

Natalie's story: part 3

We interviewed Natalie two years ago and she became the first "Personal Story" on our web site www.substancemisuse.net. Natalie had been in treatment for her heroin addiction.

We recently interviewed Natalie again. We asked her about her life now, how she finds working life, and about the changes she has experienced over the last three years. First, read a synopsis of Natalie's drug-taking experience and her recovery. And after the interview, take a look at her original personal story.

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Natalie started smoking cannabis when she was 14. This rapidly got out of hand and she also started taking acid and valium.

She became pregnant when she was 15 and kept away from drugs during the time of her pregnancy. She remained drug-free until she was 17 when she started taking ecstasy.

At 18, she was drinking a lot and taking speed. Her boyfriend when she was 19 was a dealer of speed and she started taking this drug a lot. It gave her plenty of energy and helped her deal more effectively with being a mother.

Her boyfriend went to prison where he developed a heroin habit. Natalie started to use the drug and over the next year was taking it two or three days a week. After about two years she was taking it every day.

She stopped taking her son to and from school, stopped going to bed, washing and putting on clean clothes. Her son witnessed everything and Natalie feels he has been affected.

Although Natalie had reached a stage where she hated her boyfriend, she could not leave because he was her supplier. She couldn't face a life without heroin.

Aged 24 years, she contacted a 12-step based treatment agency. She knew that she needed help although she was not sure what a treatment agency could do.

She went through treatment, which completely changed her life. She started doing voluntary work about six months later. After six months, they offered her a full-time paid job.

It will be three years this September since she started work.

Natalie, two years on: The interview

We asked Natalie about the impact that having a job had on her life

She'd never had a 9-to-5 job before and her initial concerns were whether she could cope. She also had a very high opinion of people in the agency and was concerned that she would do things wrong and let them down.

She thought about it for a while and then decided that if other people could do it, she should give it a go herself.

She was pretty quiet when she first started work, but soon gained her confidence. The counsellors in the agency were supportive and friendly. The opportunities that earning money – that would not be spent on drugs - opened for her were considerable.

“First, I managed to pay off my debts. I don't have any outstanding debts... I managed to take my driving test, get a car, go on holiday... if William [her son] wanted something I could get it for him, guitar lessons etc... and just being able to pay my own rent, my council tax, being independent, having money to do what I want to do... what I've always wanted to do.”

Would you ever have seen yourself here? [the treatment agency]

“No, no, no. I thought, there's something different about this place, it's safe... and they knew where I was coming from. I saw happy things going on here, people getting on with their lives... it was a dream, it wasn't something I ever thought I could be part of really.”

If you look at yourself now, what do you think when you reflect back on where you were, and how far you've come?

“When I look back I feel a certain amount of distance from my using. I shock myself when I think of the state I was in. I was 24 with no future other than my addiction and I truly believed I would never achieve anything. As a child, my dream of what it was like to be an adult was nothing like how I was living and that was very sad.”

“But now I am so happy and that dream of adulthood is far better than I ever imagined. I feel free and very fortunate. Most people who come here are really shocked when they find out I'm a recovering heroin addict.”

“I do feel quite distant from my past, it just does not feel real... when I go over it you know, I just can't remember... it just doesn't seem important anymore. It is awesome now though, it's good.”

How do you feel when you think about the fact that your life went down that path, and that you've managed to recover?

“I don't think that I'm any different from anyone else, I really don't...”

"I know I didn't think I could do it [recover]... I used to go to these self-help groups and I would look at everybody and I'd think they were a different type of person, because they could do it and I was never going to..."

"I was a different type of addict, I wasn't a together addict, they must have been together in the first place but my life was a wreck... There was no hope for me and I used to think that I would try and probably wouldn't succeed in anything I did."

"I know I'm no different from anybody, definitely not... I think anybody can do it [recover]... People think I've got something that they haven't got and that's not true."

"But you have to be ready to do it and it is tough, its not easy..."

"You're talking about giving up all your friends, all my friends were users..."

"... and if you do come into group therapy it means you don't go into wet places (I left my job, a place where I was really happy) as it was a wet place..."

"... and it caused problems at home, some people didn't agree with the fact that I was abstinent..."

"... there is a lot of changes you know... you have all that to contend with, and also thinking are you going to make it, are you going to be able to do this."

Any regrets?

"I think everything is meant to be... even the bad stuff that happens... something positive can come out of everything. Even the worst stuff that can happen, you can use it to turn your life around."

"I even think my using etc. was meant to be... I wouldn't change that cos if I changed that I wouldn't be where I am now... I wouldn't change nothing."

We then talked more about Natalie's recovery.

What were the most important things that helped you turn everything around?

"My son, definitely my son... all the support... my family were a tremendous support without a shadow of a doubt..."

"... the meetings... the self-help groups... this place..., for me this place had a huge impact, it is where I got my job, etc. I owe this place a lot. I am very lucky"

What is it about this place?

"They carry you... You don't actually know anything, you're going on blind faith... They're telling you all this stuff and you think should I trust them and believe them and go ahead with it?... I felt I was giving up a lot... I was 24 and stopped going out, stopped drinking..."

"They've got to carry you really and take you through until you believe in yourself... and they do that for you... They give you the love you need to get you through..."

"I mean Dave, he assessed me... and I asked him, do you think I can do this... and he said, 'yeah, course you can', and that was the first time I ever had anything of hope, that someone believed that I could do it."

"It's also having people that believe in you... people telling you as it is... building up the trust so they can say, 'what's going on here?' when you don't seem right'."

"I had a sponsor... and she's my best mate... I used to speak to her every night... when I felt I was going out of my head, and bored."

"[You] need a support network, a sponsor, a counsellor... and somewhere stable, cos you're not used to stability, so... just having a stable home, eating at the right time, you're not used to that... I had to learn all that."

"I mean, I didn't know how to go to bed... I actually didn't know anything, I didn't know how to eat... how to put my pyjamas on. I used to go to bed and lay there and think, well what do you do... and I thought you must set the alarm and lay down..."

"So they've got to teach you all that. I know it sounds insane... learning how to be a mum... but I did have a supportive family too."

What did you do yourself that helped you, for example when you had cravings or were struggling?

"I'd read recovery books, go to a meeting, speak to sponsor, all the things that they tell you to do... they advise you what to do and you just go on blind faith and do it..."

"I found it easy to follow the advice. I know loads of people who didn't... I'm fortunate I never relapsed... Because I was just in awe, I couldn't believe this place..."

"And things like the cookery course... I started filling up all my time, helping out in the school... I mean me! This person who never used to take their son to school and I started helping the kids learn to read!"

"Time was a big thing. I did have a lot of time on my hands."

What were the key things that you found helped?

"I think it's really hard if you haven't got a treatment agency... how else would you know unless you were learning, for example off a counsellor? I think you need support, definitely."

Would you do anything differently?

'No, no... there's nothing I regret... If my son got damaged through it, he must have, even though he's fine I know it must have affected him.... I wish I hadn't hurt other people'

What would be your message to people who are in the same situation that you were?

"There's hope, anyone can do it... if they want to do it they can do it... Nothing is too immense to sort out, but it's reaching out really and getting the help, doing it..."

"And not to think that you can do it on your own. You don't have to do it on your own, there are people who will help you... and the self-help groups, they are amazing as well."

How would you describe your life now, and in terms of your recovery?

"Life's definitely different in the last two years... the first two years, I was putting the foundations of my life down, all the learning I had to do... getting to know myself... I wasn't in a relationship for 3 years..."

"All the foundations were laid, and now I'm living the way I want to live... and I feel confident speaking to parents at the school... I always had a problem with that as I felt less than them... making friends with the teachers... I've got loads of new friends... different friends..."

"Its stability and being free and having choices"

And finally, what are your projections for the future?

"I have no idea... I don't know... I can't really say because the way I live, I only live for today. That's another thing they teach you... anything can happen.... I don't know... I don't have huge expectations. I haven't got great career plans... so really... I'm just going to plod along for a minute... I'm quite happy where I am."