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228 — The Gangster's Guide to Sobriety with Former Gangster and Actor Richie Stephens

Amy Morin:

Welcome to *The Very Well Mind Podcast!* I'm Amy Morin, the editor-in-chief of Verywell Mind. I'm also a psychotherapist and a best-selling author of four books on mental strength. Every Monday, I introduce you to a mentally strong person whose story and mental strength tips can inspire you to think, feel, and do your best in life. And the fun part is we record the show from a sailboat in the Florida Keys! Don't forget to subscribe to the show on your favorite platform so you can get mental strength tips delivered to you every single week.

Now let's dive into today's episode.

Right now, one in five deaths for people between 20 and 49 is related to alcohol. I hate that so many people are dying from something that we've not only made legal but a drug that we've glorified. We don't do that with other drugs. We ban commercials that make smoking look cool. We don't allow TV characters to smoke. Yet we turn cases of beer into football displays in the grocery store. And we create music, movies, commercials, and TV shows that still send the message that everyone drinks and it's harmless to do so.

Although many people can drink in moderation and it doesn't create problems for them, alcohol is a drug, and there are always risks associated with consuming it. I'm hoping

someday soon, we'll take the risks alcohol poses a lot more seriously. Unfortunately, many people are now just discovering how dangerous alcohol is for themselves, and they're having difficulty quitting. Every January, a lot of people attempt what's known as dry January, and they quickly realize that they can't stop drinking. In fact, some people discover just how dangerous it is to quit "cold turkey" as regular drinkers might even die from withdrawal if they stop drinking too fast.

If you want to stop drinking, and you're physically dependent on alcohol, talk to your doctor about your options. There are medications that can help you safely detox from alcohol on an outpatient or an inpatient basis. And if you have a problematic relationship with alcohol, there are lots of treatment options available. Different treatments work for different people. There are medications that can help with cravings. There are support groups, education groups, therapy, inpatient rehab, intensive outpatient services, and even sober coaches. Most people mix and match a few services until they discover what works for them. Keep in mind that many people with substance use disorders also have an underlying condition that requires treatment too, like an anxiety disorder or depression. Seeing a therapist or a psychiatrist for the underlying condition is often a big part of treatment.

On today's show, I'm talking to Richie Stephens, who is sharing his journey to recovery and what he learned along the way. Richie's an actor who often plays the bad guy on TV shows like *NCIS*, *Days of Our Lives*, and *MacGyver*. He also wrote a book called, *The Gangster's Guide to Sobriety*. Richie says those parts come easy to him because, for a long time, he was somewhat of a bad guy. In fact, he was an Irish gangster for most of his life. He did a lot of things he's not proud of, like selling drugs and beating people up. He also had serious problems with drugs and alcohol. There were times that he wanted to quit using substances and times when he convinced himself that he could quit if he really wanted to.

But at some point, he decided to take a friend up on an offer to go to a 12-step meeting with him. But he didn't like it. In fact, he almost never went back to his second meeting. But he decided to give it another chance. And in his new book, *The Gangster's Guide to Sobriety*, he explains what it was like for him to go through each of the 12 steps.

Some of the things he talks about today are why he didn't like 12-step meetings at first, what he eventually learned from them, and how he's managed to stay sober for a long time.

Make sure to stick around until the end of the episode for The Therapist's Take. It's the part of the show where I'll give you my take on the strategies Richie shares and explain how you can apply them to your own life. So here's Richie Stephens explaining *The Gangster's Guide to Sobriety!*

Amy Morin:

Ritchie Stephens, welcome to *The Verywell Mind Podcast!*

Richie Stephens:

Thanks, Amy. Thanks for having me on.

Amy Morin:

Absolutely. I'm a fan of your book. You wrote this book called *The Gangster's Guide to Sobriety: My Life in 12 Steps*. Of course, the title alone is intriguing. I'm sure people are going to be like, "Wait, *The Gangster's Guide to Sobriety?*" Because we talk so much about people who are struggling, they get into recovery and so often they say, "Yeah, I had a past, I had a problem. And then I had rock bottom, I hit this epiphany and then I changed my life."

One of the things you talk about is like, there wasn't this one moment, there was all these different things that happened to you. And you'd never really hit this ultimate rock bottom where you ended up homeless under a bridge, but you lived this crazy lifestyle. Can you just explain a little bit about what your life was like before you got into recovery?

Richie Stephens:

Okay, yeah, I've had a pretty crazy life. So I'm originally from Ireland, obviously. And I'm an actor here in Hollywood and usually on TV and movies, I play bad guys, the gangster, the killer, all this kind of stuff. But in real life, I used to actually be a gangster

before I got sober. Got sober 12 years ago. And basically my addiction and alcoholism led me into all these crazy situations. The Hollywood people didn't really know that I used to actually be involved in that life. So the book is a tell all about how I got sober and how I got away from all that stuff. Started off in Ireland, then I moved to San Francisco, and at one point I was living in Australia. And basically the book was written with the creators of Silicon Valley, John Altschuler and Dave Krinsky, they're my writing partners and they really enjoyed my story. So we wrote the book together and it's supposed to become a TV show in the future.

Amy Morin:

Oh, I didn't know that. That's exciting. And for people who haven't yet read the book, I just want them to know, we're not just talking about, you sold a few drugs on the street corner or something like that. We're talking about kidnappings and these huge things that used to go on in terms of like major drug sales and smuggling and international stuff happening. And all of these huge things going on and you really didn't seem like a likely candidate for somebody who would then step into the 12 step program and really adopt it like you did.

Richie Stephens:

Yeah. Most people who were involved in the stuff that I was involved in are either dead or in jail. And I was really lucky that I didn't end up in either of those places. Yeah, it's not the kind of story you hear every day. But part of being sober, going through the 12 step meetings is people ask you to share your story. So I've been telling people my story for a lot of years because it's unusual. There's not many Irish lads here in LA and there's not many Irish lads who used to be a gangster who were sober in LA, too. So I get to tell my story a lot. But people just said to me, I should write a book about it. I finally did.

Amy Morin:

And you know what though? You did a really good job of not glamorizing your story as in, this is so amazing and look at all these awesome things I did. You're pretty humble.

And you say, I didn't want to share my story initially because I thought I was a bad guy for doing a lot of these things.

Richie Stephens:

Absolutely. I'm not proud of a lot of the stuff that I did. But it's a positive story because it's about somebody who changes their life and stops misbehaving. A lot of the stuff that happened to me wasn't glamorous. It's not glamorous to be beaten unconscious or have your face bitten or get arrested. A lot of these things aren't fun.

Amy Morin:

And what do you think was the difference about why you got out of it? And as you say, a lot of the people you were with during the day, the other Irish gangsters are dead or still struggling?

Richie Stephens:

Well, in America, I was with some Asian gangsters, I was in an Asian gang. So I was the only white fellow in that gang. But I was in Irish gangs back in Ireland, too. But the reason I got sober is because somebody helped me. I didn't get sober on my own. This fellow that I used to work with, his name was Bernard or Americans would say Bernard. So I was a criminal, but I was also in construction. And Bernard was a sober construction worker. He knew I had a problem and I used to always ask him questions. I'd be curious about what the 12 step ... because I knew he got sober by going the 12 step meetings. So I'd said to him [inaudible 00:08:49] and I'd be curious about it. He didn't give away a whole lot or he didn't preach to me. He didn't say, "You have a problem." He just says, "This is my number. Give me a call if you want to get sober."

And for some reason I kept his number and I hit my bottom one day. I kind of thought I was crazy because I didn't understand what it meant to be an alcoholic or an addict. I used to get depressed and quick to anger and all these kind of feelings. I had no idea that was part of being an addict. So I kind of thought I was crazy. When I knew I had the problem with the drugs and alcohol. And towards the end of my drinking, I kept wanting to kill myself all the time. These thoughts would come to me all the time. But I got the

idea that maybe if I can stop drinking and getting high, then I'll stop wanting to kill myself.

So that's when I called Bernard and he took me to my first meeting and basically he saved my life. He showed me how to do it and how to not drink again. Because I thought I had to keep on drinking. I thought I had to keep on getting high. I didn't think there was any other way of living. But this fella saved my life. I credit him with helping me. I didn't figure out how to do it myself.

Amy Morin:

Yeah, a couple of things. I was curious if you'd done all the voices in your book. I now know that you did, in your audiobook.

Richie Stephens:

Yeah. I'm glad they wanted me to do the narration. Because I don't know how the hell anybody else was going to know how these people of my story sound.

Amy Morin:

Right. And again, it was a captivating audiobook to listen to. But I did like that part of your story, how you talked about this other person just said to you, if you give me a call when you're ready. And he didn't lecture you, didn't say you have a problem, didn't try to convince you and didn't drag you to go. But instead knew maybe someday you'd get to the point where you were willing to. And then when you were, he picked you up and brought you.

Richie Stephens:

Exactly, yeah. And it's funny because when you get sober going to 12 step meetings, you're supposed to get a sponsor. Sponsor is the person who helps you and shows you how to do it. So he knew a lot of my story. But I guess he didn't know it all because I sent Bernard a copy of the book recently and he read it because I dedicated the book to him. And says to me, "I had no idea you were so crazy." Yeah.

Amy Morin:

Well, that brings me to another question. Sometimes it's like the chicken and the egg. I'm a therapist, so people will say, "I can't stop drinking until I improve my mental health." But then on the other side of the coin is, well maybe if you stop drinking, your mental health will get better. What did you find? When you quit using drugs and you quit drinking, what happened to your mental health?

Richie Stephens:

Well, when I just took away the medicine. The cocaine and the booze was my medicine. That's when I needed to live life all the time. Whenever I had any kind of a feeling, I wanted to get high or drink. So if I was bored, I'd drink. If I was happy, I drink, let's celebrate. If I was annoyed about something, I'd drink because that would make me feel better. It was literally the solution to anytime I had a feeling. So I'm used to drinking since I was 14, 15. And I was 28 when I got sober. So I had a lot of years of that was normality for me.

So what happened was when you just take away the drink and the coke at the start, I was super irritable because I had no medicine. That was my medicine for life. So at the beginning I was pretty irritable because you have to learn how to do everything sober. And just basic, I had no idea how to do sober. I remember I started going the maintenance and Bernard says to me, he says, "We're going to go for fellowship." And I says, "What the hell is fellowship?" And he says, "It's when we go and hang out." I says, "Where are we going to hang out?" He said, "We're going to hang out in a coffee shop." That was kind of an alien concept to me. I said, "What are we going to do there?" He says, "We're going to drink coffee and talk."

And for me, that was completely bizarre. I had never gone into a coffee shop and had a coffee with somebody. Because usually if I was in a social setting, I'd want to have a couple of beers to take the edge off. Because I used to get social anxiety. So I had to basically learn how to do everything sober, without the medicine. So at the start, it was completely alien to me and I was very irritable. But then I was going to these 12 step meetings and I asked Barnard, "How do I stop drinking? How do I make these cravings go away?" And he says, "We're going to go to meetings every day and we're going to work the steps." So basically working the 12 steps is what gave me a bit of relief and

brought me to where I am now, where I don't need to drink at all or get high. I can get through life like a normal person.

Amy Morin:

I think that's one of the things that makes your book really cool is you explained that the 12 steps aren't just like a checklist, and you sit down and you check them all off and then you're done. Instead, you explained how as you worked through the steps, you gained the skills that you needed to do things sober. You learned how to manage conflict without violence. You learned how to communicate with people and how to confront somebody when you're offended rather than beat them up.

As you explain these things, we really get into your thoughts. Because one of the things is we often see is the change in somebody's behavior. Somebody will say, "Yeah, I quit using drugs, I quit drinking." And they might say it was kind of hard. But the cool thing about your book is you go through and really detail how your thought process changed. You spent a lot of years thinking you were a victim, even though you put yourself in these horrible circumstances. When something bad happened, you never took responsibility because you said, whatever happened in the end was somebody else's fault. But then as you go through the 12 steps and you do this moral inventory and you start talking about making amends, you really had to come to terms with the fact that, well, I share some responsibility and a lot of the things that happened to me.

Richie Stephens:

Yeah, totally. Part of getting sober is ... part of it is dealing with your past. So obviously I had a bad past because I was a criminal. I never killed anybody, but I did some bad things. But yeah, as you were saying, part of it was I thought ... a lot of cases I felt like I was a victim. Even though I was a criminal, I kind of thought I was a good guy. I didn't snitch on anybody or anything like that.

Part of the steps is they call it making a moral inventory. So what does that mean? You write down a list of all the people, places and things that you're mad at, and your fears, your relationship history, that kind of stuff. So I had a lot of people I was mad at. Before

I started to work with Bernard who became my sponsor, I wasn't able to see that I had a part in a lot of the stuff I was mad about. That I wasn't completely nice guy, victim guy.

I remember at the start he told me to make the list, and then we had a talk about it. And then we sat down to talk about it. He says, "What's on your list?" I said, "Okay, number one, Ollie." "What did he do to you?" I said, "He snitched on me to the cops." So when I was a kid in Ireland, well 19 or so, I was a drug dealer, a wholesaler, I used to send them all over the country, all over Ireland. And one of my employees, we'll call them Ollie, I had to change all the names in my book for obvious reasons. But Ollie was one of my employees who got caught by the cops and instead of keeping his mouth shut, he set me up.

He told me to come up with all of the stuff I had, a bunch of drugs. And the cops were waiting for me because he was working with the cops. So he set me up with the cops. And Bernard says to me, "Who was your partner" Well, I didn't have a partner, I was a standup guy. The cops came to me and they said, "We just want the bigger fella. All you have to do is give us the bigger fella. You won't even go to court." But I didn't want to snitch on the person above me because I thought I had honor, even though I was criminal. And so I didn't have a partner, I was a standup guy. And Bernard says to me, "Weren't you selling drugs?" I says, "Yeah." He says, "Aren't drugs illegal?" I says, "Yeah." He says, "Well, if you weren't selling drugs, you wouldn't get arrested and he wouldn't have told on you."

And that was the complete revelation to me because for all these years I was mad at Ollie because he had snitched on me and got me in trouble. So until I had a sponsor to help point that out to me, I thought I was a complete victim there. And then I realized obviously I'm not a victim if I'm committing crimes. And there was a bunch of stuff like that, that my sponsor, Bernard, he helped me realize. And then I didn't feel like such a victim. I could look at other things with a more clear perspective.

Amy Morin:

Yeah, I appreciated that you walked us through your thought process and how it shifted. Because it's one thing to change your behavior. Okay, I'm not going to drink or I'm not going to use drugs. But if you really want to heal from the inside, you had to change

your mindset. And you walked us through how that mindset changed over the years and how you learned these things differently to be able to say, "All right, there's more than one way to view this story. And maybe I wasn't a victim all of these times that I thought I was. And perhaps if I take some responsibility." That's how you change, moving forward.

Richie Stephens:

Yeah, the bottom line is if a gangster gets sober, he's still a gangster, unless he changes his behavior. So when I got sober ... when I discovered these meetings and I realized there was an actual solution for me that I don't need to get high or drunk no more. I was like all in with it. I says, "Bernard, tell me whatever I got to do, I'll do it." And he basically told me I had to change my whole moral compass. He told me, in order to stay sober, you had to stop lying, you had to stop doing shady stuff, you have to stop being violent. All these kind of things that was basically the way I had been living. So I was willing to try it and it worked. I couldn't keep on selling drugs or stealing or doing any of this stuff if I wanted to stay sober. So I had to not just put a plug in the jog. I had to stop misbehaving, too.

Amy Morin:

Yeah, I thought that was interesting, too. You talked about the fact that you were married for quite some time during this. But y'all had a girlfriend on the side. But you knew if you continued your infidelity, that would just lead you down the wrong path. So it wasn't just about quitting the drugs and the alcohol. You said, "I have to change my whole life."

Richie Stephens:

Yeah, everything. I was not the husband of the year when I was married, at least when I was drinking. So yeah, I had to stop all that kind of misbehavior. Because I saw him with other people too, start doing shady stuff, that leads them back to drinking again. So I didn't want to drink again, so I had to change my behavior.

Amy Morin:

So I'm a therapist, and I'm going to tell you the three biggest reasons why people are often resistant to 12 step groups, and I want to know what you think about it. The first one is people say, it's too religious. I'm not into this whole God thing or I'm an atheist. What would you say to somebody who says that?

Richie Stephens:

That's the way I felt when I came into it, too. Because I was raised Catholic. I went to mass when I was a kid, I was an altar boy, all this kind of (censored). When I was a young lad, I kind of believed in God. And then as I became older and bad things happened to me, I became an atheist. I figured with all the bad things that happens to people, there couldn't be a God. And especially a lot of stuff happened to me too, that led me to believe that there is no God, God's for children or it's like Santa Claus. That's the way I felt.

And then when I came into my 12 step meetings, the very first meeting I was listening, it was a men's meeting on a Friday night and I was curious, but I was taking it all in. And I was listening to these men talk about how they had been feeling like (censored) them off and getting irritated. And I could totally relate. And then I was all pumped about it, I was like, "Oh, this is the solution. I'm going to keep going to these meetings and I can stay sober." But at the end of that first meeting, everybody got up and held hands and prayed together. And it really freaked me out because I had stamped my card as an atheist and I was like, "No, this (censored) isn't going to work. It must be some kind of a cult or a religion." So I wasn't going to come back after that first meeting.

We left and I was all freaked out. And I got into the truck with Bernard and he was all excited. He says, "Well, what did you think?" I says, "What the (censored) is all that God (censored)?" And he goes, "What God (censored)?" "Holding hands and saying the Lord's prayer. I don't want to do that (censored). I'm an atheist." And he looked at me and he goes, "Nevermind that (censored)." And I was like, "What?" He goes, "You don't have to believe in anything. In these meetings, there's Buddhists and atheists and Muslims and every (censored) thing." He says, "You don't have to believe anything. Just shut your mouth and come back to the meetings."

So once I heard that, I don't need to believe in God or any this kind of crap, that was okay with me. And then I came back. Cause a lot of people do pray in the meetings. If you're going to meetings, you don't have to believe anything. So I could see how people would be turned off because I was turned off when I saw that when they came in. And then when I realized you're not forced to believe in anything, then I kind of relaxed about it. But if I didn't have Bernard to tell me after that first meeting, I never would've came back. They'd be like, "Oh, this is a (censored) mistake. This is weird. I'm not joining no religion."

Amy Morin:

Right, and I think that's what happens with a lot of people is they just think, I don't have a higher power. But you made it clear that, well, you don't necessarily ... you still pray, but you're like, I don't even know who I'm praying to. But as long as I believe in a higher power. And one of the parts I really liked is you said, "I don't know if it's actually my higher power that helps me with the cravings or if it's just my belief in the higher power that makes them go away." But either way, it works, right?

Richie Stephens:

Yeah, either way. I haven't thought about drinking or getting high in nearly 11 years when I was [inaudible 00:24:05] it's not me.

Amy Morin:

So the second reason why people will say I'm not going to try a 12 step meeting is they'll say, "Everybody, there's a hypocrite." And as a therapist when I say, "You should give it a try." They're like, "Amy, you don't realize, everybody who goes there is just getting drunk or getting high the minute they walk out the door." What do you say to people who have that concern?

Richie Stephens:

I wouldn't say everybody's a hypocrite. But you'll find hypocrites at the bar, too. Everybody you meet at the bar isn't going to be nice. You're going to meet (censored), the same with when you go to meetings, you'll meet some (censored), too. But at least

where I'm living in California here, we have a good old selection of meetings. Here in LA, there's men's meetings, women's meetings, mixed meetings, gay meetings, comedian meetings, rocker meetings. So it's kind of like when I was a bar drinker, I used to like dive bars. I wouldn't be going to too fancier places, I was more comfortable at dive bars.

And it's kind of like the same thing with the meetings. You just find ones that work for you. If you're in the middle of nowhere, you're kind of (censored) because your choices might be limited. Like where I'm from in Ireland, there might only be two or three meetings a day. And if you go to those ones and you don't like the people, you're (censored). You have to go over the other county or like a few towns over to find one with people you don't like. But yeah, obviously there's hypocrites everywhere. But I wouldn't be coming to these meetings for 12 years if it was (censored). I met a lot of good people.

Amy Morin:

And you can verify that the vast majority of people aren't-

Richie Stephens:

Yeah, there's a lot of good people.

Amy Morin:

They're not getting high or drunk two minutes after they leave the door.

Richie Stephens:

Well, there are people who do that, but I would say a small percentage. I never understood that when I came in. Because sometimes you would meet people who pretended they were sober, but they were really using or drinking. But I didn't get what was the point of it. Like, for me it was like, just go and drink if you want to drink, if you don't, just come to the meetings.

Amy Morin:

I think there's a couple things going on. Sometimes people are in different places, they're not quite ready to quit, but they're just curious. So they show up. And then you have other people who are there because they're on probation or they have a loved one who's concerned. So they're just trying to make other people get off their back, right?

Richie Stephens:

Exactly. Some people are just hiding out, whether they got the nudge from the judge or the wife is bothering them, or maybe they got in trouble at work and their work wants them to. Yeah, that's the thing, too.

When I was a young lad and I got in trouble at that time when I was caught dealing. I was very lucky I didn't go to jail, I was put on probation. I used to have to go and see a drug counselor. In Ireland at the time, they didn't send you to the 12 step meeting, they sent you to drug counseling. And I was like a 19 year old kid, but I didn't really believe I had a problem. Before I got caught on a night out, I was probably averaging about 15 ecstasy pills on a night out. Maybe three or four times a week. But I didn't realize I had a problem. I thought that was the amount I was deciding to do and that I could stop anytime I wanted.

So they sent me to these meetings at the time with a drug counselor. So I would come in every week and tell this man a pack of lies because I thought I was fooling them. I really didn't believe I had a problem. And I'm sure there's also people who are going to the 12 step meetings who might feel the same way. They might not really believe they have a problem. Because when you're an addict or an alcoholic, there's a lot of denial that can go with it. If you meet somebody who has cancer and you tell them they have cancer, they're not going to go, "No, I don't have cancer." But if you tell an addict, they're an addict, a lot of times they go, "I'm not an addict. I can handle my (censored)."

Amy Morin:

Right, everybody has a vision in their head of what somebody who has a problem looks like. And we think as long as I'm not that person, I don't live under a bridge and I don't struggle every day. Or I'm able to take a day off once a month, so therefore I don't have a problem. And you talked too about how you changed the goalpost for yourself several

times. When your wife got pregnant, you said, "Well, then I should quit drinking." And then it was like, "No, when she has the baby, I'll stop." And then you were like, "No, the baby doesn't know if I'm using. I'm going to wait till the baby gets older." And you just kept changing it to justify your actions for a long time, right?

Richie Stephens:

Yeah. The weird thing about being an addict, if you're in the middle of it, you think it's you that's making the decision. But after you get sober and you get a little bit of hindsight, you realize that you're powerless over it. I would come up with reasons to explain my behavior. "Oh, I was gone all weekend even though I'm married, but I'm only 22 and she got to have her youth and I didn't." Or, "Oh, I had a fight today at work. I need to go and drink to drown my sorrows." Or, "Yay, Ireland won the football match. We need to celebrate." So there's a lot of this making up a narrative to ... making up your own story to allow yourself to keep on doing it. It's a weird thing.

Amy Morin:

Yeah. I guess the third thing is that I hear from people is they'll say, "Well, Amy, I've been to 12 step meetings before, but I feel like everybody there is just pretending they're happy or sober. They're not." What would you say to somebody that has that concern?

Richie Stephens:

I would say I felt like that when I was new, as well, because I wasn't a very happy person when I tried to get sober. If you are in a place where you're trying to stop drinking and getting high, your life obviously isn't going well. So I used to come in, I'd come to these meetings and I would see all these allegedly happy people and they would pick me off too because I wasn't feeling good. There's a friend of mine, Frank, a Scottish fella, now when I was new, he used to always share this thing, he'd say, "I've got a wee daughter and she's never seen me take a drink." And I'd be thinking, "Oh, (censored) you." Because when I got sober, my kids were three and five, so they might have seen me taking a drink. They might not remember it, they might be so young. But yeah.

And plus when I was new, everybody comes up to me and they're giving me their phone numbers and stuff and they're like, "Oh, give me a call anytime." And all these men were giving me their numbers. And I was thinking, "Are these gay fellows gay or what?" Because I lived in a world where you don't help somebody for free.

Amy Morin:

Yeah.

Richie Stephens:

If you're nice to somebody, you want something off that person. Or they're going to owe me something. And so that's the way it is when you're in the bar. People aren't just usually nice to you for no reason. So yeah, I was kind of skeptical and paranoid by nature. So I have all these people being nice to me and asking me for my number and calling me up to see how I was doing. That wasn't a world where I lived in. And it took me a while to realize that there was no catch. Lot of times people just really wanted to help you, like there was no agenda. I knew I was a bad dude because of all the stuff I had done, and these people didn't care about that. All they cared was this is a new man and he wants to get sober and we want to help him. So it took me a little while to adjust to that because I didn't believe that people could really be nice like that.

Amy Morin:

Yeah, I guess to accept help when you're suspicious of people, in general, and to wonder why are they being so friendly and so nice and why do they want to help me? And then to allow them to come into your life a little bit and just show you some genuine kindness must have been tough.

Richie Stephens:

Yeah, the main thing was just me believing that they really did want to help. Because that's not always something I was used to. And then eventually when you see that there's no catch and there's actually good people out there who are willing to help you for fun and for free. Like finding something that didn't exist in my life.

Amy Morin:

Did you do anything else to help you get sober? Aside from going to meetings.

Richie Stephens:

No, I just did the meetings and worked the steps. And I never got to go to rehab. I used to be envious of people who got to go to rehab. Because for me, it looked like a holiday camp. Before I got sober, there used to be a TV show called Celebrity Rehab, a reality show. I used to watch that while I was drinking and getting high. I used to laugh at these people and say, "Oh, these idiots can't handle their (censored)." And I'm the alcoholic and addict who's looking at them. So my perception of what the rehab was is hang out by swimming, pool, all these fine chicks and smoke cigarettes and do yoga. That's what I thought rehab was. But obviously there's a lot of different kinds of rehabs. They're all not like those Malibu kinds.

So I never got to go to rehab. Nobody ever brought me. I'm sure I was bad enough to go to rehab, but I think maybe my wife at the time didn't know enough about addiction to ... and even if she did ask me to go, there's no guarantee I would've accepted the suggestion. So to answer your question, when I was getting sober, I still had a job. I was working in construction. So I'd work construction during the day and then at nighttime I would go to meetings every day. And then at the weekends were a killer because for me as an alcoholic and an addict, downtime is what's Hampton. So if there's nothing going on, that's the dangerous time where I might want to drink. So at the weekends when I was new, I would go to three meetings a day just to stop myself from going crazy. But that's what it took for me.

Amy Morin:

So last question for you. If we have somebody listening who says, I've thought about going to meetings, but I just can't find the courage to walk in the door, I can't push myself to go. What would you say to that person?

Richie Stephens:

Well, I didn't have the courage to go either. I was a criminal, I used to carry a gun and all this kind of stuff and do all this tough stuff. But at the same, I didn't have the guts to go into a meeting by myself. That's why I called Bernard.

But if you don't have the courage to go actually into a room, these days, you have online meetings on Zoom. So if you're feeling like that and you don't have anybody to bring you, maybe I would suggest doing a search for these sobriety meetings on Zoom. And you can log in and you can leave your camera off and nobody will even see you. And just go on and have a listen and see if you can relate to it. And you might have the same experience I had, where I came in, I heard these men talking. I was like, oh, there's more people who's like me. Because I kind of thought that there was nobody like me. I was a unique person. Nobody felt like I felt, if you felt the way I felt you'd drink, too. And then I came in, I said, "Wow, there's more of them." Because these people were sharing the same feelings I was having. So if you're feeling like that these days, you don't have to into [inaudible 00:35:22] check out the Zoom.

Amy Morin:

Great idea. Because that's a really easy way to sort of just check it out, listen in without having to feel like anybody's looking at you or you don't have to share your real name or anything like that.

Richie Stephens:

Yep.

Amy Morin:

Richie Stephens, thank you so much for being on the Very Well Mind podcast.

Richie Stephens:

Thanks a million for having me, Amy. And if anybody wants the book, it's on Amazon or Audible or Simon & Schuster. Yeah, you can find me on social media, Richie Actor on Instagram. Any of my friends who hasn't heard Amy before, you can please rate and subscribe to the podcast.

Amy Morin:

Oh, thank you. I will link to your book in the show notes, and I highly encourage people to listen to the audiobook too, because it's a fun listen.

Richie Stephens:

Thanks so much, Amy.

Amy Morin:

Welcome to The Therapist's Take! This is the part of the show where I'll break down Richie's strategies and share how you can apply them to your own life. Here are three of Richie's strategies that I highly recommend.

Number one: check out an online 12-step group if you don't want to attend one in person. Going to your first meeting, or even a first therapy appointment, or walking through the door to rehab can be terrifying. So I like that Richie suggested trying an online meeting first if you're struggling to go to a meeting by yourself. There are online 12-step meetings 24/7, and you can easily find links to them online. You can join a meeting without turning on your camera and without revealing your name. You don't have to say anything either. You might just sit and observe and learn what meetings are all about.

Even if you live in a small town, you might be surprised to discover that there are still several meetings every single day. You can find local AA or NA meetings online. If you have any difficulty finding them, contact your doctor or call a hospital and ask for a social worker. They can usually provide you with that information.

And number two: practice doing things sober. Richie said doing things sober was a completely new experience for him. Even having a cup of coffee with someone and talking to people weren't things he was used to doing. He'd always used alcohol or drugs to calm himself first. So he had to learn how to do sober things one small step at a time. That's important. I have a lot of therapy clients over the years who have thought they couldn't do certain things sober. Or they concluded that they just weren't like

everyone else since things that gave them anxiety seemed easy to everyone else. But with practice, they were able to get used to doing things sober over time and it got easier.

Number three: when something doesn't work, stay open-minded. I appreciated that Richie was honest about his concerns about 12-step meetings when he first started attending. He was convinced that they weren't going to work for him. But he agreed to try again even though he didn't completely believe everything he was hearing. That's important. Whether you're trying medication for the first time, or you're trying to use an app that might help you stay sober, stick with it for a while to give it a chance. You might change your mind over time, or you might still get something from a meeting or treatment, even if you don't agree with everything. The most important thing is don't give up if something doesn't seem like it's a good fit. You might change course or give something else a try. But keep trying things until you discover what works best for you. So those are three of Richie's strategies that I highly recommend. Check out an online 12-step group if attending one in person feels overwhelming, practice doing things sober one small step at a time, and stay open-minded about treatment options.

To learn more about Richie's experience, check out his book, *The Gangster's Guide to Sobriety*. It's filled with great information, and it's pretty entertaining too. And then reach out to him on social media to let him know what you think of his book.

If you know someone who could benefit from hearing this message, share this show with him! Simply sharing a link to this episode could help someone feel better and grow stronger.

Do you want free access to my online course? It's called "10 Mental Strength Exercises That Will Help You Reach Your Greatest Potential." To get your free pass, all you have to do is leave us a review on Apple Podcasts or Spotify. Then, send us a screenshot of your review. Our email address is podcast@verywell.com. We'll reply with your all-access pass to the course.

Thank you for hanging out with me today and for listening to *The Verywell Mind Podcast!* And as always, a big thank you to my show's producer (who happens to love the title of Richie's book), Nick Valentin.