

Aged 24 years, Natalie realised her heroin addiction was ruining her life and her family, and decided to do something about it. Drink and Drugs News follows her story.

Natalie started smoking cannabis when she was 14. This rapidly got out of hand and she also started taking acid and valium. She became pregnant when she was 15 and managed to stay away from drugs until she was 17, when she started taking ecstasy.

At 18, she was drinking a lot and taking speed, supplied by her dealer boyfriend. It gave her plenty of energy and helped her deal more effectively with being a mother. Her boyfriend returned from a spell in prison with a heroin habit. Natalie started to use the drug two or three days a week, then every day.

She stopped taking her son to and from school, stopped going to bed, washing and putting on clean clothes. Her son witnessed everything. Although Natalie had reached a stage where she hated her boyfriend, she could not leave because he was her supplier.

At one time, her father, boyfriend and most of her friends were using heroin. She couldn't face a life without it. Finally, her mother gave her an ultimatum; Natalie decided she must quit.

She picked up the phone and called a local treatment agency which also offers harm reduction services



“I was sitting in my room one day, crying, withdrawing, and I'd had enough. I just got the phone. When I told the receptionist that I had a heroin problem, it was the first time I'd told anybody that I was a heroin addict.

I was assessed by a treatment agency worker three weeks later. He said to me, 'You'll do this. You're gonna do it.' I thought he was just saying it to make me feel better. When I started the pre-treatment programme the following Monday, I was so nervous. During the meeting, I met an ex-heroin user who had been clean for sixteen years. She talked to me and I was just in awe. I couldn't believe that she had done the same as me. So much sounded the same. From that moment, I didn't feel so alone.

I attended pre-treatment once a week for two months. During this time, I also started going to Narcotics Anonymous meetings. As my time with the agency and NA progressed, I felt a sense of belonging. I felt I had something in common with those around me. I also started to understand my addiction and realised that my behaviour was part of my illness.

I was horrified when the agency suggested to me the possibility of a detox at a local psychiatric hospital. I thought detox was for 'down and outs', not for me. But I thought about it more and finally decided that I did actually need to detox from heroin. The agency arranged an assessment appointment for me.

Meanwhile, my father helped establish a reduction program, weighing out a certain amount of heroin each day for me, each portion progressively decreasing in size. At the start I

was using one-and-a-half grams of heroin a day. I stopped using heroin two months later, three days before the detox assessment.

During the assessment, I was asked what I expected from the detox. I said, 'What I would like is just to be normal and have a happy life. Do you think that's too much to expect?' I really thought that it was, but he said 'no, not at all'. Four months later, I received a phone call from the hospital, informing me that they had a bed for me. I pointed out that I had been clean for four months.

The heroin withdrawal wasn't too bad initially, as I was cutting down slowly. I was also drinking a lot, which may have helped to mask some of the withdrawal. I was drinking at least three pints of lager every night. Every three or four days, I would binge drink, with anything from spirits to lager to wine, to the point where I would drink myself unconscious.

I had trouble sleeping and this lasted about two months. Sometimes I couldn't sleep at night, so had to sleep during the day. It was all so chaotic. I was disorientated, very shaky inside. I didn't know whether I was coming or going or what was happening. It was like being put back into the world after being locked up for a couple of years. I could deal with the physical withdrawal, but the mental was difficult.

My family supported me and took me to places whenever I said I couldn't handle things. I had so many things going on, I was scared, worried about messing up again. I had these feelings rushing around, but I didn't know what they were because I had suppressed them for so long. I couldn't distinguish between the feelings of hurt and

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anger and I had to relearn them and what they stood for with my counsellor's help.

The agency provided me with telephone numbers of people who had been through treatment and were willing to be contacted. They helped a lot. I did all sorts of things to try and stop thinking about heroin – ironing, cooking, washing the dishes. I read a lot of the literature I was given and kept thinking I want this, I want this, I really want this. I was tired a lot and bored, very bored. I didn't see anybody. I ate a lot. I was irritable and sensitive.

At the beginning it was difficult avoiding my drug using friends – they were phoning me and wanting to come back into my life. And that was hard because I wanted to be with them but at the same time I didn't. And I was jealous that they were still using and still doing it and I wasn't. My ex-boyfriend was very persistent and kept leaving letters. But I burnt them and did everything I needed to do to keep myself 'safe'.

It was strange trying to re-establish a 'normal' life. I was so used to gouching out every night in my clothes that I had forgotten the process of going to bed. I was thinking one night, 'well, what do you do? You must put your nighty on'. It'd been so long since I'd done that. I put my nighty on and I got in bed and I thought, 'well, what do you do now? Right, people set their alarms don't they?' So I did that. The feeling was so strange. It was also a strange feeling when I stopped using heroin and became aware again of simple things, like the taste of food, birds singing and springtime.

Next issue: Natalie wins her life back, with the agency's help.

World of WIRED

WIRED is becoming valued as a unique grassroots initiative to tackle drug and alcohol misuse that merges real world activities with a high profile web based communication system. We asked its creator, Professor David Clark, how WIRED developed.



The concept of WIRED was developed five years ago as a way of empowering people to tackle substance misuse. I felt that the internet was not being used innovatively to help the field. Its potential for supporting an integrated resource of information, support, education, training and research, as well as bringing together expertise from both within and outside the field, needed to be realised.

I also knew that WIRED has to be involved in both virtual and real world activities, fostering a strong grass roots initiative which has long-term continuity and stability. My vision was big – very naively so – but then what we are tackling is enormous. As far as I could see there are plenty of people who want to become involved in tackling substance misuse problems but don't know how to get involved. They need something to which they can belong and contribute.

Our first challenge was learning about the field and gaining an identity. We initially evaluated and supported all projects funded by the Drug and Alcohol Treatment Fund, the largest treatment fund in Wales. This two year project allowed us to work with a large number of high quality projects on the ground. It also emphasised to us the divide that can exist between community services and central government, and the need for a strong bottom-up approach which could be sustained.

Around this time, we also launched Daily Dose. This website is now the world's leading news portal on substance misuse, with over 2,500 daily subscribers and many other site visitors. Daily Dose is top of 2.7 million listings on Google. We later launched substancemisuse.net, the content of which

included our personal stories, project profiles and original articles, as well as the results of our research. Our personal stories provide important insights into the lives of people who have experienced and recovered from substance misuse problems.

The research we undertake is focused on issues relevant to practice. I am excited that we are able to recruit top students from our university department who go on to love this field and want to contribute more. Our ongoing projects include work on recovery from addiction and the role of treatment processes; the impact of substance misuse on the family; prejudice towards substance misusers, and drug overdose.

One of the most exciting developments has been our link with the Federation of Drug and Alcohol Professionals (FDAP). We have jointly launched *Drink and Drugs News* magazine (with the publishers, CJ Wellings) and are working to bring a new secure and confidential communication tool (Virtual Outreach) into the field which can be used for assessment, counselling, aftercare and various other forms of support. This unique tool has been developed by Distance Therapy and it will be looked at in more detail in the next issue of *Drink and Drugs News*. Ultimately, we want Virtual Outreach to link into the web communities we are developing – the first will be for parents and carers of people with a substance misuse problem.

In the past week, Wired has launched a consultancy service to help organisations and communities tackle substance misuse, and linked up with the Beckley Foundation to provide them internet support and

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marketing for their international drug policy programme.

Who are WIRED? Well, we're a small group of people from around the country with different backgrounds, most of whom are carrying out this work in their spare time. To date, we have survived with very little funding. It's been tough at times combining my normal day-time job (university professor) with my role as director of Wired. But it has been exciting and very rewarding working in this field. We've had too many 'balls in the air', but sometimes you have to over-commit in order to keep a unique initiative going until it attracts funding. My colleagues and I have loved working with clients, families, practitioners and many others. We thank them all.

An important aim of the past five years has been to develop WIRED as a high quality, innovative organisation that is dedicated to best practice. In the coming years, we need a significant financial investment to take the initiative forward in the way that it deserves.

David Clark is a professor in psychology at the University of Wales Swansea. He spent 25 years as a neuroscientist working with the neurotransmitter dopamine, having trained with the Nobel Laureate Professor Arvid Carlsson, before changing career.

WIRED comprises a charitable company, Wired International Ltd and Wired Consultancy. If you would like further information, you can contact david@substancemisuse.net or visit www.wiredinitiative.com.