

The drug experience: heroin, part 6

In his latest Background Briefing, Professor David Clark continues to look at the process of recovery from dependent drug use, as described in seminal research by James McIntosh and Neil McKeganey.

In the last Briefing, we started to look at the recovery process for people who become dependent on heroin. Analysis of the interviews with 70 recovering addicts in Scotland emphasised the importance of the person wishing to restore a 'spoiled identity' as being key to a successful recovery. The person must not only desire a new identity, but also want a different style of life. They must also believe that this is feasible.

Nearly all the interviewees described previous attempts at trying to stop taking drugs which ended in failure. These failed attempts are not simply a waste of time and they may play a significant role in the process of recovery.

A period of abstinence can clarify and highlight the extent their identities have been damaged. During abstinence, addicts can examine their drug-using lifestyle from the perspective of a non-user. Also, the addict's residual identity (non-using identity) can re-emerge and comparisons can be made between it and the drug-using identity.

Addicts not only acquire first-hand experience of an alternative lifestyle, but also potentially see its feasibility. If they can abstain from taking heroin for a time, why not for good?

Despite knowing that they need to stop taking heroin, a person may continue because they fear the pain and discomfort of withdrawal. Ambivalence is a striking feature of addiction, particularly when the person has made a rational decision to stop using and makes attempts to do so. There is a conflict between wanting to change on the one hand and a reluctance to give up the drug on the other.

In people who have become dependent on heroin, the vast majority of periods of abstinence are followed by relapse. It is much easier to stop taking drugs than it is to stay stopped.

Factors that are known to precipitate relapse include: craving or continued desire for the drug; negative emotional states such as depression, boredom and loneliness; the experience of stressful or conflicting situations; and pressure from others to resume the drug.

However, these risks, or predisposing factors, do not lead inevitably to relapse. Many addicts recover successfully despite these negative experiences. Why?

McIntosh and McKeganey emphasise that '...the key to successful recovery from addiction is the construction by the addict, of a new identity incorporating non-addict values and perspectives of a non-addict lifestyle'.

The construction of a new identity, or a renewed



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sense of self, has to be built and constantly defended against a variety of often-powerful opposing forces.

'One of the reasons why the transition is so difficult is because the individual has to get used to an almost entirely different way of life. The drug using lifestyle has provided much of the meaning, structure and content of the person's life, often for many years, then all of a sudden it is gone and something has to take its place.'

It is generally very difficult for addicts to re-enter conventional life – they often feel strange, incompetent and lacking in important practical and social skills. They have been detached from mainstream activities and culture for a long time, and have often done 'everyday' things under the influence of the drug.

'The second thing that makes managing the transition out of drugs so difficult for addicts is the

unrelenting nature of the task of ensuring that they remain abstinent.'

In establishing a new identity, addicts have to distance themselves from their past lives and their drug-using networks. Interviewees emphasised that a continuing desire for drugs – which does abate over time – and a lack of confidence in being able to resist, makes them vulnerable. They wanted to put as much distance as possible – socially and physically – between themselves and those who might seek to tempt or pressurise them into using again.

Recovering addicts also have to develop a range of new activities and relationships both to replace those that they have given up and to reinforce and sustain their new identities.

One of the major problems that addicts face when giving up drugs is how to occupy their time. The drug-using routine – getting the money, acquiring and then taking the drug – take up a major part of the day.

Interviewees recognised how important it was to keep themselves as fully occupied as possible, both mentally and physically. However, simply occupying their time was not enough. They want to do something that provides a sense of purpose and gives their life some meaning. The ideal solution is paid employment.

Recovering addicts also need to develop new social relationships in order to fill the social vacuum. These relationships must reinforce the new identity, support the alternative lifestyle, and help provide the recovering addict with a new sense of purpose.

The acceptance by non-addicts of the recovering addict's new identity is especially important in sustaining its development and, thereby, maintaining abstinence from drugs.

Once the person's new life begins to develop – with new activities, relationships and commitments – this creates a powerful barrier against temptation to revert back to drug taking.

New activities and relationships impart a sense of normality and progress and help to reinforce faith in both the desirability and in the probable success of rehabilitation. They also provide positive reinforcement for the recovering addict's attempt to develop a more positive sense of self and self-worth.

The new life provides a stake in the future.

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