

To whom it may concern,

My name is Evan Johnson. I am a kratom consumer. I am a 26 year old PA native, and a productive, industrious member of society. I have had my feet in many fields. I am a social worker presently, a former steel fabricator/welder, former McDonald's manager, and a musician on the side. Currently, I am working at one of the largest and most influential mental health agencies in Luzerne County. My job is to provide linkages to the community for people suffering from disruptions to their mental health. I am passionate about my work towards positive outcomes for my clients. I do my work with enthusiasm and energy despite the social adversity, poor luck, and psychological trauma I help my clients deal with on a day-by-day basis. I am proud of the successes I facilitate in their lives. Everything from helping them get a day's dinner to finding them a home. From micro to macro, every success means a lot to me.

I wasn't always as industrious and productive as I strive to be today... I wasn't always in a place where I could commit to helping disadvantaged people. That is a privilege I had to work very hard to attain.

For the nearly seven years encompassing my final years of high school and the entirety of college, I battled mental illness of my own which manifested in a cycle of depression and addiction. These issues worsened over the years, eventually culminating with three hospitalizations within six months from episodes of binge drinking. I had also received a DUI, a public drunkenness charge, and a disorderly conduct charges. All alcohol related. My blood alcohol level was around .3 each time I was hospitalized. Some binges even had me drinking mouthwash to avoid the detox after I was out of alcohol and couldn't get more.

I was severely addicted. Once the binge started, it would only stop once I was bed-ridden and out of alcohol. I was told by doctors that each binge will take a progressively harder toll on my body and most likely result in death by my thirties. I did not heed their warnings. Eventually suicide began to cross my mind multiple times a day.

But the part of me that is dominant today wanted to live...

I committed to rehab, tried to focus solely on work and school. Took up exercise, meditation, nutrition, etc. I tried to apply the principles of self-care I learned in social work education to myself. None of this worked initially, but seeds to flourishing were planted with each healthy activity I tried. Eventually my attention was directed towards supplements, of which I tried many to varying degrees of success. Valerian root, St. John's wort, kava, various vitamin formulas. During this period of intense research on methods of self-improvement, I discovered kratom and ordered some out of desperation right before a relapse on alcohol.

The kratom arrived to my house shortly after my parents called the cops on me for being belligerent. Their presence calmed me down and they left after I apologized to my parents. I walked outside to get air and noticed a package sitting by the side door. I realized it was the kratom. I ate some of it right then and there. I promptly vomited due to the taste and being drunk. After I fought through the horrendous alcohol detox, I then decided to try the kratom again. I did this the following day upon reaching .00 blood alcohol which my parents were forced to measure due to my tendency to sneak alcohol before going to work. I worked at McDonalds at the time, and could barely hold that job due to my issues.

After taking the kratom I felt better than I had in years. Alert, sharp, and motivated. I didn't know what to make of it initially. I continued attending outpatient rehab over the days following.

After a session that was particularly emotional. I went home and ate some kratom and then decided to go for a run. In that clear head-space kratom provided, I reflected on the rehab session that day where I witnessed a single mom describe her desperation. Suddenly it was like everything I was attempting with college, recovery, self-care, and my life trajectory in general came full circle. It was a moment of epiphany and synchronicity.

It was on that day, at that moment, that I realized how lucky I am to be born in this country and to have the life I do. All my doubts about becoming a social worker dissolved. I realized it is my purpose to help people with mental illness.

I haven't had a binge since.

That was four years ago. I went from being an alcoholic barely able to hold a job at McDonald's to someone passionately committed to helping others and fortunate enough to be doing so as a career.

I truly believe that kratom provided the head-space to be able to fully commit to overcoming my addiction. It certainly was not the sole reason I was able to overcome, but seemed to facilitate a tipping point. Mental illness is one of the great issues our society has not found an effective way to combat. As a result, many people unfortunately do not survive. Due to the vast differences among people, be it genetics or social environment, the road to recovery will differ greatly for each person suffering. Kratom may or may not be part of that for many people. I firmly believe that it is not perfect, not for everyone, not a miracle. I was for me though. It was the atomic bomb in my personal Manhattan Project that I began in order to win the war for my mental health. A quick search on the internet will reveal that many others have been helped by kratom.

For this reason, I believe kratom should remain legal. A ban would be detrimental to the people who have been helped, possibly saved by kratom. Rather, a regulatory structure should be put in place to protect consumers from adulterants and keep it out of the hands of children. This has already been implemented by compassionate politicians who heard the stories of folks like me.

We don't want to be labelled criminals. We want to be productive and flourishing members of society. Whoever reads this - please - take some time to hear the stories of people who have used kratom to better themselves.

Sincerely,

Evan Johnson, BSW