

Peter's Story

Peter (38) comes from a family of alcoholics and grew up in a boy's home in Dublin. He has had a drinking problem since the age of 18, stemming from a desire to "forget" the sexual and physical abuse he received as a child and to deal with his ensuing psychological problems. Funding his drinking through crime, he denied his alcoholism, which increased, worsening his existing depression. After numerous suicide attempts, Peter reached rock bottom and was ready to change. After attending the Burton Addiction Centre for eight weeks he is positive about his future.

Peter was exposed to the effects of alcoholism at an early age – his mother and stepfather were chronic alcoholics. His stepfather was very aggressive, which resulted in Peter "hating alcohol."

"I used to always say that I hope I never touch alcohol."

Alcoholism is common in Peter's family – his six brothers and two sisters are alcoholics, as are his grandparents, aunts and uncles. Peter strongly believes that alcoholism is a disease that he was born with, due to his genetics, although he is shocked by the hold that drinking had on him, especially considering his early experiences and feelings towards alcohol.

"I was born with the seeds."

Peter started drinking at the age of 15 with the "older boys," because it made him feel "grown up." He also expressed a desire to "be like everybody else."

"No one made me drink...I chose to pick up the can of cider...from the first day I tasted alcohol, I fell in love with it. I thought it was marvellous."

This drinking became a Saturday night routine, and his alcohol intake gradually increased until he was drinking two litres of cider every Saturday. He discovered his "favourite" drink – vodka – when he was 18. Initially, alcohol made him feel "happy and jolly," although this was to change as his addiction developed and he became increasingly socially isolated.

"I went from being on a high to being on a low."

In retrospect, Peter identifies his drinking becoming a problem at the age of 18, when he left the boys home.

"I was 18, and I didn't care. Although I know I had a problem I wasn't willing to admit it."

He felt very unprepared for leaving the boys home and entering "a world on my own."

"No one told me what the world was going to be like on the outside."

Although he had a job at a sewing factory, Peter would drink before work in "early houses" that opened at 6 o'clock in the morning. His drinking escalated to during working hours as well, which resulted in his eventual dismissal. Combined with his girlfriend falling pregnant, this led to Peter having a nervous breakdown, resulting in his first suicide attempt, when he tried to drown himself in the river Liffe, at the age of 18. He was treated for depression, but this only involved being given medication and being told, "your problems would go away." He was still however haunted by the "nightmares" of his past, as he was neglected as a child and was physically and sexually abused.

"I used to get attacked in my sleep."

"I'm still terrified today of the night."

In addition, Peter was diagnosed with schizophrenia, which he believes was caused by his drinking.

"I started hearing voices. I started hallucinating, seeing the devil and seeing the blessed angel."

Peter's desire to forget his problems fuelled his drinking, which he financed through crime. He stole from friends, family and even the church collection box. In addition, he became a male prostitute, a "rent boy", putting himself in many risky situations.

"I experienced being beaten up, mugged, raped, used and abused by people. And all I wanted to do was drink to forget about it."

"I used every trick under the sun, and everything in the book to manipulate people, I lied, I cheated, I stole – all to get drink."

Peter feels that he adopted a Jekyll and Hyde character through drinking.

"When I wasn't drinking I was a wonderful person, but when I was drinking I was just...I wasn't human, I was like somebody from a different planet."

He was socially very isolated – his family disowned him and his girlfriend left him.

"My family didn't want to know me. I was an alcoholic, I was a male prostitute, and I was a homosexual man. I had no friends; the friends I thought I had were only there for money, for drink."

This increased his inability to cope with his problems, perpetuating his need for alcohol. He had very low self esteem and didn't care for himself anymore – going for days, weeks or even months without having a bath. In addition, he wasn't eating – at one point he weighed only five stone.

"I couldn't go through with life; nobody, I felt was willing to help me. I wasn't willing to give up the drink...I was so in love with the drink."

He entered a downward spiral – he drank to forget, but drinking no longer improved his mood, it increased his depression, making him "chemically unbalanced in the brain." This resulted in numerous suicide attempts and although he was hospitalised a number of times he did not receive the long-term care needed to pull him out of the spiral.

"They just threw me back in to the community and then I just repeated myself again."

Up to this point, Peter had failed to admit he had a drinking problem, despite being told on numerous occasions, and even by his psychiatrist. Part of this stemmed from his fear of what other's would think of him.

"I thought that people would look down on me. I had this horrible problem that if people knew I was an alcoholic no one would like me."

In fact, it was this denial and desire to prove people wrong that led to him drinking increasing quantities.

"It became stronger and stronger; I couldn't go a day without alcohol."

He finally admitted to himself that he had a drink problem after his most serious suicide attempt when he set himself on fire. This resulted in him being retained in a psychiatric hospital, "under lock and key" for a year and a half, during which time he underwent electric shock treatment and developed an addiction to valium. During this time he was not allowed to drink. Although he eventually got used to not drinking, the desire to drink did not go away.

"At that back of my head was I can't wait to get out of here and have a pint."

From then on, Peter attempted to cut down his drinking, not abstaining completely, but restricting it to only the weekends. He drank lager instead of vodka, but ended up drinking more lager to compensate for it not being as strong. Reducing the amount he drank however, resulted in his psychological problems increasing. Moreover, he experienced desperate loneliness, loneliness that could be relieved by going to the pub in the evenings, "just to mix with people." Being in an atmosphere where alcohol was readily available however, combined with his increasing depression, resulted in his attempts being thwarted. Nevertheless, after each period of increased drinking, Peter again tried to cut down:

"Each time I tried, I really believed I could do it."

"Sometimes I wouldn't even drink during the whole week. But come Friday night, I would make up for the whole week...I thought that it

was the tradition to drink, I mean everyone in Ireland had a drink after work or on weekends.”

Peter’s health was significantly affected by alcohol, especially when he was living on the streets. He contracted bronchitis, pneumonia, asthma, anaemia, dermatitis and scabies. Moreover, he had numerous blackouts when he woke up with no idea where he was or how he got there.

“I’ve woke up in ditches, I’ve woke up in shop doorways, I’ve woke up in police stations for my own safety...I’ve even woken up in psychiatric hospitals. I’ve woken up in strange houses and not even known how I’ve got there.”

He was physically at his worst at the point when he was homeless, drinking three or four litres of strong cider a day. He collapsed on the street and was in a critical condition when he reached casualty, because he was rapidly dehydrating.

“It was then that it scared me. I didn’t have any feelings in my legs and I couldn’t hold down any water...my whole body was literally shaking.”

“I was literally on my death bed and I made a promise to the man above that if he could get me help I would do everything within me not to drink.”

This “rock bottom” marked a turning point in Peter’s addiction – he knew he was ready to get help. Peter emphasises the importance of being ready.

“It’s not about will power and what have you, it’s about the individual themselves.”

This readiness motivated him to contact a social worker, who helped him to find a flat and put him in touch with Burton Addiction Centre.

“I hated drinking, I hated being ill, but the drink wouldn’t let go of me, I had to let go of the drink. I had to say enough was enough. Do I want the life or do I want to end up like my brother and mother, dead. And I had to choose; I had to ask for help.”

When he first arrived at the centre, Peter was hugely paranoid that people wouldn't like him because of his sexuality, and that he would get picked on. He was incredibly scared, and tempted to just walk away from it.

"I saw all these happy faces, and everybody was getting on with everyone and I thought I'm not meant to be here."

The support and acceptance that the group at BAC showed Peter was crucial in enabling him to build up his self esteem and self acceptance.

"It made me feel wanted, loved, and it made me feel human."

"I can't pretend that I'm someone for everyone else, I need to be me. All my life I've had to wear a mask, I've had to pretend I'm somebody else for other people and not me."

He feels that the most important factor is that he was allowed to open up in his own time, and was not forced into anything. The warm, caring atmosphere allowed him to drop his "false pride", whilst the knowledge that "what is said in the rooms stays in the rooms" allowed him to trust people and resolve painful issues that he has been carrying for years.

"This is all my baggage. The child abuse, the sex abuse, the beating, the rapes, the prostitution, the neglect, the not being loved...most of that I can deal with today."

"I don't have to punch myself anymore because all my life all I've been doing is punching myself for other peoples doings."

He emphasises the importance of social support in coping with problems - sharing your experiences and asking for help, so that others can help you.

"I don't need to drink to push the pain away, I can just say, Look I'm going through a bad time and I need some help."

"I don't have to carry my pain alone."

Peter has been at the BAC for eight weeks now, and has a very positive outlook on life.

"My life today is...I'm like a new plant, everything around me is just beautiful, even the bar of soap that I wash myself with. I'm so grateful for it."

"When I feel negative I can turn the negative into positive."

He has regained his sense of spirituality, which he lost in the midst of his alcoholism.

"I do believe there's something more powerful than me and that something's given me another chance in life. And the more open and honest, and willing and able I am to make a go of life, the more I'm achieving."

He acknowledges that the path ahead of him is not going to be easy, and is taking every day one at a time, because he doesn't know what the future holds for him.

"I'm not going to have a life of a bed of roses. Nails are going to pop up that I'm going to have to walk on to get to the sand every so often. I'm willing to go through the pain, emotional and physical pain, to get what I want in life because all I want is to be free from all chemicals."