

SHOULD I OR SHOULDN'T I?

ANNA'S RECOVERY STORY

Through his heroin addiction and recovery, Anna's brother has taught her so much about life, including the most valuable lesson she could ever learn—you can get through anything.

1. Early days

My younger brother was always a heavy marijuana smoker, even in school, where he would have been considered a risk-taker and one of the 'bad boys' for wagging (missing) class and writing graffiti. However, he was the kind of guy who never hurt anyone—he's really gentle and easy-going and always had lots of friends. Music is his life and when he was growing up, he played the drums and became a very successful and well-respected jazz musician at an early age. When he finished secondary school, he went to university to study music.

My older brother and I were much more independent than my younger brother. Each of us worked in part-time jobs while we were still at school and earned our own money. My parents were quite strict with us as we were growing up.

My younger brother seemed to get away with much more and had a lot more freedom at a young age than my older brother and I ever had. My parents continued to support him financially and give him pocket money until he was in his mid-twenties. He'd always use the excuse, 'I can't get a job, it will clash with my jazz gigs', which was true. However, I remember feeling a bit resentful of the fact that things always seemed to fall into place for him without him having to do much work.

Now I recognise that there's no way he could have become such a good musician without putting hundreds of hours into practice and performances, but at the time, I thought he was pretty spoiled and got away with too much.

I went to work in the US as a nanny in 1997 and when I got back the following year, my brother was going out with a girl he'd met at university and living in a rundown house with some other musicians. I knew he was still smoking a lot of dope, but he'd also started to ask to borrow sums of money from mum and dad and from me.

We started to find out that was selling his belongings to pawn shops and asking us for the money to pay the interest on the loans. Sadly, he was even selling off his musical instruments. His drum kit started to shrink as he got rid of cymbals and other drums he said he no longer needed, and bit by bit he sold off a valuable collection of jazz records and CDs which he'd been collecting from a young age.

When I came back from the US, I saw my brother on a weekly basis because we shared a car. We lived about 10kms from each other and had a schedule figured out so that he could use the car for half the week to get to gigs and I could use it the other half to get to university. Pretty soon he was starting to annoy me, as he'd always return the car late with no petrol.

He'd also say that he couldn't pay his bills or his rent and that he never had any money for food. I would lend him small amounts of money, \$10 here and \$20 there. Aside from sharing the car, I didn't see him on weekends or at my parent's place because he was always 'too busy'. It seemed as if my family were seeing less and less of him unless he wanted something—usually money. We realised later he was trying as much as he could to hide what he was doing and protect us, because he was embarrassed and ashamed about what his life had become.

2. Living in denial

People think the downhill decline happens very quickly, but it actually took a few years for us to recognise that my brother's drug use was out of control. I told my parents that I suspected he was using heroin—they had no idea about illicit drugs, as they had never used them. When we confronted my brother one day about why he had so many debts and parking fines, why he'd become so thin and sick all the time, and why he was so unreliable, he burst into tears and admitted that he did have a heroin problem. He assured us that he only smoked the drug, he was too scared to inject, and he was pretty sure he could give it up.

He admitted much later that he started off by using heroin every weekend, but as he loved the feeling it gave him so much, he began to use it daily within a month or so. He also admitted that his girlfriend had been an injecting speed user, but that was in the past. Of course, the alarm bells started ringing very loudly, but we felt a bit powerless to do anything because my brother reassured us he had everything under control.

I remember saying to him, 'How could you use heroin? I've tried a few different drugs but I draw the line at heroin, there's just no way I'd ever do it.'

My brother replied, 'Well, I never thought it would be a problem, I just wanted to experiment with it. All the jazz musicians, like Miles Davis and Charlie Parker, used heroin to write and play music and to stimulate their creativity.'

I didn't say, 'Yeah, and look at where they ended up!'

In fact, even though I knew things were far from okay, I pretty much went into denial about the situation, as did my parents. My family have never been all that good at confronting really personal or emotional issues—we never fight, we never argue, we just spend a lot of time discussing the 'hows' and 'whys', rather than how it makes us feel.

Was my brother too spoiled? Maybe my parents hadn't been strict enough with him? Maybe it was all his girlfriend's fault—she had a lot of personal problems and a difficult upbringing. My brother was a risk-taker, he was creative, he was impulsive, he was too sensitive, and he'd been a difficult baby who cried all the time and was hard to settle. We needed to find answers, to try and find meanings, and for the time being, we pretended everything was okay and that it would all work out in the end.

3. Realising the severity of the problem

The day I realised my brother's problem was really serious, and he was indeed injecting, he'd come over to my house to return the car and was in a very bad way—extremely agitated and sickly looking. By this stage, he was so thin, he wore two pairs of jeans and always had his arms and legs covered, even in the middle of summer. He asked to use my bathroom and locked himself in there for about half an hour. I was furious, as I needed to get to my university course. I wanted him to hurry up so we could leave together.

When he came out of the bathroom, I went in to use the loo and I noticed spots of blood in the sink. He was waiting for me outside, slumped against the side of my front door, practically unconscious, and then he sprang to his feet and insisted on driving me to university. He was in no fit state to drive, but I gave him the keys anyway.

We drove for about ten minutes until he swerved and almost hit a parked car. When I looked over at him, he was nodding off behind the wheel. I shouted at him, demanded that he pull over, and I then drove him to where he needed to go.

A few days later, I was walking around the city on my lunch break and found my brother sitting on a bench just around the corner from Melbourne's main heroin strip at the time, Russell Street. He claimed he was waiting for a friend, but he looked agitated. I realised later he was withdrawing. I said, 'Are you sure you're okay?' He denied he was doing anything except waiting for his friend. I walked off, angry and upset because I knew he'd lied to me.

I couldn't stop thinking about how dishonest he'd become, and I was totally consumed by his deceitfulness. It wasn't until later that I could look at it from a different, much more compassionate perspective—that he had a serious health problem. Even though I realised that he probably couldn't just quit, as we all hoped, I was furious that he thought I was stupid enough to believe him and that he thought he could get away with lying to me. I really didn't have much of an idea about drug dependence back then, and all the behaviours that go along with it.

4. Becoming obsessed

After this incident in the city, I became unhealthily obsessed with finding out as much as I could about heroin, as well as trying to monitor my brother's behaviour and uncover his lies. I read every book I could get my hands on, including a few books I'd had as a teenager—Go Ask Alice, Junky and H: Diary of a Heroin Addict. Every time my brother made up some excuse about needing money, I'd be straight on the phone to my

parents, ‘dobbing’ on him. I’d check his eyes for signs of drug use, and follow him to the bathroom whenever he came over to my place to return the car.

It was around this time that I said to him, ‘Why can’t you just give up? Why is it so hard for you? I smoked and gave it up, why can’t you?’

He said, ‘For one, tobacco is not the same thing as heroin. And for two, you’re not me and I’m not you, so stop trying to make your experiences, my experiences.’ It was an important reminder that I needed to be less judgmental and stop trying to force my ideas about how the world worked on to others.

Not that I managed to stop doing this overnight. I began to talk about my brother’s heroin dependence non-stop to my friends. I’d go over the details again and again, and then I’d get upset when they started to get bored or frustrated if they couldn’t help me. I couldn’t see that my brother’s problem was his own.

At the time, it was all about me, and I was very angry with him for hurting me. Why was he doing this to our family? Didn’t he know how much he was destroying us? We loved him so much and he was treating us like crap. Why couldn’t he quit? How could he keep lying to us all the time? How could he steal from us? How could he expect us to ever trust him again?

Once I understood that it wasn’t all about me, that my brother was not purposely trying to hurt me—he was hurting himself and as a result, the rest of our family suffered—I became terribly sad and depressed and would cry most days. My brother, who was an amazingly talented musician as well as an intelligent, caring, funny, gorgeous guy, was now a junkie who spent all of his time scamming, stealing and doing whatever he could to get heroin. It was such a waste of a life, and I started to really fear that he might die.

5. My parents’ reactions

It was interesting to see how my brother’s drug use affected my parents quite differently to the way it affected me. My mum was the one who put on a brave face and started calling rehabs, visiting doctors, gathering information. She was very practical and refused to give up, believing that my brother could get better. She found out about a program for families that she and my dad attended and were introduced to concepts like enabling and tough love. My dad probably dealt with it a bit like me—he was very emotional about my brother’s lost potential and how any attempt at getting clean failed—but he was also more positive than me, or at least tried to be.

I remember one day my dad had to go to the pawn shop to pay the interest on a whole heap of things my brother had sold, and also to reclaim his lawnmower and tools that had been stolen from his shed. Dad wasn’t very comfortable going to a pawnbroker in the first place, and then when he spoke to the sales guy about the fact that my brother was selling stolen goods, the guy said, ‘Well, what do you expect from these people?’

Dad came home and cried. He was devastated this guy had been so judgmental and that my brother didn't have an identity, he was just something contemptible and distasteful. The sad thing was, we were starting to believe that too. My brother had transformed into one of those people—he had slicked back hair in a ponytail, wore the same dirty clothes every day, and carried around an old sports bag full of stolen toasters and stereos.

6. Emotional release

My parents could see that I wasn't really coping with what was happening and they convinced me to go and see a counsellor. I went to see a very expensive psychologist for three sessions. The first two sessions were spent crying and telling the same story I'd told everyone else a thousand times.

In the third session, the psychologist said to me, 'Anna, I've been hearing a lot about your brother and all of his problems. What about you? Do you think you might have a problem with drugs too?'

I said, "Yes." I was drinking every night to cope with what was going on, and my boyfriend at the time was also a heavy drinker. She said that I needed to accept that I couldn't change my brother's behaviour or anyone else's. I could only change my own. She also said that I needed to focus on my own life, and stop focussing so much on my brother's.

After the session finished, I went out to my car and bawled my eyes out. However, this was a different type of emotional release. I felt an overwhelming sense of relief. I knew that things would be different for me, and that I could change the way I was thinking and feeling. It was the first time in about a year that I could see a way forward. I then went to see a counsellor for a while, who was much cheaper than the psychologist, but I didn't find her all that helpful. I decided that I already had the tools, I just needed to practice using them.

7. Reaching out

By this stage, my brother had made a number of attempts at detoxing and rehab, but kept relapsing. It was so hard to stay positive—we would get really enthusiastic and excited whenever he went into rehab, and then heartbroken when he quit the program, disappeared, or couldn't stay clean.

My older brother, who lives in the US, offered to have him come and stay there. My parents discussed sending my brother to an expensive private rehab in Europe. Every option was considered because every day there was a new drama to deal with. Things had really gotten very bad for my younger brother—he was homeless, he had chronic health problems, and he was facing a jail term for armed robbery.

In spite of all this, he told us he'd started going to NA meetings every now and again, and he was beginning to embrace the twelve-step program. I didn't know whether it would help him, but my parents and I attended Families Anonymous (FA) meetings together. We felt that this was a way we could connect with my brother, and understand a bit more about how he was trying to deal with his dependence.

The FA meetings involved a group of women (and my dad), some in their seventies and eighties who had been dealing with their kids' drug use over a 40-50-year period. It seemed to be a competition between the group members—who had the saddest story to tell, who had the family with the most dramas. I remember one of the women saying to me rather unsympathetically, 'Why haven't you dumped your boyfriend, the alcoholic, yet? You can choose a boyfriend, but you can't choose your family,' which I thought was a bit unhelpful at the time.

Ultimately, that's what I decided I needed to do, as I'd made a decision to stop binge drinking and there wasn't room in my life for two people with drug problems. One of them had to go.

The positive thing about FA was that I felt part of a group of people who understood each other, despite the fact that everyone was very different to me and my family. There was no shaming and no blaming. We could say whatever we wanted and put a voice to our fears, resentment and hurt without worrying about sounding bitter and twisted. We also shared a few laughs about our family members' crazy capers. It was here that I learned the importance of focussing on the small steps my brother was making, and his achievements, rather than his failures.

My brother came to stay with me for a night when my parents were away overseas, at a time he was trying to withdraw from heroin. I begged him not to steal my stereo, as I didn't have enough money to replace it. He respected that. He disappeared in the middle of the night, and I found out later he'd gone to score. However, he still managed to keep his promise that he wouldn't steal anything, even while he was in the midst of an agonising experience where I'm sure he spent half the night thinking, 'Should I or shouldn't I?'

The other thing that happened at FA was that I was recruited for a new service called Family Drug Help (FDH), where I would be trained as a volunteer to answer calls from people worried about their family members. I got a lot out of the training and met some amazing people who had lots of good ideas about coping strategies, positive communication skills, and a different way of thinking about things.

I started working on the Helpline one day a week, although I was only answering one or two calls on my shift, as we were still building the FDH profile in those early days. However, it was a great way for me to talk to people with similar experiences, as well as work on my own personal issues.

My family was very fortunate that my brother didn't go to prison. When his case went to court, the judge was impressed that he was going to NA and had completed a stint at a rehab, and he was let off on a good behaviour bond.

The fact that my brother had been given another chance, along with some other really terrifying and life-threatening experiences that acted as a series of wake-up calls for him, seems to be the turning point in his recovery. He finally found whatever it was inside himself to pull through—his own personal courage and the

will to survive, a voice in his head that said, 'Enough! I don't want to do this anymore!', and an inner strength that compelled him to make huge life changes and focus on a new and improved future.

He started attending NA meetings every day, quite often multiple meetings a day to deal with his cravings. He eventually stopped using alcohol and drugs for good.

8. Life today

My brother now lives in Europe with his wife and two daughters. He teaches, plays and records music, and organises music festivals. He still goes to NA and he's a sponsor for other people, including prisoners who struggle with their drug use. He is conscious of his health and tries to do some physical activity every day. He's given up smoking cigarettes and his only vices now are coffee and chocolate.

The repercussions of my brother's drug use are still with me. Not on a daily basis, as they once were, but things pop up from time to time that make me realise how deeply I was affected.

A few years ago, he and his family were staying with our mum and dad at Christmas and he was sitting in a chair in the living room, holding his baby daughter in his arms, falling asleep from jet lag. His head kept drooping forwards and I got such a shock. I practically burst out crying because it brought back painful memories of him nodding off. I actually started thinking to myself, 'No way! It can't be! He's back on heroin! I can't believe it!'

I was so shocked that I was thinking this way, but I recognised it as a trigger—something I always need to be mindful of. It was a reminder that I need to keep practicing managing my anxiety, just as my brother does.

The other thing I find is that when I get bogged down by negative thoughts, or I'm worried about something at work or in my personal life, I have vivid dreams that my brother has started using heroin again. I call them my stress dreams and they only happen if I feel like my life is a bit out of control, I've got too much on at work, or I've had a disagreement with family or friends. In my dream, I get really angry or sad at my brother, and he doesn't seem to care, he's totally oblivious to what he's doing and how I'm feeling.

On a much more positive note, there's no way I can tell this story without saying that my brother is truly the most inspirational person I know. I am in awe of who he is and what he's achieved. He has taught me so much about life, including the most valuable lesson I could ever possibly learn—that you can get through anything. I have learnt that things might be bad, but they won't be bad forever. I also know that it's not impossible to make changes—even if they seem small and irrelevant at the time, they can lead to bigger and better things further down the track.

It's also possible to learn something new or change the way you think if you're prepared to work at it. Not only has my brother overcome his drug dependence and rebuilt his life and his career, he has travelled the world, has a gorgeous family, and can speak another language fluently, which he had to learn from scratch

when he moved overseas. It may take time, it can't be rushed, but we are all responsible for our own happiness, and it's up to us to create the lives we want for ourselves.

I understand that on some days it's probably still a battle for him, just as it is for me when I feel overwhelmed by stress and worries about work, relationships and money. But it doesn't mean I will feel this way in ten minutes, or tomorrow, or next week. I often need to remind myself to stop thinking about the past and stop worrying about the future. I need to live in the now and be happy about what I have, rather than worried or resentful about what I don't have.

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Seven Years On: June 2020

A year after I wrote "Should I or shouldn't I?", my daughter was born. She's six now and she reminds me of her uncle—creative, free-spirited, kind-hearted and imaginative. I wonder if she will experiment with drugs when she's older. With everything that's going on in the world right now, her generation, the Gen Alphas, might be in need of some heavy-duty mind-alteration once they reach their teens. Along with the rest of us.

Life is filled with should I or shouldn't I moments. I can't explain all the decisions I've made throughout my life and how I've wound up where I am today, but I do know that I'll never again be as miserable and stressed as I was during my brother's heroin years. It's a choice I've made. A promise to myself. I will recognise it if I feel it. I'll do something about it. And I will try to pass this, as well as all the other valuable lessons my brother taught me, on to my daughter.

As for my brother, he remains happy and productive. Covid-19 has put a hold on performing, but he keeps himself busy by teaching students, collaborating with musicians across the world on experimental and improvised projects, home-schooling and home improvement jobs. I'm really disappointed that a planned trip to Australia with his family has had to be cancelled, but I know that when we do catch up, we'll have plenty to talk about, lots of laughs and a well-overdue hug!