



Beer Is Better Than Whiskey...

Astonishing aerial contortions; bone-shattering impacts; sadistic, otherworldly sounds that only a disintegrating motorcycle can create – his horrifying performance unfolded in slow motion right in front of his brother. They both had leathers and helmets on, so the lifeless body actually looked pretty good as it was cradled in the arms of its shrieking, sobbing, slightly buzzed racing buddy.

Two days later, we were sitting in the darkened living room of the surviving young man and his terrified wife. She explained how the boys have always done everything together – hunting, fishing, baseball, bowling, vacations at the lake, Sunday church, – drinking – everything. The brothers even worked for the same law enforcement agency, and up until three days ago they all lived together in this very same house; his untouched bedroom is just down the hall.

She described that since the accident her husband goes from uncontrollable sobbing, to terrifying rages, to being “a living dead person who just stares at nothing” (like he was doing at the present moment). All of the weapons – even kitchen knives – had been taken out of the house for safe keeping by his fellow officers. He doesn’t want visitors, but he wants his wife to be near him at all times; although nothing she does seems to help. He won’t eat, he can’t sleep, and he refuses to take any medications prescribed by the doctor. The one thing he asks for is more Coke-a-Cola and whiskey – the only “food” he has been surviving on for over 48 hours.

I asked him if he has a favorite beer.

You see, it seems the whiskey was actually keeping him from going officially insane – that, and the fact that he had no energy to think, feel, remember, or question due to lack of food and hydration. Sleep was absolutely not an option because when he tried to rest he lost conscious control that the parts of his brain that dealt with the sights, sounds, smells, tastes, touch, and feelings of the horrific trauma he had just went through – way too much for him to deal with right now. Since medication was not currently an option and memories of his brother were intimately connected to every single person, place, or activity of potential comfort, we figured if we could start by switching him to beer, it would be an improvement over the caffeine in the Coke and the higher alcohol content in the whiskey.

This simple intervention may seem inappropriate to folks unfamiliar with the world of acute trauma. Most people can quickly point out what they think he should **not** be doing – smashing walls, smashing his head, raging in general, isolating, planning his suicide, not eating or sleeping, staying drunk – all things that most people typically agree are not in one’s best interest.

However, if you take away his tools that are currently useful (even “bad” ones), those around him might feel better, but *his* world may actually become much worse. Similarly useless is to insist that he does things we all hope will give him at least some comfort (be with others, eat healthy food, rest, drink water, pray, get some fresh air, etc.). Those might be strategies that his young wife may be able to use for herself right now, but they are not yet useful for him.

The real trick is to support choices that trend toward “better” options, while still reinforcing a sense of comfort and control. Beer is better than whiskey...doctor prescribed and monitored medication is better than beer...friends, family, and/or a spiritual community are better than medication...you get the idea.

Although we live in a world of immediate gratification and those we serve have experienced unfathomable change in literally a blink of an eye, frequently the most meaningful options for those impacted by trauma and devastating loss are those that reinforce subtle, “slightly better choices” along the harrowing journey back from hell.

Our ultimate goal is to help first responders and trauma survivors develop an extensive, integrative, effective constellation of resources **BEFORE** something annihilating occurs, such that whiskey becomes only one of many potential options. Until then, the patience to simply and respectfully reinforce the importance of micro-choices towards healthier options is your best bet. By truly honoring peoples’ resilient capacity, we must give them choice – even if that sometimes means getting them a 12-pack of their favorite beer.

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