BECOMING BETH

BETH'S RECOVERY STORY

A fullly-fledged dependent drinker by age nineteen,
Beth has gone on to become a recovery coach and writer,
in order to help other people escape from addiction.

I really shouldn't be here. The number of times I put my life in danger, the number of times I tried to kill myself, the number of alcoholic withdrawals I went through, threatening me with death every time, it is a miracle that I am alive.

It is a further miracle that, at 32 years old, I am sober and happy, having spent most of my adult life drunk and depressed. Not that I didn't have a reason to be depressed. I was already an alcoholic by the age of 19, suffering from an eating disorder, a personality disorder, an anxiety disorder, and unable to cope with life, except by drinking and self-harming.

To start at the beginning, I grew up in a loving family in a village in West Sussex in the UK. As I child, I was cheerful, well-behaved and a high achiever at school. I could be a little sensitive, but otherwise I appeared to be a fairly normal kid with plenty of friends and a nice family. My parents got divorced when I was ten years old, but my mum took good care of my elder sister and I, and our dad saw us regularly. Nothing in my life would indicate the hellish existence that would be my future, at least not until I was about fourteen years old.

1. Troubled teens

In my early teens, I was plagued by feelings of being awkward and different. While most of my friends became teeny-boppers, obsessed with boy bands, clothes and shopping, I started to become withdrawn and depressed.

At fourteen, I became uncomfortable eating in front of other people, so I would starve myself for days until I became so hungry that I would have to desperately shovel food into my mouth. I would raid the cupboards, freezer and the fridge when no one was home, catching up with all the meals I had missed. Being a body-conscious teenager, I didn't want to get fat, so I started a regime of binging and then making myself sick, to get most of what I had eaten out of my body. I didn't know that my fear of eating in front of people was one of the initial symptoms of an anxiety disorder that would eventually take over my life.

At fifteen, I began to be nervous of using the toilets at school, of putting my hand up to answer questions in class, and of walking home on my own. I was scared of changing my hairstyle or my clothes, in case people pointed it out. It is hard to describe how terrified it made me feel to have any undue attention being drawn to me, even when doing the most basic things.

I also became uneasy whenever I had to express my opinion, and it was impossible for me to say ‘no’ to anything. I hated ‘bothering people’, asking for things or looking like I ‘needed’ anything, from a seat on the bus (I always stood) to food. It was as if I didn’t deserve anything that everyone else did. A counsellor later reflected my symptoms back to me as, ‘Acting as if you didn’t have any rights in the world’. That’s a pretty good description.

At the time, I didn’t know what was wrong with me, why I was afraid of things that didn’t trouble other people. All I knew was that I didn’t like who I was, and I felt alienated from everyone else. I found solace in reading existentialist literature and listening to fairly dark music. For kicks, I started hanging out with a group of other assorted misfits and rebels, and we would spend most weekends drinking, smoking and taking drugs in the local graveyard.

When I wasn’t drinking, I found temporary relief in cutting my arms with a penknife. Cutting refocused my feelings of pain from an insufferable and confusing mental state, to a more tangible and readily understandable sensation. It was the only thing that could stop my uncontrollable crying when I was really down in the dumps.

By the age of sixteen, I was smoking cannabis every day, because it allowed me to be in my own little bubble and masked some of the symptoms of my anxiety disorder. My friends had already noticed that I was the heaviest drinker and smoker in our group. I didn’t really know anything about addiction in those days. I just saw it as fun and a respite from my symptoms.

At eighteen, I came to London to go to university. Rather than the freedom and independence I expected from moving to the city, I found my symptoms became worse than ever. I had to live in Halls of Residence, sharing a kitchen, toilet and bathroom with a whole corridor of other students. I was too scared to cook in front of other people, and I could only use the toilet or bathroom if no one else was around. I used to stand with my ear to my bedroom door, waiting until the coast was clear to nip to the loo, and I would usually take a bath at three o’clock in the morning, when I could relax because everyone else had gone to bed.

Of course, I still had to attend seminars and lectures, use public transport and do my own shopping, and I found all of these activities terrifying too. I had become pretty much agoraphobic and hated doing anything except studying in my room or going to the pub. I found it hard to make friends because of feeling like such a weirdo with my secret anxiety issues. It was a painful existence and I was too embarrassed and confused to tell anyone how I felt.

2. My ‘marvellous’ medicine

I remember the day that I decided that drinking in the morning was the answer to my problems. I went to have a contraceptive device fitted and the nurse had advised me to have a couple of glasses of wine before I arrived, because it would be a painful procedure. My appointment was at about 11.00, and leaving my room with a couple of medicinal Merlots in my belly, I realised that I wasn’t nearly as afraid of walking outside on

my own. It was such a relief to be able to walk through the streets without my eyes cast down and sweat beading on my forehead. On the way home, I bought a bottle of gin and a little bottle of lemonade.

The next morning, I emptied some of the soda out of the Sprite bottle, replaced it with gin and stuck it in my bag. I downed a glass of gin for good measure and went to university with my secret stash, which I drank little sips from during the day. It worked like a dream. Although I still felt uncomfortable, the edge was taken off the terror. Instead of having to psyche myself up for an hour to leave my room, I was able to walk right out and get on with my day.

At first, my new regime of being continually tipsy seemed like the ideal solution. However, I found that my tolerance for alcohol was steadily rising. As the semester went on, my secret Sprite bottle became more gin than soda, and I found I had to top up with a couple of pints of lager at lunchtime.

Being a secret drinker alienated me even more from other people, because by the time I would go out in the evening to socialise, I was already way ahead of everyone else. And yet it didn't stop me drinking copious amounts on a night out, too. Of course, getting that drunk led to arguments, inappropriate behaviour and upsetting the few friends I had at university. Moreover, I had started going out with a drug dealer I'd met in a nightclub, which didn't go down well with the people who cared about me.

Life with my secret drinking and my dodgy boyfriend led me into all sorts of bad behaviour. I thought nothing of stealing and selling drugs to raise some extra money. My tolerance for alcohol had become so high that I couldn't afford much else. I used to steal the textbooks I needed for university from the local bookshop, as most of my money went on gin and lager.

I would also steal alcohol. If you ever received a birthday present from me in those days, you could be sure I'd snuck it out of a shop under my jacket. Thieving from shops didn't even seem immoral to me, because my brain was so skewed by constantly being drunk. And after all, what was my alternative? Going without a drink? There was no way in the world that was happening. I **needed** my drink.

I did call myself an alcoholic in those days, even though I didn't really know what the real implications of that were. The way I saw it, alcoholic drinking was my only option for getting through life. I actually had very few qualms about my choice of self-medication, because I knew the alternative was to be too scared to even leave the house. Alcohol enabled me to function, and as far as I was concerned, alcohol was very much my best friend. If I had to lie, steal and cheat to get it, then I would.

But the more I drank, the more my tolerance rose. As a result, my anxiety problems were not nearly as well masked as they were when I first decided that alcohol was the antidote to my fears. I felt trapped between my alcoholism and my terror, and I became very, very depressed. Despite eventually splitting up with my wayward boyfriend, I was missing a lot of university, my work was suffering, and my behaviour had become increasingly erratic.

It was lonely living such a secretive and strange life. I ended up going out to the pub on my own a lot, and going home with strangers. I would sleep with anyone and everyone just to make me feel good for a while, and I soon realised that, as a young girl, I could charge money for doing it. And so began the next sad chapter in my life.

Of course, as soon as I woke up every morning, I was full of shame and self-hatred at my life and my behaviour. And of course, as an alcoholic, the answer to that was simply to drink more to block the feelings out.

I knew that alcohol was changing me. I was one of those people who had always had a very compassionate soul, and yet I was becoming callous, calculating and sometimes even cruel. Anyone who ever commented on my drinking, or tried to intervene in the way I led my life, was treated with contempt and discarded from my life, including my own family at times. When I was drunk, my parents used to say that it was like an imposter had taken over me, like I wasn't the real Beth.

It was excruciating to know that I had a good heart, yet to see it hardening with every drink. However, I believed at the time I had no choice. I could either be drunk and functional, or sober and so afraid that I could not function.

I knew I **wasn't** doing the wrong thing, because it was not my fault that I had developed this hideous anxiety that wouldn't allow me to live like normal people. I was just drinking to be able to cope, not to hurt people. And yet I knew I **was** doing the wrong thing, because my actions **did** hurt people. This tearing between my moral fibre and my anxiety-induced loop of alcoholism very much affected my mental health. Eventually, I decided that the only answer was not to go on anymore.

At the age of 21, I took my first overdose. I hated how I felt about myself and I could see no end to my problems in sight, so death was pretty much the only thing I wanted any more. I woke up in the hospital with my parents crying at the foot of my bed. I had no choice but to share some of what had been happening to me, though not all of it. I told my parents that I was agoraphobic and had been drinking so I could leave the front door, although I was too embarrassed to tell them any more of my troubles. The doctor at the hospital told me I would be sectioned if I didn't go voluntarily, and so began my first stay in a mental hospital.

It was there that I was diagnosed with Borderline Personality Disorder (BPD) and alcoholism. I didn't care about my diagnosis at the time. If they wouldn't allow me to die, then I just wanted to get out of there and drink. I behaved so badly on the mental ward that they eventually kicked me out and I returned to my life as it was before.

The hospital had referred me to a personality disorder specialist, but after the second appointment, he told me I couldn't come after having had a drink. So of course I stopped going, as I couldn't leave the house

without being tipsy at the very least. It was the same story at the alcohol service I had been referred to, and so I received no further help there either.

My life through to my mid-twenties was a blur of alcohol, hospitals, services, men, petty crime, depression and suicide attempts. My self-harm had escalated and my health had declined. I was drinking a litre-and-a-half of gin practically every day. I had pancreatitis, stomach ulcers, and I had been given a year-and-a-half to live at one point. My hair had even started falling out.

I had been to residential detox twice, although I only went because I was fainting and vomiting up bile. I didn't have any intention of stopping drinking; I just knew I was too ill to keep the drink down for the moment and my body needed a break. So I faithfully did my three weeks each time, just to be able to drink again once my health had returned.

3. The best day of my life

At the age of 25, a very strange and most amazing thing happened to me. After becoming sick of reprimands and feeling like everyone thought my drinking was a selfish act, I had eventually sent an email to my parents revealing the truth to them about my anxiety problems. They were extremely sympathetic once they found out exactly why I was drinking 24/7, and they only wanted to help. They looked up the symptoms and discovered that these odd feelings had a name. I actually had a disorder called Social Phobia, or Social Anxiety Disorder, which had never been diagnosed.

Desperate to find a treatment for me, they had sent me to counsellors, therapists and doctors, but to no avail. Then my mum asked if I had ever heard of Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP). I hadn't, but was willing to try anything to be rid of the terror that pervaded my life.

I sat down in the NLP Practitioner's office and 90 minutes later, I walked out of there, totally unafraid of the outside world. It was incredible to me that I had gone from someone who sweated and shook in public to someone who could walk down the street, head held high. All it took was a few exercises in a little room lasting only an hour-and-a-half, and for the first time in my adult life I felt like a free woman.

Amazingly, most of the other symptoms of anxiety cleared up too. I felt more comfortable eating in front of people, going shopping and stating my opinion. I remember thinking to myself, 'Thank God, I don't have to be an alcoholic anymore!' Although I had used alcohol in an alcoholic way, it was a calculated tactic to get me through the fear, and I couldn't wait to be normal, and drink normally like everyone else. All I had ever wanted was to be normal, so I was looking forward to watching the football down the pub with a couple of pints and eating Sunday lunch with a nice glass of wine.

For the first time in my life, outside of institutions, I went for days, and even weeks, sober. My almost-constant depression largely lifted and my old self-harming behaviours were much easier to renounce. However, just as I felt that my life had been handed back to me, another strange thing happened.

At the weekend, I would go off to the pub with my friends, intending to have a few pints, and I'd come home absolutely wasted, not remembering anything. I would get into the same arguments, the same stupid and dangerous situations, and do the same things I did when I was a 'willing' alcoholic. It didn't make sense to me. I didn't **need** to drink in a crazy way any longer, so why was it still happening?

I found that I would drink to oblivion at the worst possible times, like the night before a job interview or an important appointment, or when my parents were due to visit me. I tried everything to control the amount I was consuming, such as switching to weaker drinks and setting myself rules about when I could start drinking, or where. However, no matter what I tried, most drinking episodes would end in carnage. And sometimes my binges would last for several days before I stopped drinking. Or if I did manage to have just a couple of drinks, I would feel desperately unsatisfied and miserable, angry that I wasn't allowed more.

It was at that point that I realised that maybe I did have a problem with alcohol, although I still believed that it was just a case of getting my brain to catch up with the fact that I no longer needed to cling onto booze for dear life. I understood a little about neurology and believed that I simply had to re-teach my brain that this kind of behaviour was no longer necessary.

After a few of years struggling, and for the first time in my life experiencing serious withdrawals after binging then abruptly stopping, I finally threw my hands up and admitted defeat. I was not able to control my drinking, and I was making myself very ill by trying, so I promised my parents and partner at the time that I would go sober for a year and see how things went.

During all my drinking, I had never once promised that I would go sober. Promises for me were sacred, and so I rarely made them unless I was absolutely sincere. But I was very genuine in my commitment to overcoming this problem, and I had already accepted that controlled drinking just wasn't working for me. For whatever reason I had started drinking, I was now definitely addicted and I needed to try going sober.

So, I gritted my teeth and quit drinking. I can't say I was happy about it, but I'm nothing if not determined, so I decided to make the best of it. I managed to get a great job that I loved, and my parents were very proud of what I had done.

However, a few months down the line, I ended up locking myself in the bathroom one weekend, because I knew if I didn't, I would drink. Now and then, I would get cravings so bad, that I would cry all night long. On the way home from work sometimes, it was all I could do not to march into the local off-licence and buy a bottle. I was so concerned about these feelings that I sought counselling, but even on the way home from an appointment, I had to take a deep breath as I passed a pub. I was still obsessed with alcohol, but I tried to be resolute and abstain from quenching that burning thirst.

4. Returning from rock bottom

Eventually, the inevitable happened. After a series of difficulties at work and home, I finally had a drink. A big drink, a whole litre of brandy in one evening. As soon as I took my first sip, the relief was immediate, and I settled down happily to finish the bottle.

The hangover the next day was horrendous, and I told myself I'd got the need to drink out of my system and I would go sober again. However, as my difficulties at work and home continued, so did my cravings. I ended up secretly drinking every time things got too much. I was sober most of the time, but I knew my drinking was spiralling out of control again. It was happening more and more often, and I was finding more excuses to drink.

Things reached a head after a particularly stressful time at work. I binged over the whole weekend and was ill on Monday. Too ill to not have a drink. I had several 'hair of the dogs'—mine were always large ones—and I ended up going into work a bit drunk. Someone noticed, and I was sent home. After an embarrassed apology to my bosses, I returned to work, only to do the same thing a few weeks later. That was it. I lost my job.

Jobless, unhappy, lonely, and filled with guilt, shame and remorse, I threw myself back into the bottle. The more I tried not to drink, the more often I would find myself with a bottle to my lips. Every time I would be convinced that I'd only drink a couple of shots, I would end up finishing the whole bottle and then going to the shop for more.

I went to mental health assessments, relapse prevention groups, and I saw key workers and counsellors, but nothing seemed to help. I would string together a week or two of sobriety, only to find myself binging for a week afterwards. I was in and out of withdrawals once or twice a month. The nurses at my local hospital must have known me by name, although more often than not, I was too ashamed to go and get medication, and went through terrifying withdrawals at home.

No one seemed to understand what was wrong with me. My friends and family were at a loss, since my initial sobriety had promised a brighter future. I was tempted to try suicide again, because I was desperate to stop drinking, and having tried going sober, and failed, I thought I would never see my sobriety again. I seemed in an even worse predicament than before.

Then, one day my partner said he was leaving. It was Christmas Eve, and as he left to visit his parents, he told me he couldn't take it any longer. Christmas Eve, and I was being abandoned. Not that I could blame him, but being a Borderline, abandonment is the worst thing that can happen. Borderline sufferers spend their whole lives trying to avoid abandonment, and so far, I had successfully managed it. No one had ever left me before because of my drinking—I had always shipped out myself if I thought I was pushing things. So to have someone finally leave me because of my behaviour, I felt like it was the end of the world. Like I had finally gone too far.

I was inconsolable and in the depths of despair. I was terrified that I would do something awful to myself. Being Christmas, there were scant services open and most of my friends were out of town. However, my sister lived across the other side of London, so I called her and asked her to meet me after she finished work. I needed the biggest hug in the world. I spent the afternoon riding around and around on the London underground just to pass the time, determined not to drink. However, as the hours dragged on, and I waited for my sister to finish work, the longer I had to wait, the more I felt like I was going insane. I finally cracked and bought myself a bottle.

I don't remember anything after that, except waking up in an ambulance with my sister holding my hand. I had apparently met her at a pub, already horribly drunk. I had gone outside for a cigarette, fallen over and cracked my head on the icy pavement.

I spent Christmas alone in bed with concussion, yet again going through withdrawals. I shamefacedly stewed on the anguish I had caused my poor sister. I thought of the last year, of how much time I had lost and how much I had missed out on because of my problem. Of how I was hurting everyone around me, yet again. Of the fact that alcohol had now become my deadly enemy, and yet I was allowing it to ruin my life. Enough was enough. I knew there had to be something I was missing. I had met other people who had got sober and it had lasted. Surely there was a solution for me, too?

5. Rethinking recovery

On New Year's Day, I phoned my parents and promised them that I would do whatever it took to stay sober. I had always refused to do rehab or Fellowships or anything that really meant asking for help in a way I didn't find comfortable. But through my tears, I promised them I would do anything they wanted. Anything! My dad suggested that as soon as I was well enough to walk, I should go to an AA meeting. It was not what I wanted to hear, because the thought terrified me, but I promised him I would. He had attended Al-Anon since I was in my early twenties, and I figured maybe he knew something I didn't.

So, a week later I went to my first official AA meeting. Scared, confused and shaking, I was greeted with nothing but warmth and empathy. As I listened to these other alcoholics talking, I realised that these people were just like me. They understood what I was going through in a way that no one really ever had before. They had fallen into the same traps as I had and suffered from the same screwy thoughts.

I actually didn't get my recovery through traditional AA methods. I didn't do the steps and I don't have a sponsor. However, attending AA gave me the understanding and connection that I had been missing. It gave me the support network of people who have been there that I had never had before. It gave me wisdom through listening to others sharing their experiences. It helped me to understand a lot more about addiction. It impressed upon me the importance of gratitude and putting my recovery first. In short, it gave me a good deal of guidance and a whole lot of hope.

AA also gave me respite when in my renewed sobriety, I thought I might fall apart and drink. It gave me a safety net. And if I ever think it's a good idea to drink again, I know exactly where to head in a moment of desperation to be talked out of it.

But luckily, I hardly ever think it's a good idea to drink these days, because I did find recovery in the end. And unlike my first botched attempt at quitting drinking, I don't just have sobriety, I have recovery. Nowadays, I am grateful and happy to be sober. In fact, I hardly ever think about alcohol these days, because I now understand about addiction, and I am happy to have escaped it and developed my new, sober life.

As I look back to that first laboured effort to stay sober, I realise that I never even knew the difference between sobriety and recovery back then. I thought you just quit drinking and clung on for dear life until you got used to it. I never realised that you could be deliriously happy to be sober, and that working on yourself was key to getting there. And I did do a lot of work on myself to find recovery. I had to work hard to change the trains of thought that led me off the rails.

6. The final pieces of the puzzle

When I lost my job for going into work drunk, I had already had a good, hard look at my problem. I realised that my relapses were largely the products of my inability to cope and my impulsiveness. I sought comfort at all costs, as negative events would tend to cut me to my hypersensitive core. I realised that if I were ever to recover properly, I finally needed to take my diagnosis of Borderline Personality Disorder seriously. I needed to get treatment for the disorder that made me weak when I needed to be strong, that made me impulsive when I needed to be collected, that made me wilful when I needed to be willing.

During my final year of relapse, I had signed up to a waiting list for Dialectical Behaviour Therapy (DBT), the most successful treatment for Borderline patients to date, devised by a lady who had suffered from the disorder herself. As luck would have it, as I started out with my new-found sobriety, made possible by the unwavering support of AA, I finally came to the top of the waiting list and started my treatment.

From the very first sessions, it was like something had clicked. This was the stuff I had been needing to learn all along. Actually a lot of DBT fits quite nicely with the AA philosophy. To me, the Serenity Prayer sums up some of the most useful things that DBT has taught me:

> 'God grant me the serenity
> to accept the things I cannot change;
> courage to change the things I can;
> and wisdom to know the difference.'

It's about cultivating the wisdom to know that you don't have to act on your emotions. It's about being effective as a person. It's about learning to be reasoned rather than reactive. To know what you need to accept and what you can change.

I found DBT matched my needs particularly well, because unlike its sister treatment, Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (CBT), it validates how you feel. To me, CBT says, 'Your thinking is wrong. Do it differently,' whereas DBT says:

> 'You feel bad right now, because of your thinking. But do you have to react, or can you recognise that it's just a thought, not a fact, and do the right thing despite what your head is telling you?'

Personally, I prefer the latter approach, as an over-sensitive Borderline alcoholic, although everyone must find what works best for them.

As I put the lessons I was learning into practice on a daily basis, I found that life became easier. Over time, my mind-set changed and my new behaviours became more natural and automatic. I was finally in recovery. It is hard to describe exactly what it's like when you feel you have 'cracked it'—all I can say is that finally drinking alcohol was the last thing I wanted to do, and I felt happy, grateful and free.

While I credit AA with getting me sober, and DBT for my solid recovery, they are not the only tools in my kit. After achieving such a remarkable recovery from Social Phobia through NLP, I became fascinated by NLP and had to learn more about it. So I read lots of books, and eventually I trained to be an NLP Practitioner myself. To my delight, I found that it is a brilliant tool for all sorts of things, from stopping cravings to releasing destructive emotions, from dealing with stress to derailing negative trains of thought.

Learning NLP brought me into contact with all sorts of positive psychology practices, and a lot of that has further enhanced my recovery. I learnt how to build on my new, positive mind-set and how to strive to achieve my dreams. My new ambitions took me even further away from that old, murky alcoholic existence, and helped me to increase my self-esteem and rejoice in all the opportunities that life affords.

A little while down the line, when I had gone as far with DBT as it could take me, I went back to the root of the therapy which helped me so much. DBT was developed out of a combination of CBT and Buddhism. As an atheist, I had always felt uncomfortable by the emphasis placed on religion and spirituality in many recovery circles. I wasn't even comforted by the fact that your Higher Power could be the sky or a rabbit or a doorknob if you wanted, as long as you had one.

I have always believed that personal agency is important in living a good and successful life, and I didn't like the idea of turning my will over to anyone or anything else. I believe I have always had a good will and a good heart. It was sad that my circumstances and mental health problems obscured those for so long.

So when I looked into Buddhism, I was glad to discover that the ideology completely fit with my own. Much of Buddhism is about cultivating loving-kindness towards both yourself and others, and learning to deal skilfully

with any pain you encounter. I have always been my worst critic, and even in recovery, I had issues with being kind to myself. I would go out of my way to help other people, and doing that would make me happy.

However, at the same time, I could be guilty of neglecting my own needs. I also sometimes felt that I wasn't 'enough', and that I still relied on external circumstances for comfort. So Theravada Buddhism was the final part of the recovery puzzle for me, that spiritual element that I had been lacking, for want of a better word. Contrary to some beliefs, Buddhism isn't a religion; it's an ethos. It's a way of life designed to make you a more caring, resilient and peaceful human being, and better able to cope with your emotions and life's ups and downs.

They say you should always keep working on your recovery, because it is about growth and development as much as it is about staying sober. Following Theravada teachings and practising Mindfulness meditation helps me to continue improving myself and adding to my serenity day by day, while allowing me to do that through personal effort. It takes dedication and commitment, but so does everything that I have learnt which has contributed to my recovery.

7. Changing lives, changing minds

What is most wonderful about all of this is not just that I was able to get myself into recovery by learning all these new things, but that I am able to help many other people through sharing the skills and knowledge I now have.

After completing my NLP Practitioner, I undertook training in coaching and hypnotherapy, too. I now have my own business as a Recovery Coach, and I write books about addiction recovery, sharing what I have learnt. I teach others how to cope with life and its stresses using DBT, NLP, coaching and positive psychology.

I set up my service because I encountered a lot of recovering addicts who still didn't believe in themselves or have any ambitions in life. I saw people who were courageous enough to face up to and beat their addictions, but who still suffered from incredibly low self-esteem—and that was still holding them back. After everything they had been through, I thought these people deserved to have lives worth living and psyches that supported the development of an amazing life.

I believe the key to sustained addiction recovery lies in empowerment, hope and personal fulfilment. And through creating amazing lives for ourselves once we're sober, we show others that recovery is achievable, and that it is worth it. Through sharing our stories and achievements, we are a promotion of recovery to people who are still struggling.

What astounded me about my own journey was all the trial and error I had to endure before learning some very basic fundamentals about recovery, even though I had been in and out of alcohol services for half of my life. It is now one of my missions to help addicts understand about the nature of addiction, and what it takes to achieve recovery, so that they don't have to spend as long making the same mistakes as I did.

There is no one-fits-all solution for addicts, but there are certain facts and foundations that must be understood and implemented in order to achieve a lasting and happy recovery. I don't want people to suffer in bewilderment and frustration as they can't figure out why what they are doing isn't working, especially since there are people like me who have already trod that path and want to help others along it.

My life is pretty much devoted to sharing the message of recovery now. As well as running my service and writing books, I also write articles and make videos about overcoming addiction and how to change your attitude to a more positive and helpful one to cope with life.

And I don't just share the message of recovery, I also write and speak about changing the attitude of the general public towards addiction. Addiction is an illness and we need people to finally understand that, rather than dismissing addicts as weak-willed, immoral or perverse.

I believe that if there wasn't such a massive stigma attached to addiction, then more people would be inclined to seek help. As it is, a lot of addicts wait until they hit a rock bottom or two, before they finally get so desperate that they have no choice but to ask for assistance.

As a society, we need to foster an environment of sympathy and support, rather than judgement and blame, in order that people are able to ask for help sooner. We should encourage people rather than sanction them for admitting they have a problem. Addicts should not have to wait until they have lost everything, including any self-esteem they once had, and are so desperately mired in shame that death or recovery are the only options.

We also need more role models who are prepared to stand up publicly and show that they are not ashamed of being recovering addicts, because there is nothing to be ashamed about. I only understand as much as I do about addiction because others were prepared to share their knowledge with me. I only knew that recovery was possible, and desirable, because of examples of other alcoholics who had found recovery.

But we need to bring that message out of the dimly-lit church halls and into the open for everyone to see. It shouldn't be hidden away, obscure and hard to access. The message should be loud and clear, so that it is accessible to everyone.

For me, I don't feel like I need anything else to enhance my recovery, except to be allowed to contribute to the field and to help others. I am passionate about promoting recovery, challenging stigma, and supporting understanding of addiction and its attendant issues, such as mental health problems and criminal justice issues.

8. Becoming Beth

Now that I am free of the shackles of addiction, I feel like my true colours are allowed to show again. That compassionate and giving heart that was drowned by litres of gin is finally free to love and serve.

Surprisingly to some, I have actually reached a point where I feel happy that my life took the course it did. Although my family and I have been through a whole lot of pain, I feel like the happiness we now have would never have been possible without all the heartache. If I had never had all my issues, I may have taken my cosy little life for granted. I may not have appreciated the freedom I have now, if I had never been in such a perpetual prison as I was. I might never have appreciated the simple joys of life, if they had not been out of my reach for so long. I would never have been able to help other people in the way I can now, if I hadn't spent time lost in the darkness, too.

Learning to deal with both my addictive nature and my BPD has meant that I feel better equipped to deal with life than a lot of non-addicts that I know! Because my 'unskillfulness' got me into so much trouble, I was forced to learn skills that it would greatly benefit everyone to have, addict or not.

Most people do not bother with self-improvement or learning useful tools to deal with life, because they don't get themselves into dire straits without them. I am lucky I was pushed into a corner, because now I deal with issues in a much healthier way than many non-addicts. I never get stressed out these days, because I have my tools. In fact, I now run anti-stress workshops for 'norms'!

I believe all my troubles have also improved my character. If I had never been forced to take a long hard look at myself, I might have gone through life not bothering to iron out my faults, nor to build on my good qualities. I would never have had the chance to be exactly who I am now—a happy, giving, grateful person who embraces life and strives to live it fully. I am far from perfect, and I still have the odd 'Borderline' moment, but I have learnt that that's okay too, as long as I learn from my mistakes and do the right thing as far as I can. It's a lovely way to live life.

No matter what life throws at me, what pain I might have to endure, if I always do the right thing by myself and others, I can put my head on the pillow every night and sleep easily. Knowing you have your integrity intact is the most amazingly satisfying and freeing feeling of all, especially having come from such a murky and shame-ridden place.

That is my message of recovery. If you are truly committed to escaping from the darkness of addiction, and to working at your recovery, there is a wonderful reward on the other side. You have to want it, to commit it, to be willing to learn from others and to make changes.

Recovery does not mean I am immune from problems or that life is always peachy. The very nature of life is that it can sometimes be changeable, hard, frustrating and unfair. But recovery means that I can deal with challenges in a healthy, positive way, instead of hiding from them or making things worse. When things get tough, I don't have to resort to drink or drugs, or cause even more pain and suffering to myself or those around me.

I can finally make choices about how I react to life, and how I live it. My reward is freedom, self-respect and integrity–exactly the things that my alcoholism once took from me. I'm finally proud of who I am. And finally I'm the real Beth.

'God grant me the serenity
to accept the things I cannot change;
courage to change the things I can;
and wisdom to know the difference.'

…..

Seven Years On: July 2020

Since I wrote my original Story, nothing has changed and yet everything has changed.

1. Success

I got my wish to contribute more to the field of addiction recovery and help others. I have appeared in national newspapers and magazines and on the radio raising awareness of mental health and addiction recovery.

In 2015, I became the chairwoman of a charity supporting people trapped in the cycle of addiction, criminal justice system, and mental health problems.

In 2016, I had two academic papers published in a book designed to educate student doctors, counsellors, and others who may one day work with addiction. One paper covered how stigma prevents recovery, while the other investigated the root causes of addiction and potential pathways for healing.

I have tried to live the message that addicts in recovery can make a hugely valuable contribution to the world. And yet, since 2014, I have spent a large proportion of my time curled up in bed.

2. Disaster

In October 2013, I suddenly felt as if the whole word had been turned on its axis. I don't mean metaphorically. I tried to get out of bed one morning and the room started spinning. I dragged myself to the doctor's office by clinging to the railings at the side of the pavement. I was diagnosed with Labyrinthitis and assured that I would recover completely. Except, I didn't.

After a few months of feeling like I was on a not-so-merry-go-round, the violent whirling settled into a milder, but constant, dizziness. The sense of imbalance was accompanied by other unpleasant symptoms, from tinnitus, to headaches, to fatigue, to nausea, to photophobia. Noise, light, and movement were my worst enemies. After seeing numerous specialists, I was eventually diagnosed with Vestibular Migraine, a neurological disorder.

I had to give up my coaching and psychotherapy practice, my speaking engagements, and my workshops. I could no longer do the most simple of things, like showering, shopping and cooking. You can't safely chop carrots when you feel like you've just stepped off a roundabout. Socialising became impossible. Talking tired me out and there was virtually no public place where the lighting didn't trigger a migraine.

I surprised myself by how well I dealt with my life-changing illness most of the time. For that, I thank Buddhism. I completed the shift from AA to Buddhist recovery as more Buddhism-inspired groups became available. I have finally found my recovery 'home' in a program called Recovery Dharma and a discussion group called Fifth Precept. Thanks to following Buddhist principles, when I got ill, I didn't despair at first.

However, after a few years of trialling ineffective medications with horrific side effects, my mood became so low that I sought counselling. I was looking for support with pain management and a space to grieve the loss of my former life. But counselling led me somewhere completely unexpected; into a past I didn't even know I had.

3. Questions

I had never understood the reason for my numerous mental health disorders. I knew that problems as self-destructive as mine usually resulted from childhood trauma, but I couldn't pinpoint anything terrible that had happened to me. Since I had stopped harming myself and was happy, it hadn't seemed necessary to investigate the source of my old self-damaging streak. However, when my counsellor suggested that my illness might be psychosomatic, that all changed.

Psychosomatic illness means that instead of symptoms having a purely physical cause, there are psychological reasons for them too. Most people have experienced brief, mild psychosomatic illnesses; the tension headache is a classic example.

I remember the exact date my illness started. When the doctors diagnosed me, I replayed the preceding day many times over, trying to recall potential triggers. But I had been in great health, which was puzzling and frustrating. There seemed to be no reason I had gone from perfectly healthy to a bed-bound invalid in the space of one day.

Some of the doctors asked if I suffered from stress or anxiety. Having recovered from a huge anxiety disorder, I knew it wasn't that. I had genuinely been at one of the happiest points in my life when I suddenly fell ill. So when my counsellor mentioned psychosomatic illness, I was about to dismiss psychological causes out of hand. Then, she explained that she wasn't referring to everyday stresses, but something deeper.

4. Revelations

I have to give huge credit to my counsellor here. Over the course of my life, I have seen numerous therapists, psychiatrists and psychologists, some with decades of experience. However, this lady spotted

something that none of the others ever had. I had endured trauma after all. Severe, chronic, repeated childhood trauma.

I cannot go into the exact nature of that trauma on these pages. However, my counsellor helped me see it and explained why I, and everyone else in my life at the time, had been blind to it. It was insidious and so very damaging, precisely because it went unnoticed. Because no-one saw it, no-one told me I was being hurt and it was wrong. No-one offered comfort or help. As a result, I 'normalised' what happened and never understood how damaging my experiences were, or how they affected me as an adult.

It was a shock to realise that my childhood, and even some of my adulthood, had essentially been a lie. But it was also relief; through finally knowing the truth, I could move forward.

5. Psychosomatism

Trauma wreaks havoc on your nervous system. Even if you don't mentally acknowledge something as trauma, your body pumps out cortisol and adrenaline in response to what you're enduring. One major function of these chemicals is to help you fight or flee in response to danger.

When trauma is chronic and you can't escape it, your body remains in a constant state of stress. Over time, this can cause health problems. Chronic psychosomatic illness is strongly linked with chronic trauma; it can perhaps best be understood as a sort of drawn-out post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

In this context, when I revisited the exact time my illness started, the trauma stared me straight in the face. There was no denying it; the day before I got sick had been a tipping point for my body. My nervous system couldn't take any more traumatisation and waved the white flag.

6. Addiction and trauma

With a revised view of my childhood, I finally understood the pattern of all my mental health problems. Although I cannot go into the details of my trauma here, I feel I would do other addicts a disservice if I didn't write about the fact that it happened.

While researching my academic papers on addiction, the evidence suggested to me that alcoholism is caused by a biological predisposition plus trauma. This made sense to me. Who would ever willingly risk their life and everything they care about for a drink? Probably no-one; unless they had been traumatised.

Trauma builds into us feelings of worthlessness and self-destructive urges. We experience people as being inherently untrustworthy, so when we have problems, we don't reach out for help, instead relying on the comfort of a liquid. Deep down, we feel that a lethal painkiller is all we deserve to soothe us.

The prevalence of trauma had been apparent in my experience of working with addicts. I had seen myself as an outlier. I now understand that I had just as traumatic a childhood as most addicts did. I just didn't know it.

It is common for traumatised people to ‘normalise’ terrible events; so much so that they sometimes aren't aware of them. They may never understand that the past is fuelling their pain and low self-esteem and thereby their addiction.

I hope my own experience of unacknowledged trauma helps people to sympathise (empathise?) with the choices of an addict where there has been no apparent ‘reason’ for someone taking that path.

I encourage all recovering addicts to consider trauma work or counselling. What is not healed is eventually revealed. The more work you do, the better your chances of avoiding further difficulties. If I had understood what had happened to me earlier, I might have prevented my chronic illness.

7. Moving on

Counselling didn’t cure my illness. However, it gave me answers, insight, a new direction, and renewed courage. I realised that the less I do, the smaller my life will be. I never want to return to being bed-bound. So, day by day, month by month, I trained myself to do more activities.

Armed with sunglasses to cope with bright lights and my favourite music for focus, I can once again do things I never thought I could. I have gone from only being able to walk for five minutes to pounding the streets for hours. I can visit the shops, sit in a cafe, and even do some cooking without risking losing my fingers.

Last summer, I started doing yoga, which was scary considering my atrocious balance. But for the first time since my illness started, I managed to stand on one leg. While that’s not vastly helpful for everyday activities, it has given me renewed confidence that my brain and body can relearn things.

As with every obstacle I have ever experienced, my health difficulties have given me extraordinary gifts. There is no greater freedom than being authentic and my illness has taught me to be even more unafraid of being me.

Half of the battle with doing activities was worrying what other people would think about my wobbly walking or me hanging onto things to keep upright. I no longer care. I often walk around the supermarket in sunglasses on a dark winter night and if people stare, it honestly just makes me smile. If only socially phobic Beth could see me now.

My health problems have taught me the importance of boundaries, balance, and self-care. I used to be quite the workaholic, often to my own detriment. When having a shower becomes an achievement, you re-evaluate your priorities. I can say ‘no’ more easily and accept help; and those were things I struggled with all my life. And, of course, I will never again let anyone hurt me. Self-protection was a huge message from my illness and I have listened.

8. The future

As I write this, I feel supremely grateful. While I have not had an easy life by any means, and I still don't, I am amazingly blessed. Life in recovery really is a gift and one that I cherish.

I hope this explains why ‘nothing had changed, and yet everything has changed’, since my original Story was published. I am still passionate about sobriety and helping other people. While my life may look vastly different, I am doing as much growing, learning, and appreciating as ever.

I have no idea if I will ever get completely healthy again. According to specialists, the likelihood of me getting better is low. But if you have learned anything from my story, I hope you've seen that addicts are fighters.

When I was 23, I was given a year-and-a-half to live by a doctor. I have just turned 40. I have a habit of overcoming substantial odds. Whether I recover my health or not, I am going to have as much fun as possible trying. My story is not over; not by a long shot.