

Chris's story

Chris (24) witnessed his step-father using drugs from an early age. He began smoking cannabis when he was in secondary school and this progressed onto other recreational drugs, like ecstasy. He first tried heroin at the age of 17 and although he initially only used it at weekends, it quickly "grabbed hold" of him. His heroin use left him with nothing – he had to fund his addiction through crime, which eventually led to him being arrested. Numerous attempts at controlling his addiction have taught him the importance of abstinence from all drugs. With the support of counsellors at the Burton Addiction Centre, Chris is now positive that he can live his life without drugs.

Chris grew up in an environment where he witnessed drugs being used and their effects. From the age of 11, he saw his Dad using cannabis, amphetamines and alcohol – "I'd seen him use and I'd seen him wrecked."

When he started secondary school, Chris began to smoke cigarettes and soon became addicted. At 14, he started to "pinch bits" of his Dad's cannabis to smoke himself – "then I knew what it was all about." He started smoking cannabis at school and feels that this caused him to "lose interest in school." At college, he smoked cannabis every day and finding that he couldn't afford to live at home and use drugs he left college to go into full-time employment.

At 17, Chris moved to Dorset. It was here that he started going to free parties, where he took ecstasy and amphetamines. After a party, he would smoke pure cannabis to "come down off the e's and speed." He first tried heroin when a friend suggested it was a cheaper way of "wiping your come down out so that you can get to sleep." He had no idea of its addictive power, believing it to be "like every other drug" he'd done.

"No one told me it was an addictive drug."

Initially, Chris only used heroin at the weekends, so feels that he didn't get addicted for about six months.

"After six months of just taking it twice a week, it grabs hold of you and then you just don't care."
His use gradually progressed into the week, but he hid this from his girlfriend.

"I used to make arguments just so I could go out and use gear."

Chris believes that his drug using became a problem when people started to find out about it.

"As soon as they all found out, that's when it started to crumble."

He started to inject heroin when he "got in with a crowd who were injecting." He was living "here, there and everywhere" and his "life just revolved around gear. Anything else was a luxury." After seven months of injecting, Chris was left with "nothing, just the clothes on my back." He phoned his Mum and admitted that he was a heroin addict.

"I just got fed up of it. I got to the stage where I just didn't want life anymore."

Returning home, Chris stayed clean for 19 months. He did a home detox with street methadone because he was unaware of any drug agencies or rehab centres. He got a job – "so my mind was occupied" – and bought a DVD player, TV and CD player for his new flat. Chris feels he was "doing really well" until he broke his jaw. He had continued to drink alcohol and use pills at weekends but breaking his jaw meant he couldn't continue this. Unable to drink because of the medication he was on, Chris returned to heroin. This experience taught him the importance of remaining abstinent from all drugs, not just heroin.

"I still used all the recreational drugs...it's always taken me back to gear."

At his worst, Chris "couldn't function" unless he had at least £40 of heroin a day.

"I'd inject £20 as soon as I woke up, just so I felt normal."

His whole life was affected by his heroin use – he got into debt with banks and loan sharks, but didn't care.

"I couldn't be bothered to do anything. I couldn't be bothered to work, I couldn't be bothered to sort out any problems."

Chris's addiction had a negative impact on his social relationships. As his addiction progressed, he no longer used socially; he isolated himself and mostly used on his own.

"Gear causes lots of arguments and you end up falling out with everybody...you become really greedy, you don't want to share with your mates. I became really selfish."

His relationship with his family was also affected, although this didn't concern Chris at the time.

"You don't have emotions when you're on gear. Emotions don't even come into the equation."

Unable to hold down a job, Chris funded his addiction through crime.

"Anything that wasn't nailed down, I'd take it."

"The only thing that used to worry me about gear was going to jail."

Chris first realised he had a problem when he was 19. He felt that he had let himself down, but had no self-esteem or confidence in trying to get recover. He went through stages of wanting to get clean – "I was quite happy on heroin and then for a month all I'd want to do would be get off it."

"I tried to control it when I was in the frame of mind to clean myself up."

He attempted to control the amount he used by limiting the amount of money he spent a day. This was unsuccessful.

"To stay clean I wouldn't have any money."

"It doesn't work like that. You just use what's in your hand. Whatever you've got that day, you spend."

Chris feels that he put a lot of pressure on his mum during the times when he wanted to clean because he knew that he needed supervision. He would return home so that she could help and support him with his detoxes – "she always used to take a week off work to supervise me." He did eight home detoxes and feels that each time he "gained a little bit more on how to do it." Each time, he really believed that he would be able to stay clean.

"All my emotions would come back. All the love for my family, all the love for the ones that I'd missed around me."

"I used to get my head back on track, thinking 'I'm going to get a job, I'm going to sort it out properly this time'."

Nonetheless, Chris was unable to stay clean and as soon as he returned to heroin, he would forget how he had felt with a clear head – "as soon as you walk into it, you forget."

"It seemed like a game, so much that I'd forget about doing my rattle. I'd just remember all the good times, so I'd end up back in square one."

Last year, Chris was arrested for shop-lifting and spent six weeks in jail. He got out on a drug treatment and testing order (DTTO). The practitioners told him that it was "all right to use cannabis and drink", despite the fact that Chris told them that that would lead him back to heroin. Three weeks later he tested positive for opiates. He was referred to the Burton Addiction Centre (BAC).

He came to the BAC to get help "with being without any chemicals to change my mood." He wanted his "emotions back" and wanted to "feel."

"Even if I was happy, I'd still have to go chasing up my heart to just be a little bit happier."

Chris went straight into housing at the centre and was put on a subutex script. He feels that he wasn't "right" while he was on the script, but has now been off subutex for eight weeks.

"My head's so much clearer these days...I can tackle things straight away, before when I came off gear I'd still hide and still keep a low profile."

With a clear head, Chris began to realise the consequences of his addiction.

"All the things I've done to my family didn't really hit home until I'd been clean from gear...the guilt starts kicking in."

The BAC has taught him how to deal with this guilt.

"I'll hold my head up now. I've got nothing to be guilty of, I'm just ashamed really."

Chris believes that the support he has received from peers and counsellors has been invaluable in his recovery.

“The way that an addict’s brain works, you could not do it on your own.”

He feels that seeing peers who are ahead of him in the programme is very motivating, whilst emphasises the importance of “being taken out of the environment I was in before.” Nonetheless, he doesn’t think recovery is possible unless “you are in it for the right reasons.”

“My true feeling is that you have to do it for yourself.”

He believes that you have to “reach rock bottom.”

“I couldn’t go any lower, the only way for me was up.”

Chris is now positive that he will be able to stay clean and get on with his life.

“With the tools which I’ve learned at the BAC, I can truly say that from today I’m not going to use.”