

# HEALING BY THE ART OF 8 LIMBS

By Alastair Mordey

In my view there are two states of being that are likely to bring about addictive behaviors in young adults; too much stress ... and not enough stress. Often these two things combine, which may sound counter intuitive, in which case – please read on.

By 'not enough stress' I am not referring of course, to a blissful state of carefree happiness, but rather, to the stultifying lack of stimulation and mind crushing boredom which is so common in modern culture. Such unengaging environments are every bit as likely to produce an addiction in adolescence as one or more of the small 't' trauma's which are well known to result developmentally from adverse childhood experiences (ACE).

Working with youths from predominantly middle ranging socio economic groups has led me to the conclusion that there are other factors at work in the causation of addiction than just the existence of household dysfunction, neglect and abuse. Oftentimes, both parents are highly involved in the intervention which is to get these young people into treatment, and while this strong parental involvement is not in itself a sign of familial health (or proof of the absence of ACE) it does suggest that these young people are loved, and so what exactly is the problem?

The problem is this – happiness, is over rated. The Buddha told us this 2500 years ago, but in modern times we seem to have forgotten it. As the developmental psychologist Erik Erikson also noted; maladaptive traits are as likely to result from overly *syntonic* (ideal) environments, as they are from overly *dystonic* (disturbing) environments. For this reason 'just good enough' parenting has always insisted on making sure that there is a healthy dose of adaptive stress as well as protection from unnecessary suffering. Maybe, I thought to myself, we should be doing the same thing with our treatment models? And with this in mind, I set about building a program which would reflect these ideas.

Two years ago I began using Muay Thai boxing as a treatment method for young men who were mostly addicted to methamphetamines and opiates. Using a fighting sport to help heal the wounds of a condition which is partly caused by emotional and physical abuse might not seem on the face of it to be the best idea. But obviously, it's not about the fighting. Initial phases of treatment do not include contact sparring and are heavy on grounding techniques which are mainly developed through Vipassana meditation which is led by local monks (because we are based in northern Thailand). In this way, the practice of Muay Thai (the movements only) becomes a type of somatic experience in itself. For many of our young men, proper ring fighting is not desirable, and only the few who are gifted will go on to compete at an amateur level locally in Chiang Mai, once they are in transitional living, or once they have graduated.

Most of our young men choose instead to enter our Triathlon track which, with its emphasis on long term endurance, is also a great analogy for recovery and an awesome way of improving brain function and mood (because it stimulates neurogenesis, improves dopamine tone and recruits manageable doses of endorphins, enkephalins, endocannabinoids and all the other good stuff).

This healing phenomenon is not just a neurochemical process, but also a social process. As Charles Darwin himself noted, humans are fundamentally no different to the other higher mammals in terms of their basic emotional platforms, which is why we find it easy to 'make friends' with cats, dogs, and horses, but rather more difficult to make friends with snakes. Addiction professionals who are familiar with the literature know that rats when isolated get addicted to cocaine whereas

rats that are doing the proper rat things (like bonding and connecting) are almost completely immune to getting addicted to cocaine.

In 2016, a group of biologists noticed the following behavior in young male rats.

*"mild stress can actually make male rats more social and cooperative than they are in an unstressed environment, much as humans come together after non-life-threatening events such as a national tragedy. After a mild stress, the rats showed increased brain levels of oxytocin and its receptor and huddled and touched more."*Muroy, et al (2016)

And this is exactly what we find with our young Muay Thai fighters and Triathletes. The fact is young people just aren't going to get well by reading self-help books and learning to be more emotive. If the challenge is not daunting enough, it will not engage them and ameliorate their destructive tendencies quickly enough to stop them acting out again when they leave treatment, or even leave treatment prematurely.

To date, we have produced three Muay Thai fighters and more than a dozen triathletes. One of our graduates completed an Ironman triathlon

in France, where he raised money for orphans affected by methamphetamine addiction in the hill tribe areas of the Golden Triangle (Thai/Burma/Laos border). Next year (2018) will see five more of our graduates complete Ironman triathlons, accompanied by yours truly, because I believe in not asking my clients to do anything I wouldn't do myself – whether that is sparring or running triathlons.

The more I learn about trauma, the more I realize that it is not a lack of individual durability which causes it - but a lack of cultural durability. We no longer have hyper meaningful relationships with others outside of our nuclear family units. We have lost our belief systems which used to provide cogent answers to traumatic experiences. In this vein, I have sought to reintroduce a potent sense of meaning into my work with addicted young men. We should realize that abstract ideas about what is meaningful are very difficult to impart to younger people who have a more visceral understanding of life. This is especially true of young men. I do not believe that asking

them to be more quiet, sensitive and sedentary is very realistic. They learn to love these things too – only after they have embraced their destructive elements, harnessed them and walked through them. With addicted young men, any sense of belonging and meaning needs to be imparted via *activity*. In short, by odyssey and adventure with other men they respect and who embody the values they espouse. In this togetherness, they discover new depths to their own individuality. If the path forward is not challenging enough, it is impotent.

I have learned with the young men I work with – that there is almost no challenge which is too great for them to achieve. Perhaps we are not setting the bar high enough.

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