



## Learning to Live within Normal Limits

### **Background:**

Substance use and related coexisting issues can so often result in a lifestyle filled with frequent emotional “highs” and “lows”. When substance use progresses, what can follow is a pattern of excitement (highs) that is associated with obtaining and using the substances that is often later followed by an emotional “crash” related to recovering from using the substances and having to face the consequences (lows). Both situations are at the more extreme ends of the emotional spectrum.

### **Opening Exercise:**

There are many examples of “extremes” often associated with using drugs and alcohol to excess which can be really wild and exciting (Highs) or really stressful and depressing (Lows). Come up with as many examples of Highs and Lows that you can below:



### LOWS

< “normal” >

### HIGHS

- Withdrawal Symptoms
- Getting arrested
- Being broke and in debt
- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_

- The initial rush of the high
- Escaping/outsmarting cops
- Hustling and getting \$
- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_

Now go back and place an X next to the highs and lows that really stood out as significant for you personally

**Discuss** – Which highs kept you going back for more, and which lows were the most difficult for you?



## **Learning to Appreciate the Small Stuff**

Living a substance abuse free lifestyle has its ups and downs for sure, but for the most part day to day life without abusing substances is mostly within the “normal” range of emotions with far fewer extremes. That is not such a bad thing, however, because even though you may not experience the same exciting highs as when you were using, people usually don’t experience the same amount of depressing lows either.

It is possible to learn to appreciate things that you may have taken for granted when you were getting high. It may involve a change in focus by learning to look for and notice the things in life that bring real happiness and it may involve a change in attitude to learn to be grateful for what you have around you.

**Part II – Now list some things in life that can make you feel good about yourself, your situation, and your life that have nothing to do with getting high:**

### **“Normal” Substance-Free Highs**

*Appreciating a beautiful sunset*

*Listening to the laughter of your children*

*Knowing that your bills are all paid and you have some money saved legally*

*Getting a promotion at your job and knowing you have a steady paycheck*

*Planning a vacation without worrying about how are you going to bring drugs or where can you get them*

- Go back and mark which ones that stood out for you as the most meaningful -
- **Discuss your answers**



## **The Story of Joe Schmo:** (*Schmo* - n. slang – A hypothetical ordinary man)

Joe Schmo used to do a lot of blow. It took Joe a long time to stop partying, getting high and drug dealing but eventually he declared “enough is enough” and he decided to stop the wild life for good. Joe finally realized that if he kept going the way he was going he was surely getting locked up for a long time and his family was going to write him off completely. It took Joe some time and a few programs until he got it right. Joe will tell you it wasn’t just the drugs that kept him hooked in for so long, but it was the lifestyle that kept him coming back. After years of running full speed in the drug world, Joe’s life eventually became a complete mess with more problems than good times. Joe can tell you a lot of exciting drug stories that he will never forget where he pushed the limits, lived on the edge, and often took crazy risks that sometimes even paid off initially. Still, Joe knew he had no choice but to stop and avoid looking back if he wanted to move forward without increasing consequences in the “ordinary” world.

Now Joe has two young daughters and he eventually settled down and married his longtime girlfriend who he was on and off with for so many years when he was getting high. To prevent future drama, Joe stopped cheating and focused on his kids and marriage. Joe used his drug dealing skills to get a job selling cars thereby making money legally. Still Joe will tell you that the job isn’t always so easy as there is some pressure to produce and show up regularly. Joe doesn’t hang with his old buddies anymore and instead he goes out to eat or the movies with his wife and he likes to take his daughters to the park and to do other outdoor activities like fishing and camping. When Joe was getting high, he admits he didn’t care much about the meaning of life or anything like that, and he still isn’t sure about it but he has tried to attend church a few times with his wife and her parents and he likes to read and do some research in his spare time to try to figure out what he believes in. Joe isn’t crazy about his job but it pays the bills. Joe and his wife are saving money so next fall he can go to a trade school and get his certification, while his wife takes over working full time so he can become a diesel mechanic which is his dream career. Right now, Joe’s wife attends community college and she is less than a year away from becoming a licensed dental hygienist which should one day increase their income significantly. Joe at times gets annoyed with his in-laws but they help out with the kids so he has learned to keep the peace with the family, which is something he could never do when he was getting high.

Joe will tell you now that for a long while he kept thinking about getting high and going back to dealing drugs to add some excitement to his life, but those thoughts rarely pop into his head any more. Joe will openly admit that his life not nearly as exciting as it used to be in the old days but the trade-off is now he has some sanity and stability that he never used to have when he was chasing drugs and money on a 24/7 basis. Joe knows he will never feel the sheer exhilaration of taking in a big hit of crack, or the rush of a syringe full of dope in his arm or the power trip that comes from counting stacks of large bills made from drug dealing. Before Joe goes to bed at night he does something one of his counselors told him to do year ago and that is think about at least five things he is grateful for. Five things always come to mind:

- Knowing that he has a relationship with a partner he can trust who is working toward common goals with him.
- Feeling the sense of satisfaction that he is there for his two daughters not just financially but also spending quality time with them and helping raise them not to make the same mistakes he once did
- Being able to look at his bank statement every week and see that his bills are paid and he has some legal, legitimate money saved for other things that might come up
- Appreciating that sense of freedom that he no longer has to answer to a probation or parole officer or have any court dates, mandated treatment programs, driver’s license suspensions or fines.
- Having future goals that he can look forward to that he knows he can achieve if he keeps moving forward in a positive direction.



Being a “Schmo” isn’t so bad if you can learn to have the patience for it and find other positive ways to feel fulfilled in life without relying on substances. **What do you think?**

**What about You? -Can you see yourself living on an ongoing basis in the “ordinary” world?**

**What would it take? *Use your imagination:*** - Try to describe a positive picture of your own future. Be hopeful yet realistic in your description and make sure to include your ideas for:

- Career Goals – (What would you like to see yourself doing for work one day?)
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
- Family and Relationships – (Where do you see yourself with regard to your own family situation?)
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
- Hobbies and Recreation – (What can you see yourself getting involved with in order to enjoy and look forward to your free time)
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
- Spirituality/Purpose – (Even if you don’t believe in anything specific or if you’re not sure what you believe, what do you think could increase your sense of meaning and purpose in your life?)
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
- Substance Free “Highs” – (In your future, what types of constructive things and situations can you look forward to in order to feel a sense of satisfaction, inner peace, and gratification?)



**Final Discussion: What can you start doing today?**

- **What steps can you take to start to stabilize your life and reduce unnecessary “drama” so that you can maintain life within normal limits?**
  
- **What “lows” related to the substance using lifestyle could you look forward to getting rid of? (For example: No more probation or fines, no more withdrawal, no longer having to cover things up, etc.)**
  
- **What can you start doing today or in the near future in order to make some of these positive things really start to happen in your future?**