

Drugline

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From user to helper

One of our Drugline outreach workers tells how his life was all but destroyed by drugs, how he won his long fight to overcome his addiction and now draws on his grim experiences to help others on the road to recovery and to educate young people about the dangers of drugs.

“ I’m 36 years old and come from a very loving family. But at the age of 14 I began to have problems at school. Exams stressed me, other pupils taunted me because I was overweight and I didn’t have a girlfriend. I began to feel I didn’t fit in, so to win acceptance I turned to stealing. I knew it was wrong but it helped me to make friends and the girls began to like me.

Spiralling into addiction

I left school at 16 and began stealing cars. I even stole from my parents to pay for new clothes and alcohol. I constantly lied to them and told them I had started a new job, only to leave home at 8.00am to hang about the streets with my pals.

Then I was introduced to cannabis and quickly became hooked. It seemed to boost my confidence. As I spiralled into addiction I broke every moral boundary I ever had. When I was 17 the police arrested me regularly and I spent a month in prison. Things got so bad that my parents kicked me out.

At 19 I started doing speed at parties and at 20 I joined the rave scene and used ecstasy and acid tablets like they were sweets. By now I was selling cannabis to fund my habit. My run-ins with the police got worse and I spent another two months in prison. At 21 I started to use cocaine. I was at a rave and having popped about four ecstasy pills I thought, “What the hell!”

In denial

By now I was losing friends fast. They urged me to get a grip of myself but I thought they were the idiots

who were missing out, not me. I had plenty of signs to tell me I was an addict but I was in denial.

By the time I was 22 I started selling ecstasy and soon owed the dealers money. I realised that if I didn’t sort myself out I was going to get hurt. Then someone suggested going on a kibbutz in Israel and I thought that might help.

There were no drugs on the kibbutz so I took to drinking heavily without realising I was substituting my addiction. Then I discovered I could get drugs in Tel-Aviv. Within months I was selling weed. I bought it cheap in Egypt, packing rucksacks full of it and walking straight back over the border. Flush with money, I met a girl who introduced me to heroin. My money soon went. I got careless with my dealings and at the age of 25 I got caught. The police raided me and I was put in an Israeli prison.

How heroin almost destroyed me

I returned to the UK hoping to get off heroin. I tried methadone programmes, cold turkey, sleeping pills and short-term counselling but all my efforts failed. I was in a hopeless state and when the girl I met in Israel left me, my whole world caved in.

Within days I injected for the first time – not just heroin but crack as well. That was a near-fatal decision. My habit overpowered me. I was living from day to day by shoplifting. I smelled bad, looked awful and had no friends left apart from other addicts. All my veins collapsed in my arms, so I injected into my legs. They soon collapsed too and I switched to my

groin. My weight plummeted to eight stone. I was in awful pain and lost my desire to live.

I overdosed twice but was brought back by other addicts. The second time I actually wished they hadn't saved me. It got so bad I was using water out of toilets and puddles to mix with the heroin. I was arrested regularly but gave false names to get bail. I burgled my parents' house and was at death's door. I had a huge lump growing on my groin from the injections.

Finally at 28 I begged my parents for their help. They took me to hospital where the abscess in my groin burst whilst I was in A&E. It smelled so bad. It was full of pus and blood. I was so lucky I was there because if that had happened on the street I would have died. I was kept in for a month and given methadone. I had three operations on my leg but it will never fully heal.

Prison rehab

Yet when I got out of hospital I still thought I could use heroin if I didn't inject! Soon afterwards I was picked up by the police yet again and this time got an 18-month prison sentence.

Somehow prison worked out differently for me this time. Other addicts who were on the rehab wing of the prison urged me to join them and try getting clean. So I did. Then another inmate caught me using and I was thrown off the wing and back to 23-hour lock-up. But luckily my cell was adjacent to rehab and that same night someone called out, "Darren, are you there?" It was the guy who split on me. He said, "Darren, I told on you for your own good. We love you and want you to get clean. Don't give up." Then about 15 to 20 grown men in prison were urging me to keep trying to get clean. It was the most powerful message ever and it gave me a new resolve to get back to rehab and kick my habit.

No going back

This time I began trusting people and opening up to them. I participated in the programme and worked on changing myself. In December 1998 I was released. But then the hard work really started. I knew there was no going back. After serving nearly a year in prison I went straight to second stage rehab and wasn't allowed out unless supervised. I knew that if I didn't do it I would suffer a relapse.

I met new friends in rehab and this helped me to get to NA and AA Twelve Step meetings. A counsellor helped me to gradually get my life back together.

Fighting for recovery

To say my life has changed is an understatement. I haven't used illegal substances for nine years now. But I'll admit it's not been easy. To start with it was a struggle hour by hour. I had curbed my physical

addiction but my psychological addiction involved a daily battle against my cravings. I kept a picture in my wallet of myself at my lowest point, when my skin was yellow, my eyes were hollow, my body was skeletal. Whenever I had the slightest urge to use, I would look at that photograph. It was a reminder of what would happen if I succumbed.

Although I no longer yearn for illegal substances, I am aware that I have an addictive personality which I have to keep in check. To help reinforce my own recovery, I decided to take a course in therapeutic counselling and I became a qualified counsellor with an advanced diploma. I found myself sharing other people's struggles at meetings. People who were just starting to get clean. Some had HIV, some had lost children.

After completing my diploma, I was about to take a position in addiction counselling when I heard about the progress that **Drugline** was making. I believe that prevention is better than cure and think that if I'd listened to a recovering addict or someone with personal knowledge about addiction it may have prevented me from making the choices I made. So I enquired about working in schools for **Drugline** and haven't looked back since.

Working with Drugline

I am now the Outreach Education Team Leader for **Drugline** and we visit schools in nine London boroughs, and in Essex and Hertfordshire. We have reached over 30,000 pupils in the last academic year. It's great to think our message is reaching so many kids and hopefully that number will multiply in future years.

On a personal level, life is now beyond my wildest dreams. Family and friends who endured the turmoil my drug use caused them are still in my life today. Being there to support *them* with life's ups and downs is heart warming.

In 2002 on a spooky Halloween I saw a girl who I thought was so beautiful I was frightened even to ask her out on a date. But I did and she agreed. Then, in 2004, she even agreed to be my wife! We married in Sri Lanka and spent our honeymoon in the Maldives. I didn't think life could get any better. But it did and in January 2007 I became a dad for the first time. To hold my baby son Dillon in my arms brings tears to my eyes. I can't believe I'm father to such a perfect baby boy. I wondered if I could even have children after the wreckless way I treated my body when using drugs. Yet there, lying peacefully in my arms, is the evidence that life moves on.

I look into his innocent little eyes and hope that organisations such as **Drugline** will have an increasingly positive influence on young people's choices so that the hell I went through won't have been in vain. ”