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DYSFUNCTION JUNCTION

by Ruth Shalit

The promos are soft, somber, even a little sinister. A scowling fat man shuffles down a city street. A blond woman sits alone in a restaurant, gulping a glass of white wine. "It is estimated," says the narrator, "that every person with an addiction has an impact on at least five other lives. In a sylvan glade, children frolic in sweet unknowing innocence.

Elegiacally, a tattered, black-and-white photograph flutters in the breeze. Disparate, fragmented narratives are proffered in quick succession: "I was abused as a child. Sexually abused. And I didn't like the feeling. So I would eat."

"I picked him up by his arm, you know, and hit him like this--"

"I've tried just smokin' pot. Just smokin' pot and drinkin'. Just takin' pill. Just shootin' cocaine. Just shooting speed...."

"I didn't know what to do, because I wanted one of those cream puffs--"

"Drinking all the time, I was hanging out with my buddies. Gangbanging. Going to jail...."

"I went into a drawer. I took out a spoon. I took the tops off all the cream puffs. And I ate the filling out of every single one of them."

Welcome to the horror at the end of the line, the logical terminus for a culture in love with its own dysfunction: the Recovery Network, a 'round-the-clock media showcase of addiction and anomie. Currently available only in test markets, this proudly pathological cable channel will go national on April 23. The concept behind cable's newest offering is simple: all recovery, all the time. "The plan is to be a 24-hour-a-day, seven-day-a-week lifeline into the community," says Bill Moses, the former Bear Stearns executive who serves as the network's CEO. "Our

core audience will watch us at five at night and at one in the morning. In a 500-channel world, it's a natural, just a natural." Moses and his partners believe they have hit upon the greatest untapped niche market in television: the many, many millions of Americans who are, or believe they are, addicted to something. "The size of the problem is so staggering, it clearly deserves its own bandwidth," says Larry Namer, chief operating officer. "I can't believe we're not going to be a permanent fixture on the American landscape at the turn of the century."

Happily for ratings, compassion means defining suffering inclusively. "Addiction has many faces and the Recovery Network touches them all," explains a video promo. "From alcohol to drugs, to depression, sex, obsession, eating disorders, family violence, compulsive gambling and sexual abuse." With a revolving troupe of real-life dopers, toppers, anorexics, bulimics, sex addicts, compulsive gamblers and adult children, the Recovery Network hopes to create a new class in the TV culture, one in which victimhood is celebrity. "There will be no narrators, no promotional leaflets. No preaching. No interpretation. Just raw, unprocessed life experience."

On the Recovery Network, all ailments are equal: all are intractable, institutionalized "diseases," deserving of equal sympathy and attention—and air time. "We don't see any difference between being addicted to drugs, being addicted to food or being addicted to gambling," says Bill Megalos, Recovery's director of programming. "We counter vehemently any stigma by less-than-progressive thinkers that any of these ailments ... are representative of moral weakness, rather than medical disorder." Sexaholics, workaholics, cyberholics and rushaholics all will come forward to testify to the ravages of addiction, preferring their intimacies to the nation as support group. With crack and cream puffs as mere signposts along a single continuum of dysfunction, even pudgy housewives can wear the crown of thorns. "As you radiate out from the causes of addiction and its consequences, you start to run into other sources of pain—all of which have their own constituencies," explains Donald Masters, a recovering alcoholic who serves as the chairman of the network.

Programming director Bill Megalos spends his days combing California's twelve-step programs, documenting fresh foibles with the zeal of an anthropologist discovering a pristine tribe. "When you go to these rageaholic meetings, it's beyond poignant," he says. "These are people

taking tennis rackets to cushions, which they've covered up with, like, fifty layers of gaffing tape.... Most of them are transferring the rage they have for their mothers." One survivor left a particular impression. "There was this one guy who was just going off," he says. "He was gay. And he was just raging against everyone in society. He was literally screaming from the top of his lungs. He was saying, 'I used to be young and beautiful. And I'm old now, and nobody loves me.'"

Is there any pain, any addiction that the Recovery Network deems not important enough for air time, better left unshared? Nope. While conceding that anonymity may be crucial "for the healing of an individual person," Megalos insists that the social costs of silence are too high. After all, for those closet rageaholics thwacking their rackets in solitude, a good group scream might just be the gateway to salvation. "It's stunning that some people don't know there are meetings like this," he says earnestly. "I think it hurts society as a whole."

The Recovery Network's programming is segmented, like the programming of more conventional networks, into separate shows. Each show is aimed at a particular niche within the niche market. The discriminating twelve-stepper may choose among "Cruel Spirits," a look at the link between alcohol and violence; "Don't Bet Your Life," aimed at compulsive gamblers; and "What's Eating You?" for waifs and fatties. On the less serious side, the network has developed a show called "Bottoms," featuring frolicsome comedians who will "take a lighter look at the recovery process." One such comedian is "Cocaine Ralph," who regales his audiences with madcap tales from his druggie days. A promotional brochure touts the yukfest as "a creative and effective way to arm addicts with information essential to their recovery."

But the heart of the Recovery Network is surely "Full Circle," an hour-long program purporting to document the "inner workings of the recovery group process." It sounds like rough sledding, until you realize that the participants aren't your typical overtherapized motormouths. Namer, a cofounder of "E! Entertainment Television," spent months cherry-picking an appropriate ensemble--using, he says, "the exact theory that was used to pick the original veejays for MTV."

And here is where one discovers the dirty little secret of the Recovery Network. Inclusion is all very nice, but programming is programming. And while all inner children are created equal, some, in programming terms, are more equal than others. "The bottom line is that it has to be

good television," says Namer. "Some people's stories just aren't very interesting."

Namer's first move toward a more telegenic class of addict was to post flyers at L.A. recovery clinics, offering addicts fame and cash (\$100) in return for their tales of woe. "Sure, there might have been a few actors who showed up," he assures. "But auditions were done only with people legitimately in recovery." The tryouts then began. "It was essentially an open call," says Namer. "People would walk in. They would start telling their story. Some would go on for a half an hour. And you're sitting there on the edge of your seat going, 'No. No! You couldn't have!' But they did."

Not surprisingly, there is a creepy monotonal quality to the players in Namer's corps of star-quality addicts. Nestled cozily in chintz couches, surrounded by cuddly stuffed bunnies and kitties and puppies, the confessors sprinkle their lachrymose monologues with the same catchphrases and catechismal confessions. "I'm the most important person in my life," lisps a recovering compulsive eater named Meredith. "[It's] my recovery, my journey." Michael, yet another problem eater, achieves a breakthrough of sorts when he discovers that some member of his family "are not people who feed me. They're not people who feed the hunger that I have." Perhaps you'll have guessed that Michael's real hunger is, yes, "the hunger that's really deep down inside--the hunger that is really about love." On the Recovery Network, even the scruffiest of pub-crawlers speak like Stuart Smalley. "If I keep suiting up and showing up, I won't have to shoot up and throw up," declares a grizzled biker dude named Don. "Thanks for letting me share."

On a balmy March day in New Orleans, site of the 1997 Cable-TV Expo, Namer, a plump, avuncular father of two in his mid-40s, explains his journey from soulless cable mogul to misty-eyed entrepreneur of dysfunction. Namer readily admits that when he was first approached about the project, back in '93, his reaction was less than compassionate. "Truthfully, when this was first presented to me, I didn't get it," he says. "I said, 'Wait a second, here. You want me to go to Madison Avenue and tell the advertisers that they should give us ad dollars to deliver every cokehead and drug addict and drunk in the United States? I don't get it. ... I sent these guys away.'"

But, just to make double-sure, Namer sent a trusted research assistant to the library. "I said, 'Okay: drug abuse, alcohol abuse, eating

disorders, sexual abuse," Namer recalls. "Just bring me information." The assistant soon returned, bearing glad tidings. "He told me that the number of people afflicted by or affected by those four things is almost 100 million," Namer says, his eyes shining. "I thought: 100 million! It can't be!"

It was, Namer realized, a vast market that had only just begun to be exploited. And, best of all, the cash cow of codependency would never run dry. "When you're in recovery, you never stop being in recovery," Namer says. "From the point of view of a television person, that's the best viewer you could ever possibly find." The ideal couch potato: addicted to addiction TV.

Though the network thus far has been a magnet only to "non-traditional advertisers--Hazelden, Camp Recovery, Annacapa by the Sea--its shareholders are planning a lucrative sideline in recovery merchandising. As a corporate prospectus explains, the network's revenue will come not only from advertising, but from "merchandising and ancillary sources." Already, visions of twelve-step T-shirts, books and inspirational videotapes are dancing in everyone's heads.

Of course, not all the viewers of the Recovery Network will be addicts. Namer and his partner, Recovery CEO Bill Moses, are hoping for a sizable share of an already proven audience, the vast armies of the happily prurient who fill the chairs and the ratings of the daytime talk shows. "If you look at the 'Oprah' shows, if you look at afternoon television, you see that a lot of it is substance abuse, or is, uh, lifestyle related," says Moses eagerly. "And it's fascinating! It's riveting! You can't change the channel!" "We call it voyeurism," chimes in Namer, without smiling. "And that's why we're going to make a lot of money on this at the end of the day."

Not that anyone is in this just for the money. By exploiting private pathologies, the recovery profiteers argue, they perform a public good. "We think what we're doing is unbelievably important," says Namer. "It's no secret now that addiction is prevalent in our society. It's the number one cause of crime. People are being killed by drunk drivers. There are crackheads robbing people.... It's such a serious issue, we think it should be in every home."

To ensure that these noble instincts remain unsullied, the recovery-mongers have retained the counsel of a "board of advisers," filled with distinguished psychologists and proselytizers. Dr. Joseph Pursch, the

renowned psychiatrist who treated Betty Ford and Billy Carter, has agreed to serve as the chair of this advisory board. In a telephone interview, Dr. Pursch, now residing in Laguna Beach, gamely embraced his newfound therapeutic bedfellows. "I believe they are a force for good!" he exclaims in a thick German accent. "A number of the moguls involved in recovery have an emotional motivation. They all made their money in various, heh, heh, heh, devious and other ways. Now, with their other hand, they want to do some good."

For this to happen, Pursch stresses, several pitfalls must be avoided. First, he says, the network must not become a platform for recovered memory buffs and self-proclaimed survivors of satanic ritual abuse. "It is absolute nonsense," he says. "We must not have lengthy self-descriptions of rescues from satanic domination." Uh-oh. Donald Master, chairman of the Recovery Network, sees things a little differently. "I've run into people who've lived through [satanic ritual abuse]," he explains. "I've seen some horrible things.... And I just hope that everyone who's involved with the network will take a stand for compassion."

Another threat that Dr. Pursch warns against is quackery, an ever-present danger in the recovery culture. In seeking to explain the interconnectedness of victimhood, Bill Moses twice insisted that "seventy percent of women who have serious eating disorders have also been sexually abused as children." The network's promotional literature puts the number of survivors of child abuse or child sexual abuse at "20 million." When I asked Pursch about these improbably high figures, he angrily decried them as "totally speculative.... I have no idea where they got it from." The doctor sighs resignedly. "The problem," he says, "is that [recovery capitalists] are all moneymakers. In the end, they are not really knowledgeable about anything other than their own twelve-step programs."

Finally, says Pursch, there is the danger of an excessive reliance on a small clique of recovery celebrities. Though such gurus have large and loyal followings, Pursch believes they offer more silliness and jargon than sensible insight. "I'm thrilled that they are avoiding John Bradshaw," he enthuses. "My understanding ... is that they are avoiding all the trendy people whose appeal is mostly to neurotic housewives, pardon my chauvinism. Bradshaw's fifteen minutes of fame are over." Over, that is except on the Recovery Network. According to the latest programming schedule, a show in the first week will feature "John Bradshaw, noted

author, counselor and recovery figure, shar[ing] invaluable information shame and addiction."

Asked about the tension between good business and good recovery, Pursch turns psychoanalytical. "This is what happens any time you deal with entrepreneurs," he says. "They have to balance their good side with their crafty-to-conniving-to-lying side. It's the job of the advisory board to try to rein in their freedom for ... entrepreneurial crookedness." Once again, the doctor exhales loudly. "I can see how this thing is going to go," he says. "There will be a constant tug-of-war between the neurotic and exhibitionistic and exploitative father, and the levelheaded, both-feet-on-the-ground mother." There is, however, one consolation. "At least we were able to convince them that accepting beer and fast-food advertising was a bad idea," says Dr. Pursch.

But the moneymakers are already looking forward. The network now has its own radio show, its own web site, its own 800-number hotline. By year's end, according to Crain's Electronic Media, the cable channel will be beamed into 15 million homes. And there's more. On January 9, the network reached an agreement with Microsoft to provide enhanced-TV services to Recovery Network viewers. Starting in mid-'97, viewers watching the programming on their computer screen will be able to correspond, in real time, with a virtual community of the proudly dysfunctional. "It'll be the biggest group in the world," says Larry Namer. The recovery moguls and I are sitting at a fancy Cajun restaurant, relaxing in our chairs after a gluttonous orgy of bouillabaisse, lamb and bread pudding soufflé. Namer, understandably, is in an expansive mood. "Very few projects come along in your life that you actually feel good about doing," he declares. "Clearly, this is one of them. Did you know that 60 percent of the Recovery Network's employees are themselves in recovery?"

Tom Tanno, a press assistant for the network, snickers mischievously across the table. "Doesn't it make it hard to fire them, though?" he asks. "Knowing that?"

Namer grows contemplative. "Naw," says the television executive. "It doesn't go that far." And, with that, he lifts up his glass and drains the last drop of vintage Merlot. (Copyright 1997, The New Republic)