

LIVING THROUGH OUR SON'S ADDICTION AND DEATH: OUR RECOVERY JOURNEY

IAN AND IRENE'S STORY

*After losing their son Robin to a heroin overdose,
Ian and Irene set up CPSG (Carer and Parent Support Gloucestershire),
to help family members avoid some of the problems they experienced.*

We believe that it's important to recognise that recovery is not only about people with a substance use problem, but also about those people concerned about their use—parents, siblings, partners and others who are dragged into the user's world of addiction, and whose lives are impacted upon negatively.

Our story is one of the relatively brief addiction of our younger son Robin, which tragically resulted in his death by a heroin overdose after just a few years' use, and our recovery as a family over a much longer period of time.

Our son Robin died from an accidental heroin overdose in November 1997, aged 27. Such a matter of fact statement, but we need to go back a long way from 1997 to paint the whole picture.

1. Happy family life

Ian and Irene: We considered ourselves a very ordinary little family—Mum, Dad and two sons—just getting on with our lives. We had the usual traumas to experience: the terrible 'twos'; the settling into full-time school; the worrying about the 11+ exams, swiftly followed by the 'O' and 'A' level exams; and then the decisions as to what should follow, university, college or employment?

The usual family rows and squabbles occurred as well, but we always considered we were a happy little family with no particular financial or other worries. The biggest rows in the boys' teenage years were motorbikes, fashions and hair length, closely followed by loud music and occasionally dubious choice of friends. No different to many families in Britain.

We thought we'd experienced all the 'aggro' and that once they were into their 20s all would be well. Our older son, Sean, met a Kiwi girl, married her, and went off to live and work in New Zealand. So that was the first unexpected thing for us, but we accepted this quite happily and life went on.

Robin, who was always quiet and biddable, loved and played music, and worked as a self-employed builder/sub-contractor, left home to live with his partner nearby, so we still had regular contact with him. We both had interesting jobs, were financially sound, and our quality of life was high. We were busily patting ourselves on the back at how well we managed our lives and family when heroin entered our lives....

2. Heroin enters our life

Irene: I can still remember Robin telling me that he and his partner were splitting up because they were not getting on, and then the horror of his partner telling me why this was happening. Our lovely quiet son was using heroin and had been for some time. The shock of this totally knocked me over and I simply could not take it in.

My initial feeling of horror was soon accompanied by fear for Robin, fear of anyone else finding out, and the thought that as a family we could 'fix' it and no one else would need to know. My self-esteem as a parent took a battering, and I began to search for all sorts of things I might have done or have not done that had made Robin decide to use heroin.

Strangely enough, I never blamed Robin for this decision. I was determined to find out what his Dad or I had done to cause this—it was as if Robin had to be absolved from any blame.

Ian: I spent many hours after we discovered Robin's dependence talking to him about it and trying to gain some understanding. I believed that I was helping him to deal with it, but in my ignorance I really didn't know the proper way to go about this and could only offer him encouragement and support in his efforts to stop using. I might add that there was more than a hint of resentment about the way I was assumed to be able to cope, but I soldiered on and when he stopped using and was in recovery for over six months I thought, 'Great!'

Ian & Irene: Our guilt and sorrow were enormous and endured in secret. We decided not to tell Rob's brother in New Zealand what was going on, because it seemed pointless distressing him when he was so far away and unable to do much but worry. We also really believed that we could handle the situation, quickly sort things out, and get everything back to normal.

However, when we reflect back about this particular period in our lives, we can now see that however we dressed up our reasons for keeping it to ourselves, the truth was that as well as believing that we could fix it, we wanted to avoid having to deal with the stigma attached to drug users and their families. We were his parents, well used to making things right for him, so why should this be any different. How little we knew!

So here we were faced with this problem, but with very little knowledge of drugs and what they can do. We realise now what we didn't see: that the drug use was Robin's problem (not ours), and dealing with the consequences of his use was our problem. However, these facts were not apparent to us amidst the horror of what was happening in our family.

3. Trying to cope

Irene: After a sleepless night, I set out to seek help. My first stop was the Citizen's Advice Bureau, but on arrival there I suddenly felt I could not stay as everyone looked so nice and ordinary. I felt I would be judged—not a rational thought I know, but I was not in a rational state of mind.

My next stop was the local library, where I had a couple of leaflets thrust into my hand. One leaflet was for a service that had closed down, and the other was for the National Drugs Helpline who were sympathetic, but didn't have any real advice or information to give me, apart from trying to seek a support group locally.

Robin was already engaged with our local drug service, so that was at least some ground for hope, but because of confidentiality I was not included in this. We felt very helpless and alone with the horror of it all.

So, we struggled on, living our lives as usual in public and suffering in private. To this day, I cannot bear our telephone to ring at night in case it's to tell me bad news. I have got this under a modicum of control now, but the fear will never entirely go away and I live with it as best I can.

We struggled on for 18 months, during which time our relationship suffered greatly, but was strong enough to cope with what was happening. Trips away were a nightmare, because we were never sure what we would be coming back to, so we tended just to stay put and worry at home.

Ian: I had been genuinely optimistic about Robin's success in stopping his use. He had found a new partner with whom he was very happy, had stopped using for over six months, during which time they'd managed a trip to New Zealand to visit his brother Sean, with several other stops on the way there and back, so things were looking more hopeful.

However, as I now know, six months is nothing at all in terms of recovery time and sadly it wasn't to last. He lapsed, felt ashamed about it, and tried again to get clean. After a period of cutting down on his use, he was supplied with some heroin that was later found to be much less 'cut' than usual, and in combination with the drop in tolerance from his gradual reduction, this tragically resulted in a fatal overdose.

Irene: Then we received the phone call we had long dreaded. It was an ordinary Tuesday evening in November, with me settling down to watch TV and Ian getting ready to go out for a curry with his work colleagues, when Robin's partner rang to say that she had found him dead in their home when she came in from work.

If we had thought the previous 18 months had been a nightmare, they were nothing compared to what was to follow. We leapt into the car for the five-minute journey to Robin's house and I have no recollection to this day of driving there. There were police and ambulances already there and we just seemed to be in the way. The paramedic was gentle and kind and said he was so sorry that he could do nothing.

The police, I am afraid to say, appeared cold and unfeeling. We wanted to see Robin but were told in no uncertain terms that we could not see 'the body', as it was considered to be part of a potential crime scene. Only after making a huge fuss were we permitted to see our son in the mortuary several days later. Whilst I now understand to some extent why they did this, I will never forgive the police for their attitude to two newly bereaved parents.

Our lives were now changed permanently. So much for our attempted secrecy—the local press made sure that everyone knew all the details, even calling on our neighbours for comments.

4. Dealing with loss

Ian & Irene: We now inhabited a frightening and strange world. It was as if we were in some sort of parallel universe with everything in the world going on normally and us watching it through a mist. Life did go on, but this time it was on autopilot. Somehow, we managed to survive the early aftermath of Robin's untimely death, though sometimes we were so wracked with grief that life seemed pointless.

The funeral took place, and one thing that we registered clearly when we saw all his friends and colleagues there, was how much he was loved by people other than just his family. We took a degree of comfort from this fact. Sean flew over from New Zealand to attend the funeral and spend a bit of time with us, but when it was time for him to return to his home on the other side of the world, it felt like another bereavement.

Irene: The days, weeks and months after the funeral were hard, but we stood together and supported each other as best we could. That's not to say that there weren't occasions when we lashed out at each other in our individual grief, but we were managing (just) to exist in this strange new world without our younger son. I'm ashamed now to say that I used to look at apparently happy families and resent them, questioning why this should happen to us and not them.

Ian: We found that everyone was very concerned about Irene, but I, as the husband and father, seemed to be assumed by many to be able to take it all on board and stoically cope without their concern and sympathy.

I should add that I had also to cope with worries about some bizarre behaviour from Irene during the aftermath of Rob's death, as she took to driving off in the night, when she couldn't sleep, to who knows where, and hanging around near a dealer's house watching what was going on! I was worried about her safety as well as her sanity, but thankfully this state of affairs didn't last, although it caused me great concern while it was going on!

Irene: We both went back to our jobs and tried to get back to a semblance of a normal life. After some time, this got a little easier, although I still had problems as I used to suffer pangs of guilt if I was enjoying something and forgot Robin for a time. At the time, I felt that I was not supposed to be happy again.

Well-meaning friends kept telling me to 'move on', but 'move on where?' I would ask. They had no answer. Other friends appeared to avoid me, and if we did meet were reluctant to mention Robin's name and appeared anxious to leave. Someone even said, 'At least you have another son.' I know this was well-meant, but it felt like a knife in my heart.

I also felt that because of how Rob had died, I wasn't entitled to show my utter grief and despair. No one ever suggested that this should be the case, it was just me looking for another stick with which to beat

myself. I now know, however, that this is not an uncommon reaction in such circumstances, and is known as 'disenfranchised grief.'

Ian: I recall an argument we had in the early days after Robin's death. We were on our way to visit Irene's sister, had stopped in town to buy some flowers, and I'd put the steering wheel lock on prior to leaving the car. When we returned, I realised that I'd left the key at home—something I'd never done before, but we were both still functioning on autopilot and keys were not at the front of my mind. I told Irene to wait there while I walked home for it, and her reaction took me aback.

She completely lost her temper and yelled, 'How could you do this to me? I've just lost my son!' I found myself responding, 'You seem to have forgotten he was my son too!' We looked at each other in horror, realising just how we each felt, and that moment actually brought us closer together in our grief. I believe that a very early shoot of recovery grew from that moment, although I didn't recognise it as such at the time.

So we limped on, and withdrew to lick our wounds and grieve for our son and all that lost potential.

5. Starting a support service

Ian & Irene: After 18 months of endeavouring to get things back on track, we began to acknowledge that our lives would never be the same again and accepted that it would not be bad, just different. We then began to wonder if there was any possibility of something positive coming from Robin's death. We spoke to each other for a long time about this and discussed all kinds of things we might do, but nothing seemed quite right.

However, it occurred to us one night that what we could do would be to provide what we had wanted when we first discovered Robin's addiction to heroin. Quite simply, someone to talk to, understand what we were going through, be non-judgemental, have a knowledge of drugs and addiction, and be able to act as a signpost to further help.

And so, on another cold November night, CPSG (Carer and Parent Support Gloucestershire) was conceived. We agreed that this service should be free and confidential, and available to anyone concerned about another person's substance use. We planned to run the service from home on a separate dedicated telephone helpline, a website and an e-mail option. We would require minimal funding, just for running costs, as our time would be given freely.

At last we knew what we wanted to do, and now the hard work started in getting our proposed service up and running. This was really the start of our recovery, and we began by reading everything we could lay our hands on regarding drugs and alcohol, and then looked at getting some training to get started. We spent many months getting ourselves known, making appropriate contacts, and completing various training courses and research. Our recovery grew and progressed with the knowledge and understanding that we gained.

Initially, the response to our idea was not very encouraging. All services were chasing funding and, locally at least, we were a different type of service in the substance use world. We were treated with a mixture of indifference and suspicion in the beginning, but gradually we got a foothold.

Our very first funders were Cheltenham Round Table, who offered to pay for the installation of our phone line and the cost of running it for one year. Several local businesses responded to our requests for donations, and later our local DAAT offered us funding on an annual basis, so we were able to start for real in 2002.

CPSG was now underway and since then it has gone from strength to strength. In the early days, we attempted to establish a support group, but didn't succeed in attracting sufficient numbers to make it sustainable. We therefore changed to offering one-to-one sessions by appointment, and that has become a core part of what we do.

6. Early recovery moments

Irene: I remember what I now think of as my first real recovery moment, although I didn't see it as such at the time. I had been supporting another mother through her son's addiction and subsequent recovery, and she had called on the helpline to tell me that things were going well, that he had just been accepted back into university, and to thank me for the ongoing support. She then went on to say:

'You've been so helpful and knowledgeable about the problem that I can't believe you made a mistake with your own son.'

I found myself replying:

'Oh no, Mrs P. I didn't make the mistake—he did. I just picked up the mess.'

It was quite a Damascene moment for me and I felt so positive about it. She quickly said that she realised it was a bit of a thoughtless thing to say to me, but I assured her that was not the case, and that thanks to her I was able to realise how much more I understood about addiction and recovery.

The way I bounced straight back with my comment without even thinking about it made me realise how recovery was happening to me too. I no longer felt the need to make excuses for Robin's drug use, and accepted that no guilt on my part was necessary. Lasting sadness yes, but certainly no guilt!

Ian: A few years after CPSG was founded, we attended a family seminar weekend at the Nelson Trust (a local rehab), initially as observers so that we could tell clients about it, although at their suggestion we decided to participate as family members. One of the workshops was Therapeutic Writing, in which we were asked to write a letter to the substance that had impacted on our family.

We had no prior knowledge of this task, no opportunity to discuss it beforehand, and were seated well apart at opposite sides of the room. However, when Irene and I read each other's letters at the end of the session,

we were amazed to find that they were almost identical! This illustrated to us that, despite thinking that we coped and grieved quite differently at the time, our thoughts and feelings were almost identical in the aftermath—a salutary lesson that reinforced our recovery!

Irene: During a multi-services meeting, I met with the CEO of the Independence Trust who, when he learned of my great interest in the ‘substance world’, suggested I might like to be a volunteer with his organisation. I thought long and hard about this matter and decided I would be interested. I duly applied, was interviewed, and selected for training. Three months later, I was working one day a week in the Cheltenham base and very much enjoying the experience.

It put my own life into perspective when I encountered the many and varied clients who attended. I was trained to work in the Needle Exchange and initially was not sure if this was the place for me.

How wrong could I be—I loved it! I liked meeting the clients and interacting with them. I never lost sight of the fact that they were someone else’s son or daughter, so treated them with the respect that I hoped my own son had received.

In fact, one of my earliest ‘recovery moments’ occurred when I was on duty but had time off to attend the funeral of a young heroin user. After the service, a friend asked if I was going on to the little gathering in a local hotel and I said I couldn’t because I was on duty at the needle exchange. She looked at me in horror, and asked how I could go back there and give out needles after what I had just experienced.

I found myself saying without any hesitation, ‘Because I truly believe that it’s right.’ Coming from me, a woman who had wanted all needle exchanges closed down several years before, this was really something!

Far from encouraging drug users, the needle exchange keeps them as safe as possible whilst they are still considering what they want to do. Sometimes, it’s one of the few places where a user isn’t judged, but gets a bit of respect and genuine concern for their wellbeing.

Ian: In the early days of CPSG, and after completing a course with PADA (Parents Against Drug Abuse), I was invited to join the board of FAMFED, a national federation of family support groups inaugurated by them. I was both surprised and pleased by this invite, and it made me reflect on how far I’d moved on since the aftermath of Robin’s death. I served in that capacity until its demise several years later due to lack of available funding.

Once we had some experience and a number of courses under our belts, we became members of FDAP (Federation of Drug & Alcohol Professionals). It was while attending their annual conference in 2007 that I first met David Clark, although I’d had some previous email correspondence with him about his articles in Daily Dose. We found that we had much common thinking about the issues involved in substance use

treatment and recovery, have been friends ever since. Irene and I were members of Wired In To Recovery from its inception to closing.

I've also been involved with the National Treatment Agency, as a member and subsequent chair of their South West Region Carer Forum. Opportunities like this and with FAMFED, where I was able to influence opinion and meet with other family support leads and carers, have been a fundamental part of my personal recovery.

Irene: Another landmark recovery moment happened when I was on duty with the Independence Trust. A colleague introduced a client to me by saying:

'I'll pass you on to my esteemed colleague, who can help you with this.'

It was said in a jocular fashion, but it made me realise how far I'd come to gain the respect of other project workers. Ten years earlier, when I was being very vociferous about perceived failings in the treatment system, during a meeting that I'd been grudgingly allowed to attend, I heard myself referred to as a 'bloody pest'. Recalling this particular meeting after my colleague's comment, I had a quiet laugh and said to him:

'Not bad—bloody pest to esteemed colleague in ten years!'

We both realise that recovery is an ongoing process and one that will always be with us. Even now, 15 years on, I still have bad days when regrets and grief overwhelm me. These feelings can strike without any warning and for no particular reason, but I am learning how to deal with them as I progress along my own personal recovery path. I accept the bad feelings and embrace the positives that recovery is showing me.

Robin will always be with us spiritually. How could he not be? However, realistically I know we each walk a different path, although I fervently hope that one day mine will cross with his, and that's one of the things that recovery means to me.

Ian: Sometimes, it's the little things that are significant recovery moments. Like the many comments from family members who we've supported, confirming to us that their contacting CPSG has been of genuine benefit to them. Things like:

'I can only say that without the sincere, continued support of Irene & Ian, I'm not sure I would still be alive.'

That particular endorsement made us feel that all our efforts have been worthwhile.

7. Last reflections

Ian & Irene: One of the kinder circumstances of Robin's situation was that he continued to work during his relatively short addiction, so never had to resort, as many do, to theft or other crime in order to fund his habit.

He also had a very supportive partner, who continued to encourage and support him throughout his efforts at recovery, and for that we are eternally grateful.

Three years after Robin's death, we were gifted with the birth in New Zealand of our older son Sean's daughter Ellis. Watching her grow and develop has brought us great joy and contentment. It's demonstrated to us that life is moving on for us as a family despite it all, and that too is part of our recovery.

What our experience has given us is a great insight into, and an absorbing interest in, the substance use and recovery field. We've been able to translate our knowledge and understanding into a service that provides help for those people (particularly family members) who have been affected by another person's drug or alcohol use. Our ongoing work has not only been rewarding, but has also been a major factor in our own recovery.

What we'd like to say in conclusion, is that we're now in 'sustained recovery', and have found acceptance of what happened. Life is once again good for us. It's not what we envisaged, just different—we manage and are content. As Mindfulness teaches us, we don't dwell in the past, but live in and deal with the present, and don't look too far into the future. This approach works for us.

Whilst we will never 'get over' Robin's death, fifteen years on we feel that we can genuinely say we have learned to accommodate it, and are getting on with our lives. So yes, we too are in recovery and feel very privileged to have been asked to contribute our Story.

The process of writing our Story has also had the benefit of helping us realise just how far we've come with our own recovery.

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Seven Years On (June 2020):

Irene: What have I learned of myself in the past seven years? Firstly, recovery is an ever-changing world and I am constantly learning how to accommodate this. I thought it would be a smooth upward trajectory and was absolutely horrified to find that I have lapses from time to time, which I realise are very similar in intensity to those experienced by substance users in their own recovery, although obviously not exactly the same.

Some of these lapses I can understand. They occur on a specific memorable date for me and I have learned to become aware of this trigger; when the lapse occurs, I am prepared for it to a certain extent. Other lapses are more difficult to anticipate, e.g. when I catch sight of a young man who resembles Robin, hear a song he used to like, or see a film or a book he enjoyed.

The odd thing is that these particular lapses can be pleasurable at the time, recalling old memories before the harsh truth kicks in that this is all they are—simply treasured memories. It is hard to move on from lapses of this sort, but I try to do so without spoiling the memories they invoke.

Secondly, it's also still hard for me to see Robin's group of friends getting on with their lives with their own families. They are getting older, whilst Robin will always be 27 to me. Again, this is something I am still trying to deal with, and I sometimes feel that I may never be able to come to terms with it. I think it is regret for what might have been, rather than any form of jealousy—at least I hope so.

It would not be an exaggeration to say that Robin's death shook the foundations of my existence, and it has been a long, hard heartbreaking climb back. My life is not what I imagined it would be, but it is by no means bad—simply different, and I endeavour to embrace these differences and move on.

I became the manager of a needle exchange back in 2008/9. Me, who felt that needle exchanges were the work of the devil when I discovered that Robin was obtaining the means to inject himself with heroin from strangers on one side of town, whilst on my side I was desperately trying to get him to stop. I recall how I ranted and I raved about them, but I really knew nothing about how needle exchange services worked or what they were trying to achieve.

However, once I learned what they were trying to do, I became a fervent harm reductionist. I imagine Robin would find this about-turn by me quite strange and possibly even ironically amusing, but I also hope he would be pleased that I was beginning to understand, without necessarily approving of, his views.

It is 23 years since Robin died and whilst I am able to accommodate this fact, I remain heartbroken by his physical absence, which has left a large hole in my life that can never be filled. I still experience flashbacks and have never lost my fear of the phone ringing late at night—the latter is under a bit of control now, but will never disappear.

I still fear bad things happening in my world and to my other son who lives in New Zealand. I have had to re-think my life and decide what is important and what is less important. I also feel that the loss of Robin has made me more aware of other people's problems, less judgemental and hopefully kinder.

You could say that Robin and I are both victims of heroin—him for his decision to use and me for having to live with the consequences of his decision. Wounded but still walking—that's how I see myself—yet another casualty of the so-called War on Drugs. My recovery is ongoing and at whatever pace I feel comfortable with, but I will never be 'recovered'. How could I be?

Ian: Irene has written the above update to our story from a personal point of view, and I will give a brief history of our CPSG charity which provided information and support for anyone affected by another's substance use.

We lost our funding in 2016 as a result of the re-commissioning of Gloucestershire drug and alcohol services. We had some contingency money left in the account which allowed us to continue to a small extent, but that expired in 2018. Sadly, the charity was dissolved in April 2019 after 16 years of service.

However, we still maintain a close interest in the drugs field and the recovery movement. We have collaborated on projects, mainly around bereavement through addiction, with the charities Adfam and DHI (Developing Health & Independence), and Bath and Sheffield Universities. Being active members of the Wired In community also contributed to our own personal recovery process.

Irene has completed six years as a board member of DHI Bath, specialising in family issues. She was invited to join the board after an impassioned talk about the reasons for, and benefits of, needle exchanges at one of their events. She continues to speak at such events when asked.

We both maintain an interest in the field in general and, in conversation with the CEO of one of the national organisations, mentioned that 'families need to recover too.' The reply was, 'You know, I've never really thought of that and will remember it.' So, we do still contribute!

Many people have, over the years, questioned why we chose to work in the field after Robin's death. Initially, it was for us to get an understanding, which developed into an unexpected passion for the work. This passion and the work have greatly contributed to our ongoing recovery.

For myself, I still very much miss Robin and the times we could have had with him. However, like Irene, I have come to terms with the loss, although 'recovery' is still an ongoing process.