

Emily's story

After years of being unemployed and fearing she had no prospects, BCHA helped Emily find her perfect job: using her experience to help others with addiction issues.

I'd been using recreational drugs since I was 13. As I got older, I always took drugs at weekends – and my weekends always started on a Thursday.



After my father died in 1997, I took drugs so I wouldn't have to admit he was really gone. Despite having a young son at home, I started using every day. My nose was too damaged to snort speed so I was literally eating it during the day – starting with a teaspoon in the morning just to get out of bed. I'd take ecstasy to get to sleep and painkillers to create that munged out feeling. And, because amphetamines dull alcohol, I'd drink a bottle of vodka without much effect.

Things started to change on the eve of the new millennium, which I spent on my own. As a result of my drug use, I'd had clinical depression and a breakdown. I had psychosis and paranoia brought on by amphetamines. I weighed seven stone and my teeth were rotten. And I'd put myself in some really dangerous situations. I thought: if I don't do something about this, I'm going to die.

And so, on 23 May 2000, I stopped. I didn't know about the agencies who could help so a group of my friends (who were not drug users) came to my house – which I didn't leave for three months – and helped me get clean. Since then, my life has completely changed. I have a job that I love – and a son that says he's proud of me.

I came to BCHA through New Deal and explained I wanted to use my own experience to work with people with addiction issues. The BCHA advisor really gave me faith that what I wanted was achievable. Not once was I told to forget it – in fact, completely the opposite. My BCHA advisor arranged an extended six-month placement with the Alleyway Trust, a drop-in service for people involved in substance abuse. During this time, I got fantastic support from my BCHA advisor – who I met weekly – and my mentor at Alleyway Trust. It's thanks to them that I'm where I am now.

The BCHA advisor encouraged me to apply for a support worker role at St Paul's, which I got. I could see St Paul's was a really important hub for people who get missed out. I was trusted to bring in things I knew would improve the service – harm minimization initiatives like needle exchange, detox programmes and overdose training for staff and service users. BCHA have been really supportive while I've done work-related courses and voluntary work – and have even supported me through my degree.

I don't need the drugs to feel comfortable with who I am. The other day at work, I mentioned that I'd been clean for since 2000 – and my co-worker said he had no idea I'd been an addict. That was the best feeling – knowing I'm not judged on who I was, but on the work I do now.

