

Russell Brand and the 12 steps to recovery from addiction

I am taking a tour of Russell Brand's body. It's not the one I might once have imagined, because I am old and he is no longer a sex addict. But we are examining his tattoos. There are many. He does not seem to mind unbuttoning his shirt, covered in galloping stallions, for a stranger. The chakras travelling down his right arm represent "the sexual energy, the energy of the will, the energy of the heart, the energy of communication ..." he explained, touching each one lightly.

There is the sex-energy kundalini serpent (do you sense a theme here?) on his right index finger. There's one on his biceps that he and the singer Katy Perry got when they married that says "Go with the flow" in Sanskrit. They couldn't, but it was a nice thought. My favourite, though, is a quote that Brand attributed to Oscar Wilde, in loopy script that stretches from Brand's shoulder to his wrist: "If you want to tell people the truth, make them laugh. Otherwise they'll kill you."

Now there's a motto for any comedian's life, but particularly Brand's. He makes us laugh, so he is alive. This was not a foregone conclusion. Given his staggering self-destructiveness over his 42 years – he has been a junkie, an alcoholic, a bulimic and an attention addict (admittedly, that one hasn't exactly been stamped out) – it's quite the feat that he's still here. Brand is promoting his latest book, *Recovery: Freedom From Our Addictions*, a thought-provoking explication of the 12-step programme run through the Mixmaster of Brand's

verbal pyrotechnics. He believes the 12 steps have saved him. He wants them to save you too.

Brand's thinking about addiction goes something like this: At the root of all addiction is narcissism, a constant thrumming attention to self. If you are self-absorbed you are suffering, and if you suffer you seek ways to stop it – through drugs, alcohol, sex, maybe Facebook “likes.”

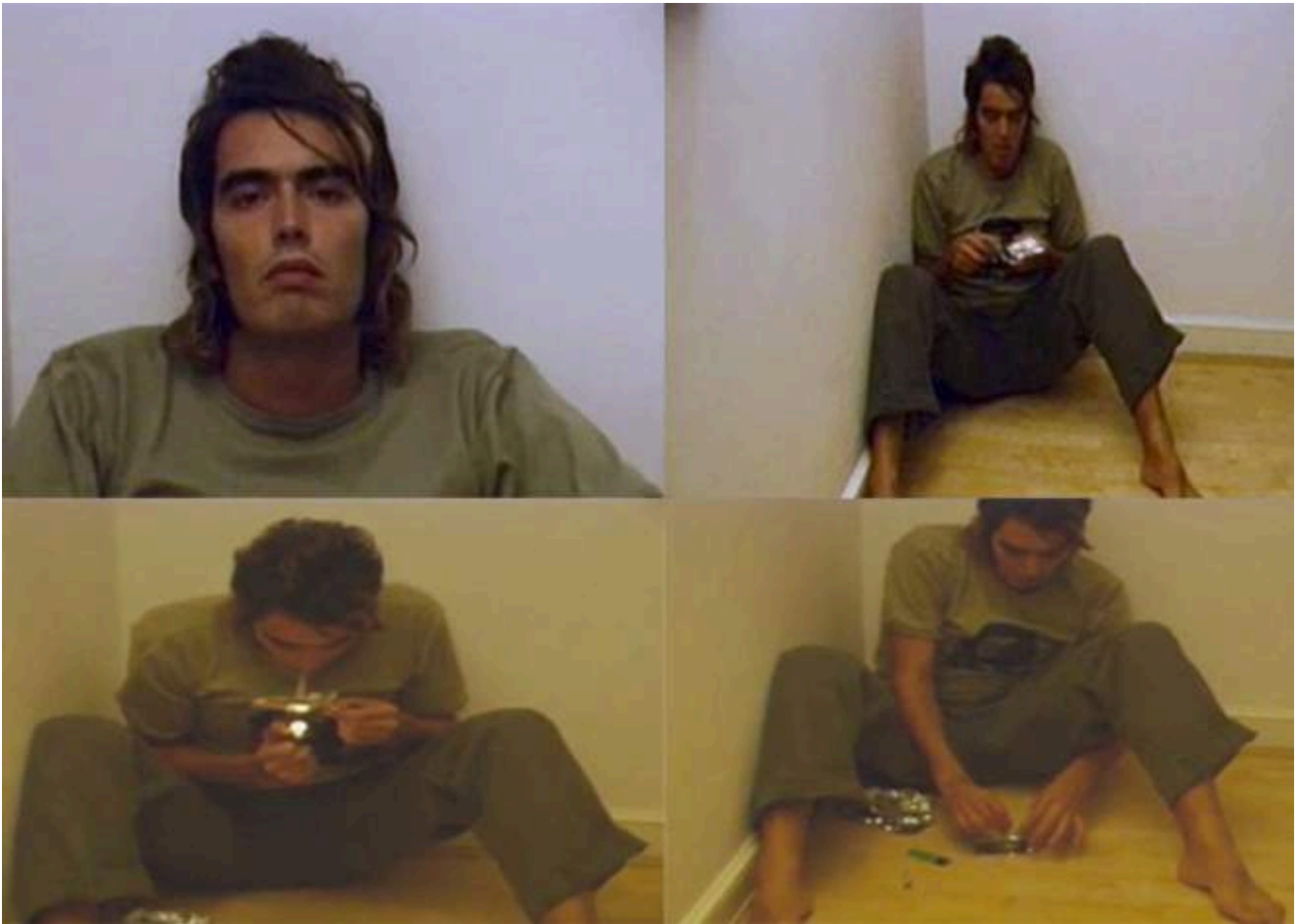
“We are trying to solve inner problems externally – whatever it is in our lives that is missing,” he said. “Eckhart Tolle said it perfectly: ‘Addiction starts with pain and ends with pain.’ Here’s the point. Drugs, booze, sex ... It’s not the particular addiction that matters as much as the fact that your life is out of control because of it.

“I think of addiction as a kind of mutating and morphing germ,” Brand said, “continually varying in my life. But the sensation is the continuum. The experience is the continuum.”

Healing, he says, requires a belief in giving yourself to a higher power, however you understand it – because your own volition hasn't served you very well, has it? Brand is someone who hasn't done well with authority, so he invites us not to think of a higher power, or even just someone else's power, as domineering and negative, but instead “as a place for nurture.” Brand doesn't entirely turn his back on the religious foundation of 12-step programmes, but he has found a universal “workaround.”

“I'm trying to create territory to have a different conversation about spirituality, for people who are naturally

humanist, or atheist. Or people who are just cynical.” The recovery tent is big, he says. Step inside.



A 27-year-old Russell Brand before he managed to kick his drugs habit (BBC)

Brand is a spellbinding talker, and while he was banging on about the evils of consumerism and its relationship to addiction, I was hanging on every word. Later, I had time to consider that the man whose last book is titled *Revolution* lives in a multimillion-dollar Tory stronghold in Oxfordshire and admits that his way of feeling grounded in a new place is to buy himself a little something. Still, there are great swatches of his book that are stunning and ring so true; When I mention them he doesn't give the faux aw-shucks of a celebrity who's used to constant praise. He looks more like a serious child who's hearing something good about himself for the first time – a physical twitch of

pleasure, coupled with doubt. That raw neediness is part of his charisma – a man unafraid to be a walking neon sign flashing “I WANT.” It’s also key to why the 12 steps worked for him, and for so many in trouble: An addict is lonely, and getting better means seeking connection and community.

For the first part of Brand’s life, that sense of connection was in woefully short supply. He was an exceedingly unhappy little boy. If you think he’s an outlier now, imagine him growing up an only child in a grim town in Essex, a sensitive little boy who was bullied, wet the bed and kept a clan of gerbils as pets. His mother was adoring but repeatedly in treatment for cancer, so he was often subject to the contempt of his stepfather. His biological father was a porn aficionado whose idea of a father-and-son vacation was a holiday to Thailand to treat his son to hookers. Additionally, he writes in his 2007 memoir *My Booky Wook*, “I was touched as a child, and I felt the warping.”

Brand became a boulder with growing fame; his taste for chocolate, heroin, sex and chaos was legendary, and he left enemies in his wake, both professional and personal. Really, it was quite impressive. Rarely will you read of a person with such a genius for antagonising authority. This gift hasn’t exactly faded with time: At the 2013 GQ Awards, he noted (before he was escorted from the premises) that the sponsor Hugo Boss made uniforms for the Nazis – “But they looked fantastic!”

Brand has been sober now for 14 years.

As bad as he was as a student, he was brilliantly diligent in working the steps of recovery. He spent days locked in a room

for Step 4, for example, the part about making a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves. And when it came to making amends to people – well, imagine how many amends a celebrity with unfettered access to women has to make. “Many didn’t want to hear from me,” he admitted. But his purpose in explaining the details of his recovery are to show that anyone, no matter how lost they are, can do it. As he explained in his rationale for writing this book: “My qualification is not that I am better than you, but that I am worse.”

Not that his struggles are entirely behind him. You can abstain entirely from drugs and alcohol, but as to those addictions that are “life-giving” – namely food and sex – he imposes structure. He is a vegan, with the occasional lapse of an egg; and since he believes that it is responsible for the commodification and objectification of women, there is no pornography allowed.

A happy outgrowth of his recovery is what he calls the “new territory” of domesticity: his wife, Laura Gallacher, and their 10-month-old daughter, Mabel.

His daughter in particular is credited with keeping his self-absorption in check. “This kid’s a pain in the ass,” he said happily, as he whipped out his phone to show me pictures. At 10 months, Mabel is a delicious imp, with the fair colouring of her mother and the gleeful expression of a hellion in training. In one photo she is smeared in kale juice, kind of *Exorcist* Lite.

“She thinks of me as the guy that holds the screen that *In the Night Garden* is on,” Brand said. “That’s my primary role in

life. *Oh, it's you, In the Night Garden Guy! Hold the screen better.* So, that's very good for me, who can get very easily – hmmm, what do I want to say? Hypnotized by self, and my own importance. She deflates me.”

Also helpful: his dog, Bear, an Instagram star in his own right who Brand described as his spirit animal. “He is my abstracted libido,” Brand said. “Even though he's neutered, I think it was too little, too late; we'd have to chop off the entire back half of him.

“He wants to eat life to death, in the most loving way imaginable. Which I identify with, because that's I think what I used to want to do.”

(Source: www.Independent.co.uk)