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## Voices (/blogs/voices)

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### VOICES: Joey Pesavento (/blogs/voices/80109766-voices-joey-pesavento)

"What happened to me?" I remember asking my mom. The moments and days that followed were among the most difficult of my life.



"You suffered a brain injury," she told me. "You overdosed on heroin and you suffered a brain injury..." I remember breaking down after hearing those words. Imagine waking up somewhere, in an institution, and genuinely not knowing how or why you ended up there. This is how I felt.

I grew up in a very privileged household in the northern suburbs of Chicago with my two older sisters, my mom and my dad. Growing up was easy. I was, in essence, one of the "popular" kids at school. Prior to starting high school, I excelled at baseball and hockey and enjoyed them very much. As high school rolled around though, my interest in those things took a backseat position as my drug usage increased and my social life took precedence.

I smoked weed for the first time when I was in seventh grade. Pretty soon, I was getting high every weekend with my friends. Reflecting on this now, it seems like a lifetime ago that that happened, and I don't know who the hell would sell weed to, literally, kids. Nevertheless, it happened, and we were lucky that none of us ever got caught, until freshman year came around that is.



It was the first day of freshman year, and one of my friends was having a party. Another one of my friend's brothers said that he was going to pick us up to "hotbox" his car. So he came, we went and picked up some weed, and then began smoking in his car. While we were smoking, we stopped at the train tracks to let a train pass, and had the incredible misfortune of a cop stopping right behind us. Long story short, the cop pulled us over just after the train tracks, arrested my friend's brother, and took my two friends and I in to the station. Let's just say my parents were not very pleased with me.

By the time I was a freshman in high school, I had experimented with various substances, from stealing my mom's Ambien, to stealing liquor out of the liquor cabinet, to taking prescription painkillers I found around the house—even taking ecstasy a couple of times. But, that year, I found out about a whole new substance that could alter my state: Xanax. I remember (oddly enough) my first time taking it: I was at school, and one of my friends, who had been prescribed it and who also had experimented with weed, told me about this medication that his doctor had put him on. He said it was like smoking weed, but feels ten times better. I, being the psychonaut that I was, had to try it, so I did. I took one pill, and that was it. I was hooked.

And so began my demise, from star athlete/ grade A student to class A drug addict. I continued with using benzos and smoking weed throughout high school. But, junior year, I dislocated my thumb in a hockey game, which resulted in me needing a surgery that entailed having three pins put in my left hand. Which, in turn, led to me being prescribed Norcos: the 10 milligram yellow pills (the highest strength available). I was at the beginning of my ultimate downfall. After having the pins taken out, I was left without the painkillers. Eventually, I began seeking them out. I found a person who, on occasion, had Oxycontin.





I remember my first time doing heroin like it was yesterday. It was senior year, and I was at a party. And my friend, the same one I mentioned earlier who I got caught smoking with, asked me if I wanted to try it. Being the curious individual that I am, I said, "Sure!" Little did I know the ultimate effect heroin would have on my life. I remember him pulling it out, making a line for me, and me snorting the whole thing. Then, this intense euphoria, so much so that I couldn't stop laughing for some time.

As the end of senior year rolled around, I knew where I was going to college (University of Colorado at Boulder) along with about 5 close friends from high school. While there, I continued smoking pot and taking pills, and I found a connect for prescription painkillers (Dilaudid and Oxycontin). So, as it goes with using drugs and attending school, my schoolwork was essentially non-existent. By the end of the year, my grades were so poor that I had to leave. So I came home, and things got bad.

When I got home, I was already hooked on painkillers and had done heroin before, so I knew right where to go. Mind you, things get a little hazy here. I came home to my parents' house, began shooting up, dabbled with crack, and was basically using day in and day out. I had plenty of clean (well, relatively clean) friends at home, but I had no desire to be clean, so I began hanging out with a younger kid who introduced me to all of my connects and to crack. I didn't have any intention of being clean. By this time, my parents knew something was up, so they took me to see a therapist. I saw him a couple of times before I admitted to him what I had been using. The next time I saw him, he had me tell my parents—one of the hardest things I have ever done—and that same day I went to rehab in Minnesota.

So, here I am, in the middle of January, withdrawing from heroin and benzos in frigid Minnesota. Needless to say, I wasn't exactly thrilled about being there, and that mindset prevailed to the end. I eventually began calling my parents to tell them how much I hated it and that I wanted to come home. But they wouldn't let me, and, at the end of my inpatient stay, I was moved to a halfway house, and then to a "sober living" home. I was clean for about 3 months when I moved into "sober living," but moving into a house meant no more babysitting, and I relapsed within a couple weeks. I began attending AA meetings, which, at the time, I completely rejected due to their ideology of staying abstinent from all substances. After months of fighting the program, I eventually convinced my parents to let me come home.

Before I even left Minnesota, I texted my "friends" (using buddies) to let them know I was coming home, and asked them to have some dope for me. As you can tell, I had no intention of being clean. I believe it was around this time that I overdosed the first time. I had picked up using right where I had left off. My relationship with my parents was extremely strained. I was hanging out with the same crowd I was before I left for rehab, working the same job I did before I left for rehab, and living with my parents again. Basically, nothing had changed since I left.



And then, this happened, the reason I am writing this. On February twenty-second of this year, 2015, I suffered an anoxic brain injury from a heroin overdose, resulting in dystonia (spasms in my head/ neck area), dysphasia (strained speech) and short-term memory loss. My mom happened to wake up in the middle of the night to find the lights still on. She found me downstairs on the couch, barely breathing. I was rushed to the ER, and I

remained in a coma for a few days in ICU. I spent weeks in the hospital, and months in a rehabilitation center before coming to. I had to re-learn how to walk, talk, and do basic daily functions. What do my parents think about all of this? I'm not entirely sure yet, but they are happy that I'm still alive and that I'm clean.

So, here I am, completely free of all substances, but still dealing with the effects of my brain injury. Will I ever heal completely? I don't know. But, I do know this: had I known that this could happen, I never would've touched heroin. My advice to anyone dealing with addiction would be this: stop before it's too late, because looking back, I sure as hell wish I had.

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