after a failed suicide attempt, and openly hated him for being a 'pissweak' man.

But 11 years ago, when I was given that prescription and taken to the chemist, I had not yet developed the faculties adequate enough to express that shame or that fear. I have taken the SSRI daily for 11 years, uninterrupted.¹ I did not have the maturity or the power that comes with age to paint a true picture of what my home-life looked like, and felt like, from the inside. I did not have the perspective necessary to view my suicidality as an emotional

¹ The longest I once went without Zoloft was four days. It culminated in me getting very drunk and saying some absolutely unacceptable things. A fellow named Byron Fay punched me in the face and ran away as I opened my eyes to see what had happened. I do not believe Byron did the right thing, as hitting others because they hurt your feelings is degenerate behaviour, but I cannot hold it against him considering that I firmly believe that I earned that quick whack. There are many other occurrences where I went without the drug for a couple of days at a time, and when coupled with alcohol or drugs, these occurrences produced outrageous, abusive, shameful behaviour.

response to those feelings of fear and of shame, as opposed to the ‘chemical imbalance’ that my feelings may have presented as. I cannot tell you whether I scared that shrink into wondering if I would make it through the week, or whether he really believed that just putting a 17 year old on SSRIs indefinitely would fix the problem. This was, after all, the same shrink that had prescribed me Methylphenidate (Ritalin) and Dexamphetamine. And this patient, after all, was not an easy young man to talk to. Not if you wanted the truth. I had learned from a young age that telling the truth was not worth the abuse it so often brought about. My relationship with the truth has, until about nine months ago, been distant in nature.

Fast forward 10 and a half years. I wake up after having failed at a suicide that I had designed to be failsafe. I can’t escape myself. A month later I wake up covered in my own urine in a cell at Richmond Police Station, Melbourne. The blackouts have been getting worse and worse. The first had been in 2012. An entire night scrubbed from memory by alcohol and prescription drug abuse. Between 2012 and 2018 they increased in prevalence: entire nights, conversations, friends made and lost, bridges of all varieties burned, sexual encounters, and crimes committed, are examples of the kinds of things I would find out about through others. My 20s have seen me use the word sorry more than any other. The life I’d been living was not worth living.

After the last blackout — the one that had me arrested, again — I got honest with a doctor, got honest with myself, and admitted that after having tried over and over throughout my 20s to just go a few days without a drink or a drug, that I could not do it on my own. The SSRIs had become established in the baseline of my dysfunctional and insane alcoholic and addict psychology. For the levels of insanity I’m feeling during these years, you’d wonder why I’d been bothering to take them at all. Well, you’d wonder until you ran into me after a few days without them. The noise in my head had been a cacophony for too long. During the last months of my drinking and using, I’m having arguments with people who aren’t in the room constantly, there is a bucket beside my bed, and I only leave the house to walk the dog.

I got sober, 8 months and 2 days ago today. The day before that, 2/04/18, was the day I ran out of the stash I’d snuck into a rehab. I was not well.

The past 8 months has shown me a quality of life that I did not know possible. Removing the alcohol and the drugs gave me the ability and the impetus to go deep into the inner workings of my perspective and the origins of my personality, this new lease on life

compelling me to engage in therapy among other things. I will not list the myriad ways that my life and my perspective has changed. I will only say that I hadn't gone 24 hours without wanting to die for as long as I can remember, and now it's been 246 days. In a row. I hold down a job I like, I study full time with a High Distinction average, I've cleaned up as much of the mess I made over the years to the best of my ability and have made direct amends to all those of whom I have hurt who have given me consent to do so, and most importantly, I absolutely love my life. I love my life.

But the last five days have taken me back. Right now, I know I should love my life, but I don't. I haven't felt this way in sobriety before. Despite how therapeutic just writing this has been, there is not much I can do about the mild hallucinations I'm experiencing. The feeling that there is something metallic deep inside my brain squirming, pangs of anxiety that drag and grip on the inside of the skin on my ribs like a sweaty hand on a window, and the dissociative episodes that, while only seem to last a couple of minutes, have me wondering how I got from one street to the next. **I can't trust myself to ride my bike, and everything that rolls off my wooden tongue crumbles under the weight of my own self-consciousness.** Today I am insane. After 11 years of this chemical crutch, my chemistry is fuck-eyed, and I would do anything to feel how I felt 5 days ago: the way I'd felt for 7 months and 29 days. Sane. Together. Reliable. Happy!

Weaning off SSRIs is different to weaning off drugs and alcohol. The first difference I would say is just the physicality of the process. My body was a train-wreck in my first month of sobriety. I could have counted the number of solid craps I took on one hand, which was shaking too much to handwrite legibly more often than not. I went a week before I slept during the night, surviving off couple-hour naps here and there. Some days I wouldn't eat, other days I'd eat for a family, all the while rapidly losing weight. Going off SSRIs has me looking presentable. I'm still scrubbed up and ready to blend in on a tram, no dramas. My craps are fine thanks. But the noise in my head is reminiscent of early sobriety. It is terrifying, it is lonely, and it is absolutely constant.

The second difference I've noticed is that there's no appreciation whatsoever by others as to what you're going through. We've seen plenty of movies and heard so many stories about getting off drugs and alcohol. All I had to say was 'I'm detoxing' to be given a wide berth and asked nothing of. People say 'good on ya', which, although feeling absolutely bizarre considering you're only detoxing because you tox-ed yourself in the first place, really

helps you to be able to feel comfortable and to therefore be honest. Not feeling comfortable enough to be honest about how one actually feels has for me been the worst thing about my experiences with mental illness, yet I feel absolutely unable to be honest about what I'm going through right now with the humans around me. Those who I have been honest with have by and large, to no fault of their own (and with a couple of exceptions), been (and I admit that I am, given my mental state, very sensitive right now) kind of assholes about it. And by asshole about it I mean they've just ignored it and continued to ask me to do stuff completely beyond the capabilities of someone who is watching floorboards warp in front of their own eyes. Having explained that the floorboards appear to be warping, there has been no change. I must say that, while it's wrong of me to expect others to understand, or perhaps even naive of me to expect them to even say 'i don't understand but i hope you're okay', I acknowledge that it is I who is currently insane and should definitely wrap this paragraph up now.

The third difference is probably the only interesting one. It is why I am writing right now, and it is why I am wrestling with the decision I've made. It is an existential difference. The decision for me to get off SSRIs is an existential matter as it is born from the belief that I, Joshua, exist independently of all the things that I have ever put into my body. I want to know who I really am, and I want to believe that that person was not *born* with a chemical imbalance. That that person is now in a position to learn the emotional regulation that he did not learn as a child, and that that person can become a man without the need to chemically alter himself.

I removed alcohol and drugs and as a result have experienced a version of myself that I didn't know existed. But what if I can exist as me — happy, healthy, motivated — without the SSRIs? After all, I've been on them for so many years that my brain has never had the opportunity to actually take a look at itself without its clothes on. I want to remove this layer of clothing to see if the naked me reflects as human and inspired and capable, or whether, no matter how long I go without the SSRIs, that the naked me will always and forever be stuck reflected like it would in a funhouse mirror — bent and stretched and unfitting for the world.

Right now I'm not looking too pretty, but I am only five days in, and I have faith that given time, perspective, and a bit of therapy, I'll emerge one step closer to the Joshua I was born to be. Until then, sorry if I say or do anything extra weird.