

If you knew me when I was growing up, you'd know why it's pretty surprising how I feel about marijuana. It is surprising to many why I did a complete 180 about medical marijuana.

When I was 18 years old, I slipped while taking a shower in my apartment in New York City. My lower back and tailbone came crashing down onto the back of the tub. Afterward I had some bruising and pain. I took ibuprofen twice or three times over a 24-hour period and eventually the pain subsided. I was fine ... or so I thought.

Gradually the pain returned and turned into a lot of pain. About a month after the fall I went to the doctor. I was sent to a back specialist who ordered a CT Scan and an MRI. He told me the fall had fractured my spine. I was sent home with two prescriptions and a referral: one prescription was for pain and inflammation and the other a muscle relaxant. The referral was for physical therapy.

I tried the PT and at first it was helpful but over time the it was useless. Within a day or so of my appointments, I was in pretty significant pain. I returned to my regular doctor who kept me on the pain meds and muscle relaxants and at some point she suggested I try yoga.

Yoga, I learned, is great for people with excellent balance. For those of us with gait issues (I have something known as [ataxia](#). I can be in a room by myself and fall over for no obvious reason), yoga can be hazardous to our health. You can imagine how someone with poor balance and a weak back might find yoga dangerous.

Through the years, several moves (Washington, D.C., Maryland, Virginia, California and eventually Puerto Rico), and a marriage in 2001, I have seen several doctors about my back. Each recommended I do physical therapy and the more “forward-thinking” doctors suggested I try yoga and acupuncture. I was willing to try acupuncture, but when I explained my issues with yoga and physical therapy, MRIs and CT scans were performed to confirm I wasn't just drug seeking.

After seeing the results of the diagnostics, every doctor confirmed I was legitimately in a lot of pain—or at least I should be. All of them prescribed the same “cocktail of drugs.” Shortly after we moved to Puerto Rico in 2009 I was diagnosed with [Sacroiliitis](#) and [degenerative disc disease](#).

My new doctor in Puerto Rico was fine giving me the same prescriptions, however at some point she asked if I wanted to take something natural and that wouldn't damage my organs. She even said she was confident after the governor was out of office, the incoming one would approve marijuana for—at minimum—medical use.

I explained that I had a history of addiction, not my own, but my late mother and both my brothers struggle(d) with alcoholism. I feared drugs that had higher risks of addiction, even if the ones I was currently taking (Vicodin and more recently Tramadol) weren't as effective. I also explained very emphatically that pot was a gateway to more dangerous drugs like cocaine and heroin. She asked me to explain. I told her about my family.

I grew up surrounded by addiction. My mother was an alcoholic who never admitted to being one, so she never sought help. Although I hadn't known it at the time, my mother was what is known as a functioning alcoholic.

When she worked, my mother successfully held down a long-term and sought-after position as an editor at *The New Yorker magazine*. Never counseled for absenteeism, for showing up late or for being hung over, my mother wasn't what we think of as a typical alcoholic. Her acute attention to detail earned her an incredible reputation at work.

Home was a very different story. With my father's demanding job at ABC News (where he was head writer for 15 years), full-time caregiving responsibilities fell to my oldest brother. Just three years older than I am, he woke me up in the morning, made my breakfast, helped me pick out my clothes, saw to it my books and homework from the previous night were in my backpack, and then he walked me to my elementary school.

He was always on time to pick me up and walk me back home, and then saw to it that my homework was done before my mother checked it over.

My middle brother was a different story.

Often compared to my mother—physically as well as in personality—few people were surprised when my middle brother took up drinking and smoking pot in his early teens. By the time he was 16, he had “graduated” to using cocaine. When I was 15 and he was 18, my middle brother overdosed on coke mixed with PCP (also known as Angel Dust).

Paralyzed and unable to speak when his girlfriend and her parents rushed him to the ER in the wee hours of that Saturday morning, three spinal taps and a CT scan later, the doctors concluded the loss of oxygen to his brain had no lasting effect on his cognition.

Waking up to the news that my brother had overdosed was scary. Nobody gave me details and all the grownups were talking in code—perhaps in an attempt to protect me. All it did was convince me he had died.

My mother had a complete meltdown and couldn't function, which meant all the responsibility once again fell to my oldest brother. This only reinforced my fears that it was very serious. If not dead, he must've been messed up for life.

When I finally learned a few days later he was not only alive, but that doctors felt confident he would be able to live a normal life, his reaction and mine were very different.

Rather than see it as a second chance, he saw him himself as invincible. He continued smoking every day, drinking heavily and snorting coke—as money would allow.

By contrast, I vowed never to do drugs or drink. In my mind, drinking and smoking pot were either as dangerous as coke and heroin or they led to using coke and/or heroin. Anti-drug slogans

did little to sway me otherwise. All this took place during the height of First Lady Nancy Reagan's "Just Say No" campaign and [D.A.R.E](#) (Drug Abuse Resistance Education).

Both left indelible impressions on me.

In terms of his career, my middle brother excelled—at drinking and getting high. He used to brag he could drink a magnum of wine a day and smoke up to a dime bag of weed a day.

After our mother died when I was 27, I drifted away from both my brothers. I believe the stress of being a caregiver at such a young age and missing out on a childhood affected my oldest brother. He started drinking and smoking all the time and he was "worse" at it than our mother—meaning that he wasn't very functional when he was drunk. He was verbally and physically violent toward women. According to relatives who are still in touch with both him and me, he is on wife number four or five.

My middle brother was very protective of his drinking and using. He made it clear that if anyone brought up the topic, they'd be banished from his life. There are some eggshells too difficult to walk on, and eventually I could no longer sit by and watch him destroy his life.

Although I lived with guilt, having them both out of my life was (and still is) healthier for me.

And With Time and Pain Come Clarity

Fast forward some 30 years and my husband and I decided to leave our jobs in biotech. Abruptly (at least that's how our close friends and my husband's family saw it), we sold our house in Southern California, quit our jobs and bought an [organic farm](#) in the interior of Puerto Rico.

A few years after we bought the farm, I started freelance writing for a well-known addiction center. Everything I thought I had known about pot was turning out to be wrong. That my middle brother "graduated" from pot to cocaine had nothing to do with a physical addiction to pot, and smoking it didn't make his body want a bigger high. He wanted a better, quicker and more intense way to escape his past and present. None of that could be blamed on marijuana.

I also learned about its medicinal properties, which were eye-opening and sobering—pun intended.

The more I read, the more a-ha moments I had. I [read many articles about how marijuana](#) reduced pain in cancer patients, reduced the extremely unpleasant side effects associated with cancer, [treated people with epilepsy](#), [prevented cancer from spreading](#), relieved pain from multiple sclerosis, treated glaucoma, reduced anxiety and much more. (For a list of indications medical marijuana can be successful treating or helping with, please see this article on [Cannabis strains](#).)

This knowledge took me on a reconnaissance mission to understand why marijuana is so vilified and compared to drugs like cocaine and heroin. Indeed it's still a [schedule 1 drug](#), in spite of the fact that there are numerous references to marijuana being used to treat myriad health conditions

dating back to China some 3000 years ago and likely brought to Egypt through the silk and spice trade route.

With everything I learned I could write several articles about the [failed War on Drugs](#). If I walked away with one clear message, it's that pot shouldn't be demonized and certainly possession and usage not criminalized.

My 180 About Medical Marijuana

I brought my findings to my doctor's attention. None of this was of any surprise to her—except my 180-turn about medical marijuana. She asked if I was ready to revisit the idea of medical marijuana now that it was legal. Her predictions came true, she explained. In May 2015, former governor [Alejandro Garcia Padilla legalized marijuana for medicinal use](#). And it was now available for sale through dispensaries.

No longer on the fence about its safety and efficacy, and confident there was almost no risk of addiction, we decided to go for it.

I never imagined I would even consider using medical marijuana, given my brothers' and mother's histories with addiction. However, between learning about the myriad benefits (ironically the result of writing about addiction), its extremely low risk of addiction and that my doctor is such a proponent of it, I find myself actually recommending it to others with chronic pain, to relieve the side effects of cancer, glaucoma, fibromyalgia, Parkinson's, etc.

If you're on the fence or have some concerns, talk with your doctor about it. You may be as happily surprised as I turned to be.