

## Freed from drugs

My name is Mark; I was born in 1969 in the seaside town of Great Yarmouth, but I grew up mostly in Singapore in the Far East. My Dad worked in the oil fields and my Mum looked after us.

When my Dad was home from offshore he was drunk a lot, and smoked dope. Mum did too, but only when Dad was home.

My brother Jason was killed on our road in Singapore, and it shocked our family, particularly my Mum. It wasn't long after that that she gave her life to Jesus.

Other than that, my memories of Singapore were good. I didn't have that bad a childhood, or bad parents, although my Dad gave me my first joint when I was 13. I went to an American school and found it strange: they taught American stuff - the history and sport was American too – American football and baseball; it was like being in a little America and I didn't like it at all. When I arrived back in England, I had sun-bleached blond hair and an American accent, which made me popular with some, and equally hated by others.

I was about 12 when we came back to the country, and in for a shock. Things were tougher than overseas and I soon started getting into trouble. Shoplifting, bunking off school and vandalism were the main things, as well as general mischief and annoying the general public. I remember we used to spit on people from the top deck of the bus, which used to make us laugh, until one day someone stopped the bus and got on and gave us a hard time. Of course when it snowed, snowballs, sometimes with stones in them, were thrown at passing cars. I don't think I was ever the instigator of these activities but was easily led by 'bad company.'

After living in various houses in England, we moved into a block of flats that my parents owned and rented out to people. Most of the tenants took drugs, and I was told not to mix with them – but I couldn't help it. There were a few incidents involving violence and drugs; this frightened me: I wasn't used to this level of aggression. One guy was battered in his bed by two guys with baseball bats, for owing drug money.

I was 16 when Andrew, another one of the tenants, moved in; he was 25. His father and two brothers were policemen, but Andrew flouted the law at every opportunity. He sold all the drugs under the sun, but he was a nice guy – he had an amphetamine habit so he needed to sell the drugs for money to fund his addiction. He was eventually arrested. He later gave his life to Jesus and he now owns his own house and works offshore. But seeing and hearing stories about how good drugs made you feel, made me want to take them more.

I started taking speed; this made me feel really outgoing and confident. In my circle of friends your coolness was measured by the amount of drugs you took, and I tried to be as cool as possible.

I smoked dope with friends as a sociable thing, but then I started smoking it on my own, and this was a significant development because I started to become isolated. Spending more time alone smoking dope, I began to live more and more in my own little world in my head, reality becoming more intolerable to me. Deep inside me I was getting problems; some were probably normal to life, such as personality clashes and depression and poor self-image stuff. But because I was constantly smoking hash, and taking chemicals, I wasn't learning how to cope with stress and normal problems – and this inability to cope was in itself causing me to become more stressed. Instead of learning to cope, I was learning to get through life by getting high or getting angry.

I learned to be angry and defensive from my Dad's side of the family. The Thompsons were a rough lot – drinking and arguing was normal. Seeing this way of behaving made me think that this was the way to act – but the trouble was, I wasn't as thick skinned as them. But I still acted out this behaviour, the 'tough' image. I became false to myself, acting one way and feeling another.

I also hung with a guy called Dee. He was 15 years older than I was. Dee sold drugs and often he would give me free speed.

Apart from the experience of taking drugs, some of the buzz I experienced at this time came from the feeling of being part of an underworld of 'heads' – users - a community of people in rebellion against the straights. I was set apart, and different from the norm – I felt that I was out of the rat race, on a better level than the 'ordinary' people who didn't smoke.

At 16, after I left school, I started my first job - on a Youth Training Scheme in upholstery. I didn't last long. I used to smoke hash at work during my breaks; my work standards deteriorated, until eventually I got the sack. I then started another YTS scheme, this time at my Dad's own new scaffolding company. The work was physically demanding and I got paid good money - for a YTS. The government also paid for me to live in a flat in my parents' building. This flat was used for sessions of drug bingeing; my parents asked me to leave, so I moved in with N, my first long-term girlfriend.

By then I had taken a lot of every drug going from magic mushrooms, pharmacy tablets and LSD. I liked LSD at first because it made me see things that weren't there; everything around me moved to the music, it was like a cartoon. But these good trips were soon shadowed by some nasty bad trips where I was so frightened I didn't know what to do with myself. Sometimes I would shut myself in my room and hide under the covers. When I lived with N at her dad's, this was a strange time. She shared with me that her Dad had raped her when she was 10, and that her Uncle had raped her recently, while I was living there. I didn't know what to do. Her alcoholic Mum tried it on with me, and N slept with my best mate. This was enough for me to end the relationship.

I was 17, and taking more and more drugs: experimenting with mushrooms and Valium, and anything I could get my hands on. I still held on to my job, but only because my Dad owned the company! While I was there I managed to gain some qualifications and my driving licence. My attitude to other people at work was starting to get quite bad; people said I had a chip on my shoulder; I know that I was getting more paranoid and angry every day. I finished with N and moved back home - and met K, my next girlfriend. We met while we were both high on drugs. We went out for two years, and we kept using drugs throughout our relationship, which eventually caused it to fall apart.

One night, things took a serious turn. A few weeks previously, my Dad had told me that my Uncle had assaulted my Mum. I had suggested that we go round and 'sort him out', but my Dad didn't want to hurt his own brother. Instead, he was allowed to come to our house again around Christmas time, where as usual he became drunk, violent and threatening.

I had been scared of my Uncle since I was a young boy – he came to Singapore with us and had made life hell. But that night I was drunk myself, and still angry with him for what he had done to my Mum. So when he threatened me, I blew a fuse and started shouting at him, telling him what I thought of him - which took a lot of courage. He responded with more threats – and then he hit my Dad.

In a panic, I picked up a milk bottle and smashed it over my Uncle's head. He shouted violently at me, and I lunged at him and cut him very badly in the face and arms. I was so drunk and fuelled with adrenaline that I hardly knew what I was doing – I was only dimly aware that I had anything in my hands as I hit him. I remember nothing of the rest of the incident, but apparently I picked up a second bottle, and was about to have another go when my Dad intervened and dragged me back into the house.

I locked myself in the bathroom. I was terrified at what I had done, and very frightened of the trouble I thought it would cause me; but at the time I was also glad that he had got punishment for what he had done. The police came and I was arrested, but my uncle chose not to press charges so I was released again. But that was far from the end of it.

The next year was a hell. My uncle called the house on the phone, shouting - describing what he was going to do to me. He smashed my car up; he ambushed me at work at 6am.

That particular morning I was sitting in the truck, writing. When I looked up, he was there - coming towards the truck with an enraged expression on his face. Charged up with anger and fear, I opened the truck door, kicking it so that flew into him, jumped out of the vehicle and grabbed hold of him. I told him to leave, because I didn't want to fight, or to hurt him any more after last time. Somebody ran over and tried to pull us apart and in the process, my uncle managed to grab my finger in his teeth, biting down with all his strength on the knuckle; I had to rip my finger out of his mouth. It was swollen for days and is still damaged to this day. And there was more to come.

One Saturday, the sun was shining and I was enjoying its warmth, sitting smoking dope in the town centre. I looked up from my daze to see my uncle standing in front of me. Before I could react, he head-butted me on the nose, then hit me a couple of times with his fists. I managed to pick myself up and hold him off, and told him that was enough and – once again – to leave: and he did. But two minutes later he returned. This time, he was walking towards me with his arms wide open, a grin on his face.

'It's over now', he said, with such a convincing tone that, caught off guard, I relaxed my stance and put my own arms out, half-expecting a reconciling embrace. Instead, he pulled out a 6-inch lock knife and stabbed me, once under the armpit, and again, in my groin.

At first, I didn't feel the stab wounds – I knew he had stabbed me, but I didn't know how badly. Instinctively I grabbed the hand that had the knife in it, taking hold of the neck of his shirt with the other hand. I lifted the hand with the knife up in the air. I shouted out to the people standing around, 'Look, everyone – he's got a knife and he has just stabbed me' – I was in a state of shock, I didn't really know what I was doing. He shook himself free from my grip.

'Now go get yourself stitched up,' he said, '- it's over.' And he turned and just walked away.

Then the pain hit me. Somebody called an ambulance and I was taken to hospital. The wounds were not deep but the knife had gone between my ribs and narrowly missed my lung. Later that day my Uncle was arrested.

Despite what had happened, I lied to the police, trying to convince them that it wasn't my Uncle who had stabbed me - because he hadn't pressed charges when I had 'glassed' him. But an ex-policeman had seen the whole event; my Uncle was sent to prison for two years. When he came out he just wanted to avoid any more trouble, so he kept away from me from then on.

After all the LSD and speed, hash and pills, I felt as if I was falling apart at the seams. The rave scene had been going on for about a year in Great Yarmouth, and I did a lot of Ecstasy and LSD at these, which only added to my paranoid fear of crowded situations.

I was becoming more and more socially dysfunctional. I imagined that people were talking about me wherever I went; eventually I even became paranoid around my friends and family, convinced that they thought I was behaving in a strange way. But I kept taking the drugs that were causing my problems, because I thought I would be missing out on something that everyone else was doing if I didn't.

I was getting more and more desperate; meanwhile my drug binges were getting less and less enjoyable, and more painful. I wanted to stop smoking hash because it made me lazy, tired, dopey, irritable and paranoid; but I couldn't stop for more than a day – I was addicted to being stoned. I couldn't go out on the town at night unless I was high on speed or ecstasy; I needed drugs to have a good time – so I thought. When I was coming down, I kept thinking to myself that I needed this Jesus who my Mum kept talking about to change me.

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It was my 21<sup>st</sup> birthday; I had a party organised at my parents' house. There was a big stereo out in the back garden and a campfire. Everyone I knew was there, taking drugs and having a laugh.

I sat alone outside thinking to myself, I don't really fit in here. I felt different, and suddenly separate from all the people around me. I walked into my Mum's front room; it was packed with people, spilling their drinks on the carpets and furniture, having no respect for my parents' house. I had taken some speed, but, strangely, I was not getting high.

I felt that God was trying to get through to me. I looked up at the night sky, saw the stars shining: everything looked so big: in that moment I knew that there was a God, and I said, 'That's it, God, I've had enough – I want to give my life to you.'

I got up, and said, 'Right, I want you all to go now'; I went round all the groups of people at the party and told everyone to leave. I knew that they thought it was strange, because it was still very early in the night, but I felt a peace about what I was doing, and I knew that something had changed inside me. That night I slept, which you never do after taking speed.

The next day, I went to a local church and gave my life to Jesus. This made my Mum very happy, as she had been praying for me for years. I went to church regularly, and found a place in the church family.

I still felt messed up from my drug abuse. I didn't feel like I fitted in with straight people; I felt awkward and different still - but instead of turning to drugs, I now found a relationship with Jesus. I managed to give up smoking, and live free from drugs for four years.

I told all my friends about Jesus and enjoyed talking to people about my faith. I bought a three-bedroom house; I got scaffolding certificates, a full motorbike licence and worked hard. Then I sold my house and moved into a community with other Christians, sharing all our possessions and living with people 24 hours a day - some of them great, some of them very difficult and contentious. After a few years of this I started getting disgruntled and disappointed with my life. I forgot the mess Jesus had saved me from. My attitude towards drugs began to change.

I moved out to live on my own, and started doing just a little bit of speed and Ecstasy, like before. Then I began to drink and smoke – just occasionally at first. I was backsliding.

While this was happening, I met KG, who I later married. She seemed like a nice girl at the time. She worked, and liked a couple of beers of an evening at home, but she didn't take drugs. Unfortunately, she didn't stay that way, living with me.

On my 25<sup>th</sup> birthday, I went to Norwich with my brother Jay, who was 17 at the time, and doing the same things I did when I was his age – i.e. a lot of drugs. We took a lot of speed, but the speed that we bought was much purer than normal, and it had an undesired effect on me. I became so anxious and paranoid that it ruined my birthday night: I felt as if someone was after me the whole time. I got pins and needles in my jaw and down my arms and hands, which was very worrying. This went on for days, and I got very depressed. I remember praying a few times, and miraculously it disappeared like a mist, and I could see clearly again. Unfortunately, I didn't learn my lesson there; I carried on playing around with drugs.

About a month later, I bumped into Steve, a friend I used to work with. He had just got out of prison for dealing heroin, and he told me where he could get some.

I had tried heroin once before, years ago when I was scaffolding: a friend and I had gone to Toxteth, Liverpool, to buy some sensi (very strong grass) but couldn't score, so we'd bought heroin instead; I thought, we might as well try it. As we made the transaction, a police car had pulled up. We drove away and it followed us – but then it had turned off. I remember being very shaken, but relieved. The fear of getting caught and the relief that we hadn't been, gave us a false sense of security about actually taking the heroin. But at the time I didn't think the feeling it brought was all that good, in comparison to the extreme highs of other chemicals I had used. It just made me feel dopey, but without the paranoia I associated with hash. I didn't do it again for about a year. Then I bought some from someone, only because I had tried it before and didn't feel it was as bad as everyone said. After that, I'd become a Christian and hadn't touched heroin again - until I used with Steve.

This time we bought £20 of heroin, in two tiny 'bags' made from Rizla papers, wrapped in cling film. We put the heroin on a piece of tin foil, lit a match underneath it and breathed in the smoke through a small piece of tinfoil wrapped round the outer part of a biro, to make a tube.

This time, it was different – it really felt nice. It calmed my nerves and made me feel very relaxed.

After that experience, I used heroin as much as I could afford. I knew it was addictive, but I believed that you had to do it a lot and for a long time before you got yourself into trouble – and I had no intention of getting addicted to it. I even gave it to K and to my brother Jay to try. They both liked it - and later became addicts alongside me.

I didn't feel any bad effects from the heroin I was taking for a long time – not like other drugs I had used, where you came down very hard. I just felt a little sick sometimes. K used to go to work, and I played guitar in a band. I would smoke a

little heroin, and play the guitar all day: it made me feel very content. I would smoke a little more at night, and that was my day.

The heroin honeymoon lasted for quite a few months; then I started to feel bad when I didn't use. My nose would run; I would sneeze violently; sweat; my stomach and head would ache. I couldn't sleep. The withdrawals were only mild at first – but the more I used, the worse it got. I knew this, but I couldn't stop. I would say to myself, 'Just one more time, then I'll stop;' I carried on saying that to myself for the next 7 years.

I started to sell things, my guitars and music equipment – two and a half thousand pounds worth – for heroin. K quit her job – she couldn't work and use; her savings ran out quickly. We inherited £5,000 from her uncle, which we spent quickly on heroin. We wanted more and more heroin; never satisfied, we started to steal money, and to shoplift for things to sell, to buy drugs.

We kept trying to stop, but it was so hard with two of us – one would always pull the other down. I wanted to regain what I had lost with God. In all the mess, I always felt God was there; I had let him down, but I knew that he wanted to help me get right again. K and I managed to stop using heroin for two months, and we got married. But on our honeymoon in Israel, I found a heroin dealer, and we came back to England with a habit again.

By then, we had moved from smoking to injecting the heroin, because it was cheaper and the rush was better. I overdosed many times and had dirty hits from injecting, which made me very ill and weak. I used to inject speed, Ecstasy, methadone, various pills crushed up, crack cocaine – there's nothing I haven't injected (except hash and alcohol!). The needle itself and the rush became an addiction.

I was never free from drugs, because if I stopped using one, I'd move on to another. Crack was one of the most mentally addictive – you're never satisfied, and it makes you very paranoid. I've seen many people's lives ruined by it.

My wife had a drink problem as well as a heroin problem and eating disorder. Her morals were gone too and she was unfaithful to me with other men, for drugs.

My brother was injecting also, and one night we were all together in my parents' house, using. When I went to bed I told Jay not to use any more that night. He didn't listen to me.

Alone in the living room he drank a bottle of wine, and injected more heroin. The next day I found him dead in my Dad's armchair.

To see him cold and blue was too much. He had lost everything – his possessions, his self-respect, and now his life. I couldn't cope with what had happened and I plunged myself deeper into heroin to try escape.

K and I moved to another town to escape heroin, but wherever we went, we found it. Our relationship was very strained. We were both very depressed and ill. I became like a skeleton, very thin. We ended up on the street, begging for money. This was embarrassing and humiliating and very hard – at first – especially when we were withdrawing; but the drive to get drugs and stop the illness soon motivated us. Eventually K and I got a divorce and went our separate ways.

I can't put into words the trouble and dark despair I felt. I was in a living hell. To get drugs, I felt had to mix with the most horrible people on earth: people who beat me up, robbed me, slept with my wife – even robbed me when I was dying of an overdose.

One day I was given money by quite a rough guy to score: the police were after him and he had to stay indoors. I went to the dealer's house, gave him the money for the drugs, but instead he gave me an empty wrap. When I found this out, I had to go back. When I went back, I was met with violence: after a brief fight I had to leave empty handed. Then I had to go back and tell the other guy that I'd had his money stolen from me. I paid him most of the money back over the next few days, but I couldn't pay him the last fiver, so he beat me up, breaking my nose. I was covered with blood; then he tried to snatch the bag of heroin I had just scored out of my hand – but I would rather take more beating than give that up, so he gave up and left.

Getting the money for heroin every day was very difficult; usually when you went to score you were at your weakest, and very vulnerable to being ripped off. This happened a lot, unless you were very, very careful. You never got anyone else to score for you: some people would just run off with your money. There was always violence around the drugs. I was at a dealer's house once when another guy came in and robbed him of all his drugs at knifepoint.

I lived for a while in a building full of bedsits inhabited by addicts. I felt constantly in danger. One night I was threatened with a hammer, by a massive guy who thought I was somebody else – he was later shot and killed, himself. Another guy in the building stabbed his girlfriend 13 times (she survived) – he flipped out when they stopped his Valium script and he'd just lost it. He was not a violent man.

I felt unsafe all the time and totally broken. I was existing to use drugs, and dying inside and outside. No self-respect: people avoiding me in the street, talking about me – how 'bad' I was.

I tried so many times to stop, and the withdrawals were very bad. Many times I went through it, only to use again afterwards. My Mum and Dad tried to help me, offering me a place to stay and looking after me through the withdrawals; but I let them down, as I let everybody down - again and again, stealing money from them and lying continuously.

I moved around a lot, but I couldn't live with the people my lifestyle threw me together with; I felt so vulnerable living on the streets. I knew I needed help. I took speed to try and come off heroin but it made me worse – so depressed - and the anguish that I felt was tormenting me so that I used even more heroin to try to deal with it. I went back home to try again – this was my last chance, my parents said – again.

This time I went on a methadone programme. My probation officer had given me a leaflet for a Christian rehab called Yeldall Manor when I'd been caught shoplifting once. I thought I'd try it.

It was hard to get help – it took me two weeks just to get an initial interview, and that's a long time for a desperate addict – but it was four or five months more before I was offered a hospital detox. At the same time I was awarded funding for rehabilitation. So I spent two weeks detoxing in hospital.

The withdrawals were ferocious, I felt like a walking nerve ending, like I had put my finger in a plug socket. I had a place booked for Yeldall Manor straight after. But halfway through my detox they allowed me to cash my Giro: so I found myself sat alone in a hospital room, in my home town, withdrawing from heroin with £80 cash in my pocket. But I was very determined, and the next day, when my mum and dad came to visit me, I gave the money to them. I knew I was on my last chance: I had to get out of addiction then or be gripped for life. So I went to rehab.

I lasted two days. I ran away from the rehab, in such a bad emotional and mental state after withdrawals that I was unable to cope with the stress of being surrounded by strangers. I escaped to London, begged some money for some heroin, and overdosed. I woke up in hospital, and caught a train back home. I used when I got back home, once, but then went on to an opiate blocker, Naltrexone. After a month staying clean on this I was given another chance and I went back to Yeldall.

This time I lasted for four months. In that time I learned a lot. I gained three stone and grew in confidence. I found Jesus to be real there, and gained self-respect. I made a few good friends. After four months I left the programme prematurely. I thought I was okay now, ignoring the advice of the rehab workers to stay for the duration. But it wasn't long before I started using heroin again. It was now that I began injecting crack cocaine.

I lost a lot of what I had gained as far as any confidence was concerned, and mentally I was shot to pieces. Even though I had the hope of Christ and heaven, something was wrong deep inside. I had a lot of unresolved pain and unforgiveness which I covered up with heroin. I went for more help and I was put back on Valium and Subutex – another opiate. I stayed on this prescription for about nine months.

At this point, I want to say that the prescribed drug Valium – diazepam – which I thought was a harmless relaxant – ended up causing me more trouble coming off than any of the street drugs.

Before this I'd met Helen and her family. They took me in and made me feel accepted. I detoxed at their house, but kept relapsing, so in the end I went back to hospital.

Coming off Valium was unbelievable. The anxiety was so intense that I thought I was going mad. I started getting really bad panic attacks; I felt like I couldn't cope. The private clinic I entered (I now know) took me off the drug far too quickly, and when I came out, contrary to what the hospital had promised, I felt terrible. I felt like a psychotic stress mess, and Helen and my parents had to look after me.

They persuaded me to go back to Yeldall Manor again, so I did, but was so anxious that I had to come back again. They persuaded me to go back, so I did, and I came back again. I still kept relapsing. I would run off for two or three days, sleep on the street and beg. I was diagnosed with hepatitis C, a liver disease, and caught pneumonia and pleurisy after overdosing in somebody's garden shed. My body couldn't handle the drugs anymore. I overdosed a lot – about 20 times in all – many times I 'died', my heart stopping, being revived by paramedics just in time.

I went to Teen Challenge, another Christian rehab, in London. I felt God's presence there but also found my great need for recovery. I stayed there for four months in total and found I needed God more than ever. I left that programme early, feeling a bit defeated, but realised soon after how much I'd actually learnt and progressed there. They taught me a lot about myself, and God, and my attitudes. I had definitely changed again – connection with God was changing me on the inside – my attitudes had changed. Also, a lot of the friends I had made in rehab had died through relapsing. I realised how lucky I had been, and how God had preserved me. I gave my life to his care once and for all.

I know now I have a choice, life or death. I wish I'd stayed with Jesus all those years ago, but I'm now free from the power of heroin, and cocaine, and Valium, and speed, and Ecstasy, and hash, and alcohol, and cigarettes. These all have had power over me in my life. My life is much cleaner, and I have put my trust in

the love and grace of God through Jesus, who died for me so that I can have the victory over sin and the power of addiction. I choose life.