

A journey into and out of heroin addiction

In his last Background Briefing, Professor David Clark began the story of Lydia's journey into addiction. In this Briefing, he hands over to the imaginary character of Lydia, to explain how addiction took control of her life, and her first experiences of treatment.



'Trying to juggle being in treatment and getting enough money for my heroin habit was really difficult.'

To begin with, using drugs was great. I had a great laugh with my friends, and it made me feel good about myself. It helped me to forget all my worries and the things that had happened in my life.

When I found heroin I knew that 'this was the one'. It made me feel like I was wrapped up in a warm blanket with not a care in the world – who wouldn't want that?

But those feelings didn't last for long. Soon things went from bad to worse. It wasn't until I had my first cluck that I even realised that I was taking heroin because I needed to, not because I wanted to.

I didn't want to experience another cluck so I did my best to make sure I had enough money to support my habit. I began committing crime – I couldn't see any other options.

It didn't take long before I got caught shoplifting. I was having a bad day and was feeling rough. All I wanted was enough money to get a bag, and then I could sort myself out. I was lucky. I got away with a caution. At the police station all I could think about was my next hit, and how I was going to get the money for it.

Before long, the shoplifting started to catch up with me. My face was being recognised everywhere, and I was banned from a number of shops. It was getting harder and harder for me to make enough money to feed my habit.

I began to get in more and more trouble with the police. The first couple of times I was arrested I got away with cautions and fines. The police got to know me and about my drug use. They looked down at me, treated me like I was a piece of scum.

Eventually, I was made to go to court for a number of shoplifting charges. I was sentenced to a big fine, which I had no hope of paying, and offered the choice between a prison sentence or drug treatment. Well, there was no choice really! I had to attend treatment every day and I was put on a methadone script.

At first, I thought that treatment was going to help sort me out. In a way I was quite glad that I had finally been made to go. My addiction was taking over, and I was losing far more from it than I had ever gained. I knew I needed help to kick it.

I had heard about methadone, but I wasn't too sure about going on it. People had told me

that it was more addictive than heroin because it seeps into your bones. I was also told it would rot my teeth.

I didn't really have a choice – it was either methadone or prison, so I thought I would give it a go. I wanted something that would help me change my life. I needed something, because no matter what I tried on my own, I just didn't get anywhere. Hopefully, methadone would be that something.

I thought methadone was going to help me to stop using heroin, but it didn't turn out that way. I started on a low dose and was even told to use heroin on top! I couldn't understand that – why not just give me a proper dose of methadone? I thought the whole point was to stop using smack, not to use smack and methadone?

I knew that I was an addict, I even understood that there were events in my past that shaped me into what I was – but what I didn't get was, why couldn't I stop? I felt let down that methadone hadn't worked for me. I'd gone along to the treatment place every day, so it wasn't as if I didn't try. If methadone didn't work, then what would?

It was starting to look like I'd never kick heroin. The only time I could even half cope with life was when I was using. So that's what I did.

Trying to juggle being in treatment and getting enough money for my heroin habit was really difficult. My days were taken up with being at the treatment centre, so I had to take risks to get money in the evenings. It was becoming increasingly difficult, but I couldn't see a way out. I felt like I was losing even more control of my life.

Whilst in treatment I met some good people. There was one girl who I really looked up to. She always looked so smart, with nice clothes and make-up. She really took me under her wing. I learnt that she funded her drug use with street work. She explained how much money I could make, and I began to see a future for myself. I thought that if I could get enough money to move away and get myself a nice flat then I could kick the heroin once and for all...'

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