

John Sheldon: [00:00:15] Hello, this is Beyond Belief Sobriety, a podcast that explores topics of interest to people who are interested in a secular path to recovery from addictions of all kinds. And today I have John Huey back from the D.C. group that we Agnostic's Group in D.C. and we're going to be talking about relapse and dealing with the shame and guilt that we often feel after a relapse and how to overcome that and move on in our recovery. So very, very interesting topic and something that we haven't actually talked about on this podcast and over the last five years that we've been doing. That's a good idea, John, to talk about this while you get the ball rolling. John, what are your thoughts?

John Huey: [00:00:58] Well, you know, we were having a brief chat before we started. And, you know, I did bring up the fact I mean, you know, some people watching this who know us or find out about it say, you know, well, what do these guys know about relapse? They've been you know, in my case, I've been sober since January nineteen eighty-seven, which will be 35 years in January if I don't drink and don't drop dead before between now and January. You've been sober a similar length of time. So chronologically speaking, since we haven't had a drink or had a relapse, we're sort of removed from it in terms of time. You know, I thought about that when I raised this topic with you. I said, well, you know what is at this point in time? What is my credibility in terms of discussing this? And when I thought about it, I looked at my own history. I saw that. Well, indeed, I had a lot of. History with relapse and I won't go into it because we've only got so much time, I won't go into the whole drunk blog part of it. But there was an incident when I was 25 years old where I woke up out of a blackout after having a horrible argument with a woman that subsequently became my first wife a couple of years later. And I was pouring my entire bar, I had no money, I lived in a shitty place on Connecticut Avenue, that was the reason I had the apartment was it was about a block from my favorite bar.

John Huey: [00:02:39] That was its primary attraction to me. And the only thing I had in there other than my books that were worth anything was a bar. And, you know, I came out of a blackout pouring hundreds of dollars, which was a lot of money at that time down the drain. And as I was coming out of the blackout, I'm twenty-five years old. And I told myself over and over and over again as I was coming out of the blackout, I heard myself saying, you have to stop. You have to stop. You have to stop. And there's a very abiding if there's an abiding mystery in my life, there is, as has been well established,

absolutely no hocus pocus in my life. But there is mystery. There are a lot of human mysteries. And one of the greatest human mysteries to me is how someone like myself. Who was perfectly cognizant and totally aware that I absolutely had to stop drinking, keep drinking from age 25 when that awareness really crystallized. It was very vivid, a very real realization in my head that I had to stop and I drank another 13 years. Wow. How the hell did that happen? So as I reviewed that, I have to look at this 13 years in many respects as one continuous slip. So, you know, I mean, continuing to, you know, produce behavior and results that were.

John Huey: [00:04:25] Almost heroically negative at times, you know, sort of in defiance of my background, in education and defiance of everything in a lot of ways and repeating that behavior over and over and over. And most particularly what happened to me, which I have related in other contexts, and I'll try to be brief about that, but it is the moment, the moment that took me to my moment of decision for the moment. And that's one of the things I ask you. If it was egotistical to quote yourself, you should have done so. I will. You know, I'll take that risk. Although some of my friends in Canada and elsewhere may have different opinions about that. But some of my admirers. But, you know, but basically what I had to do was. I had to stop at one point physically. A doctor stared at me in the spring of 1985 and I won't go into all the details, but he's sufficiently terrified me that I actually quit and I had been thrown out of a grove between my first and second marriage. I was living with this lady and she had thrown me out of her house and I was living back down at Dupont Circle in a very nice place as I somehow managed to get and keep a very nice job during all this. And I was just sitting there just drinking myself to death, basically, and somehow or another crawling into the office every day.

John Huey: [00:06:07] I still don't know how I did that, but I quit for nine months. And one night when I was out to dinner with this very same lady, by the way, that's another story there that we may have, that's maybe another podcast topic about bullying and stuff. But this very nice lady who had thrown me out of her place for an excessive devotion to Jack Daniels not a year before she's out to dinner with me. And she suggested we split, as she put it, the British way. She had a lovely way of putting it. She said a lovely bottle of wine, OK? And I split that lovely bottle of wine with her. And unlike her, who went home and forgot about it. I just started drinking and that period of time from the fall of 1985 until the end of 1986, I was in I lived in hell during that year and a

half. OK, so in fact and in truth, I know what a slip will do to you because it slipped almost killed me. Right. Oh, there's my qualification and bona fides in terms of talking about slips. The fact that I haven't had one since I quit doesn't mean that I don't incorporate and understand and live with I still live with some of the consequences of that to this day. I believe that some physical things going on with me now in my early seventies may be connected.

John Huey: [00:07:43] No, we got we all have to live with our consequences. And I had to live with that. And, you know, in thinking about this mystery, as as you know and you quite nicely reprinted with you reprinted my five articles about a secular recovery, which are sort of popular in some quarters. And there's the first article in that series is called The Secular Alcoholic and the Moment of Decision. And here's where I stick my neck out and quote myself in it. Toward the beginning of that article, I say something like I say, I didn't say something like this. I said this. The longer I'm sober in secular recovery, the more mysterious the process, particularly for the atheist becomes by mysterious. I obviously do not mean anything that might be possibly construed as coming from the so-called spiritual realm. The topic of our next podcast, what I'm talking about, is the all too human attributes of guilt, shame, self-loathing, and disgust that bring us literally and this is the ironic part in quotes on our knees, sometimes to our first hours as sober women and men. And I would say that it's not universal. And there are a lot of people with a lot of different types of stories, but in my case, all of those elements of guilt, change, self-loathing in disgust, were most certainly present in me as I was either deciding to stop drinking or kill myself, which was basically the decision I felt I had at the end of my drinking in those last weeks of 1986.

John Huey: [00:09:31] So long ago, a lifetime for many. So I know all about those feelings because I had them. But it strikes me and has struck me in all these years of dealing with this conventional program, when I went to many, many hundreds of conventional meetings, as you know before I was and as I said many times, I was very lucky here in D.C. to have our secular meeting that started in 1988. That's really what saved my ass. But I did continue to go to conventional meetings for a lot of years. And even in the context of secular recovery, I hear a lot about guilt, shame, contrition, and all of those other things. And my opinion is, is that all of that stuff is what I needed to leave behind when I got sober. I didn't need anymore, I didn't need any more shame, I certainly didn't need to go run around apologizing to a bunch of people I know that will

get some of them out there all in a wad because that incorporates guilt, shame, and contrition, doesn't it? Running around the world, apologizing to people all day long. Fuck that. I wasn't going to do that. What I was going to do is try to clean up my life so that I didn't repeat some of those grievous here.

John Sheldon: [00:11:04] That's really the best thing at that same thing here. The exact same thing here was the best thing that I could have done. In fact, it's you know, this is a topic for another podcast maybe. I think we probably talked about it before. But there's a real danger in making amends. You know, that you're going to you don't necessarily have a right to bring up a lot of crap like that with

John Huey: [00:11:23] People, you know, like like all these other things, you know, the ones that say that it did something for them, you know, let them go ahead and do it. I'm not going to tell them they shouldn't have done it or it wasn't good for them or whatever. Their self-reported experience is just as valid as mine is respect. But I'm just talking from a purely atheist, maybe reductive as certainly dialectical materialist point of view. I do that all of that business of. Shame, guilt, and contrition are not useful to me, and I see once again when we go back to our wonderful Facebook group, which is interesting stuff about other topics, but all too often I see people coming into the program with this full weight, this sort of sword hanging over their head from the past. Yeah, and it doesn't do anybody any good at all in many people's report. I haven't had this since entering the program. I haven't had to report this. But many people I've heard over the years report that it's those things that contributed to them picking up and going out and doing what they do. OK. Now. How did I break the cycle myself? OK. I came to that moment of decision that I talk about all the time, like a broken OK, and I'll just be the one more thing from that secular alcoholic in the moment of decision article that frames that a little bit.

John Huey: [00:13:13] And I'll read this paragraph and then I'll put this aside. "It appears to me that in many success stories in the program, there is a shock of recognition, a point in time that I will call the moment of decision in an instant internal circumstances, combined with illness and necessity to force a commitment to quit drinking. It comes from within and has little to do with outside forces and pressures that, while possibly dragging us to the edge, are not the things that prove decisive in a true start on a life without alcohol and drugs." All right. Once we've decided we have to

decide and nothing, or at least for some nothing pulls you back to the edge like this guilt, shame, contrition, all of that stuff. Now, why is all that stuff there now? I'm not an orange papers guy is you know, I don't spend my life writing anti-AA screeds. I'm a member of a couple of specialized Facebook groups about AA apostates and stuff like that. I don't contribute to those groups, but I sort of look at them from time to time.

John Huey: [00:14:40] So I'm not going to go about this bashing thing. But I do know. That is a lot of what this stuff in this so-called program is all about. Is about. Passive-aggressive control, gas lighting, and in many cases, the egotism of people who are trying to control others. So my suggestion is, is that there are people around us and I would posit even in the secular world. That might want to passively, aggressively control us by signing up to something like this 12 step thing, which they call secular but really is not going to go down that rabbit hole because I know you have a disagreement. Yeah, talk about that. But, you know, the the the facts were the facts. Now I've got enough I've got more than enough egotism of my own. So I know I know an egomaniac when I see one because I can look in the mirror at some point and see those traits come out in myself. But I'm certainly not going to subject myself to some egotistical guru who's framing my life for me in terms of guilt, shame, and contrition. Right. That's just going to that's that's it's not the way I'm going to do it.

John Sheldon: [00:16:17] Yeah, I agree. I mean, I think that I think that for sure that guilt and shame are just kind of go with addiction and alcoholism. I mean, you can't help but feel in everyone's life circumstances are different. But I know for myself personally, you know, every time they threw me in a jail cell for whatever period of time I was, I wasn't really feeling so proud of myself, you know, and there was a lot of guilt and shame to that. And there was a lot of shame surrounding how I would make promises to myself not to do that, not to get drunk and arrested and everything. And again and again, keep doing it. So there was quite a bit of that. It didn't do me any good, except for like you said, you know, it may be eventually got me to the point where I was able to make a decision to do something with getting sober and not drinking and getting help.

John Huey: [00:17:19] There's there are arbiters of reality out there that stop people who are truly guilty. Well, you know, sheriff's offices and FBI agents and federal state prosecutors. And if you get too far off the grid and that happens to you, that's a whole

other thing. OK, now, that never happened to me, but I know we all, of course, run across people where that even happened.

John Sheldon: [00:17:51] Oh, yeah. I mean, yeah, I know you and I have both heard every possible horror story you got against people going to prison because they killed somebody while they are driving or whatever. But there's a lot of different price that a person could carry with them.

John Huey: [00:18:07] I'm talking about this internalization thing. There's this buzzword that's used out there a lot these days in other contexts, the context of gas, like people, are constantly going on and on about gas. But, you know, there are people out there that will tell you stuff that isn't necessarily true about you. All right. And you're the one that has to make that sort of you have to sort those details out for yourself. Because there is an underlying problem, again, in my opinion, in alcoholics and addicts, that's very serious because and it goes back to my own issues and my own problem, where on some level, awareness of my condition was not enough. Right. It didn't stop me for all of those years somehow. And that's the mystery part. There was this internalized, dire necessity that took me to the end of my drinking. And I'm not going to let anything or anyone take me back there. Now, that comes around to yet another thing, I'm not trying to suggest that all these forces regarding relapse are external because a lot of it is. It's internal.

John Sheldon: [00:19:34] Oh, yeah, just part of the deal, part of the disease of alcoholism. You might relapse. Right.

John Huey: [00:19:40] And, you know, one of the great challenges for me in my old age is trying to figure out how to be useful. I have younger people approach me from time to time with questions or. Whatever. I don't hold myself out as a sponsor for anyone, but I do get asked for my opinion from time. And you know, mostly what I say and when I see what I see when people are bringing all that baggage to us is that in the end, it's that internal awareness of their condition that's going to see them through. That that is internal it's different from that awareness I had when I was 25, when I was in denial about it and it didn't do anything about it. It's the awareness I had when I was 38 and had finally had enough. Yeah. And why are we being drug back to all this crap about exam micromanaging and examining our behavior in these tiny little increments that you

see people going through on the Facebook pages and reporting back from these awful conventional meetings? They go to where people's where it's implied that you have to micromanage every moment of your life.

John Sheldon: [00:21:09] Yeah, I don't you know, it's you know, I don't care what organization you're going to participate in, whether it's smart recovery or the Toastmasters club or whatever, you're always going to have individuals in any organization that is going to, you know, somehow put forth their personality and their view on things and cause trouble and can't tell you things that are not true. And it gets even more complicated when you're dealing with something like substance abuse where well, where it is genuine there are genuine feelings of guilt and shame, depression, despair, that it's that we feel when we get in here.

John Huey: [00:21:56] It's so important for newcomers. All right. And for people, even people our age, they can get themselves into a corner from time to time. And, you know, you know, slipping is not to be fucked with, OK? It's really, really serious. I know that my last slip almost took me out of this world and I'll do anything. Within reason internally to avoid another one, but I'm not going to be controlled by some outside force or some outside personality in order to do so, I have to figure out internal mechanisms that work for me because here's the thing. Slips are reinforced. Unfortunately, I've had to deal with a couple of people in recent years or dead right now who kill themselves with alcohol. And there are some alcoholics and addicts who get to a point, a tipping point, where the return is virtually impossible. I know we are always supposed to say that, oh, nothing's impossible, you can always come back and I've got another that but I have seen in real-time in Vivid, all too vivid, very unfortunate tale. That some people get to a certain point and they're only going out one way, right?

John Sheldon: [00:23:35] Yeah, it's very serious. You could you absolutely. You know, I've known people more than I care to recount who have died from relapses. And it absolutely happened.

John Huey: [00:23:44] So and people do crazy things like, you know, remain unvaccinated and go to Missouri. Right.

John Sheldon: [00:23:52] Right, right. There's all kinds of.

John Huey: [00:23:54] Yeah, they do crazy stuff, you know. Yeah.

John Sheldon: [00:23:58] So, you know, I guess that what I was thinking about, um, you know, I don't care if it's AAA and the 12 steps or smart recovery and their principles and what they do or a life ring or whatever, people will relapse. And with that comes regret and shame. And I mean, that just happens. But I think it's just important to understand that those are internalized feelings that you can actually use to inspire you to move on with your recovery, right? Yeah. Your recovery can continue. And that that here's the thing, OK? And I'll put it in the context of AA. Here's the danger. You relapse, you come back to a meeting, you feel like shit. You tell everybody your shit. You tell everybody you're not working the steps. Right. And then there's some asshole over there that agrees with you. That's what's really dangerous.

John Huey: [00:25:00] But I've seen that I have a friend who I've known since the late nineteen eighties, and I'm not going to identify by gender or meeting or anything like that, but this is somebody I know who's now older than I am. And this person has not had more than six months of continuous sobriety and all that time. I know for a fact my. And every once in a while I see this person, and the only thing I've learned how to say to someone in this situation is I'm so glad to see. I can't say much more than that, right,

John Sheldon: [00:25:46] Because I am glad to see this right. Right. And you don't you know, I think the best thing to do with someone who relapses is just give them the space to talk about it when they want to talk about it, how they want

John Huey: [00:25:55] To talk about all that. You know, even when it is a seemingly hopeless case, there are people that have recovered even at this late, very late in life.

John Sheldon: [00:26:09] Sure, sure. Why do I see some cases that you would never thought the person would ever live through and eventually went on to have some long-term sobriety? But yeah, but that that's the thing that that I think that. You know, if there's anything I would want to be able to help somebody with, as if when I see someone come back from relapse if they're overly down on themselves and they think that everything, that they screwed everything up and they have to start all over their recovery from square one. You know, recovery is a long-term process. It's a process of

change that goes on. And you learn from your ups in your downs. And if you're alive at a meeting that day after a relapse, you're in a good place. And eventually, all those feelings of shame and despair and guilt will go away. But there is a danger. And I agree and I know what you're saying. I mean, when it comes to the 12 steps, if you're at if you're in a circle of people who. Are going to blame your relapse because you are somehow defective, you didn't do the steps properly, you weren't honest enough, all this other kind of crap. And I and I know that happens. That's really dangerous because that's not going to do the person any good. And I just think that the best thing to do is just to be in that person's corner, to support them in whatever their goals are, in their recovery and not and just to give them the space to talk about what they want to talk about when they want to talk about it. And a lot of the stuff, too, if you can afford it, if you can get some sort of professional help, sometimes that is that's the best possible way to deal with that kind of thing for sure.

John Huey: [00:27:49] It's not a yeah. I mean, in my own case, I know that since I got sober, I haven't had a lot even could approach to be clinical depression. Yeah. Ever since I get so I was chronically depressed in my last year and a half drinking. So in my case physiologically when I took the alcohol away, the depression went away. Yeah, but if you take the alcohol away and the depression is still there, it's something else. Yeah. And we can't I mean, you know, we all know we can't. I'm sure in the one thing about the secular community, I've never heard anybody tell anybody to stop taking their medication or not to a therapist or not take a scientific approach to a clinically diagnosed medical problem. We don't do that. I've never heard it has happened, but I've never seen it in the years I've been around. So that's a good thing. We don't do that. But even in this secular thing with these books and all this, I was going to say crap that some of my other friends will take umbrage if I say it's crap, OK, all this stuff, these how-tos and this way and that way and how do you do it and all of that other shit, I could easily write a how-to book. I'm never going to do it right. I'm trying to get my next poetry book published. I'm not going to write a book about this. Right, because it's not a book. It's a set of very simple ideas. Doesn't have anything to do with it.

John Sheldon: [00:29:22] The last thing I think that a person needs when they relapse is to critique is any sort of criticism because they didn't follow some sort of a rigid program just the right way. That's the worst thing. The best thing that that person can get is some support from people who will support genuinely support them and not try to

beat them down further. The guilt that others put on you or try to put on you is what's so damaging and unhelpful and that that's something that we can defend against. You know, nobody has a right to make you feel, you know, I'm saying because and people will do that. I don't know why, but sick bastards will do that.

John Huey: [00:30:04] Well, if you go back to the moment that you decided to stop. And internally, not externally. Figure out how to reinforce that moment and what brought you to that moment over and over and over again, there couldn't be, for me at least a simpler way to stay sober, because as I walked down the streets all those years in downtown Washington, whenever I was in town in the old days, I'd walk down, I'd walk down the street in a suit in this square in 1960, whether we were nuts in those days, but about how we dressed and stuff. But it certainly wasn't for comfort. But I went through all that discomfort every day. I was in town to hear people tell me how their lives had improved as a result of abstinence, not how their lives had improved because they bought some fucking book. I, I mean, my life improved when I read books. It's just that I had to read thousands of them from my life to really improve. So I know books improve people's life because my whole life and career have been based on reading. All right. But no one book has ever taken over my f ing or directed my f ing life.

John Huey: [00:31:34] Right. But what I did have efficacy was this idea that abstinence is combined with that decision would take me wherever I needed to go. And when I see somebody in desperate trouble and I just had someone contact me recently who appears to be in pretty desperate, desperate trouble, I can't. And I'll talk to this person some more. But I don't really have a lot of, quote-unquote wisdom to impart. But I do have a couple of like. Cor, I hate to use the word belief because people will misconstrue that I do have a couple of core principles that I know worked for me and that I, I have a feeling may work for others if they incorporate those core principles into the internal structure of who and what they are. But going into this thing where you feel you have to go into a meeting and beat your breast and say, I'm so sorry I fucked up again, I'm such a coward, don't have to do that awful piece of shit. I mean, I hear it in our meeting. I know.

John Sheldon: [00:32:55] Ok, I hear it. It happens. And but that the what people should understand is they don't have to do that. You do what you're comfortable with doing. You know what I hate. I don't know if you've ever been to meetings like this. I'm sure

you have. This is what I absolutely can't stand at meetings. Who is here for the first time since their last relapse? I hate that, I hate that don't say that if somebody wants to talk about being back from a relapse, to talk about it, but to put that out there in the environment where everybody is quiet. Wait. Oh, my God. Who might have who's here for the first time? That's just. That's awful.

John Huey: [00:33:30] Right.

John Sheldon: [00:33:30] Well, leave that alone. Let leave it up to the people to decide and then give them the freedom to talk about it and not talk about it.

John Huey: [00:33:37] Yeah. And I, I, I'm sort of remiss because I don't even now don't speak up when I hear like at a time when chips are being given out. Yeah. You know who would like a 24-hour chip or the desire. Right.

John Sheldon: [00:33:52] Right, right.

John Huey: [00:33:54] I mean who's a fuckup.

John Sheldon: [00:33:57] I know. I hate that.

John Huey: [00:33:57] I hate it and I hate it. It's and if you're a real fuckup you'll get a lot of those jokes and you know, you

John Sheldon: [00:34:06] Know, the problem with that, too, is so relapses can happen. And as you said, they are very dangerous. You do not want to have one, but they will happen. But the thing is, is to somehow find a way to turn that into a stepping stone towards your progress and not get trapped into some sort of a revolving door where it's relapse. Come back and do your penance. Get your chip. You know, it can be that, right?

John Huey: [00:34:35] Right. Well, the horror here's the for anybody that's listening and thinking about this relapse, I can say from my own experience and long observation. The older you are, the worse the relapses get. We don't do well as we age and continue to fuck up and not and I said fuck up but well and on one level, but at you know, we

don't do a lot of people don't do well as they age in this substance takes over more and more and more of their life and their health. Yeah. And it's I mean, it's really sad. Yeah. And, you know, even. I've seen it in recent years, I've had a couple of very sad instances of people we've lost. And I said a long time ago that I wasn't going to let alcoholics break my heart anymore, but they still do. On some level, on some visceral level, and every time it happens and it happens all too often for my liking, I have to say something like, if only he'd taken her, she'd taken one step back and looked a little bit longer. At what had been good for them in the past. And focused on that. But it's not that simple. That's the other part, the mystery part, yeah. How am I going to get that? How are we going to get that across? And, you know, that's why all the scientists and everybody will hear about it at our convention here in October from some of the scientists looking for the magic elixir, the magic moment, the magic bullet, which I tend to doubt,

John Sheldon: [00:36:41] Think to that people try to understand something that is just pure insanity. And there's no rationalization about it. There's no rational reason why we would drink again. But we do. The closest that I came to relapse, John, I was sober for two years. And for whatever reason, I thought I was going to get a bottle of apricot brandy, put it in a coat pocket in my closet and keep it there so that it would be there when I needed it. I went so far as to actually go into the liquor store to get that bottle and then tore out of there. I don't know why I would have done that. There was nothing going on with me, really, other than normal life stuff, you know, but that's where I was nonetheless. I could very easily have gotten that bottle. I could have very easily have relapsed. And I don't know if there had been ever any explanation for it other than I was just somehow I was apparently on shaky ground. I'm glad that I didn't relapse if I would have relapsed. I would hope I know that I would have felt bad about myself, I would have felt bad and guilty and all that kind of crap. But I would hope that I would have gone back to the meeting and been supported by my friends and been able to move on and learn from that. As it happens. I learned from the experience anyway, because I know I know the state of mind of being in a relapse. I know the state of mind. And so I've got a lesson learned that I can share with people as an experience. I was very lucky that I just didn't drink. I was very, very, very lucky.

John Huey: [00:38:21] Well, you know, this mystery can strike you anywhere you are in life, being here in Washington all these years, I've either known or been associated with

people who are associated with alcoholics at the very pinnacle of power, like. Who pissed it all away? That's right,

John Sheldon: [00:38:43] Right.

John Huey: [00:38:44] Yeah, just a more expensive bar wearing more expensive clothes. Yeah, I learned that long ago. This doesn't respect any. There's nothing you can have that will save you if you can't get straight if you really are doing this to yourself.

John Sheldon: [00:39:03] But you say it's something that's so insane to do that. There's no rationalizing that. There's no

John Huey: [00:39:11] Rational

John Sheldon: [00:39:12] Choice. There is. So it's like you can't say, oh, this person didn't do this step right. Or this person did. You know, who knows what happened so

John Huey: [00:39:20] Far beyond normal human experience? It is. And it's so far beyond any kind of rational constructs that I'm familiar with. Yeah. That how could I possibly. The. Apply negative terms to people, so if you can't. How can I do that?

John Sheldon: [00:39:44] I liken it to, and I have this I have mental illness in my family. I have a brother who is schizoaffective and he's he his behavior is completely irrational. And I don't try to understand it because I can't. You can't say he acts this way because he had a bad day or he didn't do this. Right. I didn't do that right. No, no, no. It's just it's a physical-chemical condition.

John Huey: [00:40:12] Yeah. I don't know your brother, but I do know that science doesn't understand his brain chemistry well enough yet to be truly effective in terms of dealing with is it science does not know the brain chemistry of alcoholics and addicts well enough yet to be able to be truly effective in the way that is wonderful, for example, are wonderful. Vaccines are so

John Sheldon: [00:40:38] Getting to the topic of this podcast episode when we're talking about dealing with guilt and shame associated with a relapse. Well, I think that it

would be good for everybody to understand even the person who relapsed to just to be aware that there is no explanation for what happened. There is nothing that you did wrong that caused that to happen. So the feelings that you have are nothing but just that. And they will pass, right?

John Huey: [00:41:08] Exactly.

John Sheldon: [00:41:08] Move on. Move on with your life and learn from the experience. The lessons will come eventually.

John Huey: [00:41:16] Yeah. And you can be adjudicated guilty. Yeah. Very dedicated. Responsible in a court of law. Yes. Each recovery chat room and our friend in Texas call them echo chambers. These recovery places and rooms and meetings are not definitive fact-finding outfits. Right. They don't know enough about you to put their finger on you and they have no right to do that.

John Sheldon: [00:41:49] There will always be some stupid ass that's going to say, oh, you relapse because of this or that. I have seen it so many times. Those people don't know what the hell they're talking about. Don't even listen to them.

John Huey: [00:41:59] If you would only read my book and follow every instruction, then you wouldn't do this again. Yeah. And then they go out and do it again.

John Sheldon: [00:42:07] All right. Yeah. So that just compounds the guilt that people feel when they're when they do relapse. So it's it is very dangerous. You know, I've seen it, I've seen it so many times. It makes me sick. And, you know, and I'm a person who's not opposed to the 12 steps. But I do. But I do think they should come with a warning label and a caution, as should a lot of things in our recovery. But, yeah, it's very tricky stuff, you know.

John Huey: [00:42:39] Well, I'm an atheist, unalterably opposed to the 12 steps, but we're not going to get we need to get it. We need to do that on the stage.

John Sheldon: [00:42:48] Well, yeah. Yeah. And the thing about that, maybe someday we should just have that conversation because, you know, you could talk about the

steps as written or you can talk to you can talk about them as you yourself have experienced them.

John Huey: [00:43:05] Well, I just call me Literal-minded, but I take them at their word. I take them for what they say. I don't interpret what they say. I take what they say

John Sheldon: [00:43:15] Literally, OK? And I understand I understand them as experiential. So it was just safe. No, that's not my experience either. But I see them as words written at a certain place by certain people anyway.

John Huey: [00:43:31] Yeah, if we go down that rabbit hole will ruin it. Yeah.

John Sheldon: [00:43:35] I guess I, but I could I mean even the things that you talk about, you know, but anyway I'm done with all that kind of crap to be honest with you. I don't, I don't have to put a number on anything that I have done in my recovery or any of my experiences. I don't have to attach a stop to it. I don't have to think back. I had I did that at one time, as you know, for many, many years. It's not so important to me now.

John Huey: [00:43:56] Well, people like to measure things. And I, I really do wonder about these measurement tools. I've got this 34 years sitting, which I still keep like, why do I keep this program. Thirty-four-year chip on my desk. OK, and I change it once a year or another one which fortunately they've always gone up and down. But you know, even Mr. Rational here likes his little token of, you know, progress. But we shouldn't turn it into a. Hotham, particularly for people that are just starting this because somebody's going to look at an old gray-haired mother like me and say, oh shit, I can never do that. What's with him? He doesn't what does he have to do with me? I'm 30 years old. My life's in a mess. What is this person sitting in Bethesda, Maryland, of all places, have to do with me, which is what most of America said. That's pointy-headed liberal here. But that's another story. But you know where it's like. It's like. It's maddening sometimes because I have an article of faith that it really is exquisitely simple. But incredibly complicated to impart that knowledge, and I feel very strongly that one of the greatest challenges of this secular program, whatever we want to call it, once we get over our obsession with all this, a shit which again is yet another topic for another time.

John Huey: [00:45:44] But I, I, I, you know, I know that I simply am on and on about how destructive and wasteful our discussion of AA in any way is. Did that recently. But when we boil it all down, right, how do we actually impart the simplicity of what works for us? I mean, I've got a group of people in Washington now. We're all getting old. And, you know, one of them is 81 and just had his forty first. Birthday or recovery, I shouldn't say a recovery anniversary, and I look at his life and I look at a lot of the other people I know with long term recovery and even though our lives are extremely different, the life circumstances are different, the backgrounds are different, our daily activities are very different. It seems to be very, very often when I'm talking to people about what they're doing to recover and stay recovered today, it's incredibly simple. They're just showing up. They said it's not a philosophy. Yeah, I mean, I'm going to talk at the convention about philosophy a little bit. I'm going to have a session on atheism as it relates to recovery.

John Huey: [00:47:13] My how my core beliefs have helped drive me as a person forward in this whole thing. But, you know, even my I do have a couple of Christian friends left from my early days and, you know, the very unusual people that I know from alternative lifestyle communities that I knew in the 60s that are sober now and, you know, others I know from the world of business and politics that are, to all these people, totally, completely different. But sober for a long, long time. And, you know, it's not a magic elixir, but it seems to me that the simplicity of it is really one of the hallmarks is something that can be pointed to rather than, oh, I went to this book and did this book every day or I got up every morning and did my Zen meditation or I did this or I did that. OK, so that's you know, that's you know. It's a constructive night, but how do we frame it, how do we get it across, how do we really convince people that guilt, shame, and contrition will not do it for them? Because I think there are a lot of things recovery's a wonderful thing, but there are things within the recovery community that I believe retard people's progress, hold them back and for some are inimical to their happiness.

John Huey: [00:48:59] Yeah. Which is what this topic is all about, why do we do things that could negatively impact our happiness once we've done that one incredibly positive thing that, well, not guaranteeing as happy whatever happiness is now, but certainly abstinence virtually guarantees you a more normal life, right? Yeah. And ergo, a more productive life which could lead to a happier life. Yeah. And we've just constantly sort of I, I am almost of an opinion that when any whenever anybody talks about this step for

and all of this other shit contrition and oh, you're a newcomer, here's a chip because you're a fuckup and you're one-dayer and all of these other things. Right. Instead of coming up with a simpler set of constructs and most of them are almost of the opinion that those things are dragging people down, not as much as but are a contributing factor to these relapses that we see. I relapse that I believe is directly connected with people's lack of making a full and proper decision about their drinking. But the rest of this stuff can be used as either an excuse or some sort of internal incentive. To go back to the former Behati,

John Sheldon: [00:50:40] Yeah, it's now the main thing is its people like you and me who have been around for a long time and have half of our wits about us. Maybe we really do need to look out after the new person in the room who might be getting taken advantage of, somebody who might be putting these kinds of thoughts in their minds. Because the problem is that for a lot of people who are just struggling with getting sober, they're in a really vulnerable time in their life. And they were very ready for someone to tell them what to do. And there are plenty of people out there that will be glad to tell them and help them do that. So, yeah,

John Huey: [00:51:18] And, you know, there are people of that mindset that do that.

John Sheldon: [00:51:23] And, you know, and, you know, I've seen that happen even in a secular meeting before. And I just said, OK, I just if I ever see that happen again, I think I might get that new person. Hey, listen, watch out. Beware. You know, beware of the person who says that they're going to help you. Just be very, very careful about,

John Huey: [00:51:43] You know, if if you get to a moment where a drink is imminent. Yeah. And I haven't been to a moment where I got to that moment just before our secular meeting was formed in the summer of 1988, I came close to going to a downtown bar and getting loaded once when I was little less than 18 months sober. But somehow or another, I took a deep breath and knew that instead of walking the circle to go to this bar, if I walked in the other direction down to a five 30 meeting. P.M. meeting, I would find a group of people that at least had the intention not to drink. Yeah, and that was enough for me in that particular situation. Yeah, but it was part of a recommitment to that decision. I made the beginning.

John Sheldon: [00:52:46] Oh, yeah. That was me. Probably every single day for the first 30 or 60 days that I was sober going to meetings or drink. And I went to meetings and. Right. And then calling someone to it's really important just having a network of people who support you. And it's not easy to do that early on, but there are good people out there and just it's just meeting those people and having them in your corners. Well, money.

John Huey: [00:53:11] But you have to find a peer group. Support group. It's relevant. Yes. You know, I was lucky because I knew a group of people here in D.C. who had sort of disappeared from the bar scene. Yeah. I later found in the program

John Sheldon: [00:53:29] I consider myself lucky for the same reason I had people who were all guys. We're all in our 20s or late 20s, early 30s. And we were all getting sober and we were single. I mean, it was all it was just perfect. You know, we were all we all had that in common. And, you know, when we hung out together, we hung out together as friends. And you know that that that's I'm convinced that is what in the early days really helped me.

John Huey: [00:53:57] Yeah, well, I think yeah, I had a program friend. Unfortunately, she passed away prematurely. She was cigarette smoking, but she subsequently became she was an old girlfriend of mine from the 70s, from the bar scene. And we used to have all kinds of fun whenever we ran into each other. And I ran into her on the stairs of the meeting one day and just seeing her there and seeing her just sort of smile at me and nodded her head and understand why I was there. What's important? Yeah, I mean, this lady subsequently got married to someone and became a part of a women's group that was my second wife was a part of and we ended up when our kids were small, ended up socializing and stuff. So it's kind of an ironic way to sort of end up that relationship. And unfortunately, she did pass away from this cigarette thing she had, but she didn't pass away from drinking. Yeah. Her children weren't crying about that, they were crying for sure when she passed, but it was not about that. Yeah, so, you know, you know, now it's pretty simple. I mean, I, I, I, you know, I do have external forces that hold me back from the edge. If I wanted to think about. But I don't need to use them for my daughters and my wife is a lever. They certainly would be if I went down that road. But, you know, the real lever for me is understanding at long last. How important that decision was to me so many years ago. And also, how important it was for me to reject

all these suggestions that I'd be ashamed or guilty or contrite or apologize or all of that other shit which I, unlike you, categorically reject, that was important for me as well.

John Sheldon: [00:56:18] Well, to be clear on that, I reject all those things you just said. I don't see things that way. I just don't see it that way. So in other words, I'm not apologizing to anybody. I'm not

John Huey: [00:56:29] Trying. All right. All right. It's like the New Testament.

John Sheldon: [00:56:32] I'm resolving relationships I know.

John Huey: [00:56:37] In my clerical garb. Yeah. It's not for the ones that think I'm satanic. It's not my black mascara. This is my room garb, you know. You know, the

John Sheldon: [00:56:51] Ironic I don't know if we solved anything or not. I think I think it was an interesting conversation for sure. There are so many things we could talk about. I mean, you know, if we ever wanted to get into a debate. But the thing is, I'm not as I am not the step person that I was as of old. You know, I am pretty much a take it or leave it. I'm I you know, I don't think that they're damaging as you do. But I don't I'm not a promoter of them either, you know, I'm

John Huey: [00:57:20] Saying so I think we're we're probably too old for either one of us to have a conversion experience. Oh, well, I don't know about that.

John Sheldon: [00:57:29] I've changed quite a bit. I've changed a lot. You've probably seen me change a lot in the last five years.

John Huey: [00:57:36] Yeah, I, I, I, well, I saw you develop into sort of a broadcaster that's sort of a broadcaster for broadcasting. I mean you can put up with all kinds of people, including unlikely characters such as myself and you know, here we go once again. On the one hand, we're sort of on a treadmill with our newcomers and our younger friends who may be listening because they say, well, what are these guys talking about? In the end, it all sounds rather circular. In my answer would be that it is mysterious and it is circular, because if you're doing this constant, you know, recommitment to a decision you made, that is something you're going round and round

with over again. But it's not something that has to obsess you or take over your life. It's just like something at your root that you have to be cognizant of. Yeah, because once you're not cognizant of it, then some of these other my friends in Russia, you know, what they call the people that die of alcoholism in Russia, what they say about the when I lived there, it was like I could do it. I should do a podcast on Russian alcoholism. But as an observer. But they always call it an accident. He or she had an accident. He used the restroom. It's not an accident, it's something we choose to do, but at the same time, it's not something we're guilty of.

John Sheldon: [00:59:22] That's interesting, they would call it an accident. That's what they call it, interesting,

John Huey: [00:59:28] A call they called Chernobyl an accident. Yeah, it was anything but if you look at that wonderful film about it, I. Yeah, but, you know, there's. There's a lot to be said, I don't know if we helped, as I say, John, if we helped even one person with this ramble.

John Sheldon: [00:59:48] Oh, yeah. You'll find just like always, there will be many people that will talk about how much they enjoyed and help were helped by the conversation. Then you'll have another group of people that absolutely couldn't stand it.

John Huey: [01:00:00] All right. I do have me if you're there. Yeah, yeah.

John Sheldon: [01:00:08] You should try as well

John Huey: [01:00:10] From time to time trying to catch me up short in some sort of ridiculous inconsistency of some sort. All right. I say to them, but I'm going to end this on a sweet and lovely note that, you know, we wish our friends nothing but success as they go about reaffirming their decision not to drink. That's a good way.

John Sheldon: [01:00:37] That's a very good way to end it. Thank you so much, John. I really appreciate you being here and talking to me and our listeners.