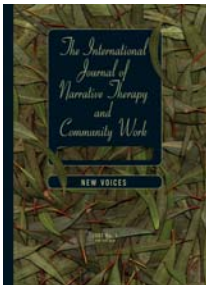


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# Deconstructing addiction & reclaiming joy

By the Deconstructing Addiction League

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This paper consists of extracts from discussions on the Deconstructing Addiction League E-list. It includes correspondence between members, theoretical and practical considerations, celebrations, a virtual interview and definitional ceremony, as well as the first story in what is hoped to become an archive of practices of joy and connection – free from substances. This collection also demonstrates the ethic of community that is central to the League's work.

Keywords: addiction, community, drugs, alcohol, joy

The 'Deconstructing Addiction League' is a network for those who wish to undermine the excessive consumption of substances through the use of community support structures and narrative ideas. While the League has multiple intentions, purposes, and ideas for the future, it has three key aims. These are explained below by the founder of the Deconstruction Addiction League, Anthony C<sup>1</sup>.

**To create a community-based resource based on narrative ideas for those of us who are revising our relationships to various substances**

Our goal is to establish a community-based resource that will offer different conversations from those which are currently available. We hope that this will eventually become another option for people to choose from, or perhaps something a person could do in addition to, existing community resources. As so many people die each year from substance use, there is a great deal of urgency and a need for multiple perspectives and options to choose from! At present, there is really only one viable community resource available – this being the 12-step model of Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) and other associated fellowships. There is much about these fellowships that is extremely valuable and I myself am part of the AA and NA community. I do not wish to diminish its enormous contributions in many people's lives including my own. It is however, only one model, and may not fit or work for everybody. We believe there is plenty of room for additional community resources.

**To assist people who are struggling with issues of substance use to make a fit with existing resources**

Assisting those with alcohol/drug lifestyles to be able to work with existing resources is also significant. There may be some aspects of existing resources (support groups, treatment programs, individual counselling) that work very well for a particular individual, whereas other practices may not. Providing a forum for the discussion of these matters in ways that make it easier for people to engage with existing resources, is a significant part of the League's work.

**To support narrative practitioners who wish to work in the field of addiction treatment**

The League also hopes to provide support for narrative therapists who wish to work in the field of 'addiction treatment'. Oftentimes narrative therapists and their ideas are disqualified in treatment contexts. Furthermore, the League will hopefully provide a better understanding of how narrative therapists can work with so called 'addicts/alcoholics' in private practice. This is critical, as many persons who seek the consultation of narrative therapists around the topic of addiction are refused. This refusal is unfortunate but somewhat understandable as one of the working assumptions of the League is that individual therapeutic responses are rarely enough to address the powerful influence of addiction, hence the need for a community-based resource informed by narrative practice. It is our hope that the League can contribute to a situation in which narrative therapists will not have to turn away anyone who is seeking to address issues of 'addiction'.

## WEBSITE AND E-LIST

Over the last two years, a section of the Dulwich Centre website ([www.dulwichcentre.com.au](http://www.dulwichcentre.com.au)) has hosted a web-based resource in relation to deconstructing addiction. Here can be found a range of writings about addiction and narrative ways of responding to alcohol and other drug use. A

Deconstructing Addiction League E-list has also been in operation for some time. This e-list, whose members include narrative practitioners and those seeking to change their relationship to substance use, has featured some rollicking discussions! The following extracts give a good sense of this! We hope you enjoy the ride<sup>2</sup>.

## DECONSTRUCTING ADDICT IDENTITY

TO: EVERYONE  
DATE: SATURDAY, 5TH JUNE  
SUBJECT: DECONSTRUCTING ADDICT IDENTITY

Hi Everyone,

I have a general question ... what do any of you think about the helpfulness, necessity, or not, of people identifying themselves as 'alcoholics' or 'addicts' as part of the process of moving away from problematic drinking/using? I'd like to hear some discussion of this and related issues.

Amanda

---

TO: EVERYBODY  
DATE: WEDNESDAY, 9TH JUNE  
SUBJECT: DECONSTRUCTING ADDICT IDENTITY

Hi Everybody,

In response to Amanda's question about alcoholic/addict identity, there is so much to reflect on.

Keeping in mind a critical perspective, which is an evaluation of the real effects of the alcoholism discourse on identity formation, it is helpful to look at this, not from a place of absolute moral certainty, but more from a position of particular ethical inquiry – *this* action, practice, discourse or story is doing *this* in *this* place and is having *these* effects. If all action and discourse is seen as contingent, it becomes clear that the effects of action and discourse will often be multiple – good and bad. As far as I'm concerned, the alcoholic/addict identity description (a fixed identity description) has multiple effects on persons' lives.

This is how the 'addict' identity conclusion has been helpful to me personally: It helps me remember that I am joined with others (at AA/NA) in the process of re-claiming our lives from substance use. It also reminds me that I can expect the same result every time that I put a substance into my body, because there is a fixed relation of dominance, which gives substances the upper hand – when I put any amount of a substance in my body.

Knowing that this (relation) is fixed and un-changing prevents me from having to learn over and

over that I can't experiment with substances. It helps me stay in touch with my commitment – to not use substances – because I have already determined this to be a dead end – for now and for always.

The fact that alcoholic identity is linked to pathology, paves the way toward all sorts of negative identity conclusions, thin descriptions and statements of personal weakness and deficiency. In many instances, persons are applauded for identifying themselves as sick and self-centered ... I wonder what the real effects of this are?

I will paste here another excerpt from an unfinished piece: As addiction is viewed as a disease intrinsic to who we are, it is assumed that certain behaviours are an expression of this disease. This behaviour is often linked to a concept of 'self-will'. A totalising description would sound something like this 'alcoholics are self-centered, a case of self-will run riot'. These thin descriptions or problem-saturated accounts of alcoholics tend to generalise where alcoholics have gone wrong. The tone is very corrective. In discovering the essence of the disease or self-centeredness, the point of correction becomes self-will. When a person's will is called into question, not only does this make everything they do subject to the scrutiny of others but it encourages a form of self-subjugation. Persons are taught to problematise their intentions, motives and desires and to internalise the gaze of authority. It is assumed that if we can get to what is true about the alcoholic – that the nature of their disease is self-centredness – than it can be corrected by prescribing certain norms for them to live by.

It is the above description that has made my journey through 'recovery' and treatment so much more difficult than it needed to be. It is also why I believe that narrative practices can make a significant contribution to the field of 'addiction'.

Smiles,

Anthony

TO: ANTHONY  
DATE: WEDNESDAY, 9TH JUNE  
SUBJECT: DECONSTRUCTING ADDICT IDENTITY

Wow, thank you so much Anthony! Even though I trip over some of the words and I have to read slowly, what you said makes perfect sense to me and helps me think about not only addict identity, but other identities that I have (or they have me!) – such as mother, sister, employee, etc.

This is my interpretation of what you said. Tell me if I go off base in any important ways: The addict identity may be helpful in some ways to some people, but not helpful or even harmful in other ways. It is up to each person to ‘unpack’ the identity and find what parts, if any, they find useful in thinking about their relationship to substances.

I simplified what you said, of course. But the thing is, I never thought of it like that. I never realised I could pick and choose like that. There is such weight, such seriousness attached to all the addict/alcoholic/recovery thing (lots of expert knowledge involved!), I guess I didn’t think to look at it critically and practically. So, you don’t have to reject or embrace the identity, you can ‘use’ it.

I think people do need support to be able to do that, because there is so much pressure to ‘decide’/admit whether or not you are an addict (fix your identity) and then to follow the prefab prescription if you are, or shut up and get on with your life if you’re not. And if one is really desperate, which people often are in that situation, it seems safer to go towards what people are telling you about yourself, even if it doesn’t feel right.

I agree with you about the shakiness of the ‘sick and self-centered, self-will run riot’ explanation. It never did anything for me but make me feel worse, and it confused me. It doesn’t make a lot of sense, except that it plays into many alcoholics’ self-loathing and allows others to get a better handle on them; maybe get a little revenge on them for how they behaved while they were using? I thought it was weird, in treatment, when, on the ‘family days’ they would invite family members in as sort of ‘experts’ on the ‘addict’. So the person’s family and all the staff get to ‘gang up’ against the patient, in a way. It all felt punitive and really bad.

In general, accepting diagnoses, definitions and treatments from other people ignores the addict’s

perspective and resources and experience and everything. And yes, it is thin and might not hold up. It’s a way of not looking at what’s really going on. Trading one rigid identity for another one makes no sense to me.

Thanks so much!

Amanda

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TO: AMANDA  
DATE: WEDNESDAY, 9TH JUNE  
SUBJECT: DECONSTRUCTING ADDICT IDENTITY

Hi Amanda,

About family members’ involvement in treatment, you wrote:

*I thought it was weird, in treatment, when, on the ‘family days’ they would invite family members in as sort of ‘experts’ on the ‘addict’. So the person’s family and all the staff get to ‘gang up’ against the patient, in a way. It all felt punitive and really bad.*

Ouch.

In the Thursday night family groups I facilitate at the treatment center where I work, we show a lot of videos. One night, I dug up a new video that was part one of Bill Moyers’ documentary on addiction. The whole tape is interviews with people who have separated from alcohol and other drugs. They are speaking from their hearts, and from their direct experience. It is all very moving to see and hear their stories. And Bill Moyers is a great interviewer. Anyway, I showed this video during family group, and at the end, there was not a dry eye in the room from the family members. We had a nice dialogue back and forth between family members and group members who were in treatment. Family members asked respectful questions of the group members about their experience; they were curious and wanted to learn. They treated the group members like experts. It was a great session. Since then, I have continued to show this video. Family members move into a respectful and compassionate position once they see it and get a chance to talk about it.

I am sorry that happened to you in your group. Those kinds of experiences you described are all too common, and that is unfortunate and sad.

Best regards,

Wendy

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TO: WENDY  
DATE: WEDNESDAY, 9TH JUNE  
SUBJECT: DECONSTRUCTING ADDICT IDENTITY

Sorry that I overgeneralised and was rough. Yes, it was a bad experience and they're still doing it, but I'm sure there are exceptions. It probably has a lot to do with the atmosphere that is set, and also the family, of course, and facilitator.

I sort of question the whole idea though, especially early in treatment. Maybe it would be okay later, and if the 'addict' and the family want to do it. No pressure or shame. And with a full awareness and acknowledgement that the addict isn't to be put in the role of troublemaker, while the family members are virtuous victims. And the addict should feel safe and be 'protected' from shaming family members. This just my opinion based on experience. One good thing though, the family day experience does function as a sort of hazing and brings the people in treatment closer together!

Amanda

---

TO: AMANDA  
DATE: WEDNESDAY, 9TH JUNE  
SUBJECT: DECONSTRUCTING ADDICT IDENTITY

Hi Amanda,

I want to clarify that my 'ouch' was not about the tone in your post, it was a response to the 'hazing' type of family night you experienced.

Your description of a 'no pressure, no shame' family night fits with the type of approach that my

colleagues and I endeavour to take with regard to family night. People can choose to invite family members or not. There is no requirement to do so, or pressure. People can also invite close friends, co-workers – it's not limited to immediate family. A tone is set of respect and connection at the beginning of each family night group. Family members are gently re-directed if they attempt to engage in shaming practices. I gave the example of the Bill Moyers' film because it helps move family members to a side-by-side place with their loved one, working together as a team, instead of being in two opposing camps.

In writing this, and the previous post, it is difficult to speak in a way that does not seek to position our treatment team's approach as uniquely virtuous, enlightened or somehow above or separate from the power relations that come with the territory of structured treatment. I work in a traditional treatment setting. There is no way to escape the power relations and the traditional assumptions the treatment program is embedded in and structured upon. While I cannot escape the assumptions of the setting, I can and do challenge and deconstruct those assumptions when I facilitate a group, in individual therapy, or in teaching an educational class, like the family night. I also like to open and create space in the groups for people to challenge my assumptions, indeed any assumptions of the 'treatment' that they are experiencing. In a space where all ideas are welcome, people can pick and choose what fits best for them. What is not welcome is/are shaming, blaming, coercion and other harmful practices.

Best regards,

Wendy

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TO: EVERYBODY  
DATE: THURSDAY, 10TH JUNE  
SUBJECT: DECONSTRUCTING ADDICT IDENTITY

Hey there!

The list is hopping tonight ... let's get this thing fired up!



I better cool it with the (exclamation points!!!)  
somebody stop me ... losing control ... can't stop  
pushing exclamation points ... must keep self-will in  
check ... help me!!!!!!!!!!!!

Yeah ... anyway ... it's good to hear from  
everybody.

Anyone else out there want to play ball?

Smiles,

Anthony

---

TO: AMANDA & CO.  
DATE: FRIDAY, 11TH JUNE  
SUBJECT: DECONSTRUCTING ADDICT IDENTITY

Dear Amanda and others,

Here is a late response to Amanda's question.  
Amanda wrote about whether or not to take up an  
identity description as 'alcoholic'...

*Spending time trying to label myself 'correctly'  
doesn't have much to do with what I do, think, feel  
everyday regarding alcohol and drinking and other  
things in my life.*

Maybe your words above point to a way  
forward? When we ask questions that are not about  
'who we are' but instead about what one does,  
thinks, feels and believes regarding alcohol, the  
conversations have many possibilities! Related  
questions might include: Can I consistently control  
drinking/using drugs in predictable ways? If so, how  
much energy does it take to attempt control? How  
hard or easy is it? Or, what is the history of my  
efforts to control or stop the drinking? What  
meaning or meanings do I make of the history of  
efforts to control drinking? What does this history  
tell me about future drinking? Should I continue? In  
what possible directions do I want to go now with  
this knowledge?

Anthony had some pieces of knowledge and  
perspective on the effects of the identity of alcoholic  
or addict, and the complex conclusions related to  
that. I've excerpted one piece from his post:

Anthony wrote:

*It helps me remember that I am joined with*

*others (at AA/NA) in the process of re-claiming our  
lives from substance use. It also reminds me that I  
can expect the same result every time that I put a  
substance into my body, because there is a fixed  
relation of dominance, which gives substances the  
upper hand – when I put any substance in my body.*

From the perspective of therapist working along  
side of people re-claiming their lives from substance  
use, I have come to believe that the knowledge that  
Anthony describes above – that substances always  
get the upper hand – is knowledge that does not  
usually come just by chance (although for some  
it might appear to be a sudden realisation). The  
process of how people come to this knowledge  
about themselves and their relation to substances is  
rich territory for inquiry. This piece of knowledge  
usually comes through experience and a reflection  
upon personal history, and the meaning one makes  
of that history – like some of the questions I posed  
above.

I am enjoying your thought-provoking questions!

Much peace,

Wendy

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TO: EVERYBODY  
DATE: SATURDAY, 12TH JUNE  
SUBJECT: DECONSTRUCTING ADDICT IDENTITY

Hi Everybody,

The entire time I was reading Wendy's most  
recent post I kept thinking ... it's on the money!  
Pardon the applause!

The reason that this was so meaningful to me,  
is that I believe it is super important for us to come  
up with a map to assist persons to evaluate their  
substance use, independent of pathology, in relation  
to the concern of the person seeking assistance, and  
without expecting an identity conclusion like  
'alcoholic' to tell the whole story of a person's use  
for them. (See box 'Inviting critical reflection on  
substance use' ... p.60.)

This in no way infers that it is important to sway  
others away from seeing their use as a disease or

identifying as an addict if this is helpful to them. In fact, it could be very dangerous for some persons to change the terms or meaning of this without a lot of support.

For me, I have never viewed myself as having a disease, and when I identify as either an addict or alcoholic, it simply means that I am a member of the group that I am attending (AA or NA) and that I belong there.

It is my relationship to substances that is fixed – I can't control my use (the way that I would like to) or the effects of my use once I start. I have evaluated this and I am certain that all use is problematic for me.

I prefer an 'experience-near definition of the problem' because it is in my own terms, and it is more difficult to let myself off the hook when reflecting on whether I can use or not. It is easy for some to dismiss a category like alcoholic because it is not personalised; you either are or you aren't.

Better go now.

Peace,

Anthony

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TO: EVERYBODY  
DATE: WEDNESDAY, 31ST MARCH  
SUBJECT: DECONSTRUCTING ADDICT IDENTITY

What I have experienced as a woman who once had a problem with the over-consumption of substances, and as someone who has worked in the substance abuse field, is that there are some people who have bought into the idea that their problem with substances totally defines who they are.

I have heard people identify all their actions, thoughts, relationships, likes and dislikes as being connected to their 'addictive personality', 'alcoholism', or 'addiction'. I believe that if I saw myself as an alcoholic, addict, cross-addicted, etc., this would have put more obstacles in my way. The obstacles would have made it more difficult to move my life in the direction where I am today.

One of the main reasons I drank in the first place was because I felt worthless. I saw myself as a failure, powerless and incapable. This idea of me led to me over-consuming substances. It would not have helped me to continue to see myself as flawed.

Even something as simple as the word 'recovering' has the ability to interfere with a person's life. Having said that, there was a time when I was referring to myself as recovering. I found that with that word people knew what I was talking about and very seldom asked for me to clarify any further. I did not have the language to describe my experience other than through the popular words that are used for these issues.

When I first started dating my current husband almost eight years ago, he asked me: 'What are you recovering from? What do you mean?' I told him I was recovering from drinking and doing drugs. I do not exactly remember our whole conversation, but I do remember a sense of freedom as we talked about exactly what these words meant. I remember thinking: 'Yeah, what am I recovering from?' I was not seeing a doctor or therapist for my over-consumption. I was not on medication for it. I had not used for many years. I had no hangovers, blackouts or anything physical going on as a result of my usage.

Through this conversation, I felt like I let go of something that was constricting me to some extent even though I had always felt like I did not buy into any of the dominant beliefs regarding substance use.

I would really love to hear more thoughts about all of this.

Thank you,

Trina Crowe



## **INVITING CRITICAL REFLECTION OF SUBSTANCE USE BY ANTHONY C.**

When a person consults a therapist in relation to their substance use, finding ways to invite a critical reflection of this substance use can be a valuable starting point. This short piece offers some suggestions as to ways of doing this.

### **THE CONTEXT THAT BRINGS PEOPLE TO SEEK ASSISTANCE**

There are many different reasons that persons consult therapists, AA members, and others in regard to substance use. I'll just name a few of the reasons that come to mind.

- Persons are having difficulty in different areas of life, and the use of substances is intertwined in this story.
- The person's use of substances is seriously problematic, but the person doesn't bring it up and has no idea that the use of substances is the source of most of the trouble.
- The person is having other difficulties in life that makes substance use look like the major problem when it isn't.
- The person's family/partner is insisting that the person get help.
- The person has decided that his/her use cannot be controlled/moderated and they would like to stop.
- The person cannot control the use of many different substances and therefore would like to enter a lifestyle of total abstinence from all substances.
- The courts are forcing this person to receive some sort of treatment. Or the person would like to get treatment on his/her own in order to receive clemency in an upcoming legal context.
- The person knows that the present amount of use is problematic and would like to cut back and moderate.

- The person is using heroin, and would like to become abstinent from this substance but would like to be able to drink alcohol.
- The person has been prescribed opiate pain medication for a major injury and can't seem to stop – and still has some pain.

As there are so many different reasons for people to seek help, it is important to understand the specific concern(s) of the person seeking assistance. Also, whose concern is it? Is it the concern of the person? Is it somebody else's concern? Is it a shared concern between the person and someone else? This is a key starting point in consultations. I'll now describe a number of ways of inviting a critical reflection of substance use.

### **ELICITING THE PERSON'S CONCERNS/HOPES:**

What are you hoping to achieve by having this conversation? Are you hoping to cut down and/or reduce harm? Are you trying to quit? Are you trying to get someone off your back and use in a way that is more private? Are you waiting to make a decision based on the outcome of this conversation? Have you attempted to achieve any of these things on your own? If so, what was it like and what happened?

While for many people a critical reflection of substance use will not be their most pressing concern, for some, the desire to 'get right down to it' is of the utmost importance. If this is the case, an inquiry into any positive effects of substance use can take place first.

### **POSITIVE EFFECTS QUESTIONS:**

What does the substance(s) provide you with that you enjoy or value?

In mapping any positive effects of substance use it is relevant to check out at least three different domains of lived experience: One's relationship to substances when alone; one's relationship to substances while with friends, family, significant others, i.e., social relationships; and one's relationship to substances in the community. This might include school, workplace, tennis club, neighbourhood, pub, volunteer work, yoga class, etc.

## **DE-CENTERED AND NON-INTERROGATIVE QUESTIONS ABOUT STYLE(S) OF USE:**

How much do you ingest when you use substances and how often do you use them? Has this changed over time? Do you use more than you did in the past, or less than you did in the past, or the same? Is there a particular time when you are apt to use more and is there a time when you are apt to use less or is it always the same? What contributes to your desire to use? Describe the different occasions for using including when you are by yourself, as well as in social or work situations.

## **BEING OPEN TO DISCREPANCIES:**

It will be important to note any discrepancies between what the person is hoping that the substance(s) will do, or used to do but isn't doing anymore, and what the substance(s) is/are doing in the current moment. This is not a way to challenge the person into realising that their use is problematic, rather it is a precise way to evaluate what is happening. Often there is a large gap between people's intentions and what is happening, and in other instances there is an achievement of the proposed intention – but the cost of this in terms of negative effects is significant.

## **CLARIFYING WHAT CANNOT BE KNOWN:**

It may be important to clarify that you (the therapist) are not in a position to know if what they are hoping for can be achieved, that you can't know in advance if a person can gain control of his/her use by means of self-regulation, or if the only means to reclaim one's life from substance use will require abstinence. Some people prefer a 'researching process' in order to figure this out, while others – after rigorous speculation – make a decision to stop using after a few therapeutic conversations.

## **PROBLEMATISING SUBSTANCE USE:**

What aspects of substance use have always been or recently have become problematic? How is substance use causing trouble in your life right now? What is the history of this trouble?

## **DISCERNMENT QUESTIONS, TO RICHLY DESCRIBE SKILLS OF DISCERNMENT:**

- How were you able to decipher this as problematic, especially since you mentioned that you had such a good time? What were the main indicators that this is the case? Are there other instances where you had a good overall experience but something about the experience bothered you or didn't feel right?
- Do you use more than you set out to? Always, never, or sometimes?
- Can you name an occasion, a period of time, or a style of use that is without question problematic for you, even if this scenario involved good aspects that went along with the bad?
- What measures or techniques have you employed to keep yourself at a level of use that works for you? When was this helpful and when was it maybe not so helpful?
- Have you ever said to yourself, 'If \_\_\_\_\_ happens I will get some help'? Has this happened, and, if so, what did you do? Do you have a bottom-line of when you would determine that things had gotten so bad that you definitely would have to make some drastic changes to your lifestyle?
- Have you ever made compromises to this bottom-line, such as, 'Yeah, that happened, but let's wait and see if it happens again'? Or, 'It happened but it wasn't too bad, so I'm not worried about it anymore'? Have you made compromises in general on behalf of your use? If so, what are they? What do you do or tell yourself in order to maintain these compromises?
- What is being compromised that is important to you? What is the compromise standing in the way of?
- Do you ever bargain with yourself by saying that 'It is okay to do \_\_\_\_\_ as long as I do \_\_\_\_\_'? What are these bargains, what

are the histories of these bargains, and have they produced what you were hoping for?

- Have you put off making changes to a substance use lifestyle despite having knowledge that something was problematic? What got in the way of you making these changes?
- Have you begun to allow some things about your use to just happen – that at one time would have been upsetting to you or had you up in arms? For instance, have you ever said to yourself, ‘I’d never do that’ only to eventually do just that and then to brush it off by thinking ‘Oh well, I guess it goes with the territory’?

### **PROVIDING A REFLECTIVE SURFACE IN ORDER TO EVALUATE THE EFFECTS OF SUBSTANCE USE:**

Many persons try to evaluate their consumption of substances in terms of the degree of ‘control’ they feel they have in relation to it. This, however, can be complicated. For instance, some people can control how often they consume, and how much they consume once they start, but have little control over the negative effects that happen to coincide with their use. For others, they stopped trying to control their use and therefore consume massive quantities per day, but despite this, have learned to reduce many of the negative effects and so are unsure what to do next. For either of these persons, a specific evaluation of the effects of substance use, to the particular concern of the individual, is what is important. To provide a reflecting surface for this to take place is crucial.

Are you okay with the present amount of substances that you consume? If so, why? If not, why not? Can you stop using when you want to, or does the substance dictate when you stop? Does one drink or hit lead to an all night affair, a three day bender, a two month binge or perhaps a two year stint? Is this usually planned or not? (These are not ‘yes’ or ‘no’ questions, rather they are ‘always’, ‘never’ and ‘sometimes’ questions.) What are some of the negative effects of substance use in your life? This includes during or after use.

### **A RICH MAPPING OF THE EFFECTS OF EXCESSIVE CONSUMPTION:**

The following questions can then be offered to the person concerned. It can be explained that these questions have been generated from the experiences of others. The areas of life listed below are those which others have described as being affected by the excessive consumptions of substances.

- Does substance use affect your mood or temper in a bad way?
- Does it make you anxious, depressed or remorseful?
- Does it make it easier or more difficult to complete daily tasks that are important to you?
- How does it affect your friendships, pets, family, significant others?
- How does it affect your job, livelihood, school, or projects you are involved in?
- Has it created any legal consequences?
- Does it affect your health or put you or someone else in jeopardy of bodily harm?
- How does it affect your financial situation?
- How might it affect your future?
- How does it affect your hopes, dreams and aspirations?
- What are the effects on your sex life?
- Is your use of substance(s) draining on you? If so, what is it depleting of?
- Are you able to show up for things, and to be present for others, and available in ways that work for you?
- Does the use of substance(s) put you at risk or in danger?

This short piece has been written to assist therapists to invite those consulting them into a critical reflection of substance use. Inviting a critical reflection of this kind can be an important starting point in developing a collaborative partnership to assist the person to reclaim their lives from excessive consumption.

## EXPLORING MULTIPLE MEANINGS

TO: AMANDA & CO.  
DATE: TUESDAY, 6TH APRIL  
SUBJECT: REINCORPORATING ASPECTS OF THE  
OLD LIFE INTO THE NEW

Hello,

I guess when I think about deconstructing addiction, I think that looking at an addiction does not have to be a process of only looking at something bad and horrible. I know for me, in many respects, addiction saved my life. I have spent time explaining to my therapist how it was so (however incredulous).

Yes, in many ways I am still amazed that I went down that road and I am sure that I learned some things there that I did not learn before or since. That is not to say I would like to return there or even that I would recommend that someone follow my footsteps, but given my particular life experiences, it seems to have made sense.

Also, I am not ashamed of that time of my life but I often come up against the stigma and discrimination that surrounds addiction in the society that I live in. I see people that I work with struggling to make sense of those parts of their lives that they loved (for many reasons other than being high/addicted) in a context that says that the only way to change is to claim that it was all bad and that they were bad people when they were there. Isn't it possible that deconstructing addiction could mean seeing its purpose/meaning in a new way? Finding ways to build on that while changing the way that you achieve the purpose?

I have felt that the period of my life when I was addicted was a spiritual cleansing of sorts. I felt that I had put myself through the 'fire' and burned away pain and suffering that I did not know how to handle otherwise.

In the end, I felt that I had acted in emotional honesty with courage. It took courage to go against everything that I had expected to become, all my values, my family and loved ones and veer off into this hell-like experience.

It was my strongest act of defiance, telling the world that I reject the norm. I reject life if it must be the way that I had experienced so far. When the time was right, I decided that it was time to come

back to what I had rejected and to stop living my life in reaction.

I am just as happy that I made that decision but still struggle with these notions about addiction. I still miss so much about that part of my life (I have been totally abstinent for ten years), none of which is the drugs. I miss the connectedness that I shared with the others in that life. I miss the bold stand against anything or anyone that thinks that they can oppress me with their ideas of what is good and right. Of course, I've realised that in the end my addiction was oppressing me and ultimately that was how I changed my life.

I look forward to learning more about how to reincorporate the parts of that life with this life and I wonder if it is possible. Can there be a bridge between these worlds?

I hope I didn't ramble too much. Thank you. I hope this makes sense to someone.

Brenda Shebanek

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TO: BRENDA  
DATE: WEDNESDAY, 7TH APRIL  
SUBJECT: RE: REINCORPORATING ASPECTS OF THE  
OLD LIFE INTO THE NEW

Hi Bren,

I enjoyed your post. I imagine that there may be ways to bridge the two worlds that you described ... the connectedness, the bold stands ... perhaps there are communities as yet undiscovered or created that might encourage the development of those rich experiences that you miss?

I've heard many women express a desire to reclaim a part of their lives that drugs and alcohol opened doors to initially, but then shut down. Some folks I know, down the road, got back in touch with those identities through art, music, political activity, writing poetry or prose.

Your post definitely made sense to me.

Wendy

TO: EVERYONE  
DATE: TUESDAY, 6TH APRIL  
SUBJECT: RE: REINCORPORATING ASPECTS OF THE  
OLD LIFE INTO THE NEW

Hi Everyone,

I just wanted to join this conversation, because your words have provoked a lot of thoughts for me. I think it is extremely important to explore the purposes, such as, what the substance use provided for the person that is important to them. I wouldn't recommend taking anyone on a romantic trip down memory lane, and in my work I want to be cautious about this sort of thing, but I feel strongly about honouring the person's experience in the way that has already been mentioned. There is so much to learn from a person about their hopes and dreams, and what they stand for in life, by talking about their relationship to a particular substance. And when I hear from persons (in their own words) their experience of the problem, I can't help but think of the cultural and social factors at play, that create a certain climate that is fertile and inciting of excessive consumption.

Just some thoughts,

Anthony

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TO: EVERYONE  
DATE: WEDNESDAY, 7TH APRIL  
SUBJECT: DECONSTRUCTING DENIAL AND ENABLING  
DISCERNMENT

Hey,

I still have some questions about 'DENIAL' as it is so fondly referred to in most of the treatment world out here ...

Ta ta for now,

Lisa Stevens

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TO: EVERYONE  
DATE: THURSDAY, 8TH APRIL  
SUBJECT: RE: DECONSTRUCTING DENIAL AND  
ENABLING DISCERNMENT

Regarding denial: I always wonder when I hear this term what kind of 'expert knowledge' is being imposed, and what are the effects of this type of therapeutic posture? Rather than assuming that a person is in denial, it might be helpful to check in and see if maybe the person does see aspects of their use as problematic, but for whatever reason, is not buying into the theory of disease. If one feels threatened and coerced, or that something is going to be taken away from them, it would be easy to hold on to ideas that could potentially be problematic.

This is why I am so interested in helping persons to develop skills in the area of discernment in relation to substance use, to help persons take a position on the effects of this substance use, and furthermore, to help them to evaluate their own actions, and what purposes their actions might be serving. If I was working with someone around these issues, I would consider entering into a conversation with them about how they were able to discern, up until this point, that the current intake amount and/or frequency of use, is or is not okay with him/her. Building upon this discernment is really important, and figuring out what might make future discernments difficult would also be important. Questions could include: 'Is this a life-preserving action, or a life-threatening action?' and if it is life-threatening, 'What are you hoping to gain from taking a risk that could be dangerous to your life?'

Another piece to consider is to set up a double transparency or a two-way discernment between therapist and consultant, so that you can check in with each other about how it is all going, and can work out in advance how each of you would determine if the person was in danger or if things are okay. People consulting therapists around substance use often have many reasons for not fully disclosing what is going on in terms of the amount of and the frequency of their use, and because of this it has to be made clear that a full disclosure will not lead to negative consequences for the person. The reason that a process of double discernment is so important is that it is difficult to assist someone when the story of use gets 'prettied-up' or things get



selected out to throw the therapist off. Let's face it, acts of deception are common practice in this field.

One way to approach this is to have the therapist – when asking questions about the effects of use – inquire as to whether the problem would be cunning in a particular way as to have the person misleading others, including one's therapist. How might this show up? How might I know if you were saying one thing and doing another? And how should I respond if this was the case? Conversations about discernment also involve unmasking various problem tactics that the person wasn't initially aware of. It might make sense when the person has taken a position against the problem to start asking questions about what might happen if the substance voice calling or craving starts to cloud one's discerning judgment – how can we prepare for that possibility? How might this affect what gets talked about in therapy?

In this area, people's actions can be deadly so you can't be too careful, and at the same time you don't want to impose, fish for problems, probe or be invasive.

I am only touching on part of the scope of denial (anyone else want to take a crack at it?) I'm going to bed.

Smiles,

Anthony

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TO: ANTHONY  
DATE: THURSDAY, 8TH APRIL  
SUBJECT: RE: DECONSTRUCTING DENIAL AND  
ENABLING DISCERNMENT

Hi Anthony,

I liked what you wrote on 'denial'.

You said:

*If one feels threatened and coerced, or that something is going to be taken away from them, it would be easy to hold on to ideas that could potentially be problematic.*

Yes! My sense about many of the people I work with in treatment is a heightened awareness of and sensitivity to the presence of coercion or threat. I do not want my role as a conversational partner (therapist) to be a person who is going to take something away from people. If I find myself the

recipient of 'denial' responses in a conversation, I wonder about the way I'm going about the conversation. Am I perceived as one who is taking something away? One who is threatening to take something away? If so, I need to shift my position, and ask different questions.

You also wrote about helping persons to develop skills in the area of discernment in relation to substance use. This is what I have found works best, as well. This position you mention above – of helping people take a position – is different from being someone who is convincing another person to stop doing something, or is taking something away. It takes the persuasion and coercion out of the relationship. Sometimes, I do get tempted to persuade. When I do, I find that I end up doing a lot of the talking and the person I'm talking with loses interest.

Much peace,

Wendy

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TO: EVERYONE  
DATE: WEDNESDAY, 7TH APRIL  
SUBJECT: RE: DECONSTRUCTING DENIAL AND  
ENABLING DISCERNMENT

On the topic of denial, I once had a series of conversations with a sixteen-year-old girl who had been described as someone only interested in drugs, sex, and running away. I had been told that she wouldn't talk to me and that she was 'in denial' about her problem.

In our conversations, she talked about what she was able to do when she was high. She told me that she was able to talk to her friends about how much they meant to her, about caring and love. She didn't know how to do this when she was sober. For her, 'denial' was connected to her not wanting to give up on her friends, their relationships, and their desire to relate to each other. She wasn't any happier about the fact that drugs had become the vehicle to this place than I was.

I'm pretty sure that if I had tried to convince her that drugs were, in fact, the problem we would have had a conversation that could have positioned her in a place of 'denial'. Me too, I guess. I would have been denying that there could have been anything



more that I needed to know about her other than that she was using drugs and doing things that scared me and her family.

Getting to a place where we could start to talk

about her interest in caring and love meant we could approach her drug use together from a completely different place.

Joel

## COMPETING KNOWLEDGE CLAIMS

*By Anthony C.*

The following exercise has been designed to give to people who are changing to a lifestyle of abstinence having lived a life characterised by excessive consumption of substances. This exercise consists of making two columns or drawing a line down the middle of a page. On the left side the person is invited to write down 'Claims for abstinence'. On the right side of the page they are invited to write the counter-claims, 'Claims against abstinence'. It is my belief that persons routinely experience these competing knowledge claims, and it is helpful to make both sets of claims visible to people for various reasons. Firstly, the claims toward sobriety are a strong reminder of one's statement of position toward a life free of substances. Secondly, the

counter-claims need to be made visible, because these are the claims that will be calling out to people, telling them why it is okay to change their position toward substances. The more visible these claims are made in advance, the easier it is to ignore them in times of crisis and to hold a commitment to abstinence.

It then becomes possible in future conversations to keep track of the influence of these competing claims, the conditions that contribute to some claims increasing/decreasing in credibility, and to assist the person concerned to predict this and prepare for this. The person concerned can be invited to nominate which 'claims against sobriety' are likely to be most influential and when, and then preparations can be made ahead of time to respond to these circumstances.

A person's chart might look something like this:

### Claims for Sobriety: Reasons for my commitment to abstinence

Every time I get high I end up homeless or in jail.

I want my life to be better and I'm tired of drugs ruining my life.

I want to be a better parent and a more available father.

And so on ...

This exercise can help to discern and unmask the ideas that can potentially undermine one's journey to sobriety.

The rite of passage metaphor (White 1995) is very relevant for someone moving from using substances to living a life free of substances. Preparing for the journey ahead of time, predicting and preparing for the difficult times that lay ahead will be vital in this process. As with any rite of passage, or migration of

### Claims against Sobriety: Claims that potentially undermine abstinence

If I just drink and don't smoke crack I'll be okay. I'll be more careful this time.

There's no way I can have a good time without getting a little wasted.

I am so miserable living a sober life that I would rather be dead than living this way.

And so on ...

identity, there will be a betwixt or between phase. This is when life will seem so confusing that it will seem better to return to a known lifestyle rather than continue to persevere with a new way of life which is unfamiliar or painful.

Having a clear view of the competing knowledge claims which the person will be journeying through can make a significant difference to the process.

TO: EVERYONE  
DATE: WEDNESDAY, 29TH SEPTEMBER  
SUBJECT: DECONSTRUCTING 'RELAPSE'

Greetings!

Someone mentioned earlier that deconstructing the term 'relapse' is an important area of interest for them. I would say that considerations of the effects of language and its implications on people's lives is an important topic to many of us on this e-list!

The term 'relapse' is 'global' and 'experience-distant' and is fraught with many difficulties. I am not at all comfortable with the common usage of the word 'relapse' which implies a step back into a disease, or an activation of a dormant disease that is part of a person's nature. The word is also synonymous with failure and 'back to square one', which can have devastating effects on people. Furthermore, the deficit-centered discourse of 'relapse' fosters all sorts of negative identity conclusions, and potential alienation from others in the culture of 'recovery'.

It's always helpful to have other options available to us and words that don't have the same implications such as 'U-turn' or 'turning back'. The same goes for the term 'addiction', which can be substituted by the alternative umbrella expression – 'excessive consumption'. Some people have addiction and excessive consumption on a continuum, where addiction is a more extreme version of excessive consumption. That is not at all how I use it; that would be more of a normalising version. According to that model, excessive consumption is problematic but somewhat acceptable or 'normal', and addiction is considered to be pathological and therefore 'abnormal'.

How one evaluates a problem in relation to substance use is directly linked to how the problem is conceptualised and language. If 'addiction' is a disease, then you either have it or you don't, and it's part of an internal state of being that one diagnoses. Excessive consumption on the other hand, refers to the *activity* which is potentially problematic, and this way of wording it enables the person to see themselves in relation to the problematic activity, which is one way of beginning to externalise the conversation about the problem and shifting away from pathologising practices. It also enables persons to make an 'experience-near'

evaluation and description of the problem. Excessive consumption refers to any level or frequency of use that the person seeking consultation is concerned about. I stay away from using terms like over-consumption, as this can often imply a norm or a limit and a measure of correct use. However, I am careful to not impose my language preferences, and if persons wish to use terms like 'addiction' or 'over consumption', etc., ... I simply invite them into an externalising conversation.

Anyway, I thought I would throw this out there to try to stimulate some conversations.

Smiles,

Anthony

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TO: EVERYONE  
DATE: FRIDAY, 1ST OCTOBER  
SUBJECT: RE: DECONSTRUCTING 'RELAPSE'

Hi Everyone,

In the therapy conversations I am a part of, as an alternative to the term 'relapse' we talk about the problem making a comeback. It's been my experience that when problems make a comeback they bring with them lots of invitations. For example, they might invite us to think about ourselves as failures. But, these sorts of invitations can be declined. That's why I like the idea so much. My cousin talked to me about 'gold embossed' invitations she receives about parenting. These were mostly invitations to think she was a bad parent. Upon reflection, she decided to decline most of them. Some, though, reminded her about things she thought were important about parenting and that she wanted to spend more time attending to in her relationship with her son.

In this way, the comeback of a problem doesn't have to be polarised into good/bad terms and can be explored more richly.

Joel Glenn Wixson

TO: EVERYBODY  
DATE: SATURDAY, 2ND OCTOBER  
SUBJECT: RE: DECONSTRUCTING 'RELAPSE'

Hi Everybody,

I just wanted to make a few distinctions here in relation to what I said earlier about alternative metaphors to 'relapse'. The 'U-turn' and 'turning back' metaphors I mentioned are in relation to rites of passage and the migration of identity map (White 1995). So the U-turn relates to temporarily stepping back into a territory of identity that they are journeying away from. This has a far different meaning than say ... 'he's turning back to the bottle again'.

Rather than thinking someone has 'relapsed' (i.e., gone back to 'square one'), instead all the hard-won knowledge that was gained from previous experiences of separating from substances can be acknowledged and drawn upon. What was it that assisted last time in separating from substances? What were the steps that were required, the skills, the knowledge? How can these be re-engaged with now? The migration of identity is still underway, it's just that this is a rough piece of territory that is being traversed. And learnings from the past may be vital in the next part of the journey.

The notion of 'comeback' also seems a very useful one. And it works both ways. When a problem has made a comeback, there is then the opportunity for the person to respond ... to plan, with others, so they can stage a comeback of their own!

Smiles,

Anthony

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TO: EVERYBODY  
DATE: MONDAY, 6TH SEPTEMBER  
SUBJECT: CELEBRATIONS

Brenda has invited you to her 'Life is Good Party'.

I know that most of you won't be able to attend but come if you can. I am going to try to create some sort of electronic record as this will truly be a joyful practice of living without substances. Hope life is good for everyone out there!

Click below for more information about the event and also to RSVP. *(Included here was a link to a website)*

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TO: FRIENDS  
DATE: WEDNESDAY, 7TH APRIL  
SUBJECT: ANNIVERSARY

Hi Friends,

I just wanted to announce that I will be celebrating two years 'sober' tomorrow, on April 8th 2004 ... giddy-up!

Smiles,

Anthony

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## A VIRTUAL INTERVIEW AND OUTSIDER-WITNESS RESPONSES

Various members of the Deconstructing Addiction League wished to use the e-list as a forum to practise skills in narrative-style interviewing. It was decided that Chana Rachel Frumin would interview Anthony C (via email) and other e-list members were invited to act as outsider-witnesses to this 'conversation'. Significant care was taken with this process. Detailed information about outsider-witness responses were distributed to the list members and all outsider-witness responses were sent to one member of the league to look over before they were posted to the entire list. This careful process ensured a re-grading and quite inspiring virtual definitional ceremony.

A lot of thought also went into the process of the actual interview. Chana Rachel sent through her questions in advance in four parts. Anthony would respond to the first part, and then Chana Rachel would send through the next set of questions and so on.

We have included here extracts of this interview and virtual definitional ceremony.

### PART ONE

Dear list members,

Here is the email interview conducted by Chana Rachel and Anthony.

If you like, you are all welcome to act as outsider-witnesses. If you wish to have conversations amongst yourselves, this can be done privately and is encouraged. We believe this makeshift form of definitional ceremony has many possibilities, and we are excited to see how it works. We will write up a brief guide or preamble for the outsider-witness practices and send this out to you all before we post the outsider-witness responses ...

*You've told me that you would like to speak about 'rich social relationships'. What are rich social relationships?*

Rich social relationships (for me) are the kind of relationships where everything comes alive! There is a spark of connection which is present between persons and it almost seems like anything is possible. It has to do with how we play together

(with each other) while using imagination and creativity. The spirit of adventure is often present, and an experimentation of the limits and avenues of joy/pleasure is explored.

Rich social relations also take place within networks or communities of people, where there is a certain continuity of experience, and a ritualised aspect to certain events that bring persons together.

Rich social relations also has to do with the way in which we care for each other, comfort one another, make people feel safe, share what is in our hearts. It has to do with creating a context for these relations to take place and sustaining them. It involves practices of hospitality, a sense of connection to others and belonging. It is about creating a space for expression and warmth.

*Can you tell me a story about such a relationship?*

When I was a very young person, my family would spend the month of August at the beach in Wainscott, New York. This included my parents, grandparents, my great aunt, my sister and nanny – all under one roof. There were other families with the same type of arrangements, and people knew each other for a number of generations.

Each Monday night we had a beach picnic that included all the members of this community. We would get together and cook on the beach, roast marshmallows on the fire, play games, light off fireworks, (hide underneath the bath house and scare people), chase frogs, learn to kiss, and much more.

*What impact did this relationship have on you?*

It gave me a sense of belonging, a history, a frame of reference for relating to people, wonderful memories, and a strong desire to be close to people and to have ongoing, tangible interactions and to be part of a community. It also gave me some roots. I am speaking about the positive effects. Some other effects that are difficult to describe as either positive or negative (let's just call them constitutive for now) include longing for the closeness to others and the desire for rather intense social interactions.

Also, an awareness of the impoverishment of social relations in the dominant culture, which I would have to come to terms with, and would end

up adapting to – sometimes sophisticatedly, but at other times in a rather dangerous manner.

*Is this impact related to this new Deconstructing Addiction League?*

Yes ... it is very much related to this project. It was at this time – as a young person – that I was able to discern what rich social relations were. As painful as it was to realise how these relations were so often absent from my life, I realised and held on to a hope that someday it would be possible to have the tangibility of them showing up in my life on a continual basis. I have to admit that I am still holding on to that hope because these relations are not so often present in my life and this is really the guiding hope that informs my participation in the League. Once the problem story in relation to addiction has been revised, in order to keep the problem story at bay, the generation of rich social relations is an imperative to sustain my life. As the consumption of substances appears to be the most readily available antidote for impoverished social relations, and the primary agent of hospitality, I believe it will be a challenge to create some new practices and ways for persons to relate to each other without them. In the future, I believe this new construction of hospitality and relating to one another will be much more rewarding than what is currently available.

TO: RACHEL  
DATE: MONDAY, 12TH APRIL  
SUBJECT: RIPPLES

Dear Rachel,

I have a wonderful follow up story to the first part of the interview. After writing about the story that takes place at the beach, I went to the movies tonight and was blown away because the exact same beach from my childhood – that I described for you earlier – was a location in the movie. I couldn't believe it ... the exact same beach! Even one of the houses (that they filmed inside of) belonged to one of my friends – he was my neighbor. It is the new Jim Carey movie and it's titled: *Eternal sunshine of the spotless mind*.

These kinds of occurrences happen to me rather frequently, and they make me glow inside, because I know that there is some kind of magic out there.

Anyway, I thought you should know about the rippling effects of our conversation. We must have hit on something!

Peace,

Ant

## PART TWO

*When rich relationships are not present, what does EMPTY talk you into about your life and about people?*

When social relationships are not present or are impoverished, emptiness and isolation can often get the better of me.

In terms of what isolation and emptiness gets me to think about myself, it gets me thinking that I am totally alone, that nobody really cares about me, it has me doubting myself and my abilities. It also gets me to believe that my hopes and dreams are too lofty and that I will never be happy or do anything meaningful.

*What does the emptiness get you thinking?*

It gets me to think that life sucks, that it is some big joke and that nobody is really happy. It says that life is often not worth living with all the suffering and pain out there, and the terrible way that people disrespect each other all the time. Also that life is torturous and wicked, and on a good day it is boring and that I am better off dead.

*What does the emptiness say about other people?*

Isolation/emptiness has a lot of nasty things to say about people – for instance – that you can't really count on people for anything. They will always let you down. They have no idea how to comfort one another or to love. They are so caught up in games of power, and they are so full of shit. Nice people

are weak and boring, and assholes are assholes. There are very few people worth dealing with.

What these answers have in common, is that they assume that the worst is the only reality, and as a result, alternative possibilities get shut down due to the inevitable paralysis (heaviness) and crabbiness.

*What voice does emptiness use?*

Emptiness uses the voice of a sad little boy who has been left alone crying for a very long time. Emptiness is a voice that I honor, because it is crying out for love, and telling me that he is sad. It is the type of voice that no one listens to, who deserves to be heard.

*Is this voice a negative influence in your life?*

I don't really experience this voice as negative, but emptiness is a sadness, and I don't want myself or anyone else I care about to be sad.

TO: CHANA RACHEL  
DATE: WEDNESDAY, 14TH APRIL  
SUBJECT: TIME OUT!

Chana Rachel, I understand why you want to go in this direction, but I don't have the support around me right now to have this type of conversation. Also, with the time lag of e-mail, I might be left in a very uncomfortable place. The voice of emptiness is eased with comforting, and this medium doesn't really provide that because we are not face to face and with enough time to get me to a comfortable place. Also, it is isolation that needs to be revised more so than emptiness, and crabby often causes isolation.

I hope this is okay. I have to take care of myself here. Maybe we could talk more about preferred identity?

Peace,

Anthony

TO: ANTHONY  
DATE: WEDNESDAY, 14TH APRIL  
SUBJECT: RE: TIME OUT!

Dear Anthony,

I will ask permission from now on with my questions. Thanks for the reminder! How about this for an alternative question: What identity gets insulted or left out by emptiness? Or, when emptiness loses what wins? Are these questions that will explore a preferred direction?

Chana Rachel

PS. I'm very committed to staying in touch during this interview. I apologise for lapsing in asking permission.

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TO: CHANA RACHEL  
DATE: WEDNESDAY, 14TH APRIL  
SUBJECT: RE: TIME OUT!

Dear Rachel,

Thanks for your understanding and commitment to stay in touch during the process. To clarify a bit, emptiness was a word that you chose, but I figured I would give it a go at first, as I saw it was relevant to discuss here. Further, the image I have of emptiness is of a sweet little boy crying, so when he loses, nobody wins. So, no identity gets insulted either.

When I mentioned preferred identity, I was thinking about exploring intentional states and values, hopes, dreams, purposes, commitments, principles, etc. ...

If you are not clear, we can have more discussion about process ... okay.

Peace,

Anthony



## PART THREE

*Please tell me more about some of the values that inform your commitment to having rich social relationships ...*

The value that comes to mind is connection.

*Can you tell me a story about this value?*

At the beginning of the year, I was experiencing a significant amount of isolation and melancholy. I knew that if something didn't change, I was headed for trouble. It was at this time that I reached out to some friends at the Dulwich Centre who responded in the most rapid and caring way I have ever experienced. Within a few hours I received phone calls from overseas, and e-mails from all over the world from friends of mine who comforted me. The feeling of love and connection was so strong, that it blew melancholy right out of the water. A few days later when melancholy began to make an appearance, I put an image in my head of the kind words shared in some of the e-mails. Again the feeling subsided, but something more significant happened. I received warmth and a tingling throughout my body that can only be described as ecstasy. For a short while, as the kindness was uploading into my body and kicking holes through the walls that had prevented me from receiving love and acknowledgement, I found myself taking in all of the love and connection from these beautiful friends.

Eventually I made a concerted effort to invite connection in my local community, which has proven to be invaluable, and separately, people are crawling out of the woodwork, people from my distant past who have found my name, address and number online. The whole thing is starting to snowball and I'm loving it!

*Is this in some way linked to dreams you have for your life?*

The dream of life that emerges from this story is that it is possible to create loving and caring networks of support in our local communities. I'm sure some persons already have this support, but for those who don't, wouldn't it be beautiful to develop a context for these relations to happen

more fully – in our own communities? What if the Deconstructing Addiction League group was able to support its members in this capacity, by employing a community response to the melancholy of its members? (Wouldn't this be terrific?!) I think so. We could have melancholy teams, and so much more. I can imagine all sorts of other ways of joining with people that bring connection into the mix and fun.

*Can you tell me a story from your life that would help me to understand where these dreams have come from?*

Last year, a group of my friends got together and started a film, literature and music club. The purpose was to turn each other on to different artistic practices by exploring various subcultures. We watched films, read books and shared music and ate food. This inspired me to start writing a novel, one friend started an indie-rock band, and another looked into taking some swing dance classes. We even went to a Japanese *anime* exhibit. Unfortunately, a few of my friends moved away and we discontinued the group. However, we got some ideas about how we would construct the next one. It occurred to us that we were hoping for something a little bit more intense. We decided that next time we would have our club meet on the beach (which is warm year round) and we would play musical instruments, perhaps tell stories or read poetry, and experiment with some improvisational acting. We were hoping to create a loose atmosphere where people were comfortable enough to take risks. Connection makes these types of events and practices possible.

*What are the possibilities for the world and her societies if everyone wanted connection more than anything?*

If connection were to become one of the highest values, and if it were to be practised and exercised regularly, I can imagine much more peaceful relations in the world, a greater context for understanding one another, and a much more rewarding and playful way of interacting with each other in general. Your question evokes an image of a beautiful world, where we can continually create ourselves like works of art – an aesthetics of existence.

*Can you tell me where the Deconstructing Addiction League fits in this picture?*

The League is a big part of this dream, and I have already seen the first steps taking place. An example of this is the story that we circulated months ago from David Newman [see below], who wrote to us about practicing joy. This was the first story, in what will hopefully become a (massive) archive where we

can share and access knowledges in regard to celebration, joy, hospitality and pleasure in life. I have already taken up a new and rather mischievous hobby as the result of David's story. As for community resources that are specifically organised for the purpose of connection, and to provide alternatives to the culture of consumption ... I can't wait to see it!

## **TOWARDS AN ARCHIVE OF PRACTICES OF JOY**

### ***A story from David Newman***

When I read Anthony's words on this e-list that described his interest in 'creating communities that play together, that provide networks of practices that bring joy in one's own community' many thoughts went through my mind. I was thinking of how, at times, I have fallen into a kind of earnest way over the years, a way that dries up joy and fun. I was thinking about what it would be like to elaborate or to have more say about practices of joy or fun. I was thinking of the possibilities that come from being more deliberate in what we do, or how we build our identities, including being deliberate with the ways we have fun or joy or hang out with our friends. And I was thinking of what it would be like to have an archive of practices of joy, what difference such an elaboration and availability of these practices could offer – particularly for those dealing with issues associated with addiction and/or excessive consumption.

Although I wasn't drawn to this issue because of my own experience of addiction, Anthony's words followed me around nonetheless. This was probably because I have found joy drying up at times in my life, but also because of much sadness I have experienced as a result of addiction and excessive drug use affecting loved ones. So these thoughts stayed with me.

I want to share a small story that illustrates where thinking about practices of joy took me to a few weeks back on a warm summer night in Sydney.

There have been many warm nights in Sydney over the last month or so, warm nights that do not provide much refreshment after hot and humid days. Sometimes there can be a cool change at night after a hot day, bringing with it what is often called 'a southerly', but there seem to have been fewer of these breezes this summer.

I live on a street that runs down a hill to the water, where there is a small beach and a large enclosed natural pool. This pool is generally teeming with fish during the day. In fact, one of the fish that lives in this pool has become something of local celebrity – a big, blue, slow swimming grouper. This fish is always up for checking out any action that might be going on.

One night I asked my flat-mate Josh if he was interested in joining me for a night snorkel in this pool. He was. We found the snorkelling gear and one waterproof torch for the two of us, and set off down the road, ready to immerse ourselves in the slightly chilly darkness. It was going to be a relief after such a hot day and warm night. And it was going to be a bit of a thrill because one torch would not really provide all that much light for the two of us.

We got in the water and I let out a small squeal as I jumped in. The water was cool but refreshing. Not long into meandering around in the water we saw a cuttlefish, swimming through the water looking a bit like a pool cleaner. This was fun to see. But very soon after that our hearts skipped a beat. I had just shone my torch on a wobbly shark resting on the bottom of the pool. Although I know that these sharks are mostly harmless and quite docile, it was exciting and a little eerie to see it through the darkness, its beady eyes illuminated by the torchlight. We stayed watching the shark for a while and then made our way slowly back to the shore.

It was such an invigorating swim for Josh and me – the cool water, the sense of not knowing what may get illuminated by the torch light, and the sighting of the shark. There was also the passing of the torch between us so the one without the torch had to follow the pace and beam set by the other. And we had a story to tell back home, especially to another flat-mate whom we knew had a bit of a thing for sharks ...

As we were driving down to the water I realised fleetingly that what had substantially fed my determination to have this little adventure were Anthony's words and the thoughts his words pushed along. I think it was deciding to deliberately and consciously build practices of fun, joy and friendship that made this small event take place.

### **AN INVITATION TO CONTRIBUTE TO THE ARCHIVE:**

When people get together to celebrate and play, without alcohol and other drugs at the centre, they are challenging the culture of consumption and thereby deconstructing addiction. If you would like to contribute to an archive of stories about practices of fun, good times, connectedness and pleasure within a context of self-care, and without the presence of substances, then we would welcome hearing from you! For instance, you may have a story about a way of celebrating a family or community ritual without alcohol. If you have a story to share, please send it to us c/o [dulwich@senet.com.au](mailto:dulwich@senet.com.au). Please place 'Deconstructing Addiction League' in the subject line. Thanks!

## **PART FOUR**

*Who do you think will want to join this process of sharing knowledges in regard to celebration, joy, hospitality and pleasure in life?*

Potentially anybody ... I have always thought that the first question to ask in relation to changing relationships with substances is 'How does one go about enjoying one's life?' Anyone who wishes to share their knowledge about this, or to explore this within a group of persons, might want to join in. Once this conversation gets going, it will hopefully become contagious – pardon the disease metaphor. What I find in the culture of 'recovery' is that fun is often considered to be a four-letter word. There is frequently an excess of seriousness and a concern for danger that overshadows the possibility of having a good time. That is why the ethic of self-care is an important component to all of this. It needs to be clear that this is about taking care of oneself, while getting one's groove on. I find that in the culture of 'recovery', restrictions and prohibitions are so ingrained and privileged, that somehow fun and pleasure in life is left to chance. I refuse to leave this to chance! I am shocked that these sorts

of explorations are not considered paramount. It is often proposed that if one gets free of substances then the promise and gift of happiness will eventually appear. Well ... how about this weekend ... what am I supposed to do for fun in the meantime? There is much talk about what not to do, but rarely do I hear specific talk, about how to enjoy life ... today. There is a skill and an art to this, and it has to be discussed and practiced, but firstly, it has to be taken seriously as a purposeful act, and also treasured as an aesthetic value. So ... (what am I for?) ... I am for continually reinventing my life and relations to others, and exploring new relations to the pleasures in a context of self-care (free of substances) ... and having a funky good time! This project is really about reconstituting an ethics of pleasure ... giddy-up!

*I am really transported by what you are saying! I think this is because I have such a strange relationship to having fun – sometimes it's as if I need to earn permission to have fun! Would you like to tell me more about the relationship of 'having fun' to the theme of connection you spoke of earlier? Or, how are you planning to invite others to join you in celebration, joy, pleasure ...?*

Thanks for sharing with me the effects of this conversation on you! When you ask about some elaborate ways to invite people to join me in this, I realise that I could talk about my vision for the local Deconstructing Addiction project, or about my personal life in relation to the skills associated with fun and connection. It would be interesting and helpful to richly describe the skills (know-how and how-to) in regard to the generation of fun, and to explore the development of a new story-line about this in my personal life. However, I think I will discuss my vision for the League project, and how it connects with fun.

One day, I would like for the League to have a website that is dedicated to organising clubs, social gatherings, networking around hobbies and activities, etc. ... I can picture this site listing all the activities in a certain community that people don't usually know about. For instance, I went to the bike shop last month and noticed a sign that advertised a bicycle club that is available to everyone. This club meets on Sundays, and large groups of people go for an extended bike ride together. If our website listed all of the clubs like this one, and also listed proposals for other clubs, then people could network around activities from chess and bridge to swing dance and poetry readings. People could also organise games like scavenger hunts, where persons form teams and have to complete a number of tasks before the other teams. At the end of the month or week, there could be a celebration, where all the people who are involved in different activities, come together to let loose and have some fun. Over time, I believe that persons would become skilled at creating festivals of celebration, and will develop a certain expertise around fun without substances. The archives could also inform people about exciting things to do amongst one's friends in more exclusive contexts. It would be terrific to go on the website and see what some folks in South Africa have been up to with their friends. I think this could spark a whole lot of dialogue, and richness around new techniques that could bring more joy to one's community.

*When this vision is up and around for five years and you have information on many ways of joining together with fun without substances, what will you have achieved?*

If this were to occur we would have achieved so much to be proud of. Firstly, seeing a vision through is quite a task and an accomplishment. I would feel that this would be a contribution to the lives of others who share this vision, or whose lives have been affected by substance use. I also believe that these actions will support the kind of life I wish to live, and have only seen glimpses of. To live a beautiful life, where dreams make up the fabric of my everyday life, is an achievement in and of itself.

The knowledge that my work may have been useful to people, and contributed to a better life for some, or perhaps even saved a few lives ... this is what is so important to me. A close friend of mine died last week from a drug overdose, and I have been really sad about it, and reminded of how urgent the need is, to generate more community resources in relation to 'addiction'.

Thanks Chana!

TO: EVERYONE  
DATE: MONDAY, 24TH MAY  
SUBJECT: OUTSIDER-WITNESS RESPONSES TO THE INTERVIEW

Hello Everyone,

We are looking forward to receiving outsider witness responses from people.

I've listed below some questions that might be of assistance in guiding your response<sup>3</sup>.

- \* describe what caught your attention / imagination as you read Anthony's interview
- \* what did this have you thinking about / remembering in your own life and why?
- \* as a result of reading about another person's life, what might this now make possible for you in your life that might not otherwise have been possible?

Warm regards,

Mark

DATE: MONDAY, 24TH MAY  
FROM: AMANDA

*What caught your attention?*

What caught my attention most of all was Anthony's willingness to be vulnerable for an important reason and how this ability or desire to be vulnerable, present, real in the context of the interview, seemed to me, to also be part of what he wanted out of rich social relationships. More generally, it struck me that all the feelings that were evoked through my reading this interview seemed to be a reflection of what he was describing as being rich social relationships. In the interview, there was risk, there was intimacy, there was self-care, there was warmth, there was commitment, there was humour, and a sense of going out on a limb, in a good way. Reading the interview made me smile and feel warm-hearted and even laugh a few times. I could feel both his vulnerability and his power. I was struck by the feeling that he is doing this already, he's actually living it. I got a sense of full engagement. I got a sense of possibility of something different, of not being stuck in the drab, unengaged world.

*What did this have you thinking about ...*

It struck me that although I would likely not use the term 'rich social relationships' to express what often feels missing in my own life, and leads to despair and makes me want to escape/use substances, it is a useful line of thinking for me. It leads me to think about the things that I need, such as spontaneity, emotional engagement, adventure, a sense of mischievousness/rebellion, creativity, safety, etc. It also got me thinking about my experience in treatment, in which one of the main things that stuck with me was our recreational therapy time, in which we often played volleyball. Many of the other participants/patients resented this time and thought it was stupid, but I thought it was a blast. In fact, when I was in graduate school the experience led me to write a paper about an after-care program where one of the main features was fun and games for adults. I've often wanted to jump in the ball pits at places where they have those for children, or go down the slides or jump in the moonwalk. It makes

me sad and mad that generally grown-ups don't get to do stuff like that and we have to stand off to the side and watch. I think recovering people could use some time playing kickball and dodge ball (although it's kind of violent!) and any other games we want to play, without any kind of need to excel, compete with anyone, or even be any good at it.

I also thought about how once my brother said he wanted to start a 'philosophy club' where we would read different philosophers and then get together and discuss them. At the time I thought, 'Oh, yeah, right', but when I read the interview I thought, 'Hey, maybe we should!'

Anthony's words also made me think about how, in treatment it seems like I am encouraged to 'Behave now and stop causing trouble for people', when, in my case at least, it would have been better had they advised, 'Stop behaving, you need to start causing trouble for people'. Trying to behave is a definite trigger for using substances to me!

*What might this now make possible in your own life ...?*

It is making me think more about the need for deliberate action to create a life that I can stand in and even be glad to be in, rather than remaining passive recipient of whatever is being handed out. It has given me a vision of what it might look like to be both powerful and vulnerable in case I want to try it myself, in my own way.

## **A FINAL NOTE ABOUT ABSTINENCE AND MODERATION**

*by Anthony C.*

'How can we ensure that the ways in which we talk, write and act in this area do not increase people's cravings, and do not contribute to adding risk to people's lives?' (Anthony C., 2004, p.14)

For the Deconstructing Addiction League, we are cautious about the 'abstinence versus moderation' conversation for several reasons. For many people, the notion that it is possible for them to use in moderation is a death sentence and abstinence is the only path to safety. Some people, however, choose a path of moderation.



Due to the highly volatile nature of this conversation, we have an ethical responsibility to monitor the effects of our perspectives on the lives of people. For instance, if anything said in this article stimulates a craving to use or the desire to switch from a non-drug/alcohol lifestyle back to a life that involves drug/alcohol use, please let us know and we will try to adjust our writings and practices. Everything said and done, or not said and not done, has an effect on people's lives. It is our intention to tread lightly and to provide new ways of working with people around excessive consumption and/or addiction, while being aware of the dangers and reflecting on the outcome of our actions.

To situate myself, the writer of this piece, in the context of the abstinence and moderation conversation, I wish to live a life abstinent from alcohol and all other mood-altering chemicals, and I plan on developing the League's resources around abstinence. For my own protection, I will not include myself in any conversations around moderation. Although what I am interested in can technically be called an abstinence model, the maintenance of not using is only one aspect of this. Richly describing personal agency, self-care and exploring other pleasures in life, are some of the other dimensions that I hope will be taken up by the Deconstructing Addiction League.

### **AN EXPLORATION INTO THE JOYS OF LIVING: DEVELOPING ADDITIONAL COMMUNITY RESOURCES**

One of the key aims of the Deconstructing Addiction League involves the development of additional community resources (based on narrative ideas) for those trying to reclaim their lives from excessive consumption of substances. As a starting point, a pilot group, entitled 'Spaces Between', was held in Florida last year<sup>4</sup>. A number of people who were trying to maintain abstinence from substances came together for discussions over three days. Most of these folks were also regular attendees at NA or AA meetings. The hope was that the conversations shared in this pilot group would further support their efforts in not using, and also contribute to richly describing personal agency, self-care and exploring other pleasures in life. Four key themes were the focus of conversations and definitional ceremony processes and outsider witness practices (White 2000) were utilised. The conversations that ensued were energising, joyful and appreciated by all who were present.

We have included the themes here in the hope that these might spark conversations and pilot groups in other communities!

#### ***Our 'know-how' about seeking joy, comfort and peace of mind***

For some of us, the quest for joy and pleasure in life is a significant theme. We have long histories in relation to seeking out pleasure and comfort and ways to revel in life. We have learned a lot along the way, about ourselves, about joy, and about life more generally. Sometimes it is a difficult task for people to re-learn how to enjoy life in the absence of substances. Sharing stories of our 'know-how' in this area can be important and even inspirational.

- Are there stories that you can tell of things that you do when you are alone that bring joy, comfort and peace of mind?
- Are there stories of activities you have shared with friends and/or family that have brought excitement, and joy?
- Are there activities in the community (hobbies, etc.) which you are interested in exploring?  
What is the history of this interest?



### ***Our skills in social connection – the joy in being connected to others***

Disconnection, loneliness and boredom can be powerful forces which prevent many people from staying on track with a substance-free life. As alcohol and other drugs have a strong hold on hospitality and socialising in general, many of us have tried to find or create spaces where alcohol/drugs are not at the center of social interaction. Many of us have tried to find ways of re-claiming laughter, camaraderie, spontaneity, creativity, adventure and excitement in relaxed or comfortable settings. In the process, we have learned things about connection and social interaction. We have learned things about the skills that go into creating fun and good times. We have learned things about what we value and about the significance of being connected to others. We have also learned that there are many different forms of connection.

- What activities/practices bring you a sense of connection to others? How did you learn this?
- What do you value in connection with others? Why?
- Have you encountered forms of hospitality, of welcoming, of celebration that link people together? What are these?
- Are there ways in which you stay connected to others even when they are not present? If so, what skills are involved in this?

### ***Caring for our selves***

Some of us have long histories of trying to work out what is harmful to us and what is helpful and life-giving. We have had to think this through in relation to actions, relationships, substances, and forms of pleasure. Some of our learning has come from past mistakes, some from wonderful times. Sharing stories about how we have learned to care for ourselves and others can be significant.

- Can you remember a time of pleasure when you realised that you were also taking care of yourself? What is involved in these times? When are they most likely to be a part of your life?
- What or who has been most influential in learning to care for yourself? Why has this been significant to you?
- Who would be least surprised to know that you have found these forms of pleasure?
- Have you found ways of evaluating potential dangers ahead of time? Have you learned to notice warning signs? How do you do this? What is the history of learning how to do this?

### ***Small acts of significance***

When you have seen a lot in life, it is not always the grand gestures, the big events, that are the most meaningful. For some of us, noticing small steps, small acts of significance, has come to have a central place in our lives. Small but significant actions, anything from paying a bill, to completing an art project, or helping someone out, can offer us a greater sense of meaning or a better feeling about ourselves.

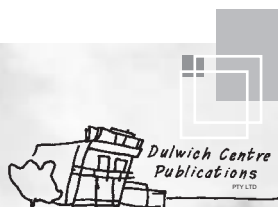
- Can you think of a small act of care from someone else that made a significant contribution to your life? Why was this significant? Why did you notice it? If the person was present now, what could you say to them to convey what a difference this made in your life?
- Can you think of a small act that you have recently done that was of significance to you, which contributed to you having a better sense of yourself?
- What difference might it make if you became more conscious of these small acts of significance?

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> The Deconstructing Addiction League was founded in 2002 by Anthony C. and David Denborough. In order to respect the AA tradition of anonymity, which states that AA maintain personal anonymity at the level of press, radio and film, Anthony has chosen not to publish his surname. Anthony currently lives in New York City. David Denborough is staff writer at Dulwich Centre Publications. Both Anthony and David can be contacted c/o Dulwich Centre Publications.
- <sup>2</sup> The extracts have been put together by David Denborough in consultation with all contributors. Some of the postings have been edited slightly.
- <sup>3</sup> For more information, see White, M. (2000)
- <sup>4</sup> The pilot group in Florida was facilitated by Anthony C. and Christopher Behan. The themes for the pilot group were developed by Anthony C. and David Denborough.

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