

### **Ryan's story**

*Ryan's drug using began at the age of 12 with cannabis. He experimented with numerous recreational drugs to find new "buzzes", and did not think his drug use was a problem until he experienced withdrawal symptoms from heroin. Although he felt ashamed by this, his heroin use escalated, affecting his physical and mental health. With the encouragement of his family, Ryan attempted a number of detoxes, but did not receive the support needed to be successful. After seven years of using heroin, Ryan has now been abstinent in the Burton Addiction Centre for six weeks.*

Ryan started smoking cannabis at the age of 12 with his best friend, and has continued smoking it ever since. They continued to experiment with drugs, including alcohol and acid, using more and more "to get a buzz."

"We always used to try everything together."

When he started going clubbing at 16, Ryan started taking ecstasy and as his use increased, he was "needing more and more of that to feel it." At 18, he began using amphetamines, and he first used cocaine and heroin at 19. He describes his lifestyle at the time as "mad" because he would "try everything" to find a new "buzz."

The heroin gave Ryan a "nice and warm buzz." He would spend as much money as he could get on it – anything from £50 to £300 a day. He didn't believe he would get addicted to it, but he soon reached a point where every morning he was waking up feeling "violently sick, hot and cold and flu-like." Unsure what was wrong with him, Ryan asked a friend who told him he was "rattling." Although Ryan didn't believe him at first, when he experienced the same symptoms day after day, he had to accept that he was having withdrawal symptoms. To begin with, Ryan needed to have at least a bag of heroin to overcome the symptoms before he could even get out of bed. As his addiction progressed, he would need at least four bags to be able to face the day.

It was when he first started experiencing these symptoms that Ryan realised he had a problem with heroin. He felt “degraded for even touching it” and his initial reaction was one of hopelessness.

“I thought, ‘I’m going to be a heroin addict for the rest of my life now’...I just didn’t want to be here, I didn’t want to be alive.”

From that point on, he believed that it “spiralled out of control” because he began to use more and more heroin.

Although Ryan was initially working as a fork-lift driver, he was unable to “handle going there like normal.” He found himself making excuses to get out and score, and as his addiction progressed “couldn’t be bothered to go in.” As a result, Ryan turned to crime to feed his habit – stealing from his parents and shoplifting. This also reinforced his sense that he had a drug problem.

“I even got a removal van to my Mum and Dad’s house to take furniture out so I could get money for it.”

Ryan’s physical health was affected by his addiction – he no longer cared about hygiene or how he looked. His sex drive was also affected. Moreover, he experienced severe mental effects, similar to schizophrenia.

“I had voices in my head – it’s like trying to think one thing but something keeps telling me to do the opposite. I used to bang my head against the wall, trying to get rid of the voices.”

Through his addiction, Ryan lost his house and girlfriend. This loss of future opportunities – they were planning to get a mortgage together and get married – seriously affected him emotionally. He believes “that led to [the use of] more and more of everything.”

His addiction also severely affected his relationship with his family.

“They pushed me out. My Dad didn’t want to talk to me...he hated me. My Mum just used to give me money...she didn’t want me to get locked up.”

It was his family telling him he “had to get off” that prompted Ryan to first try detoxing. He tried detoxing on his own on a number of occasions, but “couldn’t handle it.” On one occasion, he managed to get through the “cold turkey” and was clean for a couple of months. However, he resumed his drug use when he returned to his old group of friends.

“Everybody down there was smoking it...so that led me onto it again.”

Three years ago, Ryan first got in touch with a local drug agency and waited six months for a script. He didn’t get in touch before this because he didn’t know about the drug services available to him. Since then, he’s had two scripts – one methadone and one subutex. Neither was successful – he ended up using on top of methadone. Ryan attributes this to the lack of counselling he received – “there needs to be more places, more help and more people understanding of the situation.” Nonetheless, he feels that he has learnt from his experiences.

“I’ve learnt how it all works for you – how it makes your body and how it makes you feel.”

At this time, Ryan started injecting instead of smoking heroin. He attributes this to the fact that “smoking wasn’t doing much,” and believes this is when his addiction started to get out of hand. Starting to inject, however, did make him realise how desperately he needed help, so he started to cut down his heroin use.

“I had to get out of injecting it because I knew that I would die.”

Ryan was put in touch with the Burton Addiction Centre by the local drug agency. He feels that he had resigned himself to being on heroin for the rest of life, so he was grateful to be accepted in to the BAC, as he “didn’t want to end up being dead in a gutter somewhere.”

“I thought that I would be on heroin for the rest of my life. The thought had gone into my head that I’d end up dying of it.”

Coming into the BAC, Ryan’s aim was to get a “normal life without any substances” and regain his relationship with his family “so they could trust me.” He spent two weeks coming into the Centre from home, but quickly realised that he needed to be in supported housing for a successful recovery. He strongly

emphasises the importance of changing your associates to avoid the temptation of using drugs because they are available.

“People were knocking on my door, offering me gear...I knew I’d relapse.”

He is finding it difficult to be in housing at the BAC, because of the lack of freedom. He feels that more activities are needed, because he was “doing more when I was in active addiction.”

Ryan has now been at the BAC for six weeks, and his relationship with his family has already changed dramatically.

“My brother gave me a hug the other day. I just wanted to cry when he gave me a cuddle. My dad shook my hand and said, ‘I’m proud of you.’ It makes me feel like I can do it. I can do it for me and them.”

He feels that the group sessions are “doing good.” Ryan is encouraged to share his feelings and thoughts because “if you hold it in, it’s meant to be a lot worse for you.” Sharing the feelings that he has been using heroin to suppress has also caused Ryan to get angry, but he believes that this is beneficial – “getting it out takes my anger out.”

“When you’re an addict, your head gets messed up bad. They’re there to sort your head out, to put you on the right track.”

He is finding it difficult, however, to identify any other changes in himself because his self-esteem is so low. Counsellors at the BAC are working hard to improve his self-esteem by giving him compliments, which he is slowly learning to accept.

“Everybody else says they see things in me, but I can’t see anything.”

“I just cannot look at myself in the mirror...I can’t handle seeing a smackhead’s reflection look back at me.”

He is also finding it difficult not to smoke cannabis, because he has been smoking it since he was 12. He is realistic, however, about the importance of not giving in to temptation.

“It could wreck my recovery if I have too much and then I want to go and have something better.”

After his time at the BAC, Ryan is feeling “healthier” and has regained his self-respect. His desire to look good has returned, and he is now spending his money on clothes. Although he has been warned of developing a “cross-addiction,” Ryan strongly believes that buying clothes is not problematic because it stops him buying heroin.

In order to achieve abstinence, Ryan emphasises the importance of support and having a positive frame of mind.

“You can’t do it on your own.”

“Stay positive and use all the help around you...stay strong to keep thinking you can do it.”