

Chloe's Story

Chloe (43) first tried heroin after separating from her husband seven years ago. The drug took her immediate troubles away and she began to use it more frequently. She did not realise until about a year later that she was dependent on the drug. It was around this time that her life began to deteriorate, resulting in her losing her home, her family and her employment. Chloe sought help and over the next two years completed two detoxes. Both of these resulted in relapse, due to insufficient aftercare and unsuitable accommodation. Chloe and her partner were approached by the Nene project seven months ago. Since this time, they have both made very positive changes in their lives and have greatly decreased their drug use. They both wish to eventually stop using heroin and come off methadone. However, they appreciate that this will take time and will be hard work. They are, however, prepared to do whatever it takes to get clean and rebuild their lives.

Chloe did not become involved with drugs until her mid 30's after breaking up with her husband seven years ago. Her only previous experience with drugs was the occasional joint of cannabis.

'I was quite a late comer to drugs... I was married with three children, it was when me and my husband split up that I started to use drugs... Before that I had only had a bit of marijuana, a small puff or something...So I've not done any other drugs, really.'

Before starting to use drugs, Chloe led a very active life. She had four jobs, three children of her own and she also fostered two children.

'I was so busy. I was even fostering children as well... when I started using drugs my boys were 17 and 15 and my daughter was 11.'

Chloe feels that a combination of factors may have contributed to her first using heroin but also feels that she cannot entirely blame these external events.

'It wasn't just the divorce - a few other things happened in that one year. I can't exactly say all of that was to blame but that was when I started taking drugs.'

Chloe had little knowledge of drugs and believed that there would be no problem as long as she wasn't injecting the substances.

'I was very naïve and thought if I wasn't using needles I wouldn't get addicted'. A friend reinforced this view and told her, 'It won't harm you because you aren't injecting it.'

The friend who introduced Chloe to heroin told her that it would make her feel better and take her problems away for a while. She was desperate to escape from

her problems. However, Chloe's first few experiences of heroin were mixed. It made her sick but simultaneously relaxed her.

'The first few times I remember it made me sick, but yeah it did relax me. I wasn't very happy and it did take those things away.'

Chloe's use and dependency increased gradually and it was quite a while before she realised she had a problem.

'I did spend probably six months not being an addict, I would just have the odd bit and that... It was a year until I really admitted to myself that I was addicted to it and that I had a habit.'

At first, she would just use heroin on the weekends but she soon felt the need to use more and more often.

'I was using at weekends, then felt bad during the week, and then I'd have another bag, and before I knew it I was well and truly hooked on it.'

Chloe managed to keep her addiction a secret for a while by carrying on with her normal routine and just using heroin on her own when her children were in bed.

'I used to work all day and then pick the kids up from school and then if I'm truthful I used to watch the clock and wait for the kids to go to bed as I would never let them hear or see anything. I know that sounds sad, but I used to look forward to that hour coming.'

Chloe began to turn to heroin whenever she had any problems; it became an escape route for her.

'If I had a bit of stress I would go and have a smoke...I was going to the dealer myself because I enjoyed it, so when I had the money I would go and get some.'

It was around this time that Chloe realised she had a problem and it started to affect her life. She decided to stop fostering as she didn't think it was fair on the children. Heroin began to gradually take over her life. She found she was lying to people and had to give up her jobs, as she could no longer cope with them.

'I was lying to too many people... I was quite well off from working. It wasn't until I stopped working, I packed up another job and another... you become unreliable, no one sacked me but eventually I gave up my jobs. I just couldn't cope with them anymore.'

Her children began to suspect that she had a problem with heroin. When they learnt the extent of the problem, her sons chose to move out and she lost contact with them for a period of time. Her daughter also eventually went to live with family members.

'The kids were getting suspicious as well...my eldest son went and lived with his dad straight away. They realised what was going on. My other son said, 'If you stop mum, I will stay.' And that was awful. I couldn't stop for him and he left. My daughter stayed with me until we sold the house and then we moved in with my sister and stayed with her for a while.'

Chloe's partner was also a drug user. When they met up after he had served a sentence in prison, they began to regularly use together.

'My boyfriend (Simon), who I met about a year after I was divorced, went to prison and came out having become a heroin user. We met up when he came out and we were both users by then.'

After losing her children, Chloe began to use more and she began to associate more with other users.

'My partner was a long distance lorry driver during the week so I would go and see his dealer ... when you can't get from your one dealer then you start talking to other people and before you know it you're in a group. And then it's very hard to keep away from them. Once you get in, you're very in with them all.'

Her habit escalated and eventually took control of her life. All she could think about was finding and using heroin.

'I was using a good gram a day at the high point of it...the more you use, the more you want. There was a point where I couldn't get up in the morning without having a smoke. I went from having two bags in the evening to having another in the morning as well. By the time you've got to that level, all you think of is how to get the money to score and that. My family never really saw me for a few months.'

Chloe's physical health also suffered as a result of her heroin use.

'I lost no end of weight, you don't eat or anything. I was asthmatic so that didn't help. I just became very weak.'

Her addiction to heroin eventually cost her dearly. Chloe had to sell her house and her personal possessions and her partner eventually turned to crime. Chloe did not.

'At the end of it I sold a house that I owned and smoked it all away basically... I realised that I didn't have enough money to fund my habit... I still had bits of jewellery that my Gran had left me so I sold all of that, which upsets me now. The criminal activity was more from my partner than me... I might have been standing look out for him once or twice but that was it.'

Chloe decided that she was in trouble with her addiction and decided to seek help. She had not wanted to see her parents until she had some good news for them and only told them after she had found out about a detox program.

'I was really ashamed. I never really wanted to go round there anyway until I could get on a detox and give them some good news...It totally devastated my mum and dad. I didn't tell them until I eventually found out how to get on a detox.'

Chloe found it hard to get help as she was not considered to be a high-risk user.

'It's very hard to find help when you want it. I remember being given a phone number and going to the phone box. It was actually Peterborough Community Drugs Team [CDT]. I really thought I was going to get off it, but I was told that I was going to have to wait a month for an appointment. When I went for that appointment they said I wasn't on it too badly so there wasn't a rush for me to be seen; it was going to take over six months. By then, I had to tell my mum. So she was coming with me and I was ringing every day to say

I needed a detox desperately but it was because they were so busy, I suppose. I can't say it's their fault, it's just the demand for it I suppose. I eventually got on to my first detox.'

Chloe's first detox was successful for a while. She found it easy to come off heroin but says that the problem is staying off it as there is not enough aftercare and resources for recovering addicts.

'I did subutex and it was very easy. It's not the getting off this drug, it's the staying off. Simon did it with me as well and we were clean for nine months the first time. By that time, I was living in a friend's flat and she was going to move and we had nowhere to go so we were going to live in a car. I wouldn't put it on my mum to stay at hers and she didn't like Simon very much. So the CDT were very good at giving us detox and getting us off, but after that it's, 'see you later.'

After a period of being homeless and living in a car, Chloe and her partner were re-housed. However, they were housed in an area where they were surrounded by other users. This made it extremely difficult for them to stay clean.

'We were re-housed, got the council to house us and we were put right in the centre of the drug users in Peterborough. Whenever we went through our front door, we were watching people scoring and buying. It didn't take long for us to think we will have one bag at the weekend. It just knocks your head off because you haven't had it for a while. We were on beta-blockers as well, but I stopped taking those because I thought I was ok. Looking back, I realise how silly I was to start again but you do.'

Chloe realised she had made a big mistake by starting using again and was once again desperate to beat her habit. However, when she sought help for the second time she was faced with the same difficulties she had experienced previously. By the time she was accepted on a detox her habit was back to what it had been in the past.

'As soon as I realised what we were doing I was straight back on the phone to the CDT. I was not using much at all at this point. It took months again for them to see us and by that time we were back to having three to four bags a day.'

Living in the 'drug central of Peterborough' made it extremely difficult to make a change. The other users they were living by didn't like the fact that Chloe and her partner were attempting to get clean and rebuild their lives and made it very difficult for them.

'Where they put us you have to speak to them all - people there were into everything, not just heroin. But luckily we were never tempted to go onto any other drug. We were talking to everyone in the houses around us. Drug addicts don't like it when you go on a detox because you're not there to help them. We were quite kind, 'Yeah you can have this, share this', or we would lend people money. So they weren't very happy... We were just literally going back to the flat to sleep at night. But we were getting a lot of trouble, they were breaking our doors down trying to steal stuff. As soon as you get clean and you get money to buy stuff like a nice television they want it to sell. That was the problem with the flats.'

Chloe and her partner were concerned about doing their second detox as they realised how unsuitable their accommodation was for recovering addicts and doubted their ability to succeed considering the many obstacles in their way. They therefore moved out and lived with a friend who was also on a detox - this worked out well. Chloe persistently approached the council asking to be rehoused and eventually succeeded.

'I couldn't see the point of going on a second detox and still living there so we moved out of the flat. I went to live with a friend who was doing a detox as well...he had been a heroin addict for seventeen years. In that area of Peterborough, I didn't have to talk to any drug addicts. I kept going into the council every day saying, 'I've got to have a place' and eventually with letters and support from the CDT we were housed... it's not too bad, but it's still quite a bad area.'

As Chloe states, wherever you go there will be drugs. It is up to the individual to make the decision to change their life and to stick to it.

'We were in two minds to move as we are still in an area where there's lots of drugs about. But wherever we go they're going to be about...I knew I had to make a decision and stick to it.'

Chloe did not realise how much her heroin addiction and her subsequent lifestyle changes had affected her family.

'When I had an interview with the doctor for the second detox I had my mum come in with me. I hadn't realised how much it had affected my mum until I heard her breaking down and saying how I had gone from being a super mum, which I was, to not caring for my kids. That made me realise how bad it was.'

Despite this evident effect on her family, her second detox was also unsuccessful. Chloe again attributed this to inadequate aftercare.

'The second one we did, I did say to one of the workers that I thought I needed more help and she said, 'Well, its time to let you go, you need to get on with your life.' I was disappointed with that.'

It was not until Chloe and her partner joined the Nene project that they received the necessary support to enable them to significantly change their behaviour and their lives. They were approached by the project through Simon's probation officer.

'It was James who came up to Simon. He used to be his probation officer. He was sad to see both of us doing so well and then to go back down that road again and getting back on gear. He said, 'Why don't you come up to the Nene and we will help you through it again?'

Chloe was a bit dubious of the program at first.

'At first I was very anxious...you just don't know what to expect, you come to the police station and wonder what is going to happen. You think they might just lock you up and never let you out again.'

However, Chloe is now extremely grateful to the project and speaks very highly of it.

'I've got nothing but praise for them... they've been very friendly... After we had the interview, they were very good with us. After they saw us, we were in within two weeks and they were helping us and prescribing us methadone... the Nene project is brilliant because they see you every week.'

Chloe was concerned about beginning on a methadone prescription. She had several concerns but the doctor that the Nene project arranged for her to visit discussed these with her and reassured her that this was her best option at the time.

'I didn't really want to do methadone but our habits were too high for another subutex. After seeing the doctor at the Nene project, he said that if we did the subutex we would be clean in a month but suggested we do the methadone and take our time to sort out our home and all our problems properly...he said, 'You have to get your life right, it's not so much the rushing off the drug, its getting your life ready for when you come off it'...To begin with, I thought I would have methadone for a month and I would be all right, but he was exactly right because I have taken my time and now I've got a proper home and everything.'

Since being on the Nene project, Chloe has managed to slowly rebuild her life and some of her relationships. This has been very difficult at times as she feels the needs to constantly prove herself. She realises that she is on her last chance and this gives her the incentive to make it work this time.

'I have spoke to my kids - they do know that I'm doing another detox. They did come back to me, but it was hard because I didn't realise how difficult it is to get back to a normal life. Although I wasn't doing drugs, I was thinking people were looking at me and thinking that I was doing drugs. Then I was over-compensating and giving money to my daughter or buying her some trainers to prove that I'm not spending the money on drugs.'

'Most of my family are being quite supportive now... I've got some that are very supportive, but like my brother wouldn't even talk to me if he saw me in the street, but that's his choice. My sister's very good, she's understanding about it. They know we are trying and if we are being seen to be trying they're helpful to us... the family are chuffed we are doing well...My mum did say if I ever slipped back she would never have me in the house again... I just don't want to hurt anyone again, I wouldn't want to upset them anymore. Like I said, I was probably the perfect daughter at one point. I'm quite embarrassed about it, actually.'

Chloe discusses further difficulties with trying to rebuild her life and the benefits of the support offered to her through the Nene project with regards to everyday issues such as paying bills and shopping. On the previous programs, there was nowhere for Chloe to go to discuss everyday problems. However, the Nene project operates a twice weekly drop-in clinic for people on the project.

'For all those years when I didn't pay any bills, you go to turn on your gas and electric and they know where you are. So I've got bills and fines coming from here and there because we didn't bother with any of that... even though I'm not buying gear we've got so many debts that have caught up with us. I do worry that we haven't got a television licence, its getting everything back that's normal. I think

it's a good idea the way the project is run because you can go and see them twice a week at the clinic if you have any problems.'

'Unless you've been on it, you don't realise. I couldn't even go shopping without being on it because I got paranoid that people were looking at me and I didn't like a lot of people around me... If your'e on heroin you don't notice it, you're in your own little world'.

Chloe realises that they have a long way to go and understands the importance of her partner staying clean in order for her to stay clean.

'It's very good for Simon as well, because he trusts them. Not saying he's more in control, but if Simon's behaving then I will. If he's not doing drugs, I won't either. He's quite happy taking methadone every day.'

They are both determined to succeed and are keeping themselves occupied in order to maximise their chances of keeping clean.

'He's started his own business up... Block paving. He was working with his brother at first, but we thought why let his brother line his pockets when we could do it.... I'm doing a computer course as well so I can help him...when I was married, that's what I used to do. I used to run my husband's business so I can do that side of it and then Simon can do his ground work and that.... I've also got a puppy now to try and get my mind off it. You know, take it for walks.'

By returning to college, Chloe is also meeting new people.

'I have began going out and socialising since I started the course. I'm meeting people out of the drug scene.'

Chloe and her partner are taking these positive steps. However, Chloe emphasised how much you lose through addiction and the immense impact that addiction has on all aspects of your life.

'I have got nothing left from twenty years of marriage and buying and selling houses. I've got nothing. I've ended up being homeless and living in the car...it took my troubles away, but it took my life away in the end. At the time I didn't realise it could do this.'

Furthermore, the recovery from addiction is not a one-step process. It takes time, perseverance and a lot of hard work. Chloe still uses heroin occasionally and feels that this is largely due to boredom and the void which giving up heroin has left in her life. Again, the doctor has been supportive throughout the recovery process and offers practical advice without any pressure.

'In fairness, we still use the odd bag, and they [the Nene project] want us to be completely off. But the doctor says, 'Don't worry' and he tells us to try to think of other things. He also tells us about the importance of triggers and how we should avoid them... I don't think it's the triggers though, we just get bored. When you come back to the world of living, your days are very long. When you're scoring it takes up your day, so its only when we are bored that we think we will have a bag. That's the one we've got to stop, really'.

Chloe is keen to reduce her methadone, whereas her partner is quite scared of this. However, Chloe is determined to recover fully and will listen to any advice given to her.

'Simon's scared - he thinks it's going to make him ill if he reduces it. When we go in on Thursday we are going to ask them to knock it down a bit. I know if they think it's not right they can put it up in a couple of days. I'm quite keen to get off it and I'm rushing. I'm quite scared because this is our third time and I don't want to mess it up. I will listen to people, that's what I like about the Nene project. It's so different to the CDT, it's not their fault but they were always so busy.'

Finally, and crucially, Chloe believes that the key to recovery is a true desire to recover and the motivation to do so.

'It's like when they get the orders from courts they're wasting their time on those when there are those who need and want help like us, we do really want to get off it'.