



Real people
share their
recovery stories



*“Each story might be different
but we hope in reading them they
provoke a sense of recognition and
connection; you are not alone.”*

Foreword

Welcome to this collection of people's personal stories of their pathways to recovery. All people who access services have a big story to tell and it doesn't matter what the motivation is that gets you in the door. The important factor is that you're here and that recovery is possible.

People often ask: what exactly is 'recovery'? 'Recovery' means different things to different people. There is no one definition and like most things, one size does not fit all.

It can be helpful to think of recovery as “a process of change through which individuals improve their health and wellness, live a self-directed life, and strive to reach their full potential.” (SAMSHA 2011)

As these stories show, our pathways to wellness are different for each of us and each person defines for themselves what recovery means to them.

Each story might be different but we hope in reading them they provoke a sense of recognition and connection; you are not alone.

Enormous thanks to the people who have so generously shared their stories with us.

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The Matua Raki Consumer Leadership Group

Some authors have chosen not to use their real names.

Some of the services described may no longer be available.

Stock photos of models have been used for privacy reasons.



Helen's story

“Treatment helped me build a good life for myself”

Waking up on a Tuesday morning with a thumping hangover, the familiar feeling of dread and not in my own bed – I'd reached rock bottom.

I'd been here a number of times before; waking up in hospital after an overdose, sitting sobbing in a heap in the middle of my room not able to stop using, ending up in dangerous situations not knowing how I'd get out, the list goes on. I'd woken up hungover in different parts of town many times but on this particular morning I'd had enough. I didn't even like the person I was with. He had offered to take me out the night before for a drink so I'd gone with him. I had no resistance against drugs or alcohol. People used to joke I had a rubber arm because I was so easily convinced to drink or take what was on offer.

I didn't think I was an addict. I am Pakeha, middle-class and, at the time, was in my first year of post-graduate study. I didn't use meth or inject drugs and wasn't using every day so I thought I was messed up in the head but definitely not addicted. But when I used, whether I picked up a drink or other drugs, I couldn't stop and life became very chaotic. I did things that went against my morals. I put myself in danger and didn't care about anything except for using. I knew that morning something had to change.

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I began going to a community alcohol and drug service (CADS). The biggest difference treatment made for me was giving me the skills and abilities

to stay drug free and build a good life for myself. Before I came into recovery I stayed drug free for a few months by white-knuckling it and my behaviour was just as bad as when I was using. I eventually relapsed and my using got much worse. Treatment helped me understand addiction, how it had impacted my life and I learnt new ways of coping with my feelings. Treatment gave me something I hadn't had in a long time – hope that my life could get better.

Another impact treatment had on my life was once my recovery was underway, I began treatment for my mental illness. My mental health was severely impacted by my drug use and it wasn't until I was free from alcohol and other drugs that the treatment for my mental illness was effective. After a decade of being in and out of the mental health system, I had wellness.

Being in recovery has meant I am able to be in relationships with my family and friends. I am no longer a source of stress or concern for them because I lead a healthy, functioning life. Being in recovery means I can be a good daughter, a sister who can be trusted to look after her nephew, and a friend who can be relied on. If I didn't have my recovery I wouldn't have any of these relationships in my life because drugs would always come first.

I believe if I didn't find recovery when I did I would probably be dead because when I use I get self-destructive. I no longer hurt myself or other people and I can now look myself in the mirror without feeling shame. Treatment helps.

“Treatment gave me something I hadn't had in a long time – hope that my life could get better.”





Paul's story

“My treatment journey was a discovery journey”

I had a difficult childhood and at 11 tried solvents for the first time. I started smoking and when I was 13 I tried cannabis for the first time. I drank as a teenager then I discovered mushrooms and LSD so alcohol became redundant. I joined the army at 18 as I was going nowhere and although I drank as all soldiers did and smoked weed when I could, I was pretty much ok.

When I was discharged at 22 I went into a spiral of poly drug use and as a result ended up with a four year prison sentence for robbery just eight months after getting out of the army.

I used in prison, mainly weed, but also methadone a bit, though was also studying for the qualifications I never got at school so was quite focussed. I left prison and went off to university to do my first degree. I was like a kid in a sweet shop and the great summer of love (1991) came and I became heavily involved with ecstasy, to the point that I would quite regularly end up passing out from taking too much as we were buying pure powder. After a while the quality of ecstasy went down and I started using cocaine; this is where my troubles really started.

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Cocaine is a deceptive drug. I was working for the first time and many other workers around me were using 'recreationally' – we all thought it was ok. Within a year I was up to my neck in debt and lies which only got worse. I hid the extent of my use from my friends and colleagues and things just went downhill. I even pretended to my then partner that I had a gambling issue (why the money was always going) as it seemed somehow more palatable than stating I had a drug issue.

Treatment was ineffective. There was a service set up in London that saw 'professionals' and I went there, once. I found the whole assessment process annoying, intrusive and upsetting; like many coke users I wanted immediate results and when that did not happen I never returned.

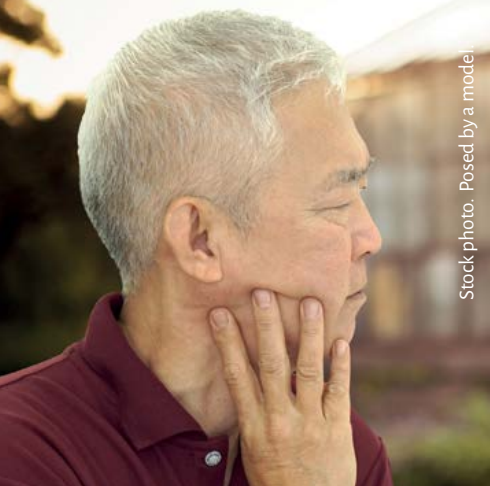
The tipping point came when I went to an ATM the day after paying my credit card bill to draw out some cash (this cycle had been going on for years) and

“I could see, hear, feel things and experience them for what they were, not through a drug filter.”

I realised I did not have enough money to pay the house bills. I just stood there looking at the screen, panicking inside, knowing that I was about to lose my house, partner, child. There was nothing I could do...should I confess, should I run away? Where was I going to get money for coke tonight?

I decided (best decision) that I needed to get away from London, it was toxic. Stopping coke was hard, it all came out, the debt, the infidelities. The emotional time bomb just went off and my partner threw me out though we agreed on joint parenting for my youngest son; I had to be responsible for him. I still smoked weed but that stopped soon after and my recovery/discovery really started when I realised that actually, for the first time since childhood I had some really clear thought processes; I could see, hear, feel things and experience them for what they were, not through a drug filter. I had a few friends who listened, supported me and also told me what an arsehole I had been. I needed that. I also needed to know, for me, that the temptation would always be there.

I do not use the term recovery though I respect those who do. My term is discovery....I did not want to recover to life pre-drugs, it was horrid. I discovered me – I was not stupid or weak (though the devil inside still tells me that I am). I could experience joy without drugs (it only took quarter of a century!). I also discovered a spiritual side of me that connects with nature (my higher power), I love life post-drugs and realise now that I deceived myself and others for so many years.



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Andrew's story

"I drew strength from others"

Years of addiction had taken almost everything from me. A once successful and happy family man, now just an empty shell, full of fear and loneliness, entrenched in a dark life of crime, violence and isolation. Feeling no empathy for those I hurt and expecting warmth from no one.

I gave up hope and resigned myself to the fact that I would die in my misery. Then in an instant my life changed forever. I was arrested on major charges and a sense of relief came over me - I didn't have to live that way anymore.

I entered a treatment centre and as the fog cleared I regained hope for myself, I began to take responsibility and I started to get my family back.

I graduated treatment and moved to Wings Trust. I was still full of fear and anxiety because I didn't know how to have healthy relationships with people and I was still facing a lengthy prison sentence. Slowly with the loving kindness of all those around me I began to find peace and acceptance in whatever lay ahead for me. I became part of a community support group and I do service there to give back what was freely given to me. The Wings community nurtured me to wellness and to a serenity that I had never experienced before. At my sentencing the judge commended me on the changes I had made and acknowledged all the support I now have.

I am now serving a community based sentence and remain very much involved with Wings Trust. I am forever grateful for the second chance I have been given to better live my life and for the network of peers who I draw strength from through every moment of my day.

"I am forever grateful for the second chance I have been given to better live my life and for the network of peers who I draw strength from through every moment of my day."



Stock photo. Posed by a model.

Michael's story

"CADS and the methadone programme saved my life"

Like so many people that have used the CADS service and methadone programme, my life of using drugs go back to my early teens—13 years old.

With a long history of drug abuse there was lots of sadness, loneliness and helplessness. After being part of the system for so many years, from 13-39 years of age I had this moment! "I was done; death would have been kinder than this emptiness I was experiencing... rock bottom."

I was ready to make a change but it took me a good nine months going around to different treatment services looking for what I needed until I found the methadone programme. Once I landed there it was up and up; for me it was having someone take control, that's all it took. I had lost complete control and I needed someone else to take over the reins for a while.

"There was starting to be a trust relationship with the service—a stage where people were starting to believe in me and trust me as I also started to trust and believe in myself."

From here I began to get well. With regular screening and case management I was able to reach the next step and get takeaways. There was starting to be a trust relationship with the service—a stage where people were starting to believe in me and trust me as I also started to trust and believe in myself.

That was six years ago. Now I have full control over myself and my recovery, I'm at the stage where I can go onto GP Authority. After two years of a reasonable high dose I was ready to lower my dose. I have reduced from 95mgs to 65mgs where I have stabilised for the past year. My next goal is to reduce further to 50mgs at 1mg per month. It seems a bit slow but I'm not in a rush because I still remember the madness of addiction.

Moving through to my doctor, no longer in need of CADS, but forever thankful for the service, that I believe saved my life.



Jessica's story

“I never thought I could get well”

As an adolescent and being a good Kiwi lass, I was on the piss every weekend. I was proud of being able to “drink the boys under the table” even though I seldom remembered the details.

I experimented with mushrooms and acid then with speed and pills. At around 17 I developed bulimia and still thought I was normal. I figured I could never be too thin or too popular. I drank and drugged my way around until, when I was 23, my Dad died.

That was when my drugging patterns took a turn. Things changed and my family home was sold and I never really felt settled again. I felt lost, like I was drifting. For the first time I started buying my own weed. As long as the pain of losing my dad was numbed, I didn't care. The whole ugly concoction of my life festered like this until I up and went to England. Enter heroin. Finally, something numbed me to nothingness. The details blur together now. I came home from England with a nasty habit and promptly hooked up with an old crush. We decided to get married on our first night together. Five years of shit followed. We raised hell. Bankruptcy, overdoses, getting sacked and fleeing places in the dead of night—none of it meant much. As long as we could get on we could get by.

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In 2004 we came home broke, sick and desperate and choking on shame. Our families insisted on a community alcohol and drug service (CADS) but we pulled out after one session because they wanted us to have separate counselling. We persuaded our families we were miraculously cured and truly remorseful and we were on it again in a week. Soon bankrupt, again, under investigation and horribly sick, I thought I'd had enough. My husband hadn't and I have never seen him again. I managed to stay off opiates for about six months and I thought I really was miraculously cured. I had counselling with an amazing woman at CADS and I did a CADS group every week. I didn't mention my stash of weed, a drink here and there, or the new fella. Funnily enough, that fell apart pretty quickly. And now it was time to 'go it alone'. I spent about a year thinking I had it sorted — working part-time, under the table of course, and spending my wage and benefit on my drug of choice. Inside I was dying.

I re-engaged with CADS and they let me stay. I pushed it as much as I could, still using, and hoping I'd never get called on it. After years of going on and off “bupe” (Suboxone) in Australia, I learned about community detox here and that “bupe” was now available in New Zealand. I tried community detox twice to no avail. I was unravelling fast and I wanted to die. I couldn't see any way out. I was so relieved to finally not be living a secret life anymore. I detoxed at Pitman House, re-engaged with CADS and started attending a support group in the community.

And two years eight months later, here I am. My life is amazing. I've just started working full-time in my dream job. My relationships are healthy, if not always to my liking! Despite breaking up with my boyfriend recently I AM OK! Today I don't have to drink or use drugs to deal with life and every day that amazes me. I never thought I could get well, let alone live drug free and like it. Today, thanks to the amazing people I've met along the way, and my faith in a 12-step programme, I wouldn't change a thing.



Shane's story

“My environment was not a place for my recovery to flourish”

Firstly, I had already experienced a good dose of recovery previous to the latest and (one hopes), last tipping point – also known as ‘rock bottom’.

In August 1998 I had six weeks at a treatment centre focusing on my use of illegal substances. After this I had the obligatory slip-slide period followed by six years of complete abstinence recovery. Then there was about four years of struggling. There were good and decidedly average periods.

My tipping point before entering the Salvation Army Bridge programme in late 2012 was a series of events. They were varied but all involved alcohol - the legal drug which ironically got me into more trouble than all the illegal drugs I used. My marriage was failing. I had three DIC charges. One charge was driving while disqualified and I got my partner's car impounded. All that within the space of a seven day period. This led to a short time in jail. I was a non-existent parent and I constantly thought of suicide culminating in one half-arse attempt and a week in a psych ward. That crash and burn was the climax of about five years of using alcohol, prescription drugs and over-the-counter codeine on a daily basis.

While I was eventually sentenced to home detention with a bracelet, I did manage to stop using and get on the Bridge day programme. For once, I was not a resident in a place with rules and guidelines. Not that

I didn't need them. I would have actually preferred that. Day programme was the only option available and I was desperate so I leapt at the chance to be on it.

“I haven't lost being my own person, which seems to be the thing that people say they will lose when contemplating doing any sort of treatment.”

Being able to go somewhere, have a schedule and a focus towards something meaningful gave me a sense of satisfaction and enjoyment. The positive environment and people was motivation to turn up every day. While it may have been that the urges to use are easier to manage and tend to melt away in the security of the residential bubble, I didn't feel I needed that luxury. The practice of a day at the Bridge, feeling fortified and then going home to a real world situation was what I required to actually progress. However this is all written with my 20/20 hindsight. That the scenario presented to me that turned out to be so beneficial happened either via circumstance, Higher Power “HP”, call it what you will.

Discipline and routine got locked in over the eight week programme. The improved self-esteem and assurance via increased confidence was doing the trick. It made recovery feel OK, do-able.

What I realised was the environment I inhabited prior to starting the Bridge was not a place for my recovery to flourish. It took a few months and there was a slip. But I became aware of what my fundamentals were that I had to have in place. And unfortunately my partner was not part of that. The recovery I had built up gave me the courage to get that sorted.

The aftermath of all of this was I could function, actually operate in the areas I expected myself to be responsible in. This started slowly at first but eventually my family were able to observe this in the form of my increased independence. As progress continued, like gaining a volunteer position, trust returned. So now four years after leaving the programme I am perceived by parents, ex-wife etc. as leading a “normal existence”. Interpret normal how you like. But I have a job, am a responsible active parent and those around me see as reliable.

In saying that, I haven't lost being my own person, which seems to be the thing that people say they will lose when contemplating doing any sort of treatment.



Pat's story

“I learnt who I really was and to accept my vulnerability. I was no longer alone.”

At 35 I thought I knew all there was to know about addiction. I was the child of an alcoholic father and my young life had been chaotic as a result. I knew what I wanted out of life – financial security, a house in a leafy suburb and respectability and I had achieved it all. I had a husband, a job I loved, nice clothes and a good social life. I enjoyed the occasional drink of course but I certainly didn't drink more than anyone else and any indiscretions were forgiven, so all was well.

I can't put an exact time on it but gradually things stopped being fun. I was anxious and depressed and there was no one to talk to about it. I had to drink to socialise and keep up the pretence of being the life and soul of the party. I became worried about my drinking and trying to control it became a constant battle. I hid my car keys from myself but always ended up driving drunk because when I was drunk I believed I was clever, interesting and invincible. Occasionally the reality of what a sad creature I had become would break through my defences and I would feel devastated – and drink more. What frightened me most was that I felt detached from myself. I felt that

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I dressed my body in the morning and went to work and became the person they wanted me to be. I came home and became the person my husband wanted me to be. There was nothing of me left.

The final straw was that I had a blackout. I don't mean a hazy recollection of the night before but a complete

blackout. One minute I was in a bar with a group of people the next minute I was in my bed with vomit on the sheets. When my husband told me what I had said and done, I didn't believe him. But there was no way to argue – I had 'lost' a whole night. I have met people since who had regular blackouts and continued to drink – but for me it was the end. I was terrified. I rang every organisation in the phone book with “alcohol” in their title and by sheer luck ended up with a cancellation appointment with a counsellor at the local alcohol and drug service. She pointed out the obvious – that drinking was probably not doing me much good.

So I stopped. Physically I felt better immediately, but the reaction of those around me was surprising. My husband was seriously underwhelmed with my decision. I didn't look like a drunk – we didn't look like a couple with problems and he felt I should just cut down a bit and carry on as before. Acquaintances seemed to consider my abstinence a reflection on their own drinking. And I quickly realised that I didn't have any real friends.

My counsellor suggested that I try Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) to get some support but attending meetings horrified me. I believed I had nothing in common with those people and I didn't hear anything in their stories that related to me. My anxiety levels reached alarming proportions: I could barely go to work. I saw conspiracy everywhere and the only person I trusted was my counsellor. She suggested I go somewhere 'safe' which is how I ended up at Queen Mary Hospital in Hanmer Springs. This was the beginning of a long journey of self-discovery. During my weeks in treatment I saw myself mirrored in others in my group and received some lovely letters of support

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(continued)

and understanding from my father. I began to learn who I really was and to accept my vulnerability. I was no longer alone.

This was way back in the 1980s and it would be great to say that I lived serenely ever after but life isn't like that. The more my self-awareness grew the less my old life held satisfaction. My marriage ended a year after I returned from treatment. The poor man hadn't signed up for the person I had become. I found that going to AA meetings was a great comfort and I made some wonderful friends there. After a few years my new way of life seemed sufficiently engrained for me to stop focussing on my addiction and think fairly rationally – well most of the time! My life has had some major ups and downs, many of which I have thoroughly enjoyed.

And where have I ended up? Well I am 67 years old, I have a job I love, I have lots of friends and a great social life, I live in a leafy suburb—but happily, I will NEVER be respectable!

Jason's story

“I'm no angel”

I started using to deal with pain after a serious accident.

It started with the pills the hospital gave me, then what I could get from my doctor, then from a number of doctors, but that got harder and harder. Finally I was scoring heroin, homebake, palfum, whatever I could get my hands on. The problem was that eventually the drugs stopped working!

After a long time thinking about it, I went on methadone and I've been on ever since. It helps with the pain as much as my affection for opiates 'cause the pain hasn't gone away. I just had to learn to live with it. Got help from the pain clinic. Now I use NSAIDs (non-steroidal anti-inflammatories) and they actually work! I never believed anything would work but opiates. Just goes to show you can teach an old dog new tricks aye?

I like a smoke occasionally and I still like a beer after work on a Friday so I'm no angel you know? Now if I could get medicinal marijuana that'd be the icing on the cake. I'd rather get my dak like I get my methadone, all kosher. Fingers crossed aye?

"I never believed anything would work but opiates. Just goes to show you can teach an old dog new tricks aye?"



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Noel's story

“Recovery helped show me how to live”

In 2004 I was diagnosed with ischemic heart disease. This diagnosis immediately put me into a state of dis-ease – how could I maintain my current level of alcohol consumption without it putting undue stress on my heart and health?

My alcohol intake wasn't “over the top” but it was steady and I drank every day. This dilemma worried me. I was filled with a lot of fear which of course fuelled my drinking.

After a few weeks of my diagnosis and a few weeks of taking powerful meds to take the strain off my heart, my heart condition worsened. I knew I had about 20 minutes to get some treatment. A friend drove me to the nearest A&E and from there I was taken in an ambulance to hospital where I had angioplasty and had a stent placed in one of my coronary blood vessels. I was discharged from hospital after six or seven days. That was six or seven days without a drink plus a few days after release from hospital when I was too fearful to have a drink.

Soon after I realised that perhaps I wasn't going to die immediately and I found the courage to restart drinking. Just a few glasses of red wine, at first – for the health of my heart. This soon increased to my pre-health crisis levels.

I was going to post-heart surgery rehabilitation classes. I remember telling the nurses that I was feeling uneasy about my heart health because I was drinking enough to wake up in the mornings with hangovers. I was put on an exercise regime at the heart-clinic gym which helped anxiety, allowing me to feel better about my daily drinking.

“I now have some tools to use on my journey and have been shown how to blow the dust off some skills that I never really thought I had.”

During this time I was having on-going counselling. One of the things I discussed with my counsellor was my concerns about my drinking but it took 12 months of continued drinking before I was finally ready to do something about it. My counsellor and my GP both suggested I enrol in a community alcohol and drug service (CADS) programme. Which I did. I haven't picked up a drink since. But it hasn't been easy. After the CADS course I had some one-on-one counselling for six weeks and then I was released to get on with my life. Without alcohol. But with the cushion of paroxetine.

The first five years of sobriety were difficult. I was very determined not to pick up a drink! I refrained from contact with a lot of my friends. I stopped going to music events at pubs and to other social functions. Not complete isolation but almost. It was a difficult time but my meds helped a lot. I started being involved with activities that didn't involve alcohol.

I stopped using paroxetine after about three years of not drinking. I began going to a support group for people who have a problem with alcohol where I still attend meetings. I regularly chair my local home group – an unimaginable situation before I chose sobriety.

Recovery has really helped me by showing me how to live. Progress has been pretty slow at times but I know I am way better off now than I was. I've still got a long way to go – as long as my life lasts in fact – but I now have some tools to use on my journey and have been shown how to blow the dust off some skills that I never really thought I had. I have slowly, reluctantly at times, incorporated these tools into my life.

I feel nowadays that I am a way better listener than I was. I believe I have far more empathy with my fellow humans than I ever had before. I humbly reckon I have the beginnings of a spiritual connection to this world. My connection to my family and friends is much better than it has ever been. I am much more honest in my dealings with everybody. Not perfectly, of course but a massive improvement on what I was like. As I write this I have real hope for the future. I think it's going to be a good day.



Reg's story

“I live now, not just exist”

I wake up. Where the hell am I? Why am I in a prison cell in prison garb? I ring the bell and screws come running. “What are you doing boy? It's for emergencies only.” Well I don't know what I'm doing here my court date is not for another month. “You're doing nine months!”

For the rest of that day and night I was trying to figure out how I came to be a sentenced inmate at the oldest, coldest prison in the country. I was 20 and locked away with other men who scared the living crap out of me. I had been on a bender putting anything into my mouth that would get me off my nut. I was not meant to be in here but my actions and my behaviours had got me here. “Hi my name's... And I'm an addict.” This phrase I say at least three time a week now, but not with shame, with pride.

I wake the next day as I hear the key in the lock on the heavy wooden door that is my home for the next wee while and make a call to Moana House. A long six months later I arrive there and start what was the beginning of my recovery journey. I did the full Moana House treatment programme and stayed for 18 months. I wanted so badly to finish one thing and graduate. I was the third person to graduate from the programme and still take pride in knowing that.

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I had for the first time in my life, insight into who I was as a person – my behaviours, feelings, thoughts and how these are my patterns that I can have some control over. Only I have the power to change these; not some pill, some drink, some drug or someone else telling me. I had become responsible and transparent to others in my life. Family found it hard to hear all these feelings that I was beginning to express to them as they had never known or expressed much of their own. I could ramble on about my upbringing in an alcoholic family. At the end of the day my upbringing was not really that bad.

“My family have a man back who is not keeping secrets and walks with his head up.”

After I left Moana House I stayed drug free for quite a few years but complacency got the better of me. I thought I could use socially. I crashed and became a full blown addict again. I was introduced to Narcotics Anonymous (NA) and went to a few meetings from time to time and tried to white knuckle my way back, with little success. I did the Bridge Programme at the Salvation Army. On step one I finally accepted I was an addict and enjoyed the simplicity of the 12-step programme. It was written by addicts for addicts. I find comfort in the room of this fellowship that is all over the world. I can sit in a room of other people just like me and listen and share my stories.

My family and close friends, of which I have few, are true friends and want nothing from me. My life is not a box of fluffy ducks, it is hard, but I live now, not just exist. Problems come and I deal with them. My family have a man back who is not keeping secrets and walks with his head up. I have found my whakapapa and traced my family history finding my roots. I have in doing that found my spirituality and a higher power. I don't know if God is real but I know there is something in nature that's greater than myself. I am very tied to the sea and can sit and watch the waves for hours. Counting the sets as they roll in finding the seventh wave and being happy.

I am no longer that scared boy who was in prison facing a life of crime and drug abuse. There were only two options on that path; jail and more likely, death, as I am a very greedy addict. Now I am a grateful addict who has chosen life on life's terms.

How do you want to live?



Angela's story

“I saw the light and admitted defeat.
I asked for help, and I got it.”

I would like to start where I have worked very hard to be... Living in recovery, happy, mothering my smart and handsome boys, fulfilled in my life, working as a Peer Support Worker, supporting other women in recovery and (mostly) free from the self-limiting and destructive thoughts, feelings and behaviours that plagued me my whole life. Life sure is good!

I didn't need help understanding why addiction got a grip on me. I knew why. I had a shitty start to life and no one around me had the skills to take care of me properly or teach me healthy ways to be in the world. No one around me had the emotional skills to live life well so I didn't learn them either. I was bumbling along until I found stuff that made me feel better and numbed my internal pain. That stuff was alcohol and at 14 I was ready for anything to take me away from being me. By 15 I was living out of home and consuming alcohol regularly. By 16 I was out of school, had a job and drinking Thursday to Sunday. Blackouts were a regular occurrence and this led to waking up in places I didn't remember getting to with people I didn't know. Every time I drank I tried to not black out but who can stop a freight train?

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I moved to a bigger city, Auckland, and discovered other drugs and was so happy to discover the solution to my blacking out problem: I could just stay awake! Or take certain drugs and not need copious amounts of alcohol. But, as you may have heard before, the

good times and the drugs only worked for a while, before they stopped working and I was left with my emotional pain (plus extra doses of regret, shame, self-loathing), dodgy friends, no money and a comedown! I would try to sort my life out, re-build with what I had left, promise myself I would not do drugs again, and try my hardest to 'stay good'. I could never stop everything though, just the hard drugs that were especially damaging. And I would try really hard... like really, really hard. But I could not maintain the change for long. I would have one night of use and that would release the beast again and I would be off on another binge; each time getting worse results, worse consequences and worse self-loathing. Why could I not get my shit together? How do other people know how to do life and I don't? What's wrong with me?

Some people talk about a rock bottom, some describe being sick and tired of being sick and tired, some discuss a moment of clarity, a window of opportunity for a change; I had them all in a lump of deep soul-felt failure, that I was unable to live a good (perfect) life and be a good (perfect) mother. I knew my life was a mess, I knew I was letting myself and my kids down, that I was clinging on to the teeny bit of sanity I had left with my fingernails, yet I could not stop using substances. This is the grip of addiction, you know you need to stop, you want and try to stop, but you just can't stop.

I couldn't see a way out so one was made for me. As a client of Pregnancy and CADS Parental Service they gently challenged me (I was still trying to portray that I had my life together) on staying stuck where I was and supported me to find ways of doing things differently. When I finally realised my toxic relationship was destroying me, my sons were about to be taken off me; when I had almost lost that last slither of sanity, I saw the light and admitted defeat. I asked for help and I got it.

My journey started in a medical detox then into a social detox, 12-step meetings and an outpatient treatment programme. As I stepped into recovery I learned about addiction, how alcohol and drugs

(continued)

affected my body, my brain and restricted my ability to think clearly. I met others like me who wanted to live life differently than they had before. My antidote/medicine is recovery, a self-designed system of good supports/beliefs/choices that enable me to live a fulfilling life with love. This has taken a great deal of effort, commitment, surrender and acceptance. Surrendering to a life without substances, to trying different ways of doing things, to listening to other people's advice and guidance (instead of thinking I know what's best). Acceptance that I am wired differently to others, that I cannot use mind or mood altering substances and have a quality life, acceptance that I am a human being with a normal range of emotions and can learn to feel them and cope with them. And a great deal of effort to being gentle with myself as I learn a new and healthier way to live.

I can now feel pretty okay with myself and my life... This is a good place to be.

Stock photo. Posed by a model.

Damian's story

“The level of support I had surprised me”

In the end it was a simple conversation with myself one morning that made the difference.

I had my first venture into recovery two years earlier after a serious attempt to take my own life. For the previous 24 years I had a daily addiction to marijuana, four serious dabbles in intravenous opiates and weekly binge drinking sessions. The most destructive drug I took was marijuana. While it alleviated my depression short term, it caused a lot of damage long term. I was destroying my confidence and had no future thinking. When life's curve balls came along, instead of dealing with them in a rational manner, I would get stoned and the problem would be sent into tomorrow's filing cabinet. I repeated this pattern on a daily basis. Eventually the filing cabinet overflowed.

I had just ended the most tempestuous relationship I had ever been in. I lost my job, my flat and my cat. I was at the lowest point of my life. I was in torment and the only time I had peace was when I slept. So I made the decision to go to sleep forever. Thankfully my plan didn't work and I found myself in the acute ward of Sunnyside Hospital (as it was known in those days). From Sunnyside I had a comprehensive alcohol and other drug assessment and within a few weeks was at Queen Mary Hospital in Hanmer Springs. I did a five week course at Queen Mary and came out telling everyone in earshot how I was cured

and was going to be the poster boy of addiction in Christchurch. I had no humility and was full of grandiosity.

Within three months I had my fourth relapse which lasted 18 months. I was fully entrenched in my addiction and I was living a double life. I lied to my family, my friends and my employers. However, the person I was really lying to was me. I would make internal excuses for my behaviour. It never sat well with me and I was always feeling guilt.

So on that day I asked myself a simple question, “when am I going to be honest with myself?” I flushed my dope down the toilet and made a decision to go to the lunchtime Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) meeting. Going to that meeting was one of the hardest things that I have done. The people in there knew me as this loud mouth with limited humility. I slunk into the back seat feeling ashamed and embarrassed. After the meeting many people came up to me and welcomed me back. Luckily no one judged me. I heard a strong voice and message from an older man and asked him to be my sponsor. He accepted me under the premise that, in his words, “I shut my mouth and opened my ears”.

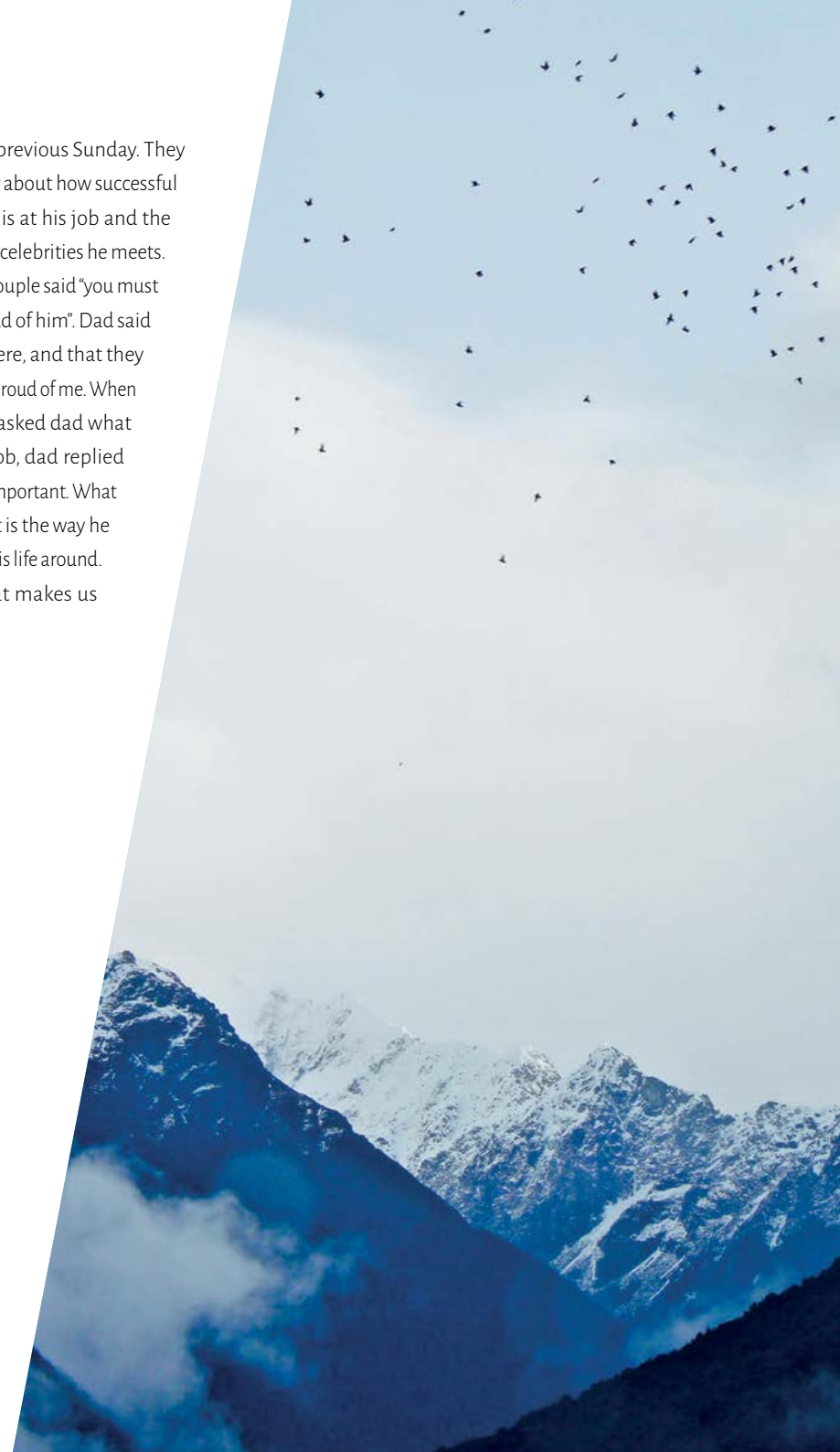
I spent the next three years attending anonymous community support group meetings. In those rooms I learned healthy ways to deal with life's curve balls. I also learned about humility and acceptance and realised how important those qualities are to a healthy recovery. The lessons learned in the fellowship rooms connected the dots and linked what I had learned at Queen Mary to the real stories in the rooms.

My parents never understood why I would waste my time, money and brain cells taking drugs and alcohol. At first they were angry then those feelings turned to frustration, sadness and self-blame. I tried to explain that the substances I was self-medicating on were the only things I perceived could make me feel good about life. It wasn't until I got into recovery that I realised my friends and family really loved me and cared for my wellbeing. They had seen me spiral to an all-time low two years earlier and did not want me to go through that again. The level of support I had surprised me. I had cultured such a pattern of self-loathing and dishonesty I felt worthless. Finally there was something in life that I was doing well. Eventually my recovery became the norm.

The day I knew that my lifestyle had changed my loved ones respect for me happened during a phone conversation with my mother. She was relaying a conversation that she and dad had with a couple after

“When the person asked dad what I did for a job, dad replied ‘That's not important. What is important is the way he has turned his life around. That is what makes us so proud.’”

church the previous Sunday. They were talking about how successful my brother is at his job and the well-known celebrities he meets. One of the couple said “you must be very proud of him”. Dad said that they were, and that they were just as proud of me. When the person asked dad what I did for a job, dad replied “That's not important. What is important is the way he has turned his life around. That is what makes us so proud.”



Need help?

**Call the Alcohol Drug Helpline 24 hours
a day for free confidential information**

> 0800 787 797

Other helplines

Alcohol Drug Youth Helpline:

0800 787 YTH (0800 787 984)

Alcohol Drug Māori Helpline: 0800 787 798

Alcohol Drug Pasifika Helpline: 0800 787 799

Lifeline: 0800 543 354

Online support

Alcohol Drug Help: www.alcoholdrughelp.org.nz

Aunty Dee: www.auntydee.co.nz

Drug Help: www.drughelp.org.nz

Living Sober: www.livingsober.org.nz

Whaiora Online: www.whaioraonline.org.nz

Community support

Alcoholics Anonymous:

www.aa.org.nz | 0800 2296757

Narcotics Anonymous:

www.nzna.org | 0800 638632

Family support

Al-Anon Family Groups: www.al-anon.org.nz

Kina Families & Addictions Trust: www.kina.org.nz

Other help and information

NZ Drug Foundation: www.drugfoundation.org.nz

Mental Health Foundation: www.mentalhealth.org.nz

Matua Raki

National Addiction Workforce Development