

# A Better HIGH

*How Eating, Laughing and Other Stuff Can Get You  
High Naturally, Everyday*

Matt Bellace, Ph.D.

*Inspired by the nationally renowned youth program,  
“How to Get High Naturally”*

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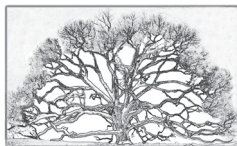
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To my readers, I hope you will enjoy reading this book as much as I enjoyed writing it. I look forward to hearing your compliments...



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CHAPTER ONE

*How to Get High Naturally*

“THIS WOMAN SAID TO ME, ‘YOU DON’T DRINK?

WHAT A GREAT ACCOMPLISHMENT!’

I RESPONDED, ‘I ALSO HAVE A PH.D.’

SHE PAUSED AND SAID, ‘YEAH, BUT NOT DRINKING...

HOW DO YOU DO IT?’”

-MATT BELLACE

The reconstructive knee surgery I had in 2007 taught me the difference between good pain and bad pain. When I woke up in the recovery room, my leg was in this machine that was bending it every thirty seconds. I was fine until the anesthesia wore off and I started making noises only dogs and mice could hear. My surgeon – Dr. Russell Warren – is the team doctor for the New York Giants and a man of few words. He watched me struggle on the machine and said, “You have to do this for the next six weeks, six hours a day, every day.” I was devastated. Then he said, “But this is the good pain.” I was thinking, “If that’s the good pain, what’s the bad pain? Punching me repeatedly in the groin?” Dr. Warren continued, “If you don’t do this your knee will scar over and you might have a limp for the rest of your life.” Then he looked at me and said, “But it is up to you,” and left the room. I was thinking, “It’s up to me? Pull the plug!”

When I was not at home on that machine, I was non-weight bearing on crutches for eight weeks. That experience taught me that snow and ice are not your friend. Also not your friend: tornados. I met a student in Kansas who survived a tornado while on crutches. I

asked him, “Did people help you?” He said, “No. They just yelled, ‘Get down!’” I also learned that people love to guess what happened to you. I often heard, “Was it skiing?” That is so rude especially if I don’t even know you. Would you go up to a stroke patient in a wheelchair and ask, “Was it smoking?” No, that would be terrible. I am not ashamed to admit that there were moments during that time when I cried because it hurt so badly. But every time I wanted to pull the plug and quit, I realized that if I did I would be a hypocrite. How could I talk to students about good pain and then give up when facing it. Young people have it tough because they are faced with so many examples of good pain when they are young. It hurts to turn off a favorite television show and study for an exam. It hurts to stand up and be a leader at your school. It hurts to tell someone at a party, “I don’t want to drink.” I guarantee no young person will ever turn down a beer and then skip away singing a song. This is not High School Musical. You will never hear, “No thanks for the beer! We’re all in this together...” These are examples of good pain because even though they hurt in the short term, some day young people will look back and be thankful for them. They will be thankful that they learned academic discipline, leadership or simple refusal skills. The good pain is also easier to get over.

The bad pain is reserved for people who choose to take the easy way out. They would rather cheat on a test than put in the work. They would rather complain about life than actually stand up and make a difference. They would rather have trust issues with their parents than tell their friends, “no.” These are examples of young people choosing the bad pain. They qualify as bad pain because the negative consequences that come from them are not easily fixed. Failing out of college, an inability to be a leader in your life, and trust issues with parents are complicated to resolve. It is much easier to choose the good pain now over the bad pain later, but as Dr. Warren said, “It is up to you.”

## Prevention Speaking

*“I don’t like Dr. Phil because he comes on his show and tells his patients exactly what’s wrong with them. Any good psychologist knows – you keep that a secret.”*

*- Matt Bellace*

I have been fortunate for over a decade to travel the country and speak with young people about making healthy choices. As you might expect, adolescents are usually thrilled when they hear there will be another assembly related to not doing drugs. The e-mails I receive from students after my programs often begin with, “When I heard there was going to be a drug speaker, I thought, ‘This is going to suck. I’ll just sleep through it.’” I was lucky to have learned from watching some of the great speakers and legendary comedians how to entertain while making a point. More importantly, I never say “Don’t do drugs” because I know that won’t stop young people from doing drugs. It will, however, stop them from listening to me. Instead I share laughs, some of my story, and insights from patients that I have treated. In the end, if students walk away from my program having heard me out then I win and so do they. Honestly, it is a victory that after so many years I don’t live in a van down by the river.

Telling people how to live their life does not change behavior. If it did, psychotherapy could last one session and everyone would be cured. Real behavioral change takes empathy, guidance, and time. I usually only get an hour or so to have an impact on an audience, so I choose to focus on supporting positive choices. Psychologists believe it is easier to shape behavior by supporting a positive choice rather than punish a negative one. To accomplish my program goals, I structure the talk by presenting an acronym – L.E.A.D. I created the acronym because it helps the audience remember what I talked about, but I also believe that living a naturally high lifestyle requires being a leader in your own life. The four points of L.E.A.D. are: Leaning on healthy people for support, Expressing your emotions in a healthy way, Achieving natural highs every day, and Don’t be afraid to take a stand.

## Lean on Healthy People for Support

*“If my dad gets bored with your conversation, he will just get up and leave the room.*

*That hurts when you’re the only two people in the room.”*

*-Matt Bellace*

I played football in high school, which if you knew me would be hard to believe because I am built more like a reader. I was a quarterback at Montclair High School (Montclair, NJ) three years before New York Giants Super Bowl hero David Tyree started playing his high school ball there. My fondest memory came in my senior year. It was the fourth quarter of a tie game against Clifton High School. There was one minute to go in the game when I threw that pass all quarterbacks dream of throwing – the ball was intercepted and returned seventy-five yards for a touchdown. We were losing by seven points and our coach was so angry he benched me and put in the backup quarterback for the final plays. With only a few seconds left, our backup quarterback threw a fifty-yard desperation pass that our receiver Darnell Williams caught and ran into the end zone as time ran out on the clock. Our coach decided to go for the two-point extra point to win the game instead of kicking for the tie. Amazingly, he put me back in the game, but I later found out it was because the other guy did not know the play. I remember being so nervous my hands were shaking, which is not good when you get underneath the wrong lineman. I got underneath the correct lineman, called “Hike!” rolled out, and threw the ball in the direction of our best player, Jason Curry. The pass was a beautiful tight spiral. Jason reached out his hands and the ball sailed six inches away from his fingertips. I put my head down in shame just as our fans erupted in cheers. I looked up and realized that another wide receiver had seen the ball was going to be overthrown – probably because he knew I was throwing it – and made a diving catch in the back of the end zone to win the game.

When I tell this story in schools sometimes I get that look that says, “So, what happened next?” Well, a reporter from The Newark Star Ledger newspaper came up to me in our locker room and said,

“That was incredible! You rolled out and saw Jason was covered, looked him off and threw the ball right to the other guy. What do you have to say?” I leaned back in my chair and said, “Yup. That’s pretty much how it happened, son.” I don’t know why we used words like “son” in my high school, but Montclair High is such a diverse school that you could walk down the hall and hear all kinds of words, like “What’s up, nephew?” To which I once responded, “That’s not your nephew! Clearly that’s a girl.”

I selfishly tell the football story for a reason. I had two groups of friends in high school. The popular group of friends thought their unofficial job was to put down everyone and everything at the school. After the game, my popular friends said things like, “Ah, Bellace you got lucky. You shouldn’t be playing quarterback. You suck.” My second group of friends was much different. They were not as popular, but that did not seem to bother them. They were much more supportive. After the game they came up to me with nothing but high fives and hugs. It is almost twenty years later and I am still close with some of those supportive friends. We have been in each other’s lives through the good times and the bad. I can honestly say that without their support I would not be who I am today. If you are wondering about the popular friends, well they are buried deep in my Facebook page, but I don’t know them. I guess I never did.

Leaning on healthy people for support could be the most important part of living a naturally high lifestyle. If you are surrounded by positive support it can encourage you to step outside of your comfort zone and try new things. This is why the National Institute of Drug Abuse lists the number one protector against adolescent substance abuse as strong and positive social support. This support can be in the form of friends, family, religious or service organizations, teachers, or coaches. It is not who it is, but the quality of the support that matters. In my opinion, it is especially important to have a small group of fun, supportive friends you can rely upon. Let’s face it – the right friends can even make waiting on line fun.

If you feel like your support is made up of some negative influences, I can sympathize. I grew up in an Italian family in Northern New Jersey with a dad who looked like a smaller version of

Tony Soprano. In some ways my family acted like the Sopranos, too. No one ever got decapitated, but I heard plenty of critical comments and negativity. When the stock market collapsed in the fall of 2008, someone asked me if my father – who worked on Wall Street for over 30 years – was upset. I said, “Upset? He is the most relaxed I have ever seen him. He has been waiting for this his entire life.”

I am fortunate that despite any negativity in my family, they happen to be supportive. They have always been there for me when it mattered most. I am fortunate that they are healthy and that I get to spend time with them. However, telling jokes about my family is how I cope with their eccentricities. I developed this coping mechanism at an early age. The most difficult period of time for my family during my lifetime occurred while I was in middle school. I watched arguments on an almost nightly basis between my older brother and my parents. These arguments were centered on my brother and his poor adolescent choices. My brother is five years older than me and in high school he was very social. He hung out with the party-holic crowd. They were into drinking, drugs and other high risk behaviors. The fact that many young people his age were doing it was really not an excuse. What seemed to upset my parents most was that my brother would get caught doing something wrong and then defend his behavior rather than take responsibility for it. He would yell at them and say, “You’re just jealous!” In my head I thought, “Dad is not jealous – you have no money and no car.”

The way I coped with all the arguments was to find humor in the pain. Fortunately for me there were a lot of funny moments. Like the day my brother decided he was going to be blonde. So he gets this spray called Sun-In – similar to bleach – poured it all over his black hair and went out into the sun. Two hours later his head looked like an orange highlighter. That happened to be the week my father decided to take the family picture. To this day, in my parents’ living room there is a big picture of three Bellace’s and Danny Bonnaducci.

In the beginning, I would go to my room when the yelling broke out. Eventually, I became so used to it that I stayed for all the great material. One time my brother was being lectured on why beer was bad for teenagers and he responded, “Relax, I heard there’s protein in beer.”

My brother “failed out” of Lycoming College in Pennsylvania after his first semester. He probably could have returned, but my parents felt that he wasn’t even trying. I find it ironic that all the partying and rebelling against my parents landed him in the one place you would think he would be horrified to end up – back home. Coincidentally, Lycoming College invited me to speak to their freshman at orientation. They had no idea about the connection when they first hired me seven years ago. At this point, I think I’ve spent more time on their campus than my brother did.

I remember those days as some of the worst in my family’s history and not just because of my brother’s behavior. My maternal grandfather, Roy Basso (or “Pops” as we called him) passed away around the same time from pancreatic cancer. He was the mayor of Point Pleasant Beach, NJ, owner of an Oldsmobile dealership in town, and truly beloved by everyone who knew him. When he passed away there was a funeral procession that stretched over a mile long – a big deal in a town a mile long. There could have been one car at the funeral and it would never change the fact that Pops was the biggest role model in my young life. His death created a vacuum in our family that has never been filled.

As I look back, two positive things came out of my brother’s turmoil. First, the bad pain of failing out of college and having to pay my parents back for his first semester’s tuition eventually helped him focus and get his life back on track. To my knowledge, the biggest change my brother made during his second chance at a new school was to surround himself with more supportive people – including fraternity brothers and learning specialists – to help him get through. I am very proud of my brother for putting his life together and moving in a positive direction. There are many examples of people who just give up after failing out of college, never to return. He never gave up and that is honorable.

Following my programs, one of the most frequent questions I get is, "How is your brother today?" Well, I am happy to report that he is doing well and we are closer than ever. As I write this chapter, he is about to get married and I will be his best man! To be honest, I never thought I'd see my brother get married. I could see him getting bailed out of Mexican prison or saved from international waters, but for him marriage is unexpected and wonderful.

The second best thing to come out of those days was my decision – in eighth grade – not to drink or do drugs. We live in such a crazy time that making the decision not to drink or do drugs could actually be the basis for a career. One night I announced at the dinner table, "I will never drink or do drugs." I imagined my mom would be so happy she would just hug me and say, "Son, you have no curfew. You can drive the car." I'd be like, "Mom, I'm only twelve." She would say, "It doesn't matter." For some reason, my real announcement did not impress her as much as I thought it would. In the summer of 1989, as a sophomore at Montclair High, my mother sent me to a leadership and prevention conference called the Teen Institute of the Garden State (T.I.G.S.). I guess she didn't send me as much as she made me go. It was the last week of summer vacation and I was so mad about it that I started making up lies to get out of it. I said, "Mom, I heard this conference is just for recovering alcoholics." My mom hated that one. When I arrived at the camp there were counselors on stage, in costumes, cheering and I said, "Look! They're still drinking!" It would not have mattered anyway, because my mom would have never let me leave. She was the vice principal at my high school and a tough woman. Guys would stop me in the hall and say, "I'm going to kill you. Your mom gave me two weeks detention." To which I would reply, "I'm not afraid of you. I live with her."

T.I.G.S. was marketed as a statewide prevention program which empowered students to be drug-free. For me, it went from feeling like a death sentence to a magical place almost over night. The camp was deep in the woods outside of Blairstown, NJ. Yes, New Jersey has deep woods. It featured ropes courses, great motivational speakers/

comedians, and small group discussions. I can still remember how empowering it felt to have an adult ask me for my opinion and actually listen non-judgmentally. The best part was making friends from other schools and of course, the four-to-one girl-to-guy ratio.

As I look back on it now, the conference did something very progressive. They did not use scare tactics to convince young people to behave. Scare tactics have been proven not to work when it comes to drug and alcohol prevention. A speaker can come into a school and tell kids, “Drugs and alcohol will kill you” (which they can). However, over the course of the year those students will go out to about a dozen parties, look around at their friends and think, “Guess what? None of us are dead!” The real problem is that drug and alcohol abuse does not kill people quickly enough. That is a pretty dark thing to say, but what do you think would happen if one teen died every time there was a drinking or drug party in your town? Well, first of all people would walk real slowly into those parties. They would be saying, “Who’s it going to be tonight? Not it!” If drug and alcohol abuse killed one student at every party the problem with drugs and alcohol would practically disappear in this country. Psychology teaches us that punishing something quickly and consistently changes behavior. The problem with drug and alcohol abuse is that it can go on for years before the user feels the bad pain from his or her negative behaviors.

The T.I.G.S. conference somehow knew that scare tactics do not work. Instead, they focused on empowerment. They inspired us to achieve greatness in our lives. I am not sure everyone responded, but I did. I got the message: If you want to be better than you are today, you have to want to be healthy. I was all about internal motivation to do something positive. By the time the five days ended, I went from hating it to loving it. I went from dying to leave to dying to come back as one of those crazy costumed counselors.

I was rejected the first time I attempted to return to T.I.G.S as a counselor. It is ironic now, but it was devastating. The following year I matured quite a bit and re-applied. The second time I was accepted and went on to have a great experience. In fact, it was during that counselor year that I bonded with all of those supportive

friends that I still hold so dear. The responsibilities of the counselors at camp included putting on skits, role modeling healthy behavior, and genuinely helping others. If you were really lucky, you would be asked to speak in front of the camp. Dave Johnston, the leader of the counselors, saw something in me and made sure that I would speak to the group. It was probably less than five minutes, but the experience gave me my first taste of being a social activist. I created part of my identity at that conference. Yet, without the friends I met there, I would have had little chance to carry the behavior back home.

**Exercise:** Are you interested in attending a Teen Institute or high school prevention conference like it? There are almost a dozen active in the United States under the umbrella of the National Association of Teen Institutes ([www.teeninstitute.org](http://www.teeninstitute.org)). New Jersey's Teen Institute has been through some unfortunate turmoil over the years, through no fault of its own. Today it is called the Lindsey Meyer Teen Institute (L.M.T.I.), named after an inspirational young woman who attended the program in the late 1990's ([www.lmteeninstitute.org](http://www.lmteeninstitute.org)). There are also very similar and more popular programs around the country – such as Youth to Youth International ([www.y2yint.com](http://www.y2yint.com)) and Students Against Destructive Decisions ([www.sadd.org](http://www.sadd.org)) – that also have great local and national conferences that do much the same as the one I attended in 1989.

### **Brain Facts: Environment**

Reading science articles does not cause me to break out a highlighter much these days. I guess after 21 years of school I have done enough of that. However, the June 25, 2006 edition of the New York Times had me highlighting like an eighth grader again. In a great Science Times article called “An Anti-Addiction Pill,” by Benoit Denizet-Lewis, there was a reference to a study called “Rat Park.”<sup>1</sup> This was an elegant 1980's research study performed by Dr. Bruce Alexander from the Department of Psychology at Simon Fraser University (British Columbia, Canada).<sup>2</sup> The hypothesis was simple: Rats that lead stressful, boring lives would self-medicate (i.e., drink a sweet

substance with a heroin-like drug in it) when given the chance, and rats with stimulating, lower stress lives would not self-medicate.

Dr. Alexander first constructed two very different rat environments. The low stress environment was called “Rat Park” and it had ample access to food and water, along with natural vegetation and rat toys. You know – rat I-Pods, rat Xboxes, etc. The high stress environment was much smaller, more isolating, and had no toys. The one similarity among the two environments was access to a sweet drink containing a heroin-like substance that the rats could drink when desired – rats love sweet drinks. After a week, they measured the amount of heroin-sweet drink consumed by the rats living in the two environments. The results were surprising, as the “Rat Park” animals were having too much fun to drink more than a little of the heroin drink, regardless of how sweet Dr. Alexander made it. The isolated and stressed rats, on the other hand, often got high, drinking more than a dozen times the amount of the morphine solution as the “Rat-Parkers.” Other studies since have supported the notion that the environment can play a big role in the behavior of drug abuse.<sup>3,4</sup>

The Alexander study serves as an important reminder that genetic make up is not everything when it comes to addiction. A stimulating and supportive environment – especially during childhood and adolescence – is a strong protector against addiction. Addicts are more likely to have been unnecessarily stressed during childhood and they are less able to deal with stress as adults.<sup>4</sup> These stressors can include neglect, emotional, physical or sexual abuse, or poverty. Studies show that animals stressed during early development were more likely to self-administer drugs later in life.<sup>3</sup> In contrast, living in an enriched, lower stress environment appears to protect animals from developing addictive behaviors.<sup>1</sup> It is probably safe to assume the same process occurs for humans.

## Express Your Emotions in a Healthy Way

*“My wife and I are both psychologists,  
which means we have very short arguments.  
‘Do you know how that makes me feel, Matt?’  
‘Yes, I do. I’m afraid that is all the time we have left.’”*  
-Matt Bellace

I attended elementary school in a New Jersey town called Little Falls. It was hard telling my friends where I was from because they would ask, “Do you live in Little Balls?” The elementary school in our town was called School Number Two, but the middle school was School Number One. I guess the school board naming committee had a real dislike for creativity and ascending numbers. One of my favorite things about elementary school was science class because I never knew what was going to happen. We had one girl who performed her own science experiment – she saved her sour milk cartons in her desk every day for a month. One day the kid next to her got a whiff of it and jumped out of his seat. He screamed, “Oh, that’s gross!” But it was third grade so thirty seconds later the kid sat down, cupped his hand and sniffed it again. He screamed and then told me to smell it.

The day that changed my life was when our teacher Ms. Goya put a plant on each one of our desks and explained that we would have to take care of it. My plant was a spider plant and the year was 1983. Growing up in North Jersey I did not receive a lot of plants as gifts. If you grew up in Kansas, maybe when you hit third grade your parents gave you ten acres. I don’t know. The concept of having a plant of my own was so foreign that it became a very special thing for me. By the end of the year, Ms. Goya gave us our plants to bring home. I was so excited that I began reading about plant biology and exploring the outside world. Today, over twenty five years later, I have three huge spider plants in my New York City apartment. On the wall a few feet away is my framed PhD degree in Clinical Psychology from Drexel University. I can honestly say that if it wasn’t for that science class and encouragement from teachers and family,

I never would have pursued the degree. Let's face it – there are not a lot of Italian Ph.D.'s. I think it is just me and Galileo.

Learning and sharing information with others is one of my favorite forms of self-expression. Spider plants are amazing because they put out these buds – which look like green spiders – that can be picked off and planted to become entirely new plants. During my school presentations, I tell the third grade science class story and make the point about using healthy forms of self-expression to deal with strong emotions. I also bring up a student from the audience and play a game that involves giving away one of the buds. I have given away over 500 plants since I started sharing this story in 2001, and I get all types of reactions. Some students e-mail me pictures of the plant months later. One girl just took the plant and said, “Where's the spider?”

The reason it is so important to express yourself in a healthy way has to do with coping skills. If you don't have healthy outlets for dealing with stress, then alcohol or other drugs can easily become your outlet. I was reminded of this during my predoctoral internship at Mount Sinai Medical Center in New York City. One of my rotations was on the Traumatic Brain Injury Unit. It was the most difficult – yet rewarding – job I have ever had. One patient who I will never forget taught me a lesson about self-expression.

E was dumped by his girlfriend one month before his high school graduation. I will call him “E” because I do not want to use his real name. He was angry and depressed. Like many high school students in that situation, he called up his friends, told them what happened, and they did the stereotypical thing – they took him out and got him drunk. E returned home around two in the morning, drunk and more emotional than before he left. Alcohol abuse intensifies emotions. If you are angry before you use, you can become really angry while intoxicated. If you are depressed before you use, you could even become suicidal once you do. I do not know if E attempted suicide that night, but I do know that he got on a motorcycle – without a helmet – and drove himself into a tree. He suffered a severe brain injury. When E awoke in the hospital, he could not move any thing on the left side of his body. He could

not talk clearly and he was so confused that he kept trying to pull the tubes out of his arms. The doctors had to put restraints on him to keep him from doing so. As I watched that young man struggle through the early phases of a head injury, I learned that there are far worse things in life than death.

It took E three months to begin to walk and communicate again. I met with E every day and my job was to assess his cognitive ability and talk to him about his emotions. One day, I asked him about the night of the accident. I asked him if he wanted to hurt himself. He looked at me and said, "I don't know what happened that night, but I can tell you that there has got to be a better way to deal with getting dumped." E will probably have cognitive and physical deficits for the rest of his life, but even he understood the downside of using alcohol to cope with intense emotions.

As I travel around this country, I see so many examples of poor coping skills among both students and adults. One time I was checking in for a flight at Newark Airport and the woman ahead of me was giving the agent a hard time. This woman raised her voice to the agent saying, "I will not leave until I see you put my tags on my bags!" A lane opened so I stepped up next to her and saw the anxiety on her face. She tried to explain that the airlines lost her bags once, but she was so anxious they just wanted her to leave. Then the agent helping me made the mistake of almost putting my tag on her bag and the woman lost it. I'll admit at that point, I kind of enjoyed it because fighting at Newark Airport is like fighting in prison – win or lose, you lose. She started yelling over and over, "See that's what I'm saying!" The agent yelled back at the woman, "You're making it worse. Please leave!" Then, in her loudest voice she said, "I am a motivational speaker!" My jaw dropped and I said, "G-d help us all." She just looked at me and stormed away. If you're wondering, I said nothing to the agents about my speaking work.

In the Spring of 2010, I was speaking at a school in Tacoma, WA. One thousand high school students in a gym – not exactly an intimate environment. Halfway into my program it was going pretty well until a student in the back row tried to heckle me. Addressing a

heckler is always challenging for me because in comedy I was trained to quickly annihilate the person, but making a student cry is not why I was hired. Now I couldn't even see the student, but I made a few jokes about what a nightmare he must be in class if he couldn't sit through an hour of comedy. Then he stands up and starts yelling at the top of his lungs, but he was so far away I couldn't hear him. I made a joke about how I was from New York so I wasn't scared by yelling and a teacher escorted him out of the assembly. On the way out, I said, "You seem so angry I think you're going to meet me in the parking lot."

And he did. I was rolling my duffle bag out of the school with two students escorting me. They were laughing and saying, "We're your bodyguards." Then they took one look at him across the parking lot and ran the other way! Now I'm standing out there with this lunatic and his two goons who want to punch me in the face. His name, by the way, was Casanova. I find that hilarious because if your parents name you Casanova, you've got two choices in life – you're a lover or you kill people. He wanted to kill me, so he got into a boxing position and raised his fists. I looked him in the eye and after all my years of psychology training said, "Violence is not the answer." He should have punched me just for saying that. Of course, in the back of my mind I was hoping security would show up and taze him. Eventually the Vice Principal showed up and we all left.

I was later told that Casanova was expelled from school, which I thought was appropriate, but still such a waste. He was ultimately expelled because he did not know how to cope with negative emotions without resorting to violent behavior. If this scenario could play out for me in such a public way, imagine what students in school or online face when dealing with classmates who have little self-control.

If all that drama wasn't crazy enough, the next morning I was speaking at a school in the area and the whole time I was paranoid that Casanova would show up and shank me. The presentation went well and the coast was clear on the way to my car. As I put the key in the ignition, I heard a loud knock at my window. My head spins around to see a random student holding the thumbs up sign saying, "Good job, Dude!" It felt like someone tazed me.

To be good at achieving natural highs you have to be able to express yourself in a healthy way. You cannot practice emotional avoidance. The goal is to be aware of your emotions – good or bad – and to express them through healthy outlets. For me, it was sports in high school, academics, and social activism in college. Today there are about a dozen ways in which I find myself coping with stressors and emotions without turning to substances or hurting myself in other ways. Running, cooking, and listening to great music are some of my favorites today. You may choose music, acting, or hanging out with friends. No matter what you choose, it should be an activity that tends to leave you feeling better when you're done.

**Exercise:** Make a list of up to twenty activities that you enjoy. Pick out the items that you think would help you reduce stress and feel better following a stressful event. Next time you're stressed out look at the list and try one of the items. See if it works to help you feel better.

**Book Recommendation:** One of my favorite books is M. Scott Peck's *The Road Less Traveled*. Peck passed away several years ago, but he was a psychiatrist who wrote about a common problem among many of his patients – they believed that life should be easy. The problem with this thinking is life is often not easy. Peck noticed that when his patients would encounter a problem, they would rather complain about it or abuse themselves than face emotional pain. The book takes a fascinating look at the great lengths some people will go to in order to avoid emotional pain and the neuroses that develop as a result.

### **Brain Facts: Self-expression and Stress Management**

In recent years, expressive writing has become a favorite relaxation technique for many psychologists to use with their patients. This technique has been found to have advantages over traditional treatments because it requires very little training and can be done anywhere with almost any age group.<sup>5</sup> A recent study of depression-vulnerable college students showed that expressive writing for 20

minutes 3 days in a row lowered symptoms of depression 6 months after the assignment.<sup>6</sup>

Expressive writing is believed to work by allowing the writer to express thoughts that would otherwise be suppressed. The ability to write out one's innermost thoughts and feelings can help to free the mind of those thoughts for the remainder of the day. There is a form of memory called "working memory," which temporarily stores and manipulates information – like when someone tells you a phone number. It is believed that stressful thoughts take up much of your working memory capacity, which prevents it from being used for problem solving during other daily life events. For example, if you are thinking constantly about what you are going to say to someone who really upset you, you may have higher levels of stress and less tolerance for waiting on line at the grocery store. A recent study showed that stressful thoughts and feelings are easier to deal with after a person has had a chance to free up their working memory through expressive writing.<sup>7</sup> So the next time you get upset, try writing about the event. Make sure you write out as many details as you feel are necessary. If it is too difficult the first time, try it again a few days later. As you go about the rest of your day or week, explore whether or not you feel any better.

### Achieve Natural Highs Everyday

*"I would prefer to see a Just Say No comedy [movie]. 'This summer – Rogan and Franco are... Getting their law degrees, responsibly.'"*  
-Andrés du Bouchet

There are many types of proven natural highs. Running long distances releases opiates in the brain and allows runners to experience a sense of euphoria. My wife loves running – even in the dead of winter. When she goes out in the cold I tell her, "If you get lost, I'm not coming to get you." She even runs when she has a cold because she claims it makes her feel better. Personally, as an Italian-American guy living in New York City, my natural high is eating. Eating releases small amounts of the feel-good chemical dopamine into the reward

center of the brain, which elevates your mood. Eating great food must release a ton of dopamine in my brain because I ate a pizza recently – at DiFara’s in Brooklyn – that was so good it made me cry happy tears. There is nothing creepier than seeing a grown man eating and weeping. This book explores running and eating natural highs in more detail, but it also focuses on laughing, achieving, loving, helping others, and creating your own natural high.

Natural highs come in all shapes and sizes. Some of the best are the creative ones that few people know about. One of my favorite natural high stories occurred when I was in college. A friend of mine came in and said, “Matt, we should duct tape someone to a wall.” I asked, “Where did you learn that?” He said, “Spanish TV. Telemundo.” The next morning we asked a friend if she would stand on a chair in the student center and let us duct tape her to the wall. So once our friend was firmly duct taped to the wall, we pulled the chair out from underneath her and ran away. We hid around the corner and watched other students’ reactions as they walked to class and saw a human being stuck to the wall. Some people freaked out, trying to poke at it and see if she was real. My favorite reaction was from students who grew up in New York City who walked by it – looked at it – and kept going. I have told that story at hundreds of schools and after I leave dozens of them have decided to duct tape the principal to the wall. In all cases, the principal was willing. One school did the duct tape activity as a fundraiser. They charged a dollar a strip and raised over \$2000. I think the principal is still up there.

It is important to note that the natural highs presented in this book – if done to excess – can all be abused. For example, over one-third of children in this country suffer from obesity and the rewarding aspects of eating may play a role in that epidemic. It is also difficult for me to run in Central Park and occasionally see painfully thin women exercising. I do not know what is wrong with them, but when I see the same sickly looking person every time I am out there I suspect anorexia or exercise bulimia. I had my eyes opened to these problems by my wife – a clinical psychologist who specializes in the treatment of eating disorders. It upsets my wife so much to see a

dangerously thin woman exercising that I try to lighten the mood. I just look at her and say, “Hey, at least business is good.”

One key element to achieving healthy natural highs is to incorporate them into a balanced life. If any activity you enjoy interferes with your academic, social or emotional functioning then it is out of balance. It may feel amazing to fall in love and be in a new relationship, but the natural high of loving someone is not worth failing out of school for. In college, my natural high was sports. I can remember being a freshman and telling people my major was baseball. It was my honest opinion at the time, but it was naïve. If my life were just baseball in college, I would have missed out on discovering a love for science, traveling and cooking – all of which started during my undergraduate years.

Another important element to achieving healthy natural highs is avoiding internal negativity. This type of negativity can actually be a natural high blocker. I almost did it to myself on a recent three-day kayaking and camping trip to Jackson Hole, WY – a place where you can have a natural high by just opening your eyes. My friend Paul Brown –who is a real life Man versus Wild-type guy – was kayaking with me across Jackson Lake to our camp site. A few hours into our paddle trip, I start angrily swatting every fly that got near my face. I must have looked ridiculous swinging at the air while trying to keep from tipping over. It would have served me right to fall in the water because I was ruining the experience. Paul asked me what was wrong and I told him, “I hate these flies! If I stop they’re going to lay eggs in my ears!” That idea came from an internet article I read about a guy who had flies lay eggs that hatched in his ear. Paul heard this and told me I needed to spend less time reading blogs and more time enjoying the real world. As I continued to whine, I realized that I was stressing myself out. Eventually I made the decision to adapt to the environment and accept the fact that in order to experience this once-in-a-lifetime natural high, I would have to accept a little discomfort. I am happy to report that I was able to calm down and enjoy one of the most memorable trips of my life. As for the flies, I eventually just let them walk all over my ears and eyeballs like everyone else does out there.

Attitude determines whether or not you will have a natural high. I remember doing a high school workshop at a conference at Glassboro College in New Jersey and one of the advisors told the group a story about sky diving. It was the perfect natural high story: 1) It involved something incredibly challenging – yet fun; 2) She took every precaution to ensure her safety, which involved hiring a highly experienced instructor; and 3) She experienced a rush of positive emotions so strong she could not wait to tell people about it as soon as it was over. Her story was uplifting until she got to the part about how when she returned home, her husband “picked and picked” at her experience, putting the whole idea down, until she did not want to talk about it anymore. Despite loving the natural high, she told us that she had never considered doing it again because of her husband’s negativity.

There are so many things that can interfere with a great natural high. It can be your attitude or the attitude of the people who surround you. The one thing that is clear to me now is that you have to put in some work to achieve the natural high. It requires effort and creativity, but the payoff can change your life in a positive way. I hope after reading this book you will consider overcoming an obstacle that has prevented you from achieving a healthy natural high that you have always dreamed about.

**Exercise:** If you are going to duct tape someone to a wall, there are a few things to keep in mind first. 1) You cannot just take someone and stick them on a wall. You must ASK first. 2) To make this a true challenge, limit yourself to one roll of duct tape. 3) Make sure to do it on a brick or concrete wall. If you choose a wall with wallpaper, the paper will come off (not good). 4) Do not stick the person on a tree, because if you do that the person might stop breathing (definitely not good). I would recommend doing it as a competition between groups. Some schools enjoy doing it as a competition between grades. Keep in mind – it is a lot harder than you think to put someone on a wall with one roll of duct tape.

### **Brain Facts: Laughter versus Cocaine**

In my opinion, natural highs are superior to chemical highs because they combine short term pleasure with long term benefit. In 2003, a team from Stanford University demonstrated that laughter activated the same brain regions as cocaine use.<sup>8</sup> Two of the areas of activation that laughter and cocaine use shared in common were the nucleus accumbens and the amygdala. These areas, together with a third area – the ventral tegmental area – make up the brain’s reward system. When activated, this system is awash with dopamine. This chemical acts as a reward for the brain and plays a pivotal role in motivation to continue the behavior. Over time, drug use damages the reward center of the brain because it is being forced to release dopamine based on the dose the drug user is giving it. Natural highs use the same brain area, but the amount of dopamine released during a natural high does not damage the brain tissue. Over time the person who uses drugs will have a decreased ability to get high, while the person pursuing natural highs will not.

### **More Facts: Evidence for Natural Highs**

The prevention literature does not use the phrase “natural highs” – rather, they prefer the terms “alternative” or “substance-free” activities. These terms are similar in that they all describe activities that are healthy and enjoyable. There have been a number of studies over the past decade suggesting that college students who hold positive attitudes towards substance-free activities and subsequently engage in them regularly tend to drink less frequently<sup>9,10</sup> Experimentally manipulated increases in substance-free activities – such as exercise and other creative events – leads to decreases in alcohol use.<sup>11</sup> In a 2006 study by Murphy, Barnett and Colby, college students who reported drinking regularly were asked which alternatives to drinking they would consider just as enjoyable as drinking.<sup>12</sup> These alternatives were rated on a four point Likert scale (0 = unpleasant/neutral to 4 = extremely pleasant), and the most highly rated responses from both genders included watching movies, playing a team sport, eating at restaurants and creative activities not otherwise specified. A significant predictor of whether or not the activity was considered

“as enjoyable as drinking” was if it included two or more peers or a romantic partner.

The conclusion I’ve drawn from studies like these is that students who have enjoyable, affordable, and convenient alternatives to drinking may be more likely to reduce their substance use. It seems logical that students who do not use are more likely to continue that pattern if they also have activities that they rate as highly enjoyable. These statements are consistent with the conclusion of an NIAAA (National Institute of Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism) panel that concluded colleges should offer more alcohol-free options such as coffeehouses and movies, and expanded hours for student centers and gyms.<sup>13</sup>

The beauty of alternative activities is that they are not exclusive to college students. High schools, middle schools and community groups can also offer similar alternatives – albeit with increased supervision. The key to creating events that will be rated as “enjoyable” is to empower young people to help create these events. The students need to take an active role in planning the events so that 1) some students take ownership over the event and show up, and 2) the activities reflect the interests of young people. For a program to succeed, it also needs to be flexible and grow with the changing interests of the students.

### **Don’t Be Afraid to Take a Stand**

*“My roommate heard my idea for a drug-free group and said,  
‘That is social suicide.’*

*I just looked at him and said, ‘Jason, you haven’t washed  
your sheets in a year – I’m not listening to you.’”*

*-Matt Bellace*

I never thought that my high school prevention leadership training would be useful in college. Within weeks of arriving at Bucknell University, I was amazed by the intensity of the alcohol and other drug problems on campus. Bucknell was probably not much different than most colleges, but I had no other reference point. As

time went on, this atmosphere made me increasingly uncomfortable. In my mind, I was faced with a choice. Either I was going to change my school and transfer, or change my school and do something about the problem. After speaking with friends and family, I decided to stay and change my school from within. That decision was the catalyst for the prevention group I founded at Bucknell in 1993 called C.A.L.V.I.N. & H.O.B.B.E.S. It stands for Creating A Lively Valuable Ingenious New Habit Of Being (at) Bucknell & Enjoying Sobriety. You probably would have guessed that though, right? The organization was based on the simple idea of having fun substance-free. We did not tell people how to live their lives. We just provided alternative late-night activities, such as bowling, bringing comedians to campus, and duct taping people to walls.

The group grew quickly and drew media attention on campus. Within a year and a half, we had over 50 regular members and events every weekend of the school year. I don't think it was so much what we did, but the fact that we enjoyed doing it together that made the difference. The defining moment for C & H came in 1994. A student was walking to class one morning and was hit and killed by a drunk driver while crossing the street on his way to class. The entire campus was devastated by the news. Students, parents and faculty were looking for answers and few were found. A few weeks later at a meeting of the Bucknell trustees (a.k.a., the guys with all the money) I made a plea for help. I asked the trustees to consider making prevention more legitimate on campus by giving us a home. Several weeks later, I picked up the school newspaper and read the headline, "Calvin & Hobbes to Take Over Former Fraternity House."

The trustees approved a quarter of a million dollars to fix up a former fraternity house so C&H could live there. The fraternity was Sigma Phi Epsilon, which had closed due to drug and alcohol violations (shocker). I suspect the trustees wanted to send a message to other fraternity houses that they could be next. In 1996 we moved in, prompting a US News & World Report story to state, "...how times have changed."<sup>14</sup> The house drew national media attention and gave the group tremendous visibility on campus. Years later,

Bucknell President William “Bro” Adams wrote my graduate school letter of recommendation stating, “Among (Mr. Bellace’s) important contributions, none was more noticeable or consequential than the creation of the revolutionary student social and residential organization C.A.L.V.I.N. & H.O.B.B.E.S.”

What do you think would happen to a co-ed substance free house on a college campus? You might suspect it would be buried in toilet paper or eggs within days, but nothing happened for some time. Then one night at around eleven o’clock, I was in my room when I heard what sounded like a large group of people. I looked outside my window and saw forty naked guys running towards the house! Yes, I counted. I thought they were going to destroy the house. What I did not know was that it was the Bucknell cross country team and their natural high was running naked on campus once a year. I ran to the front door and had an Iron Man moment where I thought, “I am going to stop them.” Ok, you don’t stop forty naked guys. In fact, you don’t stop one naked guy. If a naked guy runs into my apartment right now, he can do whatever he wants. As I ran to the front door the first guy was running in. For some reason, I quickly got him in a head lock. The whole group stopped and the guy I was holding said, “You’re holding me and I’m naked!” I did not know what to say. I should have said, “What’s up, nephew?” Just then I gave the guy a hip toss and he flew backwards into his teammates behind him. I am definitely against homophobia. I think it is ignorant and wrong. But when the one naked athlete hit the other thirty nine, a moment of homophobia was realized.

I took a stand for C&H that night, but more importantly the group took a stand for natural highs on campus. We had a lot of help during the early years. The group’s advisor, Bob Thomas, the coordinator of alcohol and other drug prevention at Bucknell, was a guiding force in helping us get off the ground. There were various professors and administrators that talked with me privately about their support for the group and the movement. There were also countless members of the group who sacrificed their time and energy to create a group that has lived on. Over the years it expanded

its activities and even moved to a new house in the year 2000 – a house with a functional kitchen.

Today, Bucknell University is a much different place on the weekends. I suspect many students still drink and do drugs, but now there are options for those who want to be healthier. Bucknell has a late-night café, a dance club, several substance free residence halls, and many other activities every weekend paid for by the student government. I'd like to believe that C&H played a major role in influencing the decision to increase alternative activities at Bucknell.

In October 2010, the group celebrated its 17th birthday! Soon there will be members in C&H that were born the year after I founded the group. Somehow this information makes me feel better when I find gray hair in yet another location on my body.

Over the years, C&H has gone through its share of ups and downs. The group has moved a few times from its original location, partly because the fraternity was allowed to re-colonize. For almost twelve years (2000-2011), C&H lived in a house on the downhill side of side of campus with a functional kitchen and as a result, weekly dinners became a big C&H tradition. This may be C&H's greatest accomplishment, providing a much needed sense of community on Bucknell's campus.

As I write this book, the group is transitioning into a substance free dorm for next year. I don't fully know why. The group has only been setting a positive example on campus for over 17 years, but I'm not bitter. The group hopes to move from the dorm into a house the following year, but regardless of where they end up I will never feel anything but pride for what the group has accomplished over the years.

One of the best outcomes of a speaking engagement for me is when a student is so inspired by my program that he or she decides to start a similar prevention group at their school. To date, I am aware of at least a dozen active college and university groups that have been inspired by C&H. They all happen to all be in New Jersey schools, and include P.E.R.K.S. (Pioneers, Enjoying, Recreation, (while) Keeping, Sober) at the William Paterson University, and New Social

Engine at the three campuses of Drew University, Fairleigh Dickinson University and County College of Morris. Many other groups have come and gone over the years, but the movement remains strong. In fact, a recent article in *The Wall Street Journal* interviewed Brandon Busteed, a college alcohol prevention researcher who stated, “About 100 colleges and universities do a good job of supporting alcohol-free activities that are frequent, regular and entertaining enough to compete with drinking.”

Students often ask me how I got started in professional speaking. It began partly as a result of C&H gaining national attention and local schools inviting me to come speak to their students. I was also very fortunate to have the support of the T.I.G.S. director who gave me the opportunity to present every year. My presentations back then were not very good, but I was always passionate about my message. In fact, it took me over a decade to find my comedic voice and to understand how to engage students.

I never knew the power of taking a stand until I applied to Ph.D. programs in clinical psychology. The competition was fierce. I interviewed at a school where there were two hundred applicants for four spots – only twenty applicants were interviewed. In the interview, the professor looked at my resume and skipped right to the paragraph about C&H. He read it and said, “Wow, this must have been hard for you!” I leaned in and said, “There were forty naked guys.” We bonded over the story and I got into that school – Drexel University. What I didn’t tell you was that I applied to seventeen Ph.D. programs over two years and only got into one. That was my only shot. When I got accepted, I was told by that same professor that the program needed students like me – students who were not afraid to take a stand and try something different.

Taking a stand is one of the most important elements to leading a naturally high lifestyle. It is not easy, but then again nothing worthwhile ever is easy. I hope for you that one day when you are in that moment when someone is sitting across the table and thinking, “Do we want you for this school?” or, “Do we want to give you this job?”, they can say, “Yes. We want you because you were not afraid. You were not afraid to speak out against injustice. You were

not afraid to stand up and be a leader. And you were not afraid to go through the good pain.”

### **Brain Facts: Critical Periods**

It is important for young people to learn how to socialize in healthy ways while they are young. If they do not, they can miss out on developing critical social skills. There is a well-known neuroscience experiment by Hubel and Wiesel that demonstrated a critical period for the development of vision. The researchers raised a monkey from birth to six months of age with one eyelid surgically shut.<sup>15</sup> The surgery prevented the monkey from seeing through that eye for six months. When the eye was opened it became clear to the scientists that the monkey could not see out of the eye and the blindness was irreversible. The scientists later discovered that the reason the monkey was blind was not because anything happened to the eye, but rather the area of the brain controlling vision was underdeveloped. Further studies revealed that visual deprivation in monkeys for as little as one week during the first six months of life can impair vision for life.<sup>16</sup> Similar rules also apply to humans.

Hubel and Weisel's work brought forth the idea of critical periods in brain development that apply to many different life functions in humans. The development of social skills, for example, also depends upon stimulation during certain developmental periods. There have been cases of infants who were abandoned in the wild, presumably raised by animals, and later returned to civilized society. They are known as feral children, and despite their ability to learn certain skills they showed permanently impaired social skills and language development.<sup>17</sup> One of the feral children named Wild Peter could never learn the value of money and was reported to be completely indifferent to it. This might sound like a nice attribute for a young person, but Wild Peter could never be socialized.

A more recent example involves the Harlow monkey studies of the 1960's. Two psychologists named Harry and Margaret Harlow conducted various studies in which they observed monkeys raised in isolation. They found that monkeys isolated for 6-12 months were physically healthy, but socially impaired. Their behavior often

included crouching in the corner of their cages and rocking back and forth. This ritualistic behavior is similar to that which is seen in severely autistic children, and is believed to be a means for reducing anxiety. The isolated monkeys did not interact with other monkeys when given the chance. They did not fight, play, or show any sexual attraction. The authors concluded that a 6-month period of isolation during the first 18 months of life produced persistent and serious disturbances in behavior. In contrast, the isolation of an older animal for the same period of time did not have the same devastating results. Therefore, there is something vulnerable about the developing brain in that social isolation during a critical period causes irreversible changes.<sup>18</sup>

If we expand this thinking to adolescent social development, it might help put the concept of substance abuse prevention into a new perspective. We know that the human brain is not fully developed until age twenty-five.<sup>19</sup> However, my wife thinks that for men this age extends to forty-five. It is notable that the last areas of the brain to develop are those that involve complex decision making and social development. If you allow the average fifteen year old to spend weekends getting drunk or high, they may develop mechanisms that rely heavily on drugs. However, if you take the average fifteen year old and provide them with healthy ways to have fun, they are more likely to rely on those skills later on in life.

### **Summary**

The four basic elements of leading a naturally high lifestyle include: Leaning on healthy people for support; Expressing your emotions in a healthy way; Achieving natural highs everyday; and Do not be afraid to take a stand. These four points were created partly from my experiences and partly from research on the protective factors against substance abuse. The remaining chapters of this book will describe specific natural highs, like laughing, running and eating. However, if you are considering a natural high activity that is not discussed in this book just make sure it is safe and leaves you feeling better physically and mentally than you were before you started.



**Matt Bellace, Ph.D.**, has been a youth motivational speaker and comedian since 1995. Dr. Bellace has a Ph.D. in clinical psychology from Drexel University with a subspecialty in clinical neuropsychology. He is a member of the National Speakers Association and a regular at comedy clubs in NYC. His “How to Get High Naturally” program encourages over a hundred thousand students per year to pursue natural

highs and make healthy choices. Matt was a recurring comedian on truTV’s “The Smoking Gun Presents.” His stand up can be heard - and requested - on Sirius XM’s Comedy Channels.

### *Acclaim for Matt Bellace*

“A heartfelt thank you for presenting at the Illinois Teen Institute 2008! Your presentations were simply dynamic! A definite favorite, you left a lasting impression on the students as well as the staff. The evaluations did not yield anything short of excellent. Your ability to relate to the students, relay a powerful message, and have fun is unparalleled!”

*- Shelly Musser, External Program Manager  
Illinois Teen Institute*

“Wow, let me just say I have never laughed so hard during a presentation. It was amazing how with so much comedy, you could still get your powerful message out there to the audience.”

*- Kayla H., student  
Maranacook Community High School  
Readfield, ME*

“I meet many students at Bucknell, but I come to know very few in ways that either persuade or permit me to speak so strongly on their behalf. Among Matt’s important contributions, none was more noticeable or consequential than the creation of the revolutionary student social and residential organization, C.A.L.V.I.N.& H.O.B.B.E.S.”

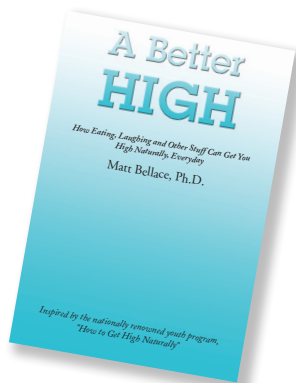
*-William “Bro” Adams  
Former President,  
Bucknell University, 1995-2000  
Lewisburg, PA*

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