

<http://www.quittingcrystalmeth.com/talking-the-tape-forward/>

Talking the Tape Forward by Joseph Sharp

Last month I had an outpatient surgical procedure related to my cancer treatment. In the prep, the nurse put an IV into the back of my hand, taped it secure, and let the saline drip. It was a little cold at first, but nothing extraordinary. Then, about five minutes later, came the actual medicine. She attached the syringe to the extra port and pushed it in. I felt a sudden chill rush through my veins, as my body tingled all over. And, you guessed it, I was triggered big time.

My mind flashed to when I'd use, the rituals, the pleasure of finding the vein and the slight, small cough that followed a good hit.

The nurse, a woman in her mid-thirties, sensed something and asked if I was okay. I shook my head. "I'm really triggered right now," I said.

She gave me a quizzical expression. "You are what?" she asked softly.

Then I explained. That I was a recovered IV meth user. That the coldness I felt rushing through my veins reminded me of other rushes. And so on.

She listened patiently, an empathetic smile on her face. "Well, that's all behind you now, right?"

I told her I was coming upon my two year anniversary from quitting in a couple of months and I was rarely triggered any longer by people, places, or things—you know, the usual suspects. "But it was gruesome at the end. I didn't know myself," I confessed. And by the time I'd finished sharing my feelings, the trigger had long passed. Ancient history. It was just this lovely woman and me, talking intimately. When another nurse asked if she'd like to take her break, the nurse shook her head, smiled down to me, and said, "No, we're bonding." (You gotta love nurses.)

In recovery, you hear a lot about "playing the tape forward" whenever triggered. We want to play the "tape" of our memory forward *past* the euphoric recollections that our disease wants us to remember. At least that's how the disease works in my mind: let's recall only the initial high, the rush, the hot sex, or whatever. So to keep the trigger from turning into a full-blown craving, which could escalate into using, I play the tape forward to the time after the initial euphoria: to the darkness, the sketchy people I was usually around, the sex that was actually not so great, but hollow and empty. I play the tape forward to the end of my last run, where my hand was trembling so I couldn't get the needle into my arm, to being up five days in a row without any sleep, to the exhaustion and horrible come down that followed. That's forward, way past the euphoric high, to the reality of being a drug addict. My life then. Playing the tape forward is one of the most powerful tools we have to stop a trigger from growing into a craving.

The unstated part of playing the tape forward is that you're doing so in your mind. You're thinking through the entire journey of your using experience, exposing the darkness and potential death. What I did with the nurse was a little different. Instead of playing the tape forward in my mind, I talked it forward to another person

I've done this before—whenever I'd call a friend, confess a thought or craving, and "tell" on myself. Why? I knew intellectually the desire to use was bad for me, but I just needed to tell someone about it in order to take away its power. (As they say in the rooms of CMA and AA, "You're only as sick as your secrets.")

So for today, I want to emphasize “talking” your tape forward. Aloud. To another person. This almost always works to interrupt the trigger’s influence and, quickly, the craving to use passes before you’ve even finished talking.

A few other notes: a common limitation we place on this technique is to solely focus on that last horrendous bottom. But playing your tape forward can also include: forward to the tough-won days and months of sobriety you now have. And if you’ve been sober even longer, you can play your tape through those challenges and triumphs of your early recovery, through it all up until your life today. You can include the rich rewards of sobriety, your newfound friends and way of living that you don’t want to put at risk by using.

Bottom line: playing it forward can mean much more than just remembering those awful post-using consequences.

And consider “talking” it forward next time, if you can. To yourself (or you could write it out) if you can’t get ahold of another person. Talk it forward. Or try texting it forward if you can’t get ahold of someone in person. Recounting past the initial euphoric recall to the gritty hell of using is an essential tool in our toolkit of sobriety.