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"I Beat Addiction Without God,"

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I attended a Narcotics Anonymous meeting during my first day at rehab in 1993. The group discussed the program's third step: "We made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understood Him." When the counselor asked us to identify a higher power, I said I was an atheist. "It's higher power or relapse," she replied. To me, this meant recovery would be impossible.

I began drinking at age 12, then abused pot, pills and acid before succumbing to a methamphetamine addiction at 16. I managed to graduate from college by exercising some control but afterward returned to daily use to cope with a violent relationship. Meantime, I worked my way *down* the corporate ladder: from law clerk to office manager to word processor. I didn't believe I could survive without drugs.

By the time I arrived at rehab, I had been an addict for nearly 20 years and desperately wanted to quit. I asked the staff for proof that only one path to recovery existed and required God. They said I was fighting the program. When asked why the cure would be spiritual if addiction is a disease as NA proclaims, my sponsor said we wouldn't debate the book. But I decided to apply only the concepts I found valuable.

We couldn't consume any drug, including alcohol, to avoid a relapse. Staff provided useful guidance on handling triggers. The "one day at a time" mantra helped too, because I could accomplish that even if I wasn't confident I could stay sober for long. When others shared their stories, they modeled methods for building a better future and gave me hope.

I reinterpreted step three as a lesson in limited control: I could work toward my goals but couldn't determine the outcome. Although the damage from earlier trauma in my life was real, the people who broke me weren't going to fix me. I had to repair myself. But I still felt apprehension when faced with the consensus that recovery is impossible absent a higher power.

After several months without drugs, I discovered Women for Sobriety. The secular alternative taught that empowered women could build strong recoveries by releasing the past and taking control of their lives. Meetings focused on positive thinking. I felt optimistic using the organization's introduction: I'm Mary Beth, and I'm a competent woman.

Another discovery was Secular Organization for Sobriety, which was succeeded by LifeRing Secular Recovery. This organization emphasized mutual support, rational decision-making, and addicts' responsibility for their own recoveries.

These programs validated my choice to create a plan that didn't include the supernatural. I began thinking more about Recovery than recovery—that is, being happy and stable without constantly addressing my addiction. The key was turning techniques into habits and reminding myself of what I could achieve before addiction ruined my life.

I started paying off debt, helped my family, and showed up for events. I quit smoking cigarettes. Anxiety sprang up as my biggest postrecovery struggle, but through therapy I began resolving the underlying trauma. I took new risks, and my confidence grew when they paid off. I took modest jobs and slowly climbed back up the corporate ladder. All this helped me move on.

Recovery wasn't a perfectly smooth path. Sometimes foreboding would consume me. I worried about my achievements being taken from me whenever I made mistakes. I couldn't shake these thoughts and overreacted to even a hint of criticism. Yet by my third year of sobriety, my brain had been rewired to stay clean. Not using was my new normal. Healthier patterns dominated, and the struggle was over. I went to law school, joined a Silicon Valley firm, and eventually became a federal administrative-law judge.

Being forced to find my own path ultimately made me stronger. My pain never has been eradicated, but I can bear what remains. Despite jitters, I'm always looking to the next goal.

Traditional 12-step programs have helped countless people recover, and I applaud their success. But I'm glad I never accepted the premise that I couldn't succeed without a higher power.

Ms. O'Connor is a board member of the She Recovers Foundation and LifeRing Secular Recovery.