

KERRY MANLEY PERSONAL STORY

I'm Kerry; I'm 54 and I live in Cardiff and have done all my life. I've got two children, a son and a daughter, four lovely grandchildren and I've been married to John for 24 years. My story is based around my son Kevin. He's had an addiction problem for many years, starting back in his mid-teens. Although it's hard to say from when exactly as my husband and I weren't aware that it was drugs until quite later on.

We had an ordinary family life, my husband and I worked very hard. We always had good times, like family holidays. Both Kevin and my daughter had a very full social life, with loads of friends. They were always very active and took part in sports clubs and air cadets. It was all very normal. Kevin was always very over-active. He was always in trouble for something whether he was there or not.

We hadn't realised that things had started to change with Kev. Stories started to come out that when he left to go to air cadets he'd taken a change of clothes and actually gone off to do other things. He would then change back into his other clothes when he came back. It was a form of rebellion I think. I think he'd also started bunking off in secondary school; it was really strange, because he'd say he'd been in school, but then come home soaking wet as if he'd been out all day.

These little things started to add up and left John and I with a really uneasy feeling, things just weren't right. It was like living with a yoyo; one minute he was just our normal son, but then other times there was an edge to him, like there was something going on, something very secretive about him.

By the time he was 16 he'd been arrested for wrong doing. It was surreal, we had all these policemen turning up at the house telling us that our son had been doing all of these awful things. It was like the end of the world; we just didn't know what to do. At that time we really only thought about him getting in trouble with the police, we didn't for a moment think that drugs were involved. I mean I knew that he smoked, but that was the limit.

Kevin had left the home at this point and John had said quite firmly that unless he splits from the people who were involved in the wrong doing, then he wasn't going to come home again. That was more his decision than mine. I felt absolutely dreadful. But I understood the reasoning behind it, but of course Kevin didn't. So a result he was simply released from the police station and was walking the streets and we didn't know where he was. John and I didn't know what to do. It was simply dreadful for both of us. We ended up searching for him locally.

Apart from that visit from the police, Kev was all right. He didn't appear any different to any teenager, really. He was a bit moody and non-cooperative at times, but then you could have put that down to his age not that something was going on. He was always talking about going to University and being sponsored by the air force. He still talked like that, even though he was being a Jekyll and Hyde character, leading a different life. What we didn't know was that he was getting deeper and deeper into this other world of crime. I still don't know whether that was to obtain money for drugs at that time. It's not something we've really discussed in depth since.

A year or two after that I found ganja in his room. It wasn't particularly well-hidden. It was in a drawer, but one I was likely to go in anyway to put things away. I really didn't think that was a problem, most people don't. I've since come to think very differently about it - it was just a stepping stone. Ganja was clearly a factor in Kevin's life - we found out later that it was the reason why Kevin had lost his Saturday job as he'd been caught smoking it at the shop where he worked.

When Kevin was 18 he had a serious motor bike accident. I don't know if you'd call it luck, but it happened right outside the hospital. Coincidentally, it was the first time that I was working a day shift. Somebody came running in and said, 'Help, there's been an accident' so myself and another nurse rushed outside to see what we could do. Immediately, I saw his motorbike and knew it was Kevin. He was lying in the middle of the road and was quite badly injured, although at this point I didn't know how badly.

When he was in hospital we found out that he was in trouble with the police again. My husband disowned him. It was a horrible time because although he accepted that I had to support Kevin and go back and forth, he would not speak to him or see him. As far as John was concerned, Kevin was not welcome back in to our home after he was discharged. Although as it happened, he did come home to us as he was so badly disabled initially that even John couldn't see him not back with us.

The accident happened as he was on his way home from work, so his rucksack was there. When I got home I emptied his rucksack and found some tablets in there. It wasn't as if I was looking for anything, I was just sorting and tidying, like mothers do. I remember thinking that it was strange; they were probably temazepam, or some sort of sleeping tablet. I thought, 'What the hell would he want with something like that?' It was probably the first time that I knew something like that was involved. My heart clenched and I thought, 'This is what it's all been about.'

It was really hard to deal with because Kevin was so badly injured and we knew he had to have major surgery. That was paramount in my mind. There were times it would pop back into my mind but I just pushed it away again. I don't know if you've ever felt the clutch of fear where your heart seems to contract. It's a horrible feeling but that's the only way I can describe it. You

tense up and your heart really feels like it's tensed up, you get a wave of perspiration or heat over you, the panic. I didn't say anything to my husband, I didn't want to worry him - I thought I'd be able to deal with it on my own by talking to Kev and offering support.

I didn't know what to think. It was the unknown that used to worry me the most, not knowing really what was going on. You sort of think the worst but then you put it away as you don't want to have to think about it. Because there were no real other signs of drug use, I thought it wasn't a major problem. I thought he'd just been dabbling. I couldn't understand why temazepam though as all they did was put you to sleep - maybe they mixed it with other things. I really was clueless about it.

The next few weeks were really difficult with Kevin being unwell in hospital. I tried talking to him about it when it was possible, but it was just explained away. He just explained it with half-truths, a little bit of the truth with lies mixed in. You'd sit there thinking, 'He's admitting this to me so he must be telling me the truth now', but he was only admitting part of it. It was very clever really.

I had experience of alcoholism with my mother so I saw the damage that it can do, but not of drugs. Even in my teenage years when I was growing up, I'd never had any contact with drugs. If someone had put something in front of me I wouldn't have known what it was or what to do with it. To me, alcohol addiction and drug addiction were very different things. I realise now that it all comes under the same umbrella. Alcohol and drugs, there isn't much difference really, just the effects that they have on the body.

The media stories used to scare me as it made me see how much I didn't understand about drugs. I'd skim over these stories in the media, about ecstasy deaths and so on. I'd get very emotional about it and start thinking about that poor person and their poor family and how they must be suffering. But I really, really didn't think it would happen or that it was happening to us.

After the accident we went through periods of where Kevin lived with us and then didn't live with us. It broke my heart when he didn't live with us. I was constantly worrying about him every minute of the day whether he was dead or alive and if he was in trouble. As the years went on, he had jobs and lost jobs but it was never his fault always somebody else's. But no matter what he was doing, everybody who came across Kevin always said how nice he was. He was a gentleman and it was very hard to condemn him completely because he always had this other side to him. I kept thinking, 'It's not all awful, he is lovely really.'

At this point, Kevin had got further into trouble with the police and was told to leave the house again, so he went to live with a friend. He had a building society account and pass book. It was his account and I knew he had a fair

bit of money in there. But by the time he came back to us a few months later, every penny was gone. We'd asked him at the time, 'What on earth have you been doing with this, what have you been spending your money on?' He was about 18 at this time and we still didn't have a clue that it was drugs. Once again, things went further downhill. He was living in and out of flats, bed-sits, and then eventually moving from one hostel to another.

I can't really remember how I found out that he was taking heroin; I think I've blocked it out. I think that I badgered him into admitting where the money was going and why everything cost so much. I must have really nagged. I don't think I came across any evidence, I don't think I'd have known what it looked like or what someone did with it or how somebody used it. I was very blinkered. I didn't want to know the mechanics at that time, but unfortunately I do now. I'm all too aware of how they use these drugs.

Eventually, we found his injecting equipment one time when Kevin was living back with us. I was at work and John had gone home unexpectedly and actually found some needles prepared ready for him to use. Kevin was in the bathroom and John rang me to tell me what he'd found and that he was kicking him out of the house, there and then. I was so angry with him because he could have put my granddaughter at risk as she used to come to the house to visit us. I don't think she would go through his things, but the fact that it was there. I felt so let down.

I have to say that when I first knew that he was injecting heroin I wanted to die, I couldn't get my head round it. I didn't think you could get much worse than injecting heroin, I thought there was no turning back. I was worried about the health issues: hepatitis, HIV, AIDS, everything like that. I didn't know how careful he was with needles, I had no control, and I couldn't bear to think. I thought it was the end - I felt absolutely petrified. I didn't believe it; I didn't want to believe it. Knowing that he was using needles in the squalor that he was living in... I had no control over it so I just couldn't bear to think about it. I have to say that that was one of the worst moments of my life when I found out he was injecting. It seemed to be the end, that he was already dead.

So he was on the street, once again. It was like a rollercoaster, he'd be kicked out, come back home, then something catastrophic would happen again and he'd be gone again. There were times when I didn't want him to live with us, but the thought of the alternative was unthinkable. I never once thought, 'Well Kevin isn't here but at least he's getting on with his life'. It just wasn't like that. It wasn't right that my son live like that, or anybody's son. He just existed. Seeing him live like that when we lived so well, so comfortably, was awful. It was just immoral.

It really was like sticking a knife into a wound every time I saw him because of how he was or how he was living. I felt very guilty as I'd brought him into

the world; I'd felt that maybe he'd got it from me because of my mother. Although I've never had problems in that way because of family connections I've always been the other way really. John also felt guilty because he felt that he didn't spend enough time with Kev when the kids were growing up. He worked seven days a week for eighteen years, to bring the money in. But it's too late to go back; you can't change anything in the past. But the drugs really did change everything. From being a handsome, young teenager with everything ahead of him, Kevin changed, slowly but surely, into a skeleton. He was like a zombie; his health was awful, he looked dreadful, emaciated. As he grew older I didn't think his life was worth living. He survived for drugs and used drugs to survive.

Although he was always Kevin underneath to me with the same sense of humour, his attitude was terrible. He never frightened me like the stereotype image of a threatening addict. Even when he was desperate for money, and I wouldn't or couldn't give him any, he'd never hurt me physically, maybe mentally, but never physically. It was so hard watching him decline and his life become embroiled into that sordid world.

It affects your whole life. We'd always be waiting for a knock on the door to say that Kevin was dead. Whenever the phone rang my heart would lurch. I'd have to change my ring tones regularly because the tunes became associated with Kevin calling asking for money or the fear of bad news. Whenever I heard that tone I'd connect it with bad news. There are still some tunes I would never have back on my phone because they remind me of the worst times. I became really anxious. For a number of years, I've been on prescribed anti-depressants, because I'm hyper-emotional. I've always been that way inclined, but since Kev's problems, I've been unable to deal with the smallest thing - I'm really over emotional. I'm sure there will be a time when I won't need to take the medication though; I'm already feeling better and not continuously anxious.

My mind was always thinking about something it shouldn't have been. My concentration was appalling, my memory, my eating habits, I ate to console myself, and I had sleeplessness. It just affected everything. I was always worrying, thinking of the next step, 'Will he ring me tomorrow? Will he be in a fit state? Will he be ill? Alive?' It was always on the mind, I'd wake up in the night and it would be on my mind.

People use the term depression quite lightly, but I was really, really depressed, suicidal at times. I was just in total despair. I remember thinking, 'How can I go on this way?' Not only me but John was the same, absolutely atrocious at times. We'd go through cycles when either both of us would be good or one of us would be down and we'd rub off on each other. I have to say that both of us have come very close to suicide, on a number of occasions. The only thing that stopped me though was thinking, 'How would Kevin manage if I wasn't there to pick up the pieces?' And I couldn't do that

to my daughter and her family; that would be too cruel. So we just had to get on with it.

At that time there was no planning for the future whatsoever. I've always been pretty keen on medical check-ups, never shied away from them. But it had got to the point where I stopped going and I thought, 'If I've got anything wrong with me, it can take me naturally and I won't do anything to stop it.' It was a strange attitude but all I could think was that it was inevitable and it wouldn't be like I killed myself. So I wouldn't plan for the future because I thought, 'Well I won't be here anyway.'

I bottled a lot up over the years. Although the way I coped changed as I didn't want to talk about it with anyone at first. When I did talk about it, it was with people who didn't understand and who never would. I think they thought they were making the right noises but often I came away feeling worse. We had very mixed reactions from those who were close to us. A few good friends were very supportive, but they really had no idea what we were going through. More importantly though, they supported Kevin. They didn't keep in contact as such, but over the years they never lost their affection for him or their willingness to support him. They might have been misguided at times because they didn't know how deep the problems were, but at least they were there or were trying to be there for us and him.

It was easier to deal with at first, it hadn't worn me down and I didn't know what was ahead. It was a gradual wearing down. It affected my relationship with John. It affected my relationship with everybody. I was being pulled in all sorts of directions, I was trying to be all things to different people and it just didn't work. My family life really suffered. Kate and I argued a lot. She felt quite jealous. I don't know if that's the right word, but she used to feel I gave Kevin more than her, more attention, but I've always been at great pain to explain that if she had been needier than he had, I would have done the same for her. If she needs me I'm there, there is no difference, but she hasn't called upon me in the way that he has.

I think she understands that now that she has her own children now, so I think she understands that feeling of a mother's love; there can be no comparison. I would do anything, if it was the right thing for my children. I've made mistakes, the way I went about doing things and I've realised that now, but I would do anything I could to help.

We all seemed to cope with the situation in different ways. Kate was angry with Kev for what he was doing to me, both financially and on the mental side as well. She could see that it was taking its toll on me and although she still loved him, she was very angry. Kate was worried about Kev of course, but she had a family of her own. At first, she only had a daughter, and Kate was quite worried about the impact Kev was having on her as he kept coming in and out of her life. Kate really looked up to Kev and really enjoyed

his company, but it got to a certain point where she had to say, 'Enough is enough.'

It was also hard because John and I dealt with it all in different ways, as well. John's safety net was to cut himself away from Kevin, although it didn't stop him worrying. It got to the point where we didn't come together to cope, we were in our separate boxes, trying to deal with it in our own way without being together on it at all. As I've said, our relationship has nearly split up many times because of it, although it is better today. He recognises the difference this time and for the first time in many, many years both he and Kate can see a future.

For many years though, I was dealing with it by myself and basically doing all the wrong things, I think. I also found that I withdrew from friends a lot and I've become very guarded with certain people. I believed they wouldn't understand and our relationship would never be the same. I didn't want to put them in the position of discussing things with them and hearing their comments. I have also had contact with people that would be judgemental. So you find yourself gradually withdrawing away, or I'd go to social activities, but I wouldn't 'be there'. I'd go through the motions because that was what was expected, but my mind would be somewhere else. Basically, my whole life was: work, Kevin, a bit of home and bed.

My work life suffered as well. I have to say that some of my colleagues were quite sympathetic at first although that did alter later, but I know that they put up with a lot. I was very distracted or would take longer for lunch to see Kevin but they appeared to understand and be compassionate about it. However, there was a core group of people who tended to gossip about it, which in fact made my position there terrible. It's a shame because I would enjoy my job if I hadn't have had to deal with their reactions to Kev's problems. Some of the people's attitudes really hurt me and hit me in ways I never thought possible. I'm getting through and over that, but I don't think my working life will ever be the same. I don't think I'll ever feel comfortable there, so it's a little bit of added pressure I could do without. But in the grand scheme of things, it's actually nothing.

I also got myself into real financial difficulties because of the amount of money I was giving Kevin. At first, it was for appropriate, explainable reasons, but then it all changed. I was giving him money, trying to stop him doing anything illegal to get the money for the drugs because I thought he'd only get into worse trouble. However, I think if he had got into worse trouble and had perhaps gone into prison that wouldn't have been an end to it. It wouldn't have been the answer like people think, because drugs are readily available in these places. I think the one time Kevin said when he was in prison (on a non-drug related charge, of which he was later acquitted) that somebody who had been his dealer from the streets was actually in at the same time and still dealing. It (giving Kevin money) got totally out of hand. I still have a loan now.

I was so concerned that his life was already so awful that there was no way he was going to get money for drugs other than illegal ways - robbing somebody, hurting somebody, doing terrible things really. I couldn't see that happen. I thought that if I could just give him enough money to stop that happening... So in vain, I just kept on and on, trying to support him, trying to give him food or make sure that he was nourished, so at least I could do some good that way.

Looking back, I don't know how I managed, how I existed, because my mind was just continuously everywhere. But I tried in any way I could to make life more bearable for him really, to help him stop taking the drugs. And he kept reassuring me that he was cutting down, that he had a plan. He used to have wonderful plans and he'd draw up a schedule of coming off this and that. Some of the times it did actually happen and I know that he was drug-free. I was optimistic about these times at first, usually I'm the opposite, but in this circumstance I wasn't. I always clung on to, 'This is the time, it will be ok, and this time it will work.' I never fully believed it but there was always that hope that things would go back on an even keel.

Then it would all go backwards again and with it came the realisation of knowing, 'Here we go again', into the madness. We had fields in front of our house and one time I went out into the pouring rain and screamed - wailed is probably a better word for it. I couldn't do it in front of the family, but I had to let it out somehow. It was awful as well because of the way in which John dealt with it. He'd let his defences down to rebuild a relationship with Kevin and then it would all be knocked down again. Then I would be back in the middle of it. I was leading a double life again: wife to John and mother to Kate on the one side, and mother to Kevin on the other. It was a completely different existence. I was torn and all the time I was trying to hold down a full-time job; one in which you needed to concentrate and have your wits about you.

Eventually, the way that I dealt with his clean periods and relapses changed. At first, I used to help him plan how things were going to be different, and talk about the future and sort of discuss strategies with him about how he was going to stop using drugs. But, of course, it only ever happened on a very short temporary basis.

Also, the places in which he was living... how can an addict refuse heroin or whatever the drug may be when it's put in front of them? Even I understand that. I realise now, that there comes a certain point where you can have all the best of intentions of stopping an addiction, but it's mental as well as physical, so until the person is ready to do that then it is all quite futile really. There has to be that point where they're totally convinced in their desire to stop, otherwise it won't happen.

I realise now that there are many things that I shouldn't have done. I was a part of it, but at the time Kevin had conditioned me. I don't think I realised how bad it was or how manipulative it was. I could only see it as 'helping' him. He was in ill health and was walking miles and miles every day to get his drugs, with his bad hip from his previous motorcycle accident years. It's really stupid when you think about it. None of what I did, like giving him money, driving him to dealers should never have happened, but I can't imagine handling it differently. I would never in hindsight have done those things and I hope to goodness I would never do them again.

I should have shared everything I knew about Kevin's using and lifestyle with John right from the beginning, instead of thinking that I could stop more people from getting hurt. I thought if I could deal with it, John would never have to know and it wouldn't hurt his relationship with Kevin. If I had shared what I knew and my feelings with John, it wouldn't have got so out of control on the financial side of things. I wouldn't have got so depressed and out of my mind with worry. So definitely, sharing right from the beginning would have been better.

I did actually have some counselling at work at one point, from occupational health. I had sessions with a lady whom I found most off-putting and unhelpful. I only had a couple of sessions, but I found her attitude quite judgemental. I was surprised because her attitude was wrong.

During the last year or two, I've been in contact with a place called Inroads. I found out about it from Kevin. He'd been going there for a while, which I didn't know about and he suggested that I get in touch because it had helped him so much. It's a drop-in centre for people with addiction problems and for those who have been affected by addicts, and they offer all manner of support. People who have problems can drop in and have contact with other people who have had problems, sometimes have treatment or just spend time there. It didn't really matter to them what I was saying, they'd probably heard it or seen it all before which was the good thing about it. They know and understand the issues, and they are very supportive.

Also, the treatments that they have there are all aimed at you as an individual, whether you're a family member or user. It's for you to get the most out of them. Sometimes, I've gone along to have the therapy and have talked so long that there's been no time for the massage! That in itself was obviously what was needed that day so it was fine. I was lucky that Kevin knew about Inroads. There are many people who haven't heard of it, they really don't know that this place exists. The treatment services do need a much higher profile.

I still go there for treatment, like reflexology to relieve stress. I did for a period of time have counselling there. That did help me, but perhaps more with my relationship with John and also to come to terms with how things had affected me, rather than dealing with Kev as such. That has finished

now, but I can always start it up again if I felt the need. What I did find good there was the attitude of the people. They're quite clued up, very understanding, and I think if it wasn't for them I wouldn't have got through it in the way I did. They were never judgemental and always there to listen.

Although I do think the unit was a help overall, it was quite misleading from an addict's point of view. Particularly because I am a health professional, I don't think its much help just handing out methadone and Subutex without anything to back it up. It needs to be more of a wrap around care, rather than just giving out prescriptions and testing addicts.

I know of many addicts who are addicted to methadone and use it along with heroin. And because addicts are clever and know when they're going to be tested by services, they know when to stop taking their heroin so it doesn't show up. I always thought this was just something Kev would talk about but was never really sure of how true it was. In hindsight, from being involved in his care when he was ill, I really do believe that there isn't enough support available to help addicts work through their problems. A prescription just isn't enough.

When Kevin was desperately ill last year, I'd go to his house every day and see that he had deteriorated. We'd been to casualty but nobody picked up on how desperately ill he was. I actually attended casualty twice with Kevin, to try and give him some sort of credibility but twice he was turned away, although his condition warranted being admitted. I'm sure that they saw no further than the fact that he was an addict.

So I was nursing him at his home, I'd bed-bath him and every day when I went there and let myself in I was prepared to find him dead. I really thought the end had come.

Even though Kev was so unwell, he was still using heroin. I sort of understood it because at this point I knew that if he didn't he'd be even more unwell. He was at such a stage that I think he might have died if he hadn't continued using to some degree. He was already having rigours - attacks of chest pain - so what would the effects of withdrawal have done on top of that?

I remember thinking what a terrible thing addiction is, that it could do this to someone. Enormously terrible, I can't say that enough. How could it get like this? How could it get any worse? If he'd died at that point it wouldn't have been worse, that actually would have been better at the time.

I have to say I really did debate whether to end his life, I could have easily. To see him there, like a skeleton, in agony and struggling for breath. He was comatose at times and I used to think how easy it would be to put a pillow over his head and end all his agony. I just couldn't though. I wanted so much for him to be better and in the end I absolutely insisted for him to be put into

hospital; and they did and thank God he didn't die. But I could so easily have done that, God forgive me, and it wasn't for any selfish reason, I just didn't want him to suffer any more. I don't think anybody quite understood what I was doing day in, day out, keeping him alive. I felt so isolated with him.

When he was finally admitted to hospital, the lack of understanding about the addiction side of it was so apparent. He was admitted to the poisons unit for people who have addictions problems, and they just didn't have an understanding of the psyche of an addict. The nursing care was nil and the lack of physical care was apparent.

Strangely enough, even after the way he had lived, Kevin was always worried about disinfecting things and making sure things were clean. He always has and always will, thank God, but the staff just didn't expect him to have those standards. He was an addict, a junkie, his illness was self-inflicted and he didn't deserve better care. It upset him, it annoyed him. He was very angry at times. Mentally, he was desperate for the right attitude. It did change a little when I spoke to the ward manager as I read out something from Kevin's notebook about how he'd been treated. She burst into tears, and said that she had no idea of what he was feeling. Luckily, she was a good ward manager; she took it on board and did make changes.

There were some doctors and nurses that believed in him though and they really made a difference. One of the registrars has said to me what hidden depths Kevin has. When you actually took the time to listen to Kevin, you understood where he was coming from.

There really needs to be more education given to staff about addiction. I've talked to senior nurses in emergency units and they've said themselves that there's a distinct lack of understanding about these issues. Basically, they need it in their training, once they start working on ward contact level. They need it the same as they do fire safety lectures; there ought to be something put in place to help them to look through the façade. What you see in front of you is not necessarily what is there. You label people. Most of the nurses, but not all, use derogatory terms when discussing addicts. It is sickening. There should be more understanding of the psyche of an addict.

For a long time I have made no secret that my son was an addict and when Kevin became ill and was in the hospital where I worked, I had to be open. It really taught me, more than ever, that it's an illness and something can be done about it - and it should be. You shouldn't label people. Since Kevin has left hospital, I have never ceased to freely talk about Kevin's problems in a way that I would never have thought I could - in a less emotional way. It's the only way I can think of to show people that we're ordinary; we brought him up with values, the same as his sister. He chose one way and she chose another way. So how can it be the way you bring a child up? It can't be, otherwise Kate would have been the same way. I think it's important for people to realise that it could happen to them. For example, even their

husband could become addicted to pain relief after an operation, so don't be complacent.

The worst for me was the attitudes of some of my work colleagues. It's very strange because I work in a caring profession in the health service, but some of the attitudes of workers were truly awful. Over the time that Kevin was an inpatient, I heard that the staff had been gossiping about him, not only on their ward but on other wards. I was told that a number of times a day they discussed him, and us as a family, in a very derogatory manner. Much of what they said was unfounded or damn right untrue. I find it incredible that they can break confidentiality with other members of staff.

I was angry and hurt, and felt desperately bad for Kevin. He was desperately ill and they were discussing him in such a malevolent way. Gossiping, saying, 'Why hasn't his father visited?' or 'His sister's cut him off?', which was quite untrue at that time.

My manager got to find out and said that it was a breach of confidentiality and they should be disciplined, but that she could only take things further if I made an official complaint. I felt that I couldn't because I wanted to keep working there. In fact I was writing something about my feelings in preparation for WIRED and John read it and had tears in his eyes. He said I should show the staff so they could be ashamed with themselves. I've been made more and more aware since I've had problems of my own how nasty gossip can be. It's made me far more aware of peoples' feelings.

People are really unaware of the deeper issues. I would have thought the people I was close to at work would have understood. Yet all they could say was, 'She should cut him out of her life'. I actually had someone say that to me, not in a nasty way but thinking that she was being helpful. I took it as well-intentioned, because she wasn't malicious, but I said, 'There's no way I could do that, he's my son.'

Before Kevin was seriously ill, he knew he could not go on living the life he was living, and I think the seeds were set for him to change but he was far too weak to instigate them or do anything about it. Whilst he was in hospital there was a gradual change. When he was talking to me, he made it clear that things were going to change and that it was make or break time. I think he actually said to me at one point that he could feel a turning point and that something had called to him. He could feel the strength coming to enable him to do it. He became more and more interested in learning about God's work and his message. Also, as he was disabled leading up to recovery, he had a lot of time on his hands to read and find out more. He began to change.

When he was starting to recover from the septicaemia it was a real challenge for him. For example, he had difficulties dealing with the issues of pain relief and medication and methadone. He was actually given antibiotics that

interacted with the methadone so they nullified its effects. Very often he was in withdrawal, although he was seemingly on the correct methadone dose. It was very difficult for him to deal with it and to communicate what was happening to the staff. It was by chance whilst talking to a medical registrar about what he was experiencing that he realised the conflict of medication. So although he was seemingly being looked after, there were huge issues surrounding the control of his addiction. He had the pain unit, addiction unit, doctors and nurses, and Kevin himself, all at conflict with one another. It took a very strong personal will to come out of that and come out the way he did. It could easily have gone the other way.

Kevin left hospital after seven months and went straight into a Christian rehab. He found out about it through a very good Christian friend. He's really happy and it just oozes out of him, there's an aura around him. He was helped both on a religious level, and on the rehabilitation side. He's had all the help he needed and has gone from strength to strength. He now lives there as a volunteer; he looks wonderful and is strong and healthy.

Kev's different now. I believe this is the first time we have really seen him, how he is meant to be, in his adult life. The issues are not clouded by anything like drugs. His hospitalisation was a dreadful time for him, but it had a huge impact.

He's worked very hard. It hasn't been the end of temptation; I know there have been times when they have been there. It's been a very different lifestyle. He still speaks to the people he used to know, you've got to, you can't avoid everybody you knew from that life. You've got to deal with it and get through it and come out the other side. I'm sure it's a battle every day. I believe that once you're an addict you've got that there, and there will always be the possibility that you could slip back. But I believe he's got the right attitude now and he's going to make it.

As time went on, he was reunited with his father and sister and now has a full relationship with them. In fact, he has a better relationship with his father now than he's ever had; they feel comfortable in each other's company, although that's come very gradually. His dad at last believes there's a future for him. His sister is thrilled to bits that he's back; he really is part of the family again.

It's been a year now since Kev came out of hospital. He's had marvellous reports from the medical staff and his friends. But it's all been down to him. If he hadn't made that decision, it would never have happened. It's got to come from within; no amount of cajoling would work. I think it was God's power that gave him strength and others have helped him channel it and put it to good use.

At the moment things are still fresh and by no means forgotten. I saw him as low as it could have got. I think it will be quite a while before that eases. I

know the memories will never fade completely because the images are too strong, but they can be in the background and be of no concern.

I've got my financial payments that I've got to pay off for quite a while. I should be comfortable at this point in my life, but I'm not. But that's a fact now; there's nothing I can do about it, all I can do is learn from it and never do it again. I realised that what I did with Kevin before was also destroying myself. I wasn't living my life; I was living Kev's. I was involved in things that I wasn't meant to be. I had a choice: I wasn't addicted, he was, and it's important to remember that and stick with that. If he chooses that route again I can't really stop it, it's his choice not mine. I realise that there are going to be temptations, but I've realised that it's his addiction, not mine, and I have to let him deal with it. I can help him certainly, but that's it.

I put on a lot of weight because I comfort eat, but I've no intention of dieting at the moment; I don't want to give myself the stress of doing that. For the first time in a while, I'm relatively stress free and I'm savouring the moment. I don't want to put myself under any pressure, that wouldn't be a good thing.

Aside from these difficulties, things are so much better now! I don't wake up in a panic, I don't even think twice about what Kevin's doing, where he is or who with. It's fabulous; I thank God every day for how he's changed. Instead of my heart contracting, it flutters; it's absolutely wonderful that I wake up everyday and look forward to my life. It's just unbelievable.

I can't wait to see him grow and do normal things, have a normal lifestyle. I'm sure that he's going to do something special with his life now. I just know he's going to use his experiences for a good purpose; maybe in the Church or working with people with addiction problems. He will do something more fulfilling and worthwhile with his life and maybe that way he'll give something back to the community, something good for others, and repay what he's been given.

Although I've been through all of this, it's still difficult to give advice to others, but what I think is important is that people should seek help and shout from the roof tops if need be. There are places out there that will help you; you just need to find the place that's right for you. I think that awareness is increasing and it will be easier to get advice, support and so forth in the future.

I'd also advise people not to try and 'sort it' by themselves. I made a big mistake and wasn't open with John from the beginning – I didn't give him the opportunity to help me deal with it. The outcome might have been the same but it could also have been very different.

Also, remember that it's not your addiction; it's your loved one's. You might get involved but it's not your life, not your addiction, it's there's. It's not something you have done that has caused it. You might think it's because of

his or her genes, upbringing, or whatever, but it's down to each individual having control over their lives, so don't feel guilty. Of course that's easier said than done, I know. The main thing is to support all you can, but remember, that unless an addict wants to stop, anything you do is futile. They have to want to do it for themselves, no one else.

So, do not feel guilty but do not lose hope either, miracles do happen!
happen!