

redefining success

Midway through a meteoric career, technology guru Tod Maffin is scaling back to better manage his depression and alcohol addiction

by Michelle Roberts

Tod Maffin needed a safety net. Earlier this year, the popular technology journalist, podcaster and social media strategist made a soul-baring announcement on his blog: In addition to having depression—a fact he revealed in 2007—he's also a recovering alcoholic.

For Maffin, the two conditions go hand-in-hand, so making it harder to drink is an important part of his treatment plan.

"Outing myself was for safety," says Maffin, 39, of Vancouver, British Columbia, "because if it's out there that I'm an alcoholic and I'm in recovery, then there are fewer spaces in which I can relapse."

Those spaces include hotel bars, since Maffin travels frequently across North America as well as to Europe and Australia. An in-demand media consultant and public speaker—the *Globe and Mail* calls him "one of Canada's most influential futurists"—he gives at least 40 speeches a year on how businesses can use social media and new technologies.

That's only one of the successful careers he's managed to build over the years. There's also whiz-kid expert in new media, co-founder of a multimillion-dollar technology firm and host of a national radio show.

For years, Maffin's morning-to-night workload and always-on personality

hid a darker truth: The depression that led him to consider ending his life more than once, and the alcohol addiction that grew from trying to numb those feelings.

"For years, I just ignored the problem," Maffin says, reflecting on how he was able to achieve so much. "And it was incredibly unhealthy."

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the daily challenge

While he first experienced symptoms of depression in his teens, Maffin wasn't diagnosed until 2005—around the same time he sought treatment for alcohol abuse.

"That was the first time a doctor said depression is what you've got," Maffin says.

"Prior to that, I thought that's how everyone felt. And I had no idea that alcoholism was my way of medicating an illness."

He says dealing with his depression, which he now treats with medication, weekly group therapy and stress reduction techniques such as meditation, remains a daily challenge.

"I see things really slowly, so the cars that pass look like they're going in slow motion," he says. "Colors dim—they become very gray and bleak. At times, I literally see the world caving in and getting dark."

Maffin went public with his mood disorder in 2007, hoping it would inspire others to seek help. He added a presentation on mental health in the workplace to the speeches he offers. He also blogs regularly about living with depression. Outing himself as an alcoholic in February, however, wasn't "for anyone else's benefit but my own," he says.

"For me, depression leads to alcohol abuse and that leads to more depression," he says. "At some point, it doesn't matter which came first, the chicken or the egg."

empty triumph

Maffin remembers first feeling what he now can identify as depression around age 14. It was so severe, he recalls, that he dressed in only black and gray, slept all day and ran around all night.

He dropped out of school in the ninth grade, but falling in love a few years later gave him a strong desire to

make something of himself. Lacking a high school diploma, he talked himself into college by convincing administrators to give him a placement test.

After completing a two-year associate degree in media resources, he parlayed his interest in a fledgling technology now known as the Internet into a swift rise. By age 24, he was named the director of new media for a public relations firm. In his late 20s, Maffin co-founded a company to market a product he'd come up with: a computer program that allowed companies to ascertain whether Internet "buzz" about them was positive or negative.

In 2000, the company went public and Maffin and his partners were suddenly worth millions. But Maffin, the CEO and president, couldn't enjoy his success.

"One of the things I've learned about depression is that it comes in many different forms and not everyone starts out feeling low. The first depressive symptoms I had were the real feelings of inadequacy—that I'm in over my head and I don't deserve the success I'm getting."

Everything he'd ever wanted was within grasp. Not only were his shares in the company worth something like \$10 million (on paper, at least), he'd also recently been given the opportunity to fulfill another lifelong dream: To produce and host a national radio show about technology on CBC Radio. On top of that, he'd been booking lucrative public speaking engagements. But he could find no joy in any of it—a feeling that would visit him again and again in the years that followed.

Things came to a head at a company launch party, when Maffin and his three business partners, their three dozen employees and the company's funders gathered at the firm's posh office in downtown Vancouver to celebrate their first product release. Maffin spent most of the night in tears, hiding out in the "relaxation room" he'd set up for employees while his then-girlfriend, Jacquie, sat with him and tried to comfort him.

"I just felt like a fraud," he recalls. "I was so depressed I wasn't even thinking rationally."

Maffin left his company a couple of months later after its venture capitalists pulled him and his partners aside and told Maffin he needed to focus more on the business.

"They were aware that I wasn't alright."

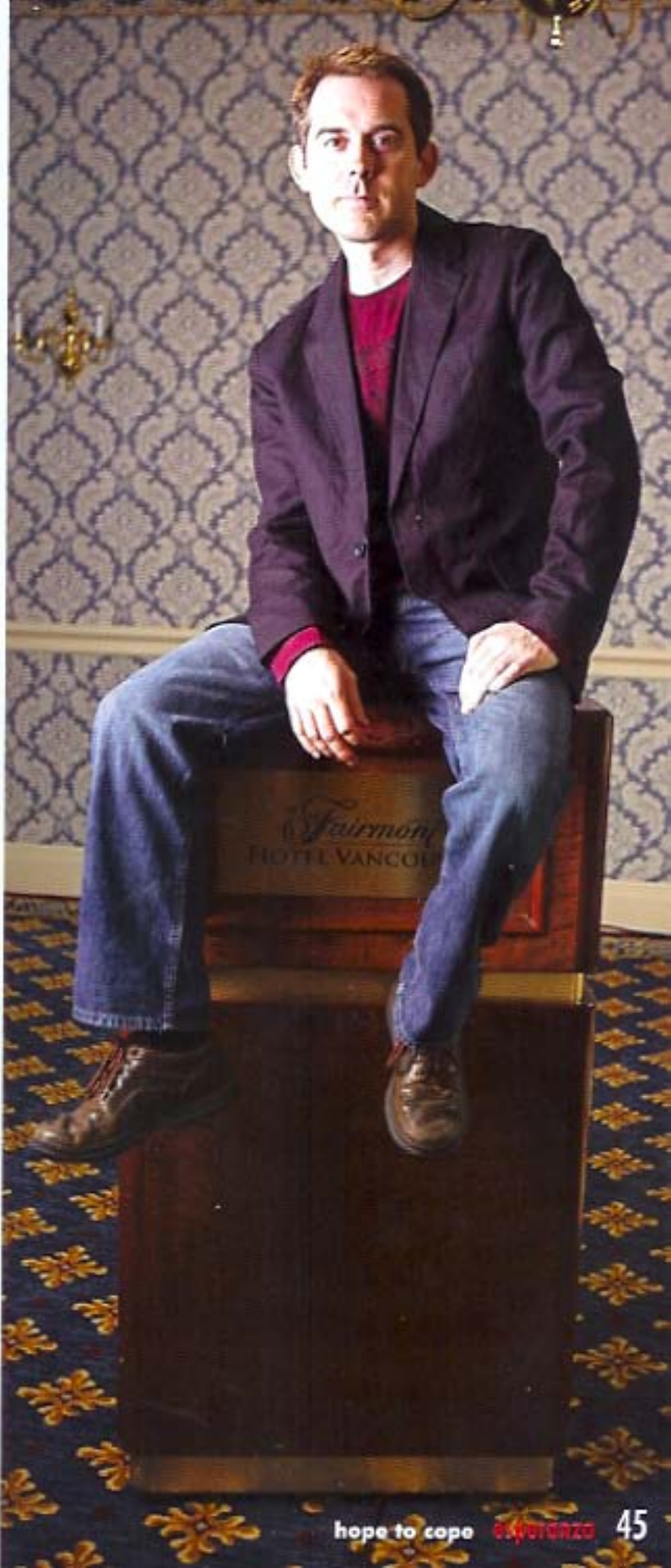


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I said the radio thing was a dream job and I was going to focus only on that," Maffin recalls. "Realistically, I knew there was this looming darkness and I couldn't figure out where it was coming from. So I walked away."

message in a bottle

Leaving the company did not ease Maffin's symptoms. Not knowing why he felt so bad, he began to drink heavily for the first time in his life. Still, he managed to keep up with his radio show, leaving the studio in mid-afternoon so he could work from home and "put some alcohol in my blood."

"I thought I'd found this magical elixir that made me feel a bit better," he says. "The alcohol was a coping mechanism for my still-undiagnosed depression."

Maffin was able to keep both his depression and his drinking from Jacque, now his wife, for several years. But he finally began to drop the balls in his juggling act. He felt too exhausted and unfocused to socialize, and the

speeches he was giving took longer and longer to prepare as his energy and concentration flagged.

He finally confessed to his wife that he feared something was wrong with him, that he couldn't stop drinking and that he wanted to kill himself. She took him to see a doctor, who diagnosed his depression and prescribed antidepressant medication. A month later, the same doctor forced Maffin into an alcohol rehabilitation center.

"I protested vigorously," he recalls. "I said, 'I can't cancel the speeches.' The next morning I woke up and I looked into my wife's eyes and she wasn't there. There was such a profound sadness in her eyes. She'd just given up. So I went."

Maffin graduated from the facility within two months. When he left in November 2006, he proudly showed off his completion medallion to family and friends. Less than three weeks later, he relapsed. A few months later, his wife, frustrated by his illness and addiction, filed for divorce.

'let the day unfold'

Over the past two years, Maffin has had two major relapses of depression and alcohol abuse—they always seem to go hand-in-hand, he says. He has been hospitalized twice, once after coming off a grueling but lucrative month of speaking around North America.

Since recommitting to sobriety and making his announcement, Maffin says he is now trying to honor his illness. He takes his medication and attends regular substance abuse support meetings. He went public about his addiction with the goal of making it more difficult (or at least embarrassing) for him to drink. He's also made lifestyle changes, such as moving to a quieter neighborhood and adopting an 18-pound Manx mix cat named Taiko that helps ease his feelings of isolation.

"My cat is right up there in my recovery program," Maffin says. "He is a comforting shadow. He always wants to be near me."

As a bonus, he adds, "I end up focusing on his purring to get myself into meditation."

Maffin says he's also learning how to scale back his professional obligations and personal expectations with the goal of staying mentally and physically healthy.

"I live my life the way my body and my life tell me to live. I used to always fight that," he says. "In the morning when I wake up, I get up and get out of my pajamas. When I'm sad, I call a friend and I cry. I've stopped trying to run my own life and I just let the day unfold as it unfolds."

"It's the simplest thing I could have done and yet it's the most freeing thing," he adds. "It took me 12 years of addiction and depression to get to this point and learn it. I know it now." **E**

Michelle Roberts is a freelance writer based in St. Louis, Missouri. A recipient of a 2004-05 Rosalynn Carter Fellowship for Mental Health Journalism, she specializes in mental health and family issues.

today's tips

Get real. When the stress in my life has built to an intolerable level, I will pull myself off the Internet. Beforehand, I always email my close friends and tell people in my blog community that I'm going through a rough time and I'm going to step off the grid. My real friends will call me to make sure I'm OK.

Speak up. Facebook, MySpace and Twitter are all great tools for reconnecting with old friends, classmates and lovers or keeping up with the goings-on of your friends. But something that's spoken—in the emotions, in the tone of voice and the pauses of sentences—communicates so much more than what you can say with (written) words.

Don't fear the phone. For those who are depressed or in recovery, picking up that phone can be difficult. I call it the 500-pound phone. Addiction and mental illnesses are so incredibly isolating that you can derive a sick comfort from that isolation: "If I don't open myself to anyone, I can't get hurt by anyone." Not good. So, give a jingle.