

Level Four

The hospital had a system for everything, both on the unit and off. As you can imagine, in a locked unit of adolescents, everyone wanted to leave. So the biggest challenge for us was how to get outside the unit.

The hospital had a rigid system in place for accessing the other parts of the hospital. For every day without incident, patients were given a point. The points translated into levels from one to four. Everyone started off at level one. After four days of remaining in behavioral control, patients were given a level four. Leveling up meant a great deal to us. We could go (with supervision) to the large dining room in the main hospital where the food was better.

Level four also meant patients had access to the hospital grounds (with supervision). This meant going to the gym or walking around outside for exercise. For confined adolescents, getting out of the confines of the unit was a huge goal to work towards.

By the time I was admitted to the hospital, I was a full-fledged smoker, and a heavy one at that. Several months prior to my admission, the rules around patient smoking had changed. Now adolescents were not allowed to smoke. Adults, however, were. When I first reached level four, I watched the adults smoking and craved a cigarette like nothing else.

One day Shirley and Kish came to see me. The visit was most welcome and uplifting. They brought me a paper bag containing a muffin with a cigarette hidden inside of it. Great, I thought, but how would I ever smoke it?

The next time I reached level four, I went outside with the cigarette in my pocket. Someone had just finished a cigarette, and it was still burning. So I lit my own cigarette with it. I took two puffs before mental health technicians intercepted me.

I was busted down to level one for the infraction.