



1000 Voices that tell one story

This same story can be heard in thousands of our homes. There may be different twists, different turns, but each person experiences the same sense of shame, shock, disappointment, guilt, isolation, fear and loss.

“It took us a long time to cop on to what was happening. When your kids are 16 or 17, you make allowances. You kid yourself that it’s usual for teenagers to sleep until the afternoon and stay out late. You tell yourself that it’s normal for them to find new friends. You put their mood swings down to adolescence. You don’t want to be rowing with them all the time. You make allowances.

When the Gardaí first came knocking on the door and told me he was found on the street, high as a kite on heroin, it was such a shock. I didn’t really believe them. Not my baby, my boy. It’s not possible that he could have been on heroin without my knowing. We went to get him. When he pulled up his sleeves and we saw the needle marks... God, it was like a kick in the stomach. After, there was a dreadful confrontation. He and his father hurled terrible abuse at each other. I suppose it was the beginning of the change of our lives.

For months there was an awful silence in our house. We didn’t know how to deal with it. We watched him. Searching for signs but we didn’t really know what to be looking out for. And we saw nothing unusual, nothing that we hadn’t seen before. I’d try to get him up earlier. Encourage him to eat more. It was like we were all acting. We thought maybe he’d stopped. Self-denial. It’s a great thing. His dad and I, we reassured each other that he was stopped. He swore he was. That there was nothing to worry about. But call it motherly intuition, or what ever. It went on nagging at me. I decided to clean out his room when he was out one day. I swear to God, I wasn’t searching, not consciously. I began to tidy his room. I looked through all his pockets...telling myself it was time for a good spring clean. I found all his equipment – smoking jars, tin foil, and needles in his old shoebox where he kept his childhood treasures. I didn’t know what they were for exactly but I knew it was drugs and that he was still using. I couldn’t believe it.

Then it began to really sink in, I’ll never forget it. You feel duped. You feel anger. You feel fear – terrible fear. You realise you don’t know what this means. You begin to blame yourself. You think, what did I do wrong? I must have done something wrong. Was it because I lived here? Was it because I worked? Was it because his Dad was travelling on the road? You search for reasons. And the reasons you come up with are irrational but you don’t see that. I made a pact with God...I’ll do anything if...and you really mean to keep your end of the bargain. I bet every parent who has a kid taking drugs has made a pact – whether they believe in God or not.

You realise you don’t know anything about heroin. Or what can be done. You think, I must find out. I need to know how to get him off this. Your mind races, searches through your memory box for any references to heroin, treatment, doctors. Then it dawns on you... it’s illegal. It’s dangerous. If you start asking questions, people will want to know why and you realise you don’t want them to know your son is on drugs. What will they think? They’ll think it’s your fault. Suddenly, you realise you can’t

tell anyone. It took me ages to tell his dad what I'd found. I didn't want him angry. I didn't want war in the house. And I couldn't tell my friends. I was so ashamed. The isolation and fear is dreadful. I felt so alone.

After the initial shock, and rows, we began to talk to him – to try to find out from him what it all meant. In the end it was him who told us about the treatment options – the counselling, the methadone, the treatment clinics and how hard they were to get into. I was amazed. Seemingly, there was precious little that we could do. There didn't seem to be services that we could easily go to. We decided to go to a counsellor. I was ecstatic that he agreed and I was so relieved just to be able to go to someone who would know what to do. A professional. He told us that there was a 3-month waiting list for the methadone treatment. But it seemed that to get access to the methadone treatment, you would have to have heroin traces in your urine, so the logic was, you had to take the heroin for the 3 months if you wanted the methadone treatment. That's what the professionals told us. But you are so desperate you believe what you hear. You take what you can get.

As time went on, I was like a headless chicken. Running round the different doctors, and the clinics, seeking advice and getting very little practical support or help. At the same time, my son was like a walking MIMS (the medical resource pack of drugs). He knew everything about pills – what's in them, what they are good for. His granny lives with us and she has a repeat prescription. He robbed them. At the time I didn't dream that was possible. But then, another time, when we lost the script, he was able to tell us what they were!

I can't describe the loss you feel when your child takes heroin. It's like you've lost them. Like when he took his granny's pills. She needs them. I couldn't believe that he would put her life at risk for his own high. He became a different person. I couldn't trust him. He would lie to us. Rob from us. I would never know if he was telling the truth. But, you've got to have a sense of humour. One time he decided to stop the heroin and cold turkey it. We were so relieved. Overjoyed. We wanted to help him in any way we could. There he was up in his room, day and night. We were rubbing oils into his joints. Providing him with anything he needed. He wanted candles to burn oils – we thought it was to soothe and de-stress him. Didn't we discover later, it was to burn the heroin he was still smoking!

That's something else you learn – that you can't sort it for them. After the shock, I truly felt that if I could get the right services, I could help him sort this. As his mother, I was going to do everything I had to in order to protect him. If that meant queues of doctors, I would do it. If that meant money, I would earn it. If that meant giving up work, I would do it. His dad felt that he was the one who had the logical, rational approach and that this could get him through this 'stage' of his life. If only we knew then, what we know now.

Anyway, after a lot of false starts, he did go into treatment. And it was good. It seemed to be working. At last, we thought, we will soon get back to normality. We assumed that the doctors, counsellors, the clinic, the medication, the residential, the methadone, would be the cure. That, once he got the treatment and medication, the drug problem would end and that normal life would resume. That is what you think. You still think that, despite having gone through all the emotional traumas of sickness, distrust, hate, fear, isolation, family rows, robbing, police, stigmatisation, that it can go back to normal! Well, that's what we thought until there was the first relapse. After 2 years being clean.

I couldn't believe it at first. The relapse. There were the symptoms again. Strange sleeping patterns, out late, staying on his own in his room for days. I really couldn't believe it. You think the ordeal is over, that you are back to normal. But then...the signs begin again. This time you recognise them. But you still can't believe it. Not after all you've been through. It's so hard to believe. You don't believe your own eyes. Small items began to disappear again. We were more alert this time. We tried to surreptitiously look into his eyes to check for the dilation of the pupils. I'd constantly search his rooms and pockets to find tell tale signs – desper-

ately hoping not to find a thing. We tiled the bathroom all over – walls and floors to stop him hiding his stuff. I'd accuse him and then back off. Rows started throughout the family. You focus so much on the heroin user, the rest of the family starts to feel resentful. Life is hell. The drug user controls the family. You can't do anything. When he relapses – it's a relapse for us all. We all live with it but we have no control over it. Sometimes, I thought he'd be better off dead... for him... for all of us. That's it – a growing awareness that you would prefer for your child to be dead rather than living a death like this. To have to sit back to watch someone turn from a beautiful child to a pathetic stranger while you are powerless has to be one of the most devastating things a parent has to go through.

Then my ten year old daughter said to me, 'what do I have to do to get any attention round here, start smoking heroin?' I realised that for the past few years we had done nothing but fly around like headless chickens, and focus on nothing but the child taking drugs – to the detriment of the rest of the family. The exhaustion is awful. For our own health and for the rest of the family, I realised we had to let him be – let him take responsibility. I couldn't do it anymore.

In a sense, it is a good stage when you realise that you have to let go. For me it was a slow realisation. You have to give the responsibility back to them. But it hurts so much – and it is so hard to do – just to sit back and watch him.

I found out about the local Family Support Group and went along. I felt I couldn't cope any more on my own. I was amazed to learn that there were other families in the community experiencing just what we were. We were able to share our experiences. Doing that, you begin to let go of it. And the best bit about it... because you're sharing common experiences... because you know that these people understand what you are going through... you can begin to laugh... you begin to see a funny side. When you sit back and share the images, you have to laugh. Here we are worried sick, running around trying to find cures, excusing their robbing, blaming ourselves, living in constant tension, creeping around them, nursing grief and all the while, they're having a great time, getting high!

Through the support group I learned that there is a process to addiction and this process takes its toll on the whole family. Once we understood the process we could deal with the situation in a more positive way. We learned not to issue orders but to offer choices and to state clearly that there were consequences to these choices. The information gave us an understanding of where he was in his addiction and this meant we could support him when he moved from one stage to the next.

Talking about our experiences in the Family Support Group gave me a lot of support and a lot of confidence. We don't all deal with it in the same way but we can share our thoughts. At one stage I was angry. I wanted to put him out of the house – just like that. But talking with the group helped me consider my options and what I could live with and what I couldn't. As the ad says, "It's good to talk".

As a result of all this learning and through my experience and involvement with the Support Group, I was able to bring some normality back into the home I also became confident enough able to challenge the professionals – not just on the basis of my own experience but because I knew the experience of the others. I am much more aware of myself as a person and I am able to recognize my own needs. This is partly because I talk to other people about their own needs, but also I know my needs reflect the needs of other people. And, I tell you something. I can laugh about it – sometimes!"

I wouldn't wish my experience with my child drug user on my worst enemy. Other families have had worse experiences. Their children are dead. But I suppose I now have more self-respect and self reliance than I ever did before. I am certainly much better informed than I was. I no longer feel manipulated by the drug user or the service providers. I now have control