

The drug experience: heroin, part 3

In his latest Background Briefing, Professor David Clark continues describing the experiences of heroin users who have their lives seriously affected by their drug use, focusing on heroin withdrawal.

In the last Background Briefing, we started to describe the experiences of people whose lives are seriously affected by heroin. The experiences are based on those described in the seminal book *Beating the Dragon* by James McIntosh and Neil McKeganey, and our own research with clients on the Peterborough Nene Drug Interventions Programme.

The recognition by individuals that they are addicted to, or dependent on, heroin can take anywhere from a few weeks to several months or even years, depending upon the amount of drug being used, the frequency with which it was being taken, and the person's ability to fund their habit.

For the majority of individuals in each of the above research studies, the recognition that they were addicted usually came from the experience of withdrawal symptoms which arose when they purposefully attempted to stop using the drug, or through not having heroin available. The most common reason for being deprived of heroin is a lack of money to purchase the drug.

These withdrawal symptoms disappeared when heroin was used again. Some people are actually surprised to find that they actually needed heroin to function normally. They were no longer in control of their drug-taking; rather, it was controlling them.

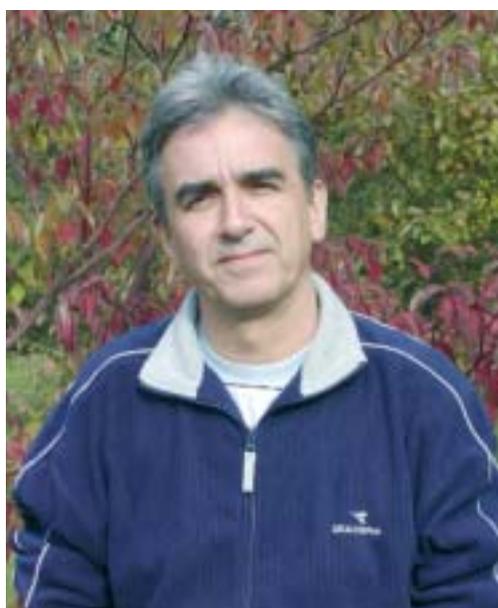
These withdrawal symptoms included stomach cramps, vomiting and retching, muscle pains, the shakes, hot and cold spells, and headaches. Some people experience considerable discomfort and pain, and seek out the drug to escape or avoid this discomfort and pain.

The authors of *Beating the Dragon* describe Michael's experience, who was taken to prison at a time of his drug-using career that he had never experienced withdrawal, and never considered the possibility that he might be addicted to the drug.

Once he started to experience withdrawal in the police cell, Michael started to ask for help, believing that there was something wrong with him. The policeman knew what was wrong and asked, 'Did your pals not tell you this?'

Michael continued, 'but, as soon as I got out next day, I went straight for a hit and that was me, within seconds I was brand-new again. So that was me, I wasn't usin' it for fun anymore, I was usin' it 'cos I had to use it.'

Being deprived of the heroin they are using, for whatever reason, is absolutely fundamental to an individual's realisation that they are addicted to heroin. In the absence of such enforced abstinence, and its physical consequences, it is possible for a



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person to maintain a belief that while they are using heroin they are doing so out of choice, rather than because they are dependent on the drug.

Heroin users will say that, apart from the experiences associated with withdrawal, there is little to indicate that they have become addicted to the drug.

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until you try to stop. I didn't think about withdrawal symptoms or anything like that 'cos I always had access to money.' (From *Beating the Dragon*.)

When heroin users realise that they addicted to the drug, they respond in a number of ways. Some accept that they are addicted to the drug, but decide not to do anything about it at this time as they are enjoying using heroin and/or the drug-using lifestyle. They are also able to fund their habit.

Other users do not want to continue using the drug, but they soon discover that it is not just a simple case of stopping. This becomes a difficult and often emotional time as they realise that they have no choice. They have to continue using the drug to avoid the physical symptoms of withdrawal.

Some of our interviewees described becoming depressed, others either considered or tried to commit suicide.

Many heroin users point out that they reached a time where they no longer experienced pleasurable effects of the drug. They continue to take it just to feel 'normal'. Some say that they never really experience the same effect as those first few times that they injected or smoked heroin.

Sometimes, family members or friends inform the heroin user that they believe that they have a drug problem. This appears to happen less frequently than one might expect. This may be because heroin users hide their habit well from their families, or because the family members choose to deny that there is a problem or simply ignore it.

When the issue is first raised, the heroin user usually denies that there is a problem. As long as they can sustain their habit and avoid the distress of withdrawal, they can maintain the belief that they are in control.

Irrespective of whether heroin addicts regard their addiction as a problem or not, once they become dependent, their lives become dominated by the need to feed their habit and to secure the means of doing so. In our next Background Briefing, we will focus on living with addiction.

Recommended Reading:

Aimee Hopkins and David Clark (2005) *Using Heroin, Trying to Stop and Accessing Treatment*.

www.wiredinitiative.com/pdf/Nene1.pdf

James McIntosh and Neil McKeganey (2002) *Beating the Dragon: The Recovery from Dependent Drug Use*. Prentice Hall.

Tam Stewart (1996) *The Heroin Users*. Rivers Oram Press.