

KAREN'S PERSONAL STORY: AN INSIGHT INTO PRESCRIPTION DRUG ADDICTION

My life before benzodiazepines (Benzos) was a great one. I had lots of friends, close family, two lovely children and I made the most of everyday. I lived life to the full. Apart from my diabetes I never suffered illness and had never had any mental health problems.

My whole Benzo experience started when, following a doctor's advice I abruptly stopped taking an opiate pain killer I had been on and this sent me into 'cold-turkey' withdrawal. I was taken to A&E where I was assessed by the on-call psychiatric team. They agreed that I was in opiate withdrawal and prescribed me 25-30mg of diazepam and 20-30 mg of temazepam, to be taken daily, and told me to get a repeat prescription from my GP when I had run out.

Little did I know at the time that although these pills took away the opiate withdrawal symptoms, this would also be the beginning of my journey into hell. After taking the Benzos for about 3-4 months and never having a follow-up appointment, I mentioned to my pharmacist that I was starting to feel ill. I was really low in spirit, depressed, vomited a lot the time, felt dizzy, experienced headaches and in general felt terrible. The pharmacist told me that it was probably the Benzos and advised me to see my GP about stopping taking them. The pharmacist also told me that the pills I was taking could be addictive.

I was very concerned and went to see my GP. He agreed that my symptoms could be being caused by the Benzos and after explaining that they can be addictive, suggested I should stop taking them. His plan was to drop the temazepam straight away and then cut out the diazepam by 5mg a week. I followed his recommendations but after a week I started experiencing strong symptoms: anxiety, depression, insomnia, sickness, severe agitation. I started pacing and rocking, and all in all, I wanted to die.

My father took me back to the GP and explained what was happening and he told me that I could make smaller weekly decreases in the diazepam, but thought that I was just generally depressed with life. According to him, you don't get such severe symptoms coming off Benzos. He also prescribed me flupenthixol to help with the depression.

So once more, I followed my GP's advice and started taking the flupenthixol and because he didn't say by how much to drop the diazepam each week my father suggested cutting down 1mg a week. Every Monday I would drop 1mg, but 3 days later I would experience the same withdrawal symptoms I had before. They were so intense at times that all I could do all day was think about killing myself. The only reason I didn't was the fact that after 3 days of intense symptoms I would suddenly be OK again. The symptoms just lifted and disappeared. Then Monday would come

round again and the whole process would start again. This is how I continued until I took my last diazepam 1 mg.

Three weeks later I called my GP and asked him what I should do about the flupenthixol because I felt OK. He said I didn't need it anymore and to just stop it that day. Again, I did as I was advised. Three days later I went into massive withdrawal. I thought it would pass after three days (like the diazepam) but the symptoms only got worse and the feelings I had were so intense and growing by the day. I hadn't slept for 6 nights and then the suicidal thoughts crept in. Unaware of what I was really doing, I took a massive overdose of insulin and slashed my arms up with a razor. I was found by a friend and taken into hospital where, after being put on a glucose drip to stop me going into a diabetic coma, I was once again seen by the on-call psychiatric team. They didn't have much sympathy, told me I was extremely depressed and put me back on diazepam and temazepam.

So here I was, once again back on the Benzos. I have to say, they did take the edge off the anti-depressant withdrawal but I knew I shouldn't really be taking them. Before I left the hospital I had asked the psychiatric team for more information on Benzos but they said they didn't have any and that I would be OK staying on them or could just stop at a later date. I was on a repeat prescription but after 4 months of taking them again I went to see my psychiatrist. I asked about my past experiences with the tablets but was told that they were not addictive and don't cause withdrawal problems. He said that I had probably cut down my dosage too slowly and that's why I had felt so bad. His advice was to just stop taking them. He gave me a number to call if I ran into problems but said I wouldn't need to use it.

So I just stopped taking the pills; just like that. What a mistake! First came acute anxiety, so much so that I just couldn't sit still. I found myself pacing my kitchen or rocking on the floor. Then came the depression and feelings of total despair; feeling that I didn't want to live any more and wanting to harm myself. I couldn't eat, sleep or talk sometimes. Then one night while I was rocking on my kitchen floor I saw thousands of spiders crawling out of the flooring and an old man standing in front of me. I started screaming and even though my dad kept telling me there was nothing there, I was sure I could see them. I calmed down but all night I could hear the phone ringing and somebody knocking on the door and walls. Of course these things were not really happening but at the time they were so real to me. This went on for days and my exhausted father eventually phoned the number I had been given to see if we could get some help. He phoned every day for days, but the answer was always the same. 'Sorry we can't help, go see your GP, have a nice hot bath and you will feel better, have a cup of tea.'

I felt like I was losing my mind and I got really scared when I reached the times when I was so delirious I wouldn't even recognise my own father or children and I didn't recognize that I was in my own home. I kept asking my dad who he was and why he had brought me 'here'. My father called my GP, but again was told I was suffering from depression and he couldn't help. My father knew it wasn't depression because my mother had suffered from it all her life and my symptoms were totally different.

This carried on for a few weeks until I eventually gave into the suicidal thoughts. I overdosed on insulin went into the bathroom and slashed myself up with a razor. My daughter, who I didn't even realise was at home, found me and I ended up in A & E again. As I lay there with my daughter and father beside me, I just kept asking to die. The psychiatric team was called again. When my father told them he thought it was diazepam withdrawal and whether I should be on a hospital ward for help, they just told him to reinstate 20mg diazepam to me and to go home when my blood sugars returned to normal. I was discharged the next day - back on the diazepam. That same night I took another overdose of temazepam and diazepam. Once again, I ended up hospital and once again I was sent home with no help or advice. The 20 mg of diazepam hadn't helped and looking back now I know it was because of the cold turkeys that I had ended up in this state.

Anyway, after all this I still felt the same way as I had before: I still wanted to die. I was still hallucinating and kept cutting my arms because I could feel worms crawling underneath my skin. I felt sick, had insomnia, lost all control of bodily functions and had to be fed at times. It was like being a baby. One evening I was lying on the couch, rocking and crying, when suddenly I had a fit. At that point my father had had enough. The next day he took me to the office of the psychiatrist and demanded he take me into hospital and 'make me better'. Reluctantly, I was admitted to the psychiatric ward. I don't remember much about being there but they tapered me off my daily dose of 20 mg diazepam in two weeks and sent me home diazepam free with a script for zolpidem sleeping pills to help me rest.

At home, I went berserk. I was slashing myself up on anything I could get my hands on. Nobody from the NHS offered any help so my dad put me back onto 30mg of diazepam and decided to withdraw me at 1mg a week as we had done in the past. The thing is, the withdrawal process wasn't like before. I didn't have any good windows offering me some peace from the symptoms. A good day for me was being able to go to the toilet without being reminded and helped and being able to put a spoonful of food to my mouth myself. A bad day was spent screaming, crying and trying to get hold of something to kill myself with. This went on for months but when I got down to 5 mg the suicidal thoughts started to leave and I stopped self harming, I could feed myself and the depression seemed to be lifting the lower I was getting on the pills. However, the anxiety was still high and I didn't sleep for days on end. Even the zolpidem didn't work. Yet I was feeling much better than in the previous three years I had spent trying to withdraw from these drugs.

I finally took my last diazepam on September 6th 2006. By this time I was able to function at a reasonable level. The major symptoms I was left with were acute anxiety and insomnia.

After five months being off the pills I brought a laptop and got linked up to the internet. I found so much information on Benzos and (don't ask me how) found an e-mail address for a man called Allen. He was the first person to tell me in layman's terms about Benzos. I will be forever grateful to him because he made me feel like I was normal and that everything I had been through was related to the drugs. He

also told me that zolpidem was just as bad so I stopped them too. He also put me in touch with a web site forum (TRAP) and there I found a world of support. I am truly grateful for all the help and advice I received from the admin there and the reassurance I got and still get is much appreciated. I have been through two opiate withdrawals and 1 SSRI withdrawal but the worse by far was the Benzo withdrawal. It nearly took my sanity and my life.

I'm writing this in the hope that it can help others to understand the problems that Benzo use and withdrawal can cause for often unknowing, sufferers. People need to understand the safest and most effective ways to withdraw from them – and to avoid the prescribing of long term Benzo treatment. These messages need to be passed onto professionals, current users and the general public.