

# **Brandon's Story**

## **Living With Paruresis and My Journey to Overcome It**

First off, I wanted to thank Steve for helping me to take the first steps in my recovery to overcome Paruresis. I also wanted to thank everyone at IPA and all of you who posted your stories and support on the forums. If it wasn't for all of you I would have never built up the confidence to face my fear.

I decided to write my story in hopes that it might urge others to seek treatment to overcome Paruresis. It's a long detailed story of my life living with Paruresis from day one up to my one on one session with Steve at the IPA office in Baltimore. I plan on adding updates to my story as I continue to work on my recovery. I found that the more people I tell, the easier it is to overcome Paruresis.

Living With Paruresis and My Journey to Overcome It My name is Brandon and I live in Baltimore, Maryland. I've had Paruresis for 19 years and it has controlled every aspect of my life. It all started when I was 10 years old in 6th grade. I remember it like it was yesterday. I was in the boy's room using a urinal when another classmate approached me and aggressively pushed me. At that very instance my boundary was violated and I left the restroom as quickly as possible. Little did I know that the rest of my life was going to be directly affected by this incident and I became a Paruretic. At the time I didn't know what was happening or that I even had a problem. It was then that I started to develop my coping skills to live with Paruresis. I started to avoid public restrooms whenever possible. If I really had to urinate, I would go during class so there was a much lesser chance that anyone else would be in the restroom.

Over the years I developed coping skills that started to directly affect my choices in life. This had a big negative impact on my social life. I like to hang out with friends, go to the mall, movies, and attend sporting events, but living with Paruresis made this nearly impossible. Whenever someone would ask me if I wanted to go out somewhere, the overall deciding factor was if I had access to a restroom that met my requirements or whether I would be home within 3- 4 hours. Unfortunately in most cases my requirements were not met and I missed out on many social events. The most frustrating factor was that I really wanted to go out with my friends, but I knew that I couldn't.

I discovered IPA's website about 5 years ago by accident one day while I was surfing the web. I was in total disbelief that there were other people out there with the same problem. It was a major relief but also a great sense of anxiety and fear knowing that I will have to face this head on to overcome it. Some people are scared of heights, flying, bugs and other things. My greatest fear in life was the thought of actually having to use a public restroom with someone in close proximity. I would have rather jumped out of a plane then to face my fear of using public restrooms.

I knew I had to start somewhere but accepting the fact that I had Paruresis was a little challenging. The first step I took was when I got the book "Shy Bladder Syndrome: You're Stepby- Step Guide to Overcoming Paruresis". I highly recommend this book; it has priceless information to guide you in the right direction to recovery. After reading the book twice I

realized that recovery is possible if you put your mind to it and commit. I first started by telling my Mother and Father who were very supportive. My Mother took interest and read the book as well which was a relief knowing that I didn't have to live in secrecy. A little while longer I told some of my friends and surprisingly they were also very supportive. Telling my friends was actually a big improvement. They now know that I wasn't declining their invitations because I didn't want to be around them. It was just the opposite, I want to go out with them but I couldn't because of my Paruresis.

Once I accepted the fact that I had Paruresis and it wasn't a huge secret the next step was by far the most difficult, "reaching out to the IPA to begin treatment". For me it was a very long and complicated process trying to build up enough confidence to seek treatment. By this stage in my life I have mastered the avoidance techniques in coping with Paruresis that go far beyond the public restroom. I've always wanted to attend a workshop or a one on one session with Steve at their local IPA Baltimore office. For most people, living within 30 minutes of the IPA office would be a dream come true. For me, it just increased my anxiety even more knowing that I couldn't use distance or location as an excuse to avoid treatment.

I emailed the IPA 2 years ago inquiring about a one on one session and they responded promptly with lots of supportive detailed information about the sessions and requested my phone number so that Steve could get in contact with me to start my recovery. Unfortunately I did what I did best when it came to coping with my Paruresis. I avoided it at all costs and I never replied back to the email. I went on for another 2 years before I built up enough confidence to try and face my fear again. By this point I realized that coping was becoming very unreasonable and I was tired of dealing with it.

This time I took a different approach to my recovery. I joined the IPA and became a member. Normally, when I attempted to face my fear, I would put the Paruresis book away and anything else that reminded me of Paruresis. As they say, "Out of sight, out of mind". I took the book out and placed it in clear view on the table. I made a commitment to not hide the book no matter what. I even kept it out when I had company over. By leaving the book out it made it more difficult to forget about my problem, but it still wasn't enough to push me. So I took another step that ultimately changed everything. I went to the IPA's Facebook page and found their logo, which is a picture of the world with IPA on it. I printed out the IPA logo on 4x6 photo paper, across the top I put "Live Life Free" and at the bottom I put "International Paruresis Association". I then took that print out and placed it on the shelf right above my toilet. By doing so I was forced to read it multiple times a day which prevented me from forgetting about my Paruresis. Overtime I gained more confidence and became more comfortable with seeking treatment. After looking at the printout several times a day for 2 months I finally caved in and went to the IPA's website and signed up for a 3 day workshop in Baltimore for June 2012. I then emailed the IPA, "again" inquiring about a one on one session. This time I had more confidence and determination to overcome Paruresis. It wasn't easy for me and I had severe anxiety, but I followed through, responded to the emails and scheduled a one on one session with Steve. During the days leading up to my scheduled appointment I worked on fluid loading to get familiar with my urgency levels. I was requested to have an urgency level of 7 out of 10 to urinate one hour after my session started. In doing so I realized that I would rarely ever let my urgency exceed a 5 under normal circumstances. I normally started looking for a restroom by the

time I reached a 4 so I still had time to locate a safe restroom before I reached a 10. Due to my low urgency levels previously, I realized I was setting myself up to fail from the beginning when attempting to use the restroom. After a week of fluid loading I became comfortable with an urgency of 7 and I had a better understanding of how much liquid I could consume within a specific timeframe.

The big day arrived and I headed over to the IPA office for my one on one session with Steve. I'll admit I was very nervous and had little expectation that I would make any progress in one 4 hour session. Steve was very easy to talk to and understanding. It was a relief to finally talk to someone who understood what I was going through and could relate. After only 30 minutes the dreadful phrase was spoken "Graduated Exposure Therapy". This was the one thing I feared the most and it was the primary reason I avoided treatment thus far. Steve explained in great detail of the process and the most important part was that I was in control. Within the office there is a door that leads across the hall to a single private locking bathroom. At first I had Steve remain in the office, I closed the door to the office and I closed the bathroom door and locked it. Under these circumstances I still didn't think I would have any success due to the slightly elevated anxiety. To my disbelief I was able to go standing up which was surprising. I opened the door to the office, closed the bathroom door but did not lock it and I was still able to go with Steve in the office. Over multiple steps I finally got to the point where Steve was just outside the bathroom door. Keep in mind that we would take a break and only try to proceed if my urgency level was at a 7 or above. I could hear him and he could hear me. This is when that invisible line is crossed which makes it far more difficult for me to urinate. At first I hesitated, but I was still successful. We slowly propped the door open little by little until the door was completely open and Steve had his back facing the doorway.

After I was successful I requested Steve to step forward a few inches and I went again. Little by little I requested him to move forward until he was standing directly behind me. Prior to this I have never had anyone in such close proximity to me in a bathroom. As expected it was very challenging, seconds felt like minutes but after a minute of standing there something happened, I started to urinate. I was at a loss for words; I could not believe that I was able to urinate with someone else in the bathroom standing directly behind me. There was no more hiding or trying to be quiet about having to urinate. It was an overwhelming sense of excitement and relief.

After only a couple hours I completed "Level One Graduated Exposure Therapy". I was still in disbelief and overwhelmed by what was accomplished. My life was changing right before my eyes. We then proceeded to discuss "Level Two Graduated Exposure Therapy" which I wasn't too thrilled about. Basically we were going to perform the same steps in a public restroom. At this point I laughed thinking there was no way, but I was on a roll and figured I would give it a shot. We went to Sinai Hospital which wasn't far from the IPA office. Steve explained that the 1st floor had the busiest restrooms near the main lobby and cafeteria. We went to the 6th floor restrooms which were not busy at all. In fact I don't recall seeing anyone going in or out of them while I did my practice sessions. Once I was successful with Steve standing at the sink next to the urinal. It was time to move on to the busy restrooms on the 1st floor. The restroom on the 1st floor was surprisingly nice. It had many urinals and stalls and regular traffic. We first checked it out to see what I was up against. Once I was ready I entered the restroom

alone and Steve remained in the waiting area. At this point I had an urgency level of an 8. When I entered the restroom there was someone already standing at the urinal. Immediately my avoidance behavior kicked in and I went for the stall. It happened so quickly I didn't even realize it. However, I was successful at going while standing up in a stall with someone else in the restroom. Afterwards I went back out and Steve came in with me. The restroom had one person in it that was using the stall. We selected urinals furthest apart from each other. Once the restroom was empty, I requested Steve to move one urinal closer after each successful attempt until he was standing at the urinal right next to me. I found myself aiming for the water to make noise which seemed to make it easier and it also drowned out any background noise. We then took a break and stood outside the restrooms.

My next challenge was to enter the restroom behind someone else. Normally I would have done just the opposite. I would have waited for that person to exit the restroom before I entered. After a few minutes someone entered the restroom and I followed. I selected the urinal furthest from them and surprisingly I was able to go. I couldn't believe it, all the anxiety, the fear and thoughts just subsided. The thoughts were still there but I didn't care what other people were thinking. I started to realize that other people in the restroom were not focused on me. People would come and go and not pay any mind to what I was doing. I could stand there for as long as I wanted and nobody even noticed. On one occasion someone used the urinal next to me but I didn't freeze up. I went in and out a few more times and was successful on each attempt. I left the restroom and declared it a successful day.

Steve and I went back to the office and we discussed what was accomplished and how to continue working on my recovery. I plan on getting in contact with the local support group and attend the meetings whenever possible. Steve also had lots of great literature that I got which I'm excited to read. I'm also looking forward to the upcoming workshop in Baltimore so that I can meet others with the same problem. My greatest focus is to continue working on graduated exposure therapy in public restrooms whenever possible. Shortly after I left the IPA office I had to use the restroom. For the first time ever I decided to stop at a local Chick-fil-A and use their restroom by myself. I entered the restroom which was very small. Unfortunately someone was using the urinal so I entered the stall. I couldn't believe it but I was able to stand there comfortably and go while someone else was in the restroom. Two people came and left while I was urinating which was a big break though. Usually I would be startled if someone walked into the restroom while I was already going.

I learned that you have to remain persistent in tackling your fear of the public restroom. You cannot hide from it anymore if you want to be successful. Otherwise it will continue to control your life. The longer you avoid treatment, the more difficult it is to face, but it's never too late to start. I also realized that the process of recovering from Paruresis was basically relearning how to pee. Deep down I already knew the basics of urinating, but in my recovery I learned how to gain control of my thoughts and feelings. In just that short amount of time my anxiety and thoughts decreased drastically and the sense of accomplishment was a great feeling. After 19 years of coping with Paruresis, I was finally able to face it head on successfully. I cannot find the words to describe how I feel. I'm sure I will have my good days and bad days, but knowing what I accomplished only reinforces my thoughts on what I can accomplish tomorrow.

Here is the IPA print out that I placed on the shelf above my toilet. It is my daily reminder that I can overcome Paruresis and Live Life Free.

Live Life Free

International Paruresis Association