

# The only ones

As the pull-out section of this issue bares out, what constitutes 'successful' drug treatment is a much disputed battle zone. What is certain, is that people's path out of drug addiction is always unique. Diane Taylor interviews Marc about his six-year battle to get clean.

What's the best way to beat addiction? Dragging users through treatment programmes linked to the criminal justice system when they commit minor crimes? Stabilisation on substitute drug prescriptions, abstinence, home detox, day programmes, residential rehab, 12-step programmes or sheer willpower? There are plenty of options out there that promise to get drug users clean, but the long-term success rates for most of them are pretty poor.

Government officials, the media and indeed the general public often underestimate the complexity of addiction, a chronic relapsing condition, and seem irritated that so many

addicts don't emerge from costly treatment programmes 'cured'.

What is certain is that there is no 'one size fits all' solution for people who are addicted to drugs, and that while most don't succeed at giving up first time round, many do after subsequent attempts.

Here, London musician Marc, 37, whose punk group recorded two top 20 singles in the early 1990s, charts his six-year battle to get clean – and the vital role played by reaching 'rock bottom' in his path to recovery.

“ Lots of users talk about getting off drugs after they hit ‘rock bottom’. But what most people don’t understand is that rock bottom isn’t a particular time, place or event: I was close to bleeding to death in hospital and all I could think about was getting out so I could score. And I was on the streets with nothing and I still didn’t want to stop using.

When you’re using your mind is very closed because you’re under a chemical cosh. I kept thinking to myself: ‘when certain circumstances are different, when I’m in a different relationship, have a different job or when I move out of the area I’ll get clean’. But I didn’t. Rock bottom is a spiritual thing, it’s when you run out of spiritual currency and there’s nowhere left to go. It was only when I hit rock bottom that I felt desperate enough to ask for help.

The first time I got properly high was when I was eight years old. I was sitting in the dentist’s chair and he gave me gas. I remember absolutely loving it. There can’t be many kids who are dying to get back to the dentist but I was one of them.

My childhood and teenage years were fine but I was a thrill seeker and along with fighting and stealing I was drawn to trying a range of substances – alcohol, butane gas, Tippex thinner – any chemicals I could get my hands on at school, then speed and psychedelics. I don’t remember having any bad trips so my state of mind before I took drugs must have been quite a positive one. The one thing I kept away from was heroin. I was sure I’d like it but my friend’s sister had died of an overdose and I knew it was something I shouldn’t touch. I saw it as a drug of last resort.

But by the time I was in my early 20s I had started to use heroin and cocaine. I had been doing a lot of speed and coke and really needed to calm down. A girl I was in a relationship with introduced me to heroin because she thought it would calm me down. Although I had always avoided heroin before, at that point I knew that the way I was feeling from taking all the other stuff was making me feel not right. I knew that I needed something to make me feel right.

I was one of four musicians in a punk band and we were all taking drugs. Although the other three were using the same drugs as me, I didn’t realise at the time that they were using heroin and cocaine in a different way from me. They used but they could stop. I was the one dishing out the drugs and I couldn’t stop.

Also like other users, after the initial buzz I was using heroin just to stop myself getting sick from withdrawal. On heroin, natural human instincts fly out of the window. You don’t eat and when you look in the mirror you don’t see how thin you are. Heroin has to come first and nothing else really matters. Time flies when you’re using heroin, but it isn’t enjoyable time. I was just using the drug to numb myself.

Heroin is such a cheap and easy drug to get hold of. You can get a dealer to deliver two bags for £15, it’s much closer to home and much cheaper than going to the off-licence and buying alcohol. I definitely enjoyed using drugs for a long time and didn’t consider stopping until I turned 30, a time that a lot of the users who haven’t packed it in yet seem to think about making changes in their lives.

I smoked rather than injected, and went through periods of trying to use one drug to get off another. At one point I was using psychedelics to get off heroin but it didn’t work.

On my first attempt to get drug free I got a codeine script, did a home detox and went to 90 Narcotics Anonymous meetings in 90 days. But when I got clean I felt mad as a hatter because I couldn’t cope with my emotions without drugs. I had an inability to deal with life on life’s terms, I couldn’t sit with myself emotionally and I’d never learnt how to live clean. I had been self-medicating since my teens and I took it for granted that that was what I had to do. I had never dealt with my emotions as an adult without drugs and I didn’t know how to do it.

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My GP referred me for some psychotherapy but the psychotherapist was very irresponsible. He was giving me permission to continue using when NA were telling me not to use. I felt like I was being pulled in different directions. I was in a very vulnerable and fragile mental state and ended up being sectioned in 2002 for three months and placed in a secure unit after I pulled a knife on someone. It was really horrible in there and it would have been far better for me if they’d sent me to residential rehab for three months.

I relapsed when I came out and then tried once again to get clean going back to my GP and getting referred to an outpatient detox. I got clean for a while and went to NA meetings, then I relapsed again. This pattern went on for quite a while. I was constantly trying to get clean but different triggers made me start using again. My whole life revolved around using. Every place I went to was connected with using and the only people I had contact with were other users. My response to any negative emotion or stress was to quash it by using.

I was working on a building site and I started using again there. I stopped, then I got a job in a nightclub and started using again there. I did a couple of home detoxes at my mother’s house but relapsed both times. Then I got arrested in possession of a small amount of heroin and was referred to rehab. But the waiting list was nine months and I thought I’d die before I got there. I know many people wait even longer. There are certain windows when users decide they want to stop using. Rehab should be immediately available for when that time comes.

I was sent to Clouds in Wiltshire in January 2007. A 12-step programme operates there. I did a three-week detox and six-week rehab and thought the programme was amazing. I’ve been working through the steps since then and being clean feels different this time than it did before. I haven’t jumped back into work this time and I’m taking things slowly.

I hope to go back to working in the music business – there are plenty of clean people making music and if they can do it, so can I. It’s a myth that using drugs makes you more creative. Taking drugs has crushed my creativity. Ultimately who wants to be a slave to a substance? There’s no freedom in being chemically addicted.”

■ Diane Taylor is a freelance journalist