



## Topping Out...Worse than Hitting Bottom?

Most people are quite familiar with the concept of “hitting bottom” which has been associated with addiction for decades. Fortunately more and more people are coming around to the reality that a person does not have to “hit bottom” (e.g. reach their lowest point in life) in order to get better when it comes to an addictive issue. For some people that is how it worked: they hit their bottom and finally decided to change their lives for the better. That still does happen. However, the point is that one **does not have to** hit bottom first in order to get better. Many people finally make the positive lifestyle changes they need at all different kinds of points in their lives, not just after reaching that lowest point, hitting bottom. Simply put: *Hitting bottom is not a requirement for recovery.*

There is another concept out there that is very common but less well-known in the world of substance abuse and addiction, which may actually be more harmful for people’s lives than hitting bottom. This is something that young people who are abusing substances should pay special attention too. What we are talking about here is the idea of “**topping out**” which can really ruin a person’s life in the long term. What is *topping out* and how does it happen?

When it comes to substance abuse and addiction, in many young peoples’ lives there can be that interval where life can be pretty exciting. Not everyone who abuses drugs goes on a rapid downward spiral right away. Often, there can be many years of a truly extravagant lifestyle when someone is caught up in the life associated with partying, drinking and drugging. Often it is this period of excitement and excess that keeps luring young people back to the world of drugs and alcohol. Going to clubs in the city into the wee hours of the next morning, engaging with multiple sex partners, fist fighting strangers in alleyways, running all night on crazy cocktails of mixed substances, illegally obtaining then spending exorbitant amounts of cash like its water, are all examples of the allure of this “party” lifestyle often associated with getting high for many youth. The problem with living the “wild life” is that unless you are a multi-millionaire, that lifestyle is almost always temporary. Sooner or later the consequences eventually catch up to everyone. Sooner or later, this life of excess and extremes becomes too costly, emotionally, physically, legally and of course financially to maintain. Therefore, once an individual has reached that point in their life where the fun times have become impossible to sustain on any regular basis, that person has likely “topped out”. Therefore by definition, “topping out” refers to reaching a point where life will never be the same again. Someone who has topped out is doomed to keep looking back at the “good old days” which will never return. The person who topped out has only one choice and that is to change and reinvent his or her life, often from scratch or close to it, or else face a life of feeling like a “has been”. A person who has topped out is in a situation where their “ship has sailed” so to speak, especially with regard to their dreams for the future. A simple way to illustrate topping out would be comparing it to someone who maxed out all of their credit cards and blew their credit and then for the rest of their lives that person is stuck paying back the bill with little left to show for anything.

Most substance abuse counselors have had the experience working with younger individuals with the “live for today – eat and drink for tomorrow we shall die” lifestyle in which there is little done toward striving for real life goals and little or no sense of planning for the future. It can start in adolescence when a kid stops trying in school at young age, choosing just to party, get high and have a good time as long as his or her parents will let them stay home. Substance abuse counselors who also work with adults see the other side of the coin when someone has “topped out” and that individual’s money is all but gone, they can’t get a decent job due to felony convictions, no one will lend them any more money, most bridges are burned, and sometimes even their good looks and charm have faded as life has beat them down to looking tired and broken down. A person in that situation may still be in their 20’s or early 30’s but because they topped out early and blew all of what they had going for them, often when they compare themselves with their peers who did not “top out” they are way far behind. Someone who topped out by age 25 may see their peers from high school working good jobs, building careers, working toward buying homes, owning and driving nice cars, and working on building families, while they themselves are still on mom’s or grandma’s couch trying looking for odd jobs that don’t drug testing or do background checks, which these days are few and far between.



By contrast, someone who is older who has experienced some kind of success in life almost always can speak to the fact that they made sacrifices in their youth to get where they are today. A person can still have a degree of fun in their youth and even look back on their younger days with a lot of great memories, however, the person who avoided topping out, usually made sure to keep some priorities in order besides just having a good time. Getting an education, working, saving, doing internships and obtaining various degrees and certifications are often examples of things achieved in youth that are part of the building blocks for a self-sustainable future that those who “top out” in youth may start doing but often let fall by the wayside in favor of having more time for thrills and excitement along the way. The difference, of course, is that the person who stuck with their goals from youth into adulthood has built a foundation for a stable and more enjoyable adulthood. The individual who topped out early, is left in adulthood facing the world behind the eight ball often empty handed, unprepared and under-skilled.

So getting back to the main point: While it may be useful to discuss the concept of hitting bottom in substance abuse treatment, it is also of equal value that young people be forewarned of the perils and pitfalls of topping out early in life. Often the best favor that a young person in the substance abuse game can do for their “future self” is to cut their losses early and pull things together before it is too late and they reach a point where they blew their proverbial cookies with nothing left to show for it. Surely hitting bottom can be a devastating event, but topping out, can be an extended multi-year process that is fun while it lasts but brings with it longstanding repercussions and regrets that can last a lifetime.

*To end on a positive note, either as a group, or on your own, review the following questions for thought and discussion:*

**After reading this, get honest with yourself – is there any possibility that you may be on a life course now in which you are not giving enough consideration toward making absolutely sure you have a positive long term future?**

**Where do you see yourself in 5 years?**

**What are some real life changes you think that you might need to start focusing on more now, in order to achieve the future you want for yourself? (Come up with 2 or 3 specific constructive and realistic ideas for yourself)**





(Continued)

Try to imagine your future self, looking back at you current self, right now. What do you think your future self would say to you to get you on the right path? What would your future self say to you about your substance use? (Do you think your future self would tell you to cut it out or at least slow it down so you can make something out of yourself?)

Of all the things that have been discussed to this point, what is one thing you can start doing today – (or as soon as possible) and stick with it - to start building a better future for yourself?



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