Facing Addiction While in the Midst of Depression

by CARLA SILVER

Carla's Story of Depression and Addiction

Several years ago, sitting at the table in the rehab dining room, it dawned on me this was either going to be a turning point in my life, or a point of no return. It was up to me.

I'm not going to put you through every single detail of the drama of rehab or the events leading up to it, but I will say alcohol and the choices I made while self-medicating with alcohol landed me there, much to my dismay and embarrassment.

After all, my family was considered upper-middle class, my (ex) husband had a well-paying job, we lived in a nice home, had beautiful children – I shouldn't have been there. There were no DUIs, no public displays of drunkenness or abuse because of the alcohol. It had set me free.

But there I was anyway, having lost the fight with my dad about going somewhere for my depression. Depression was not an acceptable diagnosis. "Let's get rid of the alcohol first," my dad told me. "Then we'll see about the depression."

Funny thing was, it was the depression that had the tighter grip. Alcohol made the grip more bearable – alcohol made *everything* bearable.

My addiction to a depressant to treat depression was impressive. Here I was, depressed over the state of my marriage being on the downward turn, drinking to show I really didn't give a damn; drinking to show how good I was at Guitar Hero while sauced; drinking to prove *he* couldn't tell me what to do; drinking to make myself brave enough to get involved with a man I should never have been involved with; and drinking to prove to myself that at least inside of my soul, I was free.

Because that is what addiction does, it makes us free. It takes away the pain, the anger, the sarcasm, the need, the want – the *everything* – and in its place leaves freedom. Or, what the addicted person believes to be freedom, when really it is just another pit.

Where to Start?

So what do professionals need to treat first? The addiction or the disorder? Do you treat the addiction to get to the root of the disorder? Do you treat the disorder to cut off the head of the addictive behavior? It really is a chicken and egg discussion, isn't it?

What I know is that addictions and disorders don't give a crap if you are the CEO of some mega corporation or someone living under a bridge. I also believe you cannot treat one and ignore the other. Both have to be dealt with and both have to be treated with serious intent.

I believe that while we have come a long way in dealing with addictive behaviors and disorders, as a country and as a people we need to learn how to place significance on both, and treat both for the major issues they are.

Next page: 'Where to Start' continued and the importance of treating both.

People who are treated as addicts receive more attention than someone who has been diagnosed with depression. Addiction is more *specific,* where depression could mean anything. It could just be laziness or an excuse not to behave right or as expected.

Interventions for addicted people receive TV time, but interventions for depressed people or bipolar people or people who suffer from a mental disorder are considered ludicrous. Yet, take away the addiction and what have you got? Someone with major trauma in their lives, probably depressed, probably anxious, and the 12 steps are supposed to help it all? No.

I don't mean to belittle an organization that has been around for a long time and helped millions of people. Really. Some of the stories I heard in AA were tales that made me feel very stupid for even thinking my best friend's last name was Comfort. But AA didn't work for me. I got tired of sitting around and talking about my drinking problem when the root of my problem was this dark abyss I was drowning in at that very moment.

The Importance of Treating Both

It made me angry to be in an environment where people were telling me depression wasn't real and if I just surrendered to the 12 steps, it would all get better.

I sat there in rehab going over in my mind how, if we were addicts trying to get away from our addictions, we were supposed to get away from them if all the lectures were on drugs and alcohol? Everything was a trigger. Everything was already formulated in our brains. It was all just something in our brains that had been messed up from the very beginning. If my addiction was "preordained", where did the depression fit in? Was it a mystery? Was it just a general ailment?

Was it a fantasy? I wanted to know about *depression*. My solution to depression was to drink. Drinking was an afterthought.

I learned a lot while in rehab. I learned my limitations as a charades participant; I learned the 12 steps do not solve every problem; I learned yoga at 7am should not even be an option; I learned some people are highly sensitive to chairs being picked up and placed elsewhere; learned what a behavioral contract was; and learned that I never, EVER want to go back there for as long as I live.

Yes, the removal of alcohol forced the depression out into the open. At least in the minds of my family. But the depression was always there. It never left. It was drowned out, so to speak, but it was always a part of my life. WAY before the alcohol ever came into play.

I don't want to say we are "preordained" to have depression or bipolar or anxiety issues because quite frankly, I don't know. Much of what we deal with as a disorder is chemical – brain chemicals that are somehow messed up; and much of what we deal with as a disorder is called life. It is often a combination of both chemical and life. Addictions come in and try to mask the circumstances or the chemicals – or at least drown them out and make us believe, falsely, we are free.

Freedom comes when both – addiction and disorders – are treated and not dismissed. Dismissing one dismisses the person. People truly committed to the well-being of others should never dismiss the person.

Walking out of rehab six weeks later, it felt as though I was walking out of prison. I thought to myself, "*sweet freedom."* But it wasn't true. I might have been unshackled from one set of irons, but I was still shackled to depression. The 12 steps of AA hadn't taught me how to deal with that.