

The drug experience: heroin, part 5

In his latest Background Briefing, Professor David Clark starts to look at the process of recovery from dependent drug use, as described in seminal research by James McIntosh and Neil McKeganey.

In the last four Briefings, we have looked at the experiences of people whose lives are seriously affected by heroin. In the present Briefing, we will take a first look at the recovery process for those people who become dependent on heroin. We will focus on the research described in the seminal book *Beating the Dragon: The Recovery from Dependent Drug Use*, by Professors James McIntosh and Neil McKeganey.

These researchers interviewed 70 recovering addicts (the term used by the authors) to gain insights into their views of the recovery process. While the vast majority of the sample had been dependent upon opiates, most would have been classed as poly drug users at the height of their drug use. The average length of time that interviewees had ceased using their drug of choice was 4.3 years (range: 7 months to 12 years).

For this sample, the process of giving up drugs was not a single, once-and-for-all experience. The great majority had made several attempts to stop. A variety of reasons were given for attempting to stop use. Among them were: impact of use on their partner, children or family; threat to their own health; to prevent children being removed from them; a sense of tiredness of demands of maintaining habit; death of someone close; and the threat of prison.

The researchers pointed out that the experiences and events that interviewees cited as reasons for stopping use did not 'appear to differ in type or quality as far as successful and unsuccessful attempts were concerned. The same sorts of reasons were given for both'.

They propose another factor – centred on the addict's sense of identity or self – that distinguishes successful attempts from unsuccessful attempts at stopping drug use.

More specifically, the person wishes to restore what is described as a 'spoiled identity'. The central feature of a spoiled identity is the realisation by the person that he exhibits characteristics that are unacceptable to himself and to significant others.

McIntosh and McKeganey emphasise that the theme that dominated their interviewees' accounts 'is their concern to recapture a sense of value and self-respect; in other words, a desire to regain a positive self. Whereas earlier attempts to abstain tend to be utilitarian in nature and geared to achieving a particular practical outcome – such as getting one's partner to return or avoiding losing one's children – what characterises the successful attempt is a fundamental questioning and rejection



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of what one has become, together with a desire and resolution to change'.

Of course, this desire to restore one's identity is not sufficient to lead the person to stop using, but it is, in most cases, a necessary condition.

The negative impact that a person's life as a drug addict had upon their sense of self was expressed in various ways: a deep unhappiness, sense of self-disgust, and a revulsion of the drug-taking world they inhabited. There was a recognition by the individual that their drug-using identity was no longer

acceptable and had to change.

A memory of the person's drug-free existence remained and this could play a role in the decision to quit in two ways. Firstly, it acted as a comparison for the addict to realise how bad their life had become. Secondly, it provided a basis for hope, as they had been different in the past and could be so again.

The process of recognising and acknowledging a spoiled identity and the subsequent decision to give up drugs were usually the result of a gradual process of realisation.

The circumstances which forced addicts to review their identities could be single events, ongoing experiences, or usually both. Often, it was the impact that their drug use was having on people close to them that forced addicts to confront what they had become.

The decision to quit was often precipitated by certain 'trigger' events. However, for most addicts the trigger came at the end of a period of reflection and review that had been going on for some time, sometimes months and even years.

The recognition that one's identity has been spoiled is not sufficient for one to give up drugs. The person must have a desire for a new identity and a different style of life. Positive occurrences (eg the birth of a child) can re-awaken an addict's perspective on the future and show that it can be better than the present and be worth striving for.

Addicts also have to believe that it is feasible to develop a new identity and life.

Some of the sample decided to quit following a rock-bottom crisis. The person had deteriorated to such an extent physically, socially and psychologically that there were only three possibilities open to them. Firstly, continue, but this would lead to total degradation of identity and likely physical damage as well. Secondly, exit through suicide, which was given serious consideration by many addicts at this stage, and tried by some. Thirdly, try to break the addiction and thereby exit a drug-using career.

Despite the role of rock bottom experiences, the majority of the sample exited on the basis of what appeared to be a rational decision. This decision generally involved a conscious balancing of the pros and cons of continuing drug use.

Recommended Reading:
James McIntosh and Neil McKeganey (2002) *Beating the Dragon: The Recovery from Dependent Drug Use*. Prentice Hall.