

My Story

When I was first asked to write my story I started trying to pinpoint a time when my problems with alcohol began. The truth of the matter is that I simply do not know. It has been one of those things that sneaked up on me, came from nowhere and could quite easily happen to anyone. This is my story of how I found myself addicted to alcohol and how I have found the path into recovery.

I was born in 1982 to a happy family which consisted of my mum, my dad and my older sister. For the first four years of my life I was happy at home with a loving, caring mum. At the age of four I started school and to this day I can remember the overwhelming anxiety that I felt on that first day and throughout my whole school life. I found it very traumatic being away from my happy home and being thrown into school life with so many other children. I found it difficult to mix with other people and to make friends. I had continual migranes and stomach aches from the stress. This was a way of life for me throughout primary and secondary school. I also struggled with feelings of inadequacy as my sister was very academic and I believed then that I was never quite good enough. These feelings were based on my own perception of myself, not something that was ever reinforced by my parents. I believe that these feelings were the start of my deep rooted belief that I was 'not good enough' which ultimately led me down the path of alcohol addiction.

At the age of sixteen or seventeen I went on holiday with my mum, my sister, my sister's friend, a school friend and her mum. It was on this holiday that I had my first alcoholic drink. It wasn't a lot of alcohol, just a small cocktail after dinner. I remember feeling very sophisticated and 'cool', especially whilst hanging around with my older sister and her friend. I also remember that it made me feel quite relaxed and care free. This was my introduction into the world of alcohol.

At the age of seventeen I would spend weekends with friends, drinking in their back gardens. One particular friend had the house to herself at weekends as her parents would go away. They were aware that we were drinking but only low alcohol drinks such as alcopops. We were responsible and never had huge parties that got out of hand, just a select group of us. However, there was always an older sibling that was willing to buy us stronger alcohol such as vodka. It was at these parties that I discovered that alcohol changed me into another person, it seemed to have magical powers. I became the outgoing, funny person that I always wanted to be, I was the life and soul of the party. All my anxieties and low mood seemed to drift away and life seemed bearable. By the age of eighteen I was well immersed in the clubbing scene, going out every Friday and Saturday night with friends and my boyfriend. The person I was on those nights was a stark contrast with the painfully shy, introverted girl I was the rest of the week.

By the age of eighteen I had left school and was working whilst I was trying to decide what I wanted to do with the rest of my life. I also moved to Perth to live with my then boyfriend for around six months. It was at this point that my life changed drastically as my dad was diagnosed with cancer which we knew was incurable from the start. The next year and eight months was extremely difficult with raging anxiety and low mood until my father passed away on 2nd March 2002. During his illness I am very aware that I used alcohol as a stress reliever, it was probably the first time I was using alcohol outside of social situations. I would visit my parents as frequently as I

could and my mum and I would often sit out in the garden enjoying a few glasses of wine, my dad would occasionally have a spritzer when he felt like it but most of his time was spent in bed. During this time I felt that my mum and I grew particularly close, we bonded over a terrible experience with the help of alcohol.

By the age of twenty I was working full time as a dental nurse but was really struggling with my low mood and anxiety. I eventually had my first diagnosis of depression and was put on antidepressants which didn't seem to help very much. I was also dating a man at this time who was a heavy drinker and we spent every weekend drinking and partying. I soon found that the only time my mood lifted was when I was drinking. Of course, when I would stop drinking on the Sunday so I could go to work on the Monday, my mood would drop even lower and my anxiety would be sky high. Eventually I took time off my work because I couldn't get on top of my mood and anxiety, which I now know was made worse by my alcohol use. However, all this did was give me more time to be alone with my thoughts and feelings which I wanted to blot out. My answer was to drink more frequently which I was able to do as I didn't have to be sober to go to work. My relationship also broke down at this point which made my drinking even worse. I felt unlovable and alone, my only friend seemed to be alcohol.

Over the years I drifted from one job to another and even did some college courses in an attempt to give my life some direction. I continually suffered from depression and anxiety which I dealt with by self-medicating with alcohol. I was always able to maintain employment as I would drink at the weekends or limit myself to one bottle of wine if it was a work night. I never attended my work under the influence of alcohol as I had to be responsible in many of my roles. The reality is that I was not performing my roles to the best of my ability as I was always suffering the after effects of drinking. I would limit my bingeing to weekends or when I was on annual leave. Over time things simply became worse. I was stuck in a cycle of taking time off work to deal with my low mood, drinking even heavier and then resigning because I was off sick for so long. Things were spiralling out of control and I found myself making attempts on my own life because things felt so hopeless. I was also having admissions to hospital due to excess alcohol consumption and being lifted by the police for being intoxicated in public.

In September 2015 I was admitted to hospital after a serious binge, having made another attempt on my life. At this point I was living with my mother but she decided that she could not tolerate living with my drinking any longer and refused to let me come home. I was now homeless after being discharged from the hospital and knew I had to tackle my drinking problem. I was given a place in Anchor House, which is a dry hostel and was referred to the drug and alcohol team. I began trying to rebuild my life but it was not a smooth journey. I managed sixteen weeks of sobriety before lapsing and this pattern continued throughout my time in Anchor House. In September 2016, a year after entering Anchor House, I received the offer of a flat which I gladly accepted. Once in my new flat I continued to follow the same pattern of maybe managing a month without alcohol before having a massive binge which could last weeks or even months.

In April of 2017 I decided that I really needed to tackle my drinking problem once and for all and so my alcohol worker organised for me to go into the detox unit at Murray Royal Hospital. On Tuesday 2nd May 2017 I went into hospital and a chain of events occurred which I believe set me on the path to true recovery. On the first day of my admission I met an amazing man who changed the course of my life, he was another patient. Against all the advice we became a couple after leaving the ward and I was the happiest I had been in a long time. I had finally found the man I wanted to spend my life with, I was getting my happy ever after. Of course, every relationship has its ups and downs and we both lapsed independently of each other. We tried very hard to stay away from alcohol but often its pull became all too powerful, it was the only thing either of us had ever known in difficult times. Despite this we spent the majority of our time together sober and enjoying life.

Just before Christmas in 2017 we were both drinking. It was our first Christmas together and sadly it is a bit of a blur due to alcohol. It was also our last Christmas together. On 27th December 2017 my mum came into my flat to check on us both and found myself unconscious in the bedroom and my partner dead in the sitting room. He had consumed such a large quantity of alcohol that it had acted as an overdose to his system. At the age of 44 he had lost his battle with alcohol. In the days that followed I continued to drink to numb the pain, it was the only crutch I had ever known. After a few days of continual drinking I knew that I needed to sober up as I would have his funeral to attend. I went through a terrible home detox but came through the other side and was able to pay my last respects to my wonderful partner. After getting through the funeral and the wake without consuming any alcohol I returned home and made the decision to drink again. If I am totally honest I simply wanted to go and be with my partner, I didn't want to live anymore.

On the 9th April 2018, almost three months after saying goodbye to my partner, I woke up with the realisation that this was not how I wanted to live my life anymore. I knew that my partner would want me to be sober and happy and I feared dying with the same indignity that he did. I wanted to make my mum proud of me, I didn't want her discovering my body the next time she walked into my flat. With that in mind I embarked on yet again another horrific home detox complete with hallucinations that had me believing my partner was back from the dead. It was truly scary but I knew that I had to get through it and after around eight days of experiencing the effects of withdrawal I came out the other side.

I knew that in order to be successful I was going to have to throw myself into recovery and that was exactly what I did. Despite still being deep in grief I felt that something had changed for me, as if this was my time. I knew that detoxing was actually the easy part and that maintaining sobriety was going to be the difficult part. My first stop was the drop in clinic with the drug and alcohol team at Drumhar Health Centre. The worker that I saw there was very supportive and together we came up with a plan of action. I had dabbled in SMART (Self Management and Recovery Training) meetings in the past and felt I would like to try these again and we found out the times and I began attending these on a weekly basis. I was also signed up for a twelve week relapse prevention course which I completed. Once my worker was happy that we had plenty of support in place she referred me on to TCA (Tayside Council on Alcohol) for one to one counselling sessions. At my initial

appointment at TCA I was also told about the peer support group which is held on a weekly basis and I decided to attend this too, as well as my one to one sessions.

The one to one sessions at TCA have been invaluable in my recovery. They have been extremely challenging but have pushed me to look at myself and my own deep rooted beliefs about myself which have played a massive part in my turning to alcohol. I have learned so much about myself throughout my sessions and have started to have more faith in myself and the person that I am. I am finally starting to like myself for the first time and believe that I deserve better than a life ruled by alcohol addiction.

The SMART meetings and peer support group at TCA have also played a huge role in my recovery. I have met the most amazing people with truly inspiring stories that have overcome so many challenges to go on to live a sober, fulfilling life. The support, advice and tips have helped me to tackle my own challenges whilst in recovery and will continue to do so for the rest of my life.

I am now extremely proud to be able to say that I have been in genuine recovery for two years and five months. Although I had previous attempts at recovery this was the first time that I entered into it with true intent. During this period of time I have experienced two short lived lapses which I overcame quickly and moved on. I never considered myself to be back at day one after each lapse as I felt this would be discouraging to myself. On the SMART UK Facebook page I saw this explained perfectly. If you were on a car journey and half way to your destination you got a flat tyre you would get out, repair it and then carry on your journey from where you left off. You wouldn't turn around, go back to the start and begin the journey all over again. This is the way that I am choosing to view my recovery, which will be a lifelong journey. I know I will always have to battle my alcohol addiction but I now have the faith in myself and tools that I will need to do this successfully.

I would very much like to thank everyone who has supported me on my journey, without you all I wouldn't be where I am today. This includes all of the services that I have been involved with, my fabulous friends, my amazing late partner and my beautiful mum. Lastly, I would also like to thank myself. Thank you for finding the strength to keep fighting and for finally believing in yourself. At last I can say that I am proud of myself.