Alcohol abuse nearly destroyed my naval career – asking for help saved it

By Theresa Carpenter

In July 2017, I was at the pinnacle of my public affairs naval career. I was in charge of a media department working along with 25 Sailors aboard an aircraft carrier, on one the Navy’s largest vessel. My unit was taking part in an international exercise along three partner nations in India. I was tasked to plan and execute the communication campaign, the largest event I had planned in a decade. The exercise was the most complex iteration of its kind and had received international press attention, even the United States President was talking about it. On the evening of the opening day of the exercise, I was attending a cocktail reception on an Indian Navy warship along with diplomats from the State Department, Commanding Officers from all the navies involved, and many other high ranking military officers. The evening should have been one of the most memorable and enjoyable evenings of my 25-year military career. Instead, I nearly destroyed my naval career due to my inability to control my alcohol intake. That night I hit rock bottom, but it ultimately changed my life.

Feelings of inadequacy began early on in my childhood. I was adopted at birth and grew up in Clintonville, Ohio in an upper middle-class neighborhood. My life seemed perfect on the outside, as I enjoyed a comfortable Catholic school upbringing, but at home I never felt like I belonged. My brother was four years older, and to me he was bulletproof and possessed everything I wanted. He was funny, naturally smart, and always had many friends hanging on to his every word. Most importantly, it seemed to me that nobody told him what to do. I wanted to be just like him and to have him accept me. Instead, he teased me mercilessly, and I never felt his love. Later on, in grade school, some girls picked up on my lack of confidence, and they would only friend me in secret. Like animals that prey on the weak, the “popular” girls made my life hell, and I’d leave grade school crying most days. All I wanted was to be accepted, to be liked, and to feel valuable. Instead, I felt like I did around my brother and his friends. I was ashamed of myself, and I thought there was something wrong with me.

My parents tried to help build my confidence, but I don’t think they understood how. My relationship with my mother was strained. We argued constantly because we both have strong personalities. As early as I can remember, I resented authority figures. My parents observed that I was lacking impulse control and had poor boundaries. I was taken to a doctor and diagnosed with Attention Deficit Disorder, but the medication only numbed my pain, my inner loathing. I continued to feel like I wasn’t smart or beautiful. As a result, when I made a close friend, I would cling to them for validation. I would get jealous and angry if they tried to walk away from the friendship because I had no sense of self within to rest upon.

At age nine, I discovered alcohol. My best friend, at the time, stole a six-pack of wine coolers from her Mom’s basement. That day sitting in the darkness, under the stairs we drank. The alcohol helped relieve my inner loathing. I inhaled my three wine coolers while my friend was finishing her one. Later, I remember puking in her bathtub. My girlfriend was shocked at my behavior and told me “she worried about my future, about people one day taking advantage of me in this state.” However, I felt amazing as the pain inside went away for a few hours. This was the first time I started associating alcohol with an ability to block out the crippling insecurity that I struggled with on a daily basis.

I discovered that my insecurities went away whenever I was drunk. Everybody I was hanging around reinforced this by telling me that I was fun when I drank. During this time, it never occurred to me that I was using alcohol to escape pain or my self-doubts. I had an entitled attitude, a rebellious streak, and glamorized partying. However, I didn’t have access to alcohol routinely, so it never turned into a habit until around 14 years old when I started sneaking out at night. I was the kid getting my girlfriends in trouble, but pushing limits gave me a high that I continued to chase into my 20s and even after my divorce in my 30s. However, no matter how hard I tried, due to my lack of boundaries I could not maintain a healthy intimate relationship. I thought a man would give me the love I so desperately craved. I continued to feel like I was in a survival mode and clinging to whatever poor friend was willing to put up with me.

At 19, I joined the Navy as a way to make money and travel. Due to my lack of impulse control, I had horrible spending habits. As a result, I racked up $2,500 in credit card bills and student loads and needed to find a way to support myself. The idea of depending on my parents was untenable. The Navy was a way out of the city, a way to make money, and a way to figure out my life.

Enlisting turned out to be the best decision I made as a young adult. Through the Navy’s training, I met...
people who had goals, who were kind and emotionally healthy. I wanted what they had, to achieve rank and be successful. I observed that if I worked hard, I could push through my insecurities and learn new skills. However, the achievement became like alcohol. Anytime I would earn a qualification or advance to the next military rank, I felt validated, appreciated and it would temporarily numb the insecurities. My drinking would subside for a period of time, and I would use accomplishments to feel good instead.

While I was routinely achieving my goals, however, I did not understand the complexities in maintaining healthy boundaries with others, nor did it completely curb my attitude toward drinking. I still glamorized alcohol and the associated partying as being fun and gaining acceptance by others. In groups where I could not at least get a decent buzz going, the dark thoughts from my childhood returned. My shame was palpable and many questions and insecurities would come to mind. Who would want to date me? I’m not smart. People don’t want to talk to me. This was the harmful self-talk that would plague me in group settings, causing me to drink heavily to block out that negative voice.

The drinking would go on until that faithful evening on deployment in India; I never examined why I was drinking until then. Achieving my goals such as becoming a public affairs officer or getting a master’s degree would become my priority instead drinking, so I would put drinking aside for a number of months, at times, even years but it never stopped being an escape, and I always glamorized it. Even getting arrested in May 2014 for driving under the influence did not stop me from abusing alcohol. Instead, I just stopped driving when I drank. Many times, I was simply numbing with accomplishments, or with relationships instead of drinking alcohol.

Around the time I attended that reception overseas, I had worked enough on myself to start my first healthy relationship. However, we were separated by the deployment. That evening, feeling alone on a foreign warship and unaccepted as a sober person, I decided to get drunk. After several drinks, I blacked out and woke up several hours later in my quarters still in my uniform with puke running down my chest. To this day, I don’t know what I said or did that night. According to those who were present, I acted fine. I believe (but still don’t know for sure) that a commanding officer from another ship assigned to my unit made sure I returned back to my ship safely. My immediate thought was “I already have a DUI on my record, if this blackout goes out publicly, there would be no second chances.” In an effort to save my naval career, I scheduled an appointment with the unit’s Drug and Alcohol Program Adviser.

It was with the Navy chief who ran the ship’s drug treatment program that I broke down crying and finally admitted that I could not control my drinking. It was a moment of reckoning for me, in the past I always made an excuse for my alcohol consumption. That day, I decided to submit to the process and told my commanding and executive officer everything that led up to me getting drunk. I felt so humiliated and ashamed. But, to my surprise instead of berating me, they offered me the support and understanding that I saw badly needed. We agreed that I would not consume alcohol again on deployment, and when we returned, I would enter an intensive alcohol treatment program offered by the Navy.

That treatment saved my military career and my life. The counselor pointed out my entitlement, the many years of playing a victim, and we examined what was blocking me from being my authentic self in group settings. It was then that I realized that everyone feels weird and has insecurities, especially in group settings. After the treatment, I would never see alcohol the same way again. It’s no longer glamorous or fun. But, I have learned that there will be days that I’m going to feel inadequate, but as long as I recognize it, I know that I can cope. I do not need to turn to alcohol, unhealthy relationships, or achievement to relieve it.

Life is not perfect today, and I still have moments of self-doubt. I don’t abstain from alcohol, but because I have learned what caused me to abuse it, it no longer has the allure that it once held. Now, I’m able to recognize when I’m doing anything compulsively by assessing the triggering feeling inside and reflecting, which then leads to wiser outcomes. In the military, there are resources to help those who are struggling. I hope that I can help lift the stigma on seeking treatment for addiction and that no matter what rank one holds, help exists. It could save your life. I know it did for me.