

ROSS JM PERSONAL STORY: AN INSIGHT INTO PRESCRIPTION DRUG ADDICTION

As a kid I was very happy and grew up pretty much care-free. I didn't know the meaning of the word of stress. I was always a bit adventurous and active. I loved exploring new environments and being out by the sea and was enthusiastic about my hobby of fishing. I was pretty 'normal' for the average child, especially a male child.

Shortly after my 12th birthday, I had a friend around to my house and we were celebrating the New Year. My friend and I decided to have an alcoholic drink and drank a vodka and coke. I didn't take that drink initially to get drunk; I just did it in the celebration type atmosphere. However, after that one drink I thought I would have another and so off I went and poured myself another vodka and coke. I drank it down. I guess 5 or 10 minutes later I felt a bit of an alcohol rush coming on. I had never felt anything like it before and it felt good. I thought, 'Wow, now I can see why adults drink this stuff! This stuff is good!' Wanting to enhance that "nice feeling", I knew there was only one way to do it, so yes, I poured myself another vodka and coke and quickly gobbled it down me. Then I thought, 'Why not, I'll have another one', so I poured myself a fourth. The vodka hit me and wow, it felt pretty good. I lay in bed that night feeling all nice and tipsy. And I guess that was it, the beast and the path of my life had been set. My journey had begun.

Before the age of 12, my idea of fun had been going out with my mates, hiding in bushes, and setting off bangers or fireworks so they exploded as someone was passing; or rapping someone's door and running off; or sneaking through a neighbour's garden when it was dark; or perhaps a trip to the cinema, 10-pin bowling or a kiddie's birthday party. Well, all of that now seemed so childish, so boring compared to having a good drinking session.

Alcohol seemed fairly benign to me; after all, it was legal and only illegal drugs were bad, right? That was the message I had picked up, I guess from the government and the media. Sure, I knew you could get liver damage but that was only alcoholics. I wasn't going to become addicted and drink that much. Why avoid taking something which gives you pleasure? Live life to the max! That was my attitude as a 12 year old. It was 8 years later that I got put onto the path to truth, at Northern Ireland Community Addiction Services.

So now every time I was at a friend's house and we were left alone, no longer was I looking for a prank to play on neighbours or whatever. Those days were over, now I was looking for a shot of vodka. I was like, 'Come on;

let's have a drink of your parents' vodka or whiskey'. Party time. What's the harm? So that's what my friends and I did for fun.

For the first year, it was only occasional shots, getting a little bit tipsy but at 13 I made a new group of friends. They had fairly liberal parents who would buy us 6 or 8 beers to share between us or perhaps a bottle of cider each whilst they went out for their Saturday night event. This was great at the time. We would get a bit drunk and then laugh about what we had said or done the next day.

I was 14 when the game turned into an addiction. The hormones of puberty were in full swing and I was hungry for the night life: the parties, the girls and of course the alcohol that comes with that - and lots of it. I obtained a fake license and would buy my own alcohol and I'd get into nightclubs by going in with older friends. I drank on every opportunity I could get. I would start drinking very early, perhaps 5 or 6pm and by 8pm I would be hammered and in a nightclub. I would continue drinking almost always to the point of being 'legless' and vomiting. I would usually get into this state at least 3 nights of the week and I always drank more than my friends and more often.

After a while, I started experiencing anxiety and panic, particularly on Sundays and Mondays. At the time, I thought I was developing an anxiety disorder. My family convinced me it was simply part of changing hormones and although I believed it, it didn't quite add up because none of my friends were like that. I had no idea I was suffering withdrawal symptoms from my alcohol abuse. We weren't taught any of this in our lectures at school on substance misuse. Sure, I knew street drugs could do that, but I never suspected that alcohol could mess up your head, only amphetamines or LSD - or so I thought! I was very concerned because I thought, 'How can I go to school this anxious and panicky?' 'How can I maintain my large network of friends?' 'How can I continue in relationships with girls when I'm a nervous wreck?' There was only one solution I could think of - I must drink every time I get these anxiety symptoms! It is the only thing that will work!

Of course, initially it did work. Only with hindsight do I now know that this was bound to 'work' - I was suffering alcohol withdrawal and so obviously alcohol relieved it! I didn't know that at the time though, I just thought I had an anxiety disorder and that I would drink my way through these "changing hormones". My little party friend, vodka, had taken its grip on me and I was its slave. It owned me and I didn't realise it was about to destroy me! I thought alcohol was my saviour!

Drinking was no longer about having a good night but about survival, and I thought my survival depended on getting a fix of alcohol each day. So I started having a quick slug of alcohol before and after school. I knew I had to find alternative ways to deal with it as someone might smell it on my breath, especially the teachers. This eventually happened, but I was prepared, I had a trick of having alcoholic mouth wash in my school bag which I would show the teachers and tell them I had bad breath and was using alcoholic mouth wash to get rid of it. And they believed me! Boy, was I good liar!

Over time, the alcohol began to distort my personality; my thinking became clouded, I became irritable, developed memory problems, and the anxiety worsened. I became very irrational and obsessive as the years went on and found

that I needed to drink more and more. I also used street drugs, usually to get me through situations in which I couldn't drink. For example, one teacher had "almost caught me drinking", so instead of drinking I would eat a bit of cannabis before going into that particular teacher's class. I also started to find that the anxiety was still there when I was drunk, so I found myself mixing street drugs like cannabis or a small amount of LSD to help take the edge off on a night out. 'That will take the edge off my anxiety until I can get my next drink', I rationalised. Things were getting out of control.

I thought my problem was that I just wasn't taking enough mind-altering substances to keep me 'level'. I thought I needed drugs to 'level me out'. I kept asking myself, 'When is my head going to level out and the anxiety settle down'. I started to worry because I knew my drinking was getting out of control, even though I still had a loving relationship with it.

My family became concerned and sent me to a paediatrician when I was about 16 or 17. Looking back, I now think that was the worst thing that could have happened. In my opinion, this particular paediatrician had been heavily indoctrinated with propaganda from the pharmaceutical industry and was a great fan of dishing out amphetamine-type drugs. He prescribed me the related drug Ritalin. He gave them out like candy and the way he spoke so reassuringly of them I actually felt like I was taking candy. I was prescribed a cocktail of Ritalin, at max dosage, with the promise to my family that it was non-addictive and would cure me. He also said that alcohol abuse was common in ADHD sufferers and that it would help me to quit drinking. I believed in the propaganda 100% and gobbled down their pills, hoping beyond hope that it was true.

I didn't abuse my pills. I was desperate to follow doctor's orders and finally get better. As time progressed though, I became addicted to them and got to the point where I had to take pills every 2 hours to 6 hours to stave off withdrawal effects (I had no choice but to take them or be slammed with suicidal withdrawal symptoms). At this stage, I still thought of alcohol as my saviour (and that I would go insane without it), even though it was this that had brought me to my knees. However, if I thought my current problems were bad, boy was I in for a shock. Over the next few years, Ritalin, Valium, Seroxat and a few other psycho-pharmaceutical drugs entered my life! Typically, as with all tolerance and dependence producing drugs, everything started 'hunky dory' and I experienced some therapeutic effects, like being able to concentrate better. The Seroxat lifted my mood in part, but still no matter what pills I was given, I was suicidal.

As with the alcohol, to me, the prescription pills seemingly caused no problems and I benefited from them – I needed them. I did not abuse my prescription drugs because I believed strongly that they would get me better. They were prescribed by a doctor after all. I feel that I was mis-advised, that I was indoctrinated into the thinking that I *needed* pharmaceuticals to 'Correct the imbalance' in my brain and that I had previously been self- medicating with alcohol. Now I know, the only 'chemical imbalance' I had was caused by alcohol and the drugs the doctors gave me!

I had been taking the max dosage of Ritalin for a while. Things started to change and I got to the place where if I went more than 2 hours without a pill I started to become paranoid - and I mean paranoid. I would also get visual unreality. These symptoms would be relieved when I took my next dose. I concluded that I 'needed' Ritalin to survive and without it I would surely go insane. The same thing happened with my Valium. If it wore off, I would feel like I was going crazy and know it was time to pop another pill.

As Ritalin is an amphetamine-type drug I couldn't take it at night time, so I had to face the 'come-down'. As my dosage increased, the come-down would involve fierce paranoia, nightmares and anxiety. I found myself relying more and more heavily on my friend vodka to get me through. If I thought my drinking was bad before, now it was about to explode. Not only had the pills failed to stop my drinking, they were now making my alcohol intake worse! I had to drink myself to unconsciousness every night. My alcohol problem escalated to unbelievable proportions.

I was drunk every day and typically from when I got up, to when I went to bed. I was out of control. I was tweaked 'up' on my Ritalin and Seroxat, and sedated by alcohol and Valium. My brain was being fried, but by this stage I was such a paranoid suicidal mess I believed that without these pills and drink I would go insane. I was trapped in the cycle. I even rationalised that if only the doctors knew how much I 'needed' to drink and take these pills they would prescribe the alcohol for me as well. I truly believed alcohol should be available on prescription. I thought it was my saviour when really it was my prison. I know that sounds crazy and I guess it is crazy but that's where I was. It got crazier though.

Around the age of 19, my Doctor referred me into adult psychiatry and stopped prescribing my Ritalin abruptly. The come-down was fierce, with lots of paranoia and anxiety. In my usual response, I turned up for my appointment with my new psychiatrist completely legless; I even took a carryout of beer and beer opener and drank them during the consultation, swaying from side to side. The psychiatrist was inept. She assessed me in this severely drunken state, listened to my paranoia and drunkenness and gave me a serious psychiatric diagnosis.

Anyhow, the Ritalin come-down wore off after about 10 - 14 days and the paranoia, intense anxiety and psychotic symptoms stopped. At least the withdrawal from coming off stimulants or 'come-down' is not prolonged; at least that was my experience.

Despite this, I still did not make the link that I had been addicted to Ritalin. As you the reader can tell, although my substance use started off recreationally - to get high, wasted, blitzed - these initial reasons quickly turned into a nightmare and enslavement. My main motivation for continuing to use mind-altering drugs, was in hindsight, to escape withdrawal symptoms and the insanity and distortions the pills and alcohol had inflicted on my brain. The fun days were over years ago. This was about survival.

My first clue to coming back to reality started when I discontinued my Seroxat (aka Paxil). A few days after stopping it I became manic and really agitated. I had a phenomenal suicidal depression, with strange neurological symptoms, such as electric shocks, brain zaps and extreme dizziness, with loss of balance. I didn't get paranoid like when I stopped the Ritalin, but it was bad in its own way. I walked about swaying like I was very drunk, even when I had no alcohol in me. I almost took my life as a result of the depression.

I picked up the Seroxat patient information leaflet which read, 'Rarely, after stopping Seroxat some people develop discontinuation syndrome including symptoms such as nausea, anxiety and headache. These effects are generally mild and only last a day or two'. I thought to myself, 'Rare? Mild? Only a day or 2? That's rubbish'. This was my first clue that the information given to doctors and patients by the drug companies aren't quite as truthful about the side effects of these drugs as I had assumed. My faith had been somewhat rattled but I still 'believed' in pills and drink as my saviour. The legal stuff was OK I thought; only the illegal stuff was bad.

As previously mentioned, I should add in here that I did misuse illicit drugs and have used drugs such as mushrooms, LSD, ecstasy and cocaine, but I never got addicted. This was in part because I knew the dangers of abuse of these drugs, but also because all of my money seemed to be going on alcohol. I went through literally thousands of prescribed 'speed balls', thousands of prescribed Valium and thousands of litres of vodka, but I 'wasn't' an addict. I just needed these legal drugs to control my symptoms or 'condition' that I got when I stopped taking them. Of course, I was in reality an all-out drug addict living in la la land. That's only with hindsight of course!

My second clue came when I decided to go on holiday with a group of friends. I was in no fit state of mind to be holidaying, but I went anyway. I was suicidal and thought that I may as well have one last holiday before I ended things through suicide; life was too painful for me. So it was off to Tenerife, for sun, sand, sea, sex and most importantly, drink and drugs. My Valium had lost all therapeutic effects years previously, and I was stressed out worrying about how I was going to get myself on a plane with my high levels of anxiety and have a rational conversation with the stranger sitting next to me. They don't let you get on the plane drunk, so I had to come up with a way of getting my anxiety levels down and my head straightened out enough to get on that plane! So, in my wisdom, I popped half an ecstasy pill. It kicked in and I felt all calm, chattery and 'raring to go'. I jumped on the plane and tortured the guy next to me talking gibberish throughout the journey.

Over in Tenerife it was not hard to come by drugs. Although I had tried all the drugs I was going to use on this holiday before, I had never done them in such proportions. I maybe had one ecstasy pill a month or a couple of lines of speed once in a blue moon. I was determined to have a few days of fun before I took my life and so I bought some ecstasy and lots and lots of speed, and went on a two and a half day binge only stopping when I ran out of money. I think I slept for two hours

at the most and I was even high in my sleep. It was strong stuff, much stronger than I had ever had before. I only took a few ecstasy pills, but really hammered the amphetamine and threw in a few grams of cocaine for good measure. My friends were worried and warned me to cut back on the drugs or else 'my head would explode'. Well, I soon ran out of money and my head did explode, very much so!

I experienced almost a psychotic come-down. I was unbelievably paranoid with lots of misperceptions, like I would think the sound of the TV was coming out of the toaster; weird stuff. It was much harder than I thought it would be. I knew immediately what was happening to me. I knew it was because of my drugs binge.

After three or four days, it ended as soon as it had begun. I was back to how I felt before the binge. It was over, phew! It was tough but I had learnt my lesson. After it was over, I realised that the feelings I got were identical to those I experienced when I used to run out of Ritalin. Anyhow, I got over the come down and didn't pluck up the courage to end my life after the holiday ended and went back to drinking and taking diazepam when I didn't have any drink.

The third and final clue which hammered home what was really wrong with me was about to take place. At this stage, I was around 20 years old. During one of my alcoholic black outs, I committed petty vandalism and thought I was going to get arrested for doing it. I thought I can't deal with 'the law' in my current state of mind. I thought that if I blamed my actions on alcohol abuse and showed that I was seeing an alcohol counsellor, the police might let me off lightly. Enter Northern Ireland Community Addiction Services (NICAS). I telephoned and made myself an appointment. It was one of those rare occasions when I decided not to drink beforehand so I popped half an ecstasy tablet and off I went to talk gibberish to the counsellor.

One of his first questions was, 'Are you serious about coming off alcohol?' I said yes but I was lying. I was determined to continue to drink until I summoned up the courage to end my life. The next question was, 'Are you under the influence of anything right now?' I couldn't tell him I had half an E in me, as I thought he would tell the police and it would mess up the whole point of going to NICAS, so I answered with a firm no. Anyhow, the counselling sessions got under way. Some of the questions my counsellor asked me were eerily familiar, almost like he knew me. No doctor or person in the world I had spoken to before seemed to almost 'know me' like this counsellor did. I even got paranoid that someone had spoken to him about me and told him my history. How could he know how my life had progressed?

'Did you find at the start of your addiction to alcohol that if you went a day or two without it you got anxiety or panic attacks?'

'Err, yes very much so!'

'Did you find that you needed alcohol to become normal?'

'Err, yes,' I answered, 'very much so!'

'Did you notice that as the addiction progressed your memory became impaired and your thinking became clouded?'

'Err, yes!' I exclaimed.

'Did you notice your abstract and rational thinking became more and more impaired?'

'Yes!'

These questions went on and on. I was flabbergasted! How on earth could this guy read me like a book?! Not even my family could do that! I soon realised that what he said about alcohol really fitted with how my life had developed. However, I did still have doubts.

He also told me that alcohol, if abused for decades, can cause dementia and brain damage and I learnt about Korsakoff's syndrome. I said if alcohol is as bad as this, surely it would be an illegal drug? I still found it hard to believe. I knew alcohol could damage your liver, but cause dementia and brain damage? Descend people into a life of torment and destroy their brains? Cause mental illness? Why is it not illegal then? This couldn't all be true or surely it must be very rare? Otherwise it would be illegal?

My counsellor explained that alcohol is legal because it is part of our culture and the Government makes so much tax revenue from it. 'Why at least does the government not educate the public about the dangers of alcohol then at the least?' They do it for illegal drugs! Why do I not know the things that you are telling me?' I asked. 'Because the government does not want to scare off social drinkers and loose billions in tax revenue,' he replied.

He went on to tell me about the massive discrepancies between support for alcohol addiction and illegal drug addiction. Everything he said made sense, but it all sounded a bit conspiratorial to me. He knew I still doubted. He said, 'Listen Ross, you can contact any alcohol addiction group you like and ask them, or read any medical text, if you don't believe me.'

I took him up on the challenge and contacted Drinkline and asked them to confirm everything that I had been told at NICAS. Drinkline confirmed alcohol could cause cognitive damage, structural brain damage and a host of serious psychiatric disorders. My next appointment with my alcohol counsellor was due in a week and I could not wait. I had so many questions.

My next appointment came and I got hit with one question which played on my mind. He asked, 'How was your life before you started using alcohol and pills? Did you have anxiety, panic and the numerous other physical and mental complaints you complain of?'

I replied, 'No I was normal, happy and loved life.'

'So why do you think you need to take all of these pills and alcohol?' he asked.

'Because I go crazy if I try to stop'.

Then he posed the million dollar question, 'Could the craziness be withdrawal symptoms?'

That was it, my thinking had changed. My so-called saviour 'alcohol and pills' was actually my torturer. The truth was quickly sinking in. That night, as I sat drinking my alcohol, the drink didn't seem to be relieving the anxiety. I thought OK, I must need to take some pills, so I took a Valium and then a Ritalin tablet (I had recently persuaded a doctor to restart this drug). Before I swallowed the Ritalin, I recalled the question the counsellor had posed to me. 'What was your life like before the pills and could the symptoms you experience be withdrawal symptoms?'

'Is this simply anxiety or is it withdrawal symptoms?' I thought.

Suddenly, I remembered. I remembered the Seroxat withdrawal and the wicked lies printed in the patient information leaflet minimising it. Then I remembered my binge on holiday in Tenerife. I remembered thinking my coke and amphetamine come-down felt like how I felt when my Ritalin used to wear off.

Oh my God, it's the pills! I am a pill addict! I am an addict! The anger boiled in me. There was no doubt in my mind at this stage. Even if the entire world tried to tell me prescription drugs were non-addictive, I wasn't changing my mind. As Margaret Thatcher once proclaimed, "Crime is Crime is Crime" and I conclude "Amphetamines are Amphetamines are Amphetamines", regardless of whether you get them in 'medicine' form from the doctor or on the street.

I knew the truth then and six years later I still haven't changed my mind. My plans for suicide were on the back burner, it was time to detox, no matter what. I saw an escape route, but it was a total change from years of engrained thinking. It felt like I was walking free from a cult.

I could not have got such freedom without the help from the drug and alcohol agencies, and learning about tolerance, dependence and toxicity. My former escape route seemed to involve taking pills and knocking myself out with alcohol, now I knew I had to do the opposite - stop drinking and popping pills! Boy, this going to be hard, but didn't realise just how hard! I still had full on benzo withdrawal to discover!

Within a week, I had made the plunge. 'No more of that alcohol,' I thought.

Boy, I should not have cold-turkeyed that stuff. I ended up severely confused and rambling nonsense in a doctor's emergency appointment office thinking I was born in 1997 (I was actually born in 1980). I didn't know where I was and was acting like

someone with dementia, despite being only 20 years old. I got fierce insomnia and anxiety, but got through it with mega doses of Librium. I gobbled down enormous doses for several months.

Eventually, I ran out of Librium and boom, I went crazy again. 'Oh my God,' I thought, 'not again!' I was suicidal, agitated and almost homicidal. I panicked and found some left over diazepam, gobbled them down and I levelled out. I was in a mess. I sat on my bed contemplating suicide and almost by a final act of mercy by God noticed a patient information leaflet on the floor. All the prior prescriptions for diazepam had come in a brown bottle with no leaflet, but my last one had come in a box with a patient information leaflet. I read it. At the bottom was the usual phrase 'Very rarely abrupt withdrawal from very high doses can be produced'. I took the 'very rarely' with a pinch of salt, but at least I knew that stopping benzos cold turkey could make you go crazy. I had tasted the power of benzo withdrawal and it was frightening.

What developed was something I could not imagine was possible. The withdrawals of alcohol, amphetamines and antidepressants weren't a thousandth of the power of benzodiazepine withdrawal. I rapidly tapered my dosage down to almost nothing and became psychotic and very disturbed. I decided to suffer it out, it was now or never. I had no one around me who knew anything about benzo withdrawal, none of the addiction workers seemed to know much about it, they 'don't do prescription drug addiction'. I didn't have any hard feelings though; they had saved me from myself. I was going to have to work out this benzo problem for myself.

The withdrawal started and as expected, I lost it. I would wake family members up in the middle of the night, turning on their lights and mumbling, walking around in circles talking to myself. I was losing my head and I just about knew it. Unlike withdrawal from the other drugs, the benzo withdrawal seemed to go on and on, week after week, month after month. It was not getting easier. I found myself in Accident and Emergency begging for relief, for which they gave me Lorazepam tablets. Darn, I had failed again; I was back up on my benzo dosage. I couldn't face going through it all again, it was too intense.

There was only one other option I could consider: suicide. I went through with my suicide attempt but 'failed'. I broke almost every bone in my body and ended up finishing my withdrawal in intensive care and on the fracture ward, from where I was discharged on crutches 3 months later.

As the months dragged on, I got better and better. I was so thankful to be free of alcohol and benzos, and all drugs for that matter. I was recovering. Ironically, after 5 months out, I began to doubt that a little yellow pill could really have caused me to want to take my life. I developed a urinary infection and was prescribed ciprofloxacin; I took it and collapsed, shaking and hallucinating uncontrollably, and was awake for days at a time. The hallucinations and shaking only lasted a day or 2, but I had a massive increase in derealisation, anxiety and panic for the following 10 days. I was very confused and frightened at what was happening and didn't understand why. I now know that the nature of this drug is linked to aggravating

protracted benzo withdrawal symptoms. I had some diazepam left in my house and I dug out some remaining packets and put some down my throat, in the hope that they would relieve some of my symptoms.

I expected at least some relief, but to my horror I became psychotic and boom, I was back in a suicidal state, fighting for my life. I made some phone calls and eventually got through to Professor Malcolm Lader. During a frantic call, I explained I had reinstated my use after being off for 5 months, but instead of finding relief my symptoms had actually become worse and seemed to be more like withdrawal symptoms. He explained that he has witnessed this before in some of his patients. They appeared to have had paradoxical effects and increases in withdrawal symptoms by reinstating benzodiazepines. The simplest way to describe the cause was to do with 'changes in the receptors after drug withdrawal'.

Anyway, I knew I had to get off the stuff again. This time, I contacted all the benzo helplines I could find, attended Narcotics Anonymous, and networked with fellow sufferers addicted to benzos. I had been so close to making it, I had to fight back and get off these pills once and for all. I started cutting down the pills every 2 weeks. It took me 6 months to come off but I made it. It was much tougher the second time round but I knew this had to be my final withdrawal. This time after coming off I binned every benzodiazepine I had, and the doctors said you will never be prescribed benzodiazepines again. I felt so relieved at that statement.

The one thing that angered me the most was the ignorance and lack of support available to those hooked on benzodiazepines. I struggled to find some anywhere. I also encountered a lot of denial about the problem from the doctors I visited. I don't know if the doctors believed the denials, or whether they were trying to cover up the damage they had inflicted on me. Only they know the truth. As I further researched the extent of benzo addiction, I also found to my horror that there is 1.2 million legal drug addicts in the UK, most of who don't even know they are addicted. It is like the problem doesn't exist.

The lack of support for me and fellow benzodiazepine addicts inspired me to set up an organisation to help those with prescription drug addictions (The Tranquilliser Recovery and Awareness Place, aka TRAP). There is no reason whatsoever that people addicted to prescription drugs, through no fault other than following medical advice should be denied help! Those offering help should be adequately trained and have a good understanding of the complexities of benzodiazepine withdrawal.

Ross JM July 2007