



# We are family:

stories of family and whānau  
affected by someone else's use  
of alcohol or other drugs



## *Foreword*

Welcome to this collection of courageous people's personal stories.

Problematic use of alcohol and other drugs (AOD) affects people across all walks of life and at all stages of life. Being affected by someone else's problematic use of AOD can be challenging, shameful and lonely. Silence divides us and diminishes our strength.

These are stories of courage and hope, people sharing their journey with us and providing an antidote to the shame and stigma that keeps people isolated. We are connected through story. We see ourselves on the page and know we are not alone. There is hope.

Gratitude and respect for the people who so generously shared their stories with us.

*Caro, Joe, Marc, Damian, Rhonda,  
Sheridan, Suzy and Adrienne*

*The Matua Raki Consumer Leadership Group*

Some authors have chosen not to use their real names.

Some of the services described may no longer be available.

Stock photos of models have been used for privacy reasons.



# Marge: A family story

"Like many partners, I suspect, I never thought that I would be in the situation where I was living with someone with active addiction."

When the opportunity to write a piece for this publication came up, I stalled. What if I was exposed? If people found out it was me, what would people think? It's not my story to tell and I am as protective as any other family of my loved ones. I don't want them to be judged. Good people do wrong things. What started me writing was remembering that this is part of the condition of an affected family member. Hiding. Protecting. Controlling. And I knew that this is what I would have loved to have access to all those years ago.

Like many partners, I suspect, I never thought that I would be in the situation where I was living with someone with active addiction. Sure, there were signs when we were younger, he drank a little more than the rest of us, was the first to start and the last to finish, but we were young. We were all at it. It didn't really get in the way. In fact drinking was a hobby for all of us then.

But then we all started to grow out of it and he didn't. He actually grew more into it and it seemed like we had headed in different directions. I reached a point where I rarely drank as someone needed to be the sober and rational one at all times. What a responsibility to have. In the early days I would make excuses for his behaviour and be concerned that it would reflect on me. Fear of shame and judgment is what kept me in the dark. I think I was mainly fearful of the pity. That I would be looked at differently. I had created this image of myself and I was as attached to that as he was to the alcohol.

What woke me up was after one incident when I realised that I actually couldn't cope with all of this by myself. Not because I wasn't a strong and capable woman, but because this was too big for one person. So I reached out. I told a trusted person. And another. And I told myself that it didn't much matter what people thought of me. In the end, I think that telling people enhanced the relationship. For once, I was showing some vulnerability and I've come to learn that it takes more strength to reveal myself to others than it does to maintain a veneer of coping. It was worth the effort though, as I started to feel like I was one whole person instead of being split in two.

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In terms of how I manage the ongoing situation now, I know that in a relationship we can't be all things that people need. So I fill my bucket in other ways. I have an active social life and good friends, some who know and some who don't. Not everyone has earned the right to hear the whole story. I take care of my body, from the outside and the inside, get good sleep and laugh often. Sometimes, I get a little boost from a short course of counselling. Sometimes I have a big vent. Sometimes I take antidepressants. Sometimes I write furiously in my journal like my life depends on it. I know what I will and won't tolerate, and remove myself from situations as I need to. The safety of my family is always paramount and not for compromise. For me it's never sat well with me to cover up for him, or clean up afterwards. Those natural consequences are part of his condition not mine.

My decision to stay has been hard for some to understand, but I'm okay. I have a good life. I'm usually cheerful. I have been able to live well alongside this good man that happens to have a chronic condition. Of course, I'd like him to stop, because we're not getting any younger and alcohol takes its relentless toll on a body. But he isn't just this condition and I'm pretty happy to be in his company.



# Peter's story

"My wife dropped through many cracks in the system. No one seemed to look at the repeated crises."

My wife and I married in 1974 and moved into our house in Hawera. She often tried to stop me from going to work because she felt she couldn't cope. My work suffered as I feared she would commit suicide while I was away.

She became pregnant and the depression got worse after our first baby. The doctors called it post-natal depression. She regularly visited our GP and I went with her to see what could be done to help. He prescribed me with valerian and advised us not to have more children. My wife got pregnant with our second child. After the birth, her health deteriorated and she attempted to take her own life. That night a new doctor came to the house to give her a sedative. He wasn't satisfied with her current treatment and he took over her case. This change prompted her referral to a specialist. She was admitted into Barrett Street Hospital. I took leave from work to look after our two babies. After eight weeks, my wife was on a new medication and seemed cured.

In 1979, we moved to New Plymouth to be closer to medical services. The depression came back. For the next 25 years my wife had many suicide threats and attempts and was repeatedly admitted to Te Puna Wairoa (TPW).

My wife was prescribed with large doses of antidepressants and other medications. No treatment worked. What followed was an addiction to alcohol and prescribed diazepam, imovane and zopiclone. This

led her to alcohol and other drug counselling, psychologist sessions and many crisis team interventions; Women's Refuge once; and respite care several times. Our son became addicted to methamphetamine which made things worse. My wife tried to take her own life. My grandchildren found her and my son and daughter removed the rope and took her down.

***“I joined the Family Alcohol & Drug Support group which I continue to attend. We meet each week to share our experiences and learn coping strategies.”***

In 2005, my wife was eventually placed in the Short Term Emergency Placement (STEP) programme by Alcohol & Drugs Services to detox. She was placed under a treatment order and sent to Nova Lodge in Christchurch. Two days later she was discharged for being underweight and threatening to jump in front of a bus. Twenty-four hours after her return I reached my limit. I called the crisis team and they took her to TPW.

The family had had enough and we wouldn't accept her discharge from TPW. We disagreed with their diagnosis. We asserted we knew her well, stating we were unable to take her into our care. I was told that I was disillusioned with 'the system' and to get support for myself, which I already had.

From my perspective, over the years the depression pills never really worked. The medical services were very good but weren't capable of a mental cure. The diagnosis wasn't forthcoming, and it often changed, which led to my impression they don't understand the mind. Nobody wanted me to assist in the healing process. I was made to feel I was the problem. No one took the time to explain psychosis to me. My wife dropped through many cracks in the system. No one seemed to look at the repeated crises.

In and out of hospital for poor physical health, the hospital realised she also had an eating disorder. Finally, the senior mental health services found a medication that helped, and later put her in a rest home. She lived out her remaining seven years in peace.

I had no idea where to go for help. I thought maybe 'Supporting Families'? But didn't really want to go, because I was afraid. However I went and met Leslie Robertson. He gave me counselling and took us through the care giver's prevention of suicide course. Later on I had counselling from Peter at Taranaki DHB. I joined the Family Alcohol & Drug Support group which I continue to attend. We meet each week to share our experiences, coping strategies and communication techniques, and it's where I give and receive the support I need to live well today.



# Susan's story

"I learned how to support my daughter – but even more importantly, how to survive and move forward with my own life."

As a child, my daughter Holly was a sweet and loving girl, some may say a high-achiever. During her pre-teen years we recognised her tendency toward perfectionism. It was this perfectionism which, at the age of 14, lead her into the grasping tentacles of anorexia nervosa.

As anorexia took hold she refused to eat with the family, declined most family outings and became withdrawn to the point of reclusiveness. Treatment proved ineffective and then, by age 17, Holly discovered alcohol.

The following years are a blur of negotiating with anorexia and Holly's growing dependence on alcohol. By age 18 she found that alcohol gave her a way to cope with the eating disorder. She sometimes was able to eat more, she gained some weight and became a little more social, but it was fueled by the alcohol and we soon had another demon to battle.

I found it difficult to find support for myself and felt I had failed my daughter in finding help for her. The truth was she simply was not ready to get well. I joined a support group, and this was the first time I felt our family was not alone with our struggles.

Many years later, after two attempts at suicide, two stints in alcohol rehab, two residential eating disorder treatment stays, several episodes in hospital medical and mental health wards and, most



recently, a two-year residential program at Ashburn Clinic, Dunedin, Holly is doing well and continues to build on the reclaiming the life we thought she may never have. She is 34 years old.

I now work in an addiction centre, where I see families arrive at the service after struggling for quite some time. They are usually just as bewildered, mystified, exhausted, anxious and fearful as my family was all those years ago. They often have very high expectations that the service is going to fix their person, and some of them display obvious signs of frustration and anger when things are not going as they had hoped.

I know the things I learned which helped us as a family did not come naturally. I needed to learn how to love her unconditionally, while showing her that I had faith in her to make a positive change. I needed to learn how to let go (stop trying to control her) but never give up. I needed to learn whose responsibility the addiction was and how to put boundaries in place so that I no longer enabled the addiction. It was through learning from other families, reading and studying about addiction and the family's journey, sharing and receiving empathy and support with my peers, that I learned how to support my daughter – but even more importantly, how to survive and move forward with my own life.

Families want to be part of the solution and we need support and education in order to learn how to do that. The Community Reinforcement and Family Training (CRAFT) model can assist families in their quest to see their loved one experiencing wellbeing while simultaneously making the best of their own lives. I also draw on the teachings of Bob Myer and Brenda Wolfe in their 'Get Your Loved One Sober' book and also Phil Harris in his 'The Concerned Other' manual, both for my own continuing journey as a family member and as guidance for other families I support.

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# Sue's story

"Nothing seemed to work, while the whole situation steadily worsened with frequent drunkenness, sexual activity, theft, breaking in and out, and increasing drug use."

We adopted my four month old niece after her father (my brother, a Vietnam vet with multiple issues) assaulted her mother (a binge drinker estranged from her family). She was the dearest baby, and we welcomed this unexpected gift into our family.

She had a happy childhood, was a popular leader at primary school with solid friendships, an enthusiastic, capable student and was firmly on track for a satisfying, fulfilling life.

At intermediate everything changed relatively quickly. First went the friendships after incidents involving severe bullying, then sport which she had always enjoyed. Next she experimented with smoking which was when I realised things were ramping up. By age 12, I understood expert help and advice were necessary, but this proved extremely difficult to obtain.

I tried every approach. Nothing seemed to work, while the whole situation steadily worsened with frequent drunkenness, sexual activity, theft, breaking in and out, and increasing drug use.

At 14 she was in alternative education, and by 16 she had effectively left home. My own ability to remain calm was compromised as I dealt with one disaster after another while still trying to keep a loving and constant relationship with her.

Throughout this time she seemed to be driven by something deep within herself. A counsellor explained that a part of her brain would have been compromised by her mother's binge drinking during the first months of her pregnancy. That knowledge helped me in my journey towards acceptance during the ups and downs we've been through since then.

*“My advice to others is to always look forward with hope – only look back to see how far you have come.”*

An expert adolescent psychiatrist diagnosed her as having dysthymia, and a psychologist said I needed to learn to be less reactive as my niece seemed to be affected by oppositional defiant disorder, and to prepare myself by reading about borderline personality disorder as that was a possibility in the future.

She refused to take prescribed medication which might have helped her depression. Similarly, with regard to talking therapies. There have probably been only three professionals who have broken through the barriers she sets up, preventing meaningful discussions which might help.

She is now almost 29. She has had settled periods of work interspersed with depressive episodes and returns to being a beneficiary. Drug use (including intravenously) and prostitution have been replaced by opioid substitution treatment which has definitely helped, though her teeth are steadily rotting and she hates the 'control'.

For many years I have attended a weekly family support group at Taranaki Base Hospital. The shared expertise, wisdom, support and help have made a huge difference. We are able to live our lives, loving our person without enabling them – though I am always aware that I still sometimes need reminders!

I am now 70. My life would have been easier without this experience but I have learned many, many lessons and have met some absolutely incredible people while on this journey. There have been frustrations but also rewards. My advice to others is to always look forward with hope – only look back to see how far you have come. The situation will change. Love the person, get the best support for yourself and make sure you nourish your own well-being and happiness by continuing to do the things you enjoy.



# Kirsty's story

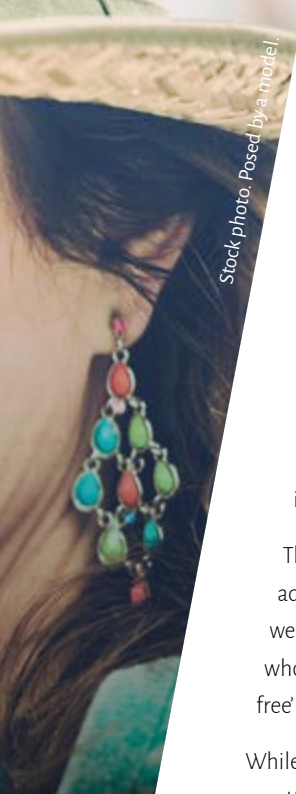
"This journey can break you. But you can also gain strength, wisdom, confidence, compassion and patience that you never thought you could have. That is a gift. And so is our son."

Our journey began when our son was around the age of 14, He started with marijuana, then ecstasy (as a party drug) then methamphetamine (meth).

By the time he was 18, our family was in crisis. We believed we had tried everything (we now know we hadn't). We were not communicating effectively (or at all), our younger son was bewildered watching his brother change and there was so much anger and grief. As parents we were divided, conquered and broken. The final straw came when we witnessed our son screaming at police while being pinned to the ground and handcuffed outside our house.

At that moment the only thing left to do, and a decision I made, was to attend Family Alcohol and Drug Support (FADS) in our community. I sat with a small group of parents who were so much further along in their journey with much older adult children. Although many things were hard to relate to, I could see that this could be my future in 10 years' time if I did not do something different. I learned that there was no hand out sheet of 10 steps to fix this and my son could continue on the path for some time. What was very clear was that I could not do the same thing for another 10 years and expect a different result.

I made a commitment to attend this group every week. Each week I set myself homework to practice techniques. I read every book in their library – these books are not found in mainstream. Slowly, by



Stock photo. Posed by a model.

changing what I did, our family began to heal and cope better. I learned about dealing with stress and self-care. For me, a fortnightly massage with a trusted friend where I could offload the stress by crying and relieving body tension was extremely important. I also used supplements and herbal remedies to ease my raw and tattered emotions. Nature plays a huge part in my wellbeing, so I walk almost every day.

*“While our son's life continued to spiral out of control, we gained strength and focused on setting boundaries and keeping ourselves well and safe.”*

There is a great deal of judgment around addiction and people are quick to offer useless advice. “Kick him out”, “kick him up the bum”, “you just need to...” are commonly what we hear. We learned to be selective with whom we shared our journey, choosing those who would give us support, and we also had times where we chose to be ‘discussion free’ of the problem to allow ourselves time to breathe and give our brains a rest.

While our son's life continued to spiral out of control, we gained strength and focused on setting boundaries and keeping ourselves well and safe. It is important to note this is a long and challenging process. We virtually had to learn to re-parent because you are dealing with a substance that has taken over your child. But it works. It allows us to have them in our lives but not spiral down so deeply with them. We wanted to keep our bond on some level so that when our son chooses wellness, we are there to support and champion him to a better life.

Our son went to Australia and did well for a while but then returned home unexpectedly, deep in meth addiction. Crime led him to prison. He is currently completing a six month drug rehabilitation course in prison while serving his sentence, and we have slowly seen our gentle, caring, hard-working, fun loving son re-emerge.

It is a joy and a gift. It is early days yet and he has much work still to do. We know addiction is a relapsing condition. But we will celebrate every success with him and continue to have faith, hope and acceptance as we travel on this journey that we never expected or would have chosen to have.

This journey can break you. But you can also gain strength, wisdom, confidence, compassion and patience that you never thought you could have. That is a gift. And so is our son.



# Zara's story

"I now know that addiction is an illness, it was like she was really sick but had no help. None of us did."

Zara's mother was addicted to methamphetamine. From a very young age, Zara took care of her younger brother.

Zara was 13 years old when she learned her mother was using methamphetamine. It was a secret Zara tried to hide from her brother to protect him. She didn't invite friends round as she worried they would be scared of the drunk people in the house who she would often find in the mornings on the couch or floor.

When her mother began a seven year relationship with a gang member, Zara remembers that as a more stable time, despite the house often being full of patched members. "They were always kind to us. I remember it as a happy time as Mum was the happiest, and he looked after us."

She had lots of freedom as a teenager but remembers wishing that her mother would be stricter with her. "People at school knew Mum was with a gang member, and I think some parents didn't let their kids come round. I envied them that their parents were strict, that they sat around the table for dinner, just normal family things."

Zara said she never saw her mum, or anyone, do drugs in front of her. "I had no experience of drugs, to this day I haven't even seen meth. I don't even know what it looks like. Looking back there were signs, like I remember she would stay up for ages. She would have these big DIY projects like she was obsessed by them. Her eyes would look

funny, widening and shrinking as she looked at her phone. She would ask the same questions over and over. She was always thin...but it wasn't like she didn't take care of herself, she always looked good."

She didn't know her mum was hiding a meth addiction. It was only when her mum's relationship was over that Zara suspected.

"I had borrowed a jersey from Mum and when I put my hands in the pocket I discovered a needle, I rang her up crying and she had some excuse like it was her friend's insulin who had diabetes. Deep down I didn't believe her, but I wanted to, as she was my Mum."

At 16, Zara was working full time and had moved in with her boyfriend. Haydee would ask her for money for food or gas. "In the end I didn't give it to her, as she would end up spending it on meth or the pokies, even though there would be no food in the pantry...I felt stink."

With his sister gone, her brother said he pretty much fended for himself. Once he found a glass pipe in the mailbox but his mother said it wasn't hers. "I didn't like the people coming to the house...I saw things that I don't think a kid should see. Sometimes Mum would be up for days, then other times she would lay in bed for days and I had to shout at her to get up, to get us some food."

When the house got raided Zara felt anger towards her mother. Her brother remembers the police storming into his bedroom and shining a torch in his eyes. "Then they took Mum away, and I was left alone. I didn't know what was going to happen."

When her Mum was sent to prison, in court Zara burst into tears. Despite the shock, she felt relief that she didn't have to worry about her mother any more.

When Zara had to sell the house, she found the extent of her mother's addiction. "In her bedroom there were needles hidden under the carpet, in lamp shades. It was proof she was lying all along. I hated her at that point, but was sad for her too. I remember sinking to the floor and crying for two hours in her bedroom, thinking—why me, why do I have to deal with all this? I felt angry, sad and confused...I felt like

*"I hated her at that point, but was sad for her too. I remember sinking to the floor and crying for two hours in her bedroom, thinking—why me, why do I have to deal with all this? I felt angry, sad and confused... I felt like I had to be the rock for everyone."*

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Having to sort out all her mother's financial affairs, including drug debts, and selling the house before the bank foreclosed, took its toll on Zara. Her weight dropped to 42kg and she got a stomach ulcer from stress. When her mother was in prison, Zara wrote her a long letter detailing the impact the drug use had had on her, saying that if she ever returned to using meth, Zara would have nothing more to do with her. When her mother, upon release from prison, went to Higher Ground residential treatment centre in Auckland, Zara wrote another letter, ending with this paragraph.

“Everything I have been through because of what you did, hurt me...but it taught me a hell of a lot about life and I have to say made me a better person. I have moved on and I have forgiven you. I feel really good about everything now that I made every effort to help you. I will always love and support you as you are my mother. I want you to be a big part of mine and my children's life, love you always.”

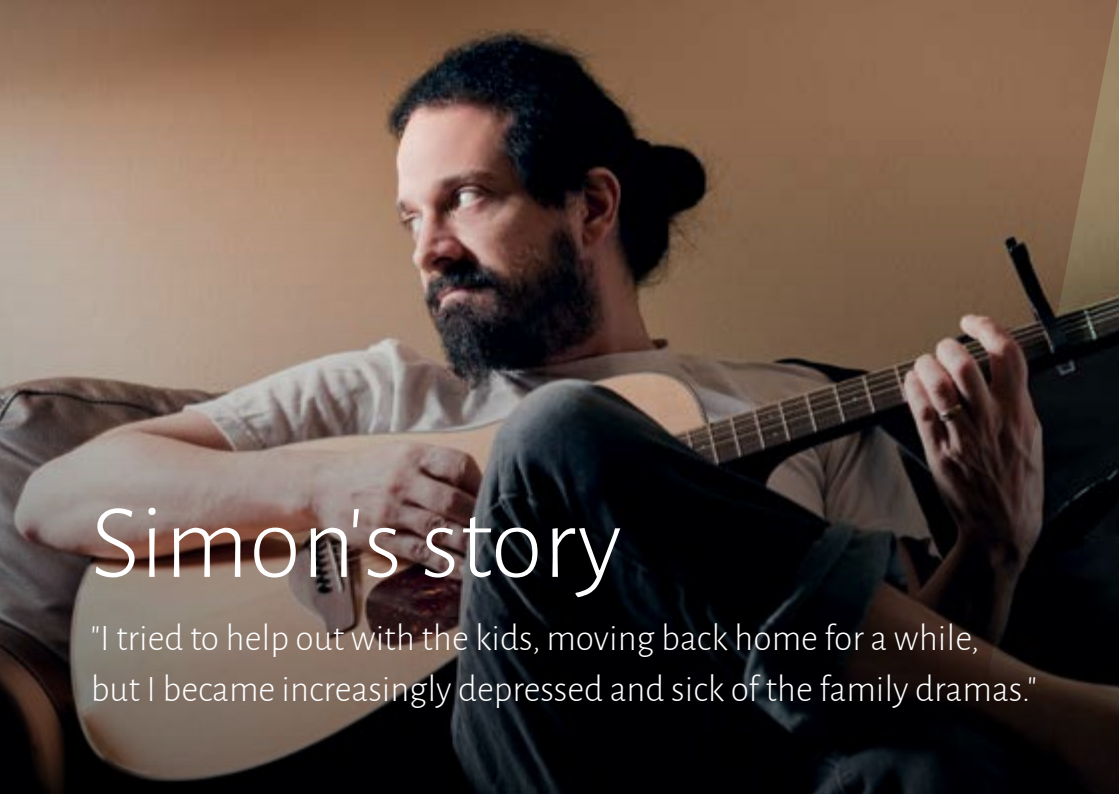
Now married with two children of her own, mother and daughter have a close relationship and Zara is happy to have her as part of her children's lives. Zara says, “I now know that addiction is an illness, it was like she was really sick but had no help. None of us did. There was nowhere for her or me to go for help. I really think we need something here in the Bay of Plenty that helps not only addicts, but their families. If it hadn't been for Higher Ground, she wouldn't be here today and my children would have no Nanny, and I would have lost my mother forever. I don't want other people lost.”

“Now that my mum is in recovery and has been for a number of years, a massive weight and stress has been lifted off my shoulders. I always worried about her and what she was doing, who she was with, what state I would find her in if I dropped in for a visit. At the time it was just the way it was, now I realise how stressful that was for me. I have no words to describe how happy I am that she is in recovery, not only for her and myself but for my two beautiful little girls. They have a wonderful Nanny who is in a really awesome place in her life, who they absolutely adore. I am proud of how far she has come and feel we are now closer than ever. I would greatly appreciate it if I have the same relationship with my girls when they grow up as I do with my Mum, and it is all down to her recovery and the person she is today.”









# Simon's story

"I tried to help out with the kids, moving back home for a while, but I became increasingly depressed and sick of the family dramas."

It took me a while to work out that I was an affected family member. I guess I knew on one level but for me it was more about the effects of having a family member whose life was controlled by addiction. My Mum and Dad were always stressed and wanting me to fix what was going on.

I worked out pretty early that my sister didn't want my help, mostly. The event that taught me that she didn't want my help was when she got caught for a group of thefts that she did. My parents were away and I tried my best to get her diversion. This was a pretty uncomfortable negotiation as I was also using drugs at the time, so the last people I wanted to deal with were the police. But as you do, I pushed through and the police agreed to give her diversion as long as she reported by 4pm the next day. So I got a day off work to go look for my sister. I found her at about 3.30pm, then she told me that her boyfriend knew all about that stuff and you couldn't trust the police and that he had a lawyer.

After a frustrating conversation I went home and got high. I had had enough from then on, I mostly just helped if I was asked to, then mostly begrudgingly because not only was Mum convinced I could 'fix it', I was pretty convinced change would only happen if my sister wanted it.

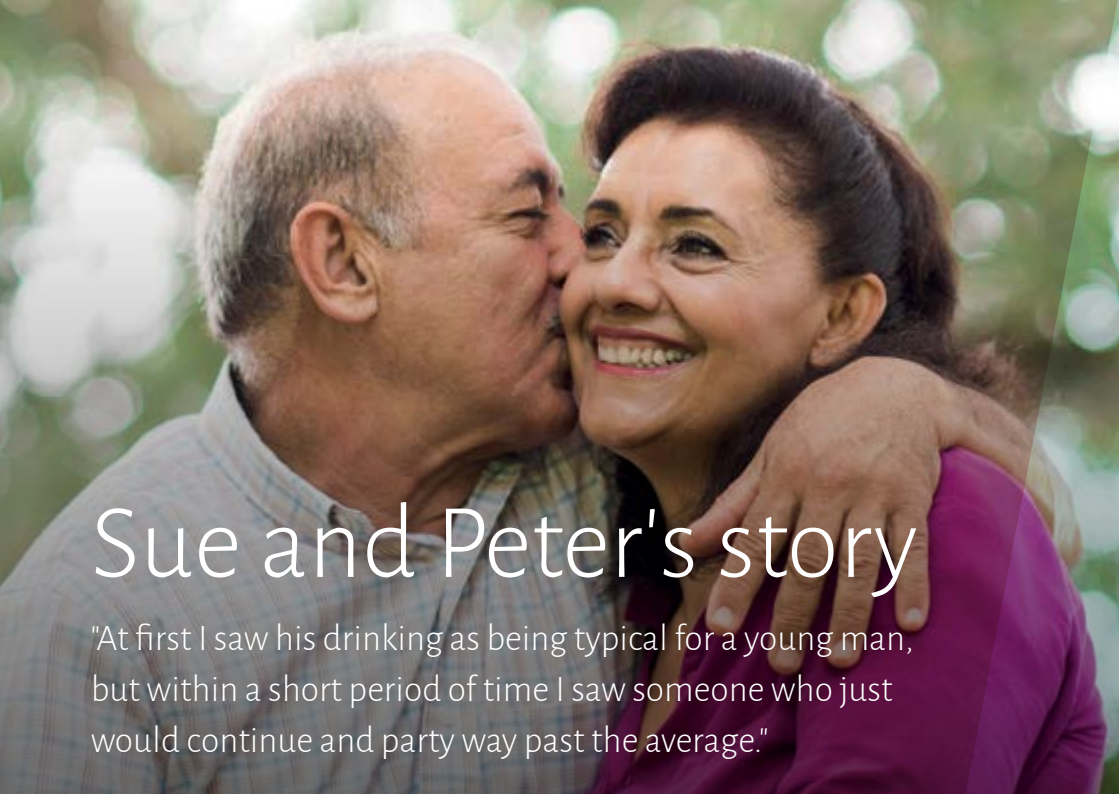
As time went on my parents took my sister's kids in as Child Youth & Family removed them from my sister's care. I tried to help out with the kids, moving back home for a while, but I became increasingly

depressed and sick of the family dramas. I went flatting again and I became more distant from my family and found another family in my friends. Every time I talked to Mum I would get another batch of her worries, concerns or more likely the latest drama and this just fuelled my growing anger. What became increasingly obvious to me over the years was that my family didn't have time for me. There was too much with parents bringing up children and my sister moving constantly, getting it together then it all falling apart again, and everybody trying to pick up the pieces again.

*“In the end I got myself some counselling and got into personal development. This often made it easier to be with myself. I also ended up getting some help for my addiction issues because this was one of my go to fixes for my problems.”*

In the end I got myself some counselling and got into personal development. This often made it easier to be with myself. I also ended up getting some help for my addiction issues because this was one of my go to fixes for my problems. And although this didn't get me in trouble with the law, it was also part of the distance I kept from my family. These dramas didn't stop for many years, but I got better at dealing with it, and sometimes not. I have started to reconnect with my family after being distant for years. I don't think they really understand what it was like for me and any time I do try to tell, Mum gets hurt or tries to one up me with her experience. That still kinda hurts.

Things are better now, all of us are closer, and all the little bits of rehab and counselling have changed us all. Not to mention some life events like my Dad's senility, that the kids are now adults, and making some mistakes and everybody seeing the mistakes and choosing to do things differently. Because mistakes happen, especially in a family like mine, but we can learn and we are.



# Sue and Peter's story

"At first I saw his drinking as being typical for a young man, but within a short period of time I saw someone who just would continue and party way past the average."

My name is Sue and I am married to Peter who now works as an addiction peer support specialist and life is great. But it has not always been that way.

We met when I was 27 and he was just 17. Family warned me of the pitfalls of being with someone so young, but despite his age he seemed older, perhaps as it turned out he was more streetwise than mature.

He hung with a slightly rougher crowd than I been around before and I realised later the edginess was one of the attractions.

At first I saw his drinking as being typical for a young man, but within a short period of time I saw someone who just would continue and party way past the average and he sought out friends who were on the same page.

One word P uses still to this day is 'hope', and this is what I think I clung onto over the following years. Though never physically abusive, nor particularly verbally abusive, he was more what I would call neglectful towards me, never to his mates, nor his children, just to me.

As our family grew he always put his children first, then his mates and then me. But like I said, I hoped he would change.

The common thread in his life, despite wherever we were at, was alcohol. Once he stopped drinking beer and moved onto spirits he changed, if he didn't come home he didn't care, in fact he moved out of home to live at his club bar, it was easier and he didn't have to ride home pissed.

*“What got me through the dark times and times when I just couldn't see the light at the end of the tunnel was reaching out and talking with friends.”*

He would come and visit his kids and would always put their sports or school camps before his club and alcohol, but never me.

He was involved with his own businesses and when he worked for others he was diligent, and later I found out he would be known as a high functioning drinker. He of course preferred to work with like minded people, which made it easier to be accepted and any flaws in his work could easily be explained away with a laugh, as he probably was having a bad day due to a hangover.

Over the years we had our problems, bought and sold houses, failed and then succeeded in business, but none of that was enough. His beloved mates and club, and of course his alcohol, came before me.

What got me through the dark times and times when I just couldn't see the light at the end of the tunnel was reaching out and talking with friends. I wasn't looking for advice (which was often given and was often negative and not helpful), just sharing how I was feeling. And that was enough. I found talking to P when he was sober about how I was feeling was way more helpful than when he was intoxicated.

However, he had a light bulb moment. I won't go into why that was but all I will say is, he changed, he became the man I always hoped he would be and finally he not only accepted he had neglected me, but put me on the same equal footing as his children. The catalyst for change was he stopped drinking and he changed his lifestyle. He finally became a true man. The man I hoped for now walks beside me.



# Fiona's story

"I've seen too many adults go to war over the kids. Nobody wins, least of all the children."

When my son and his partner told me they were expecting a baby, I saw the years of drug related bullshit stretching off into the distance.

He was 20, and had been using drugs for a long time, violent, self-obsessed and prone to breaking out in handcuffs. She was 35, with a long history of drug taking, drug dealing etc. For her 18th birthday, her parents gave her a bag of meth. She also has a teenage daughter from a previous relationship who she had lost custody of twice through drug use. I didn't need to be a clairvoyant to see how things would go.

They both tried to get off meth and succeeded from time to time but did not stop using marijuana and alcohol. What followed was years of a toxic on/off, co-dependant relationship involving drugs, violence and emotional abuse on both sides, and Police involvement. I had no idea of a lot of it and probably still don't. They broke up a couple of years ago.

My little grandson bore witness to a lot of this. I kind of always know when there is stuff happening at home as he becomes sullen, withdrawn and clingy for his mum. I try to have him one night a week but always tried not to get all up in her business. I love her and can see that she is getting most of it right. She is a good mum. Shortly before the wee one was born I told her that I never wanted to be a full time grandma, but that if I had to I would. She told me it would never come to that. From time to time when I've thought of making

a notification, I remind her and she pulls her head in. It's really important for the child's sake that I maintain a relationship there. I've seen too many adults go to war over the kids. Nobody wins, least of all the children. I've done a lot of things over the years to keep him safe, spent a lot of money to provide them with a warm, dry home to live in, and made sure that I have almost daily involvement in his life, so when he gets older he knows he can come to Nanna's any time things aren't good at home. I sometimes got really angry but I didn't say too much. I worried so much for that little boy and for her too, I would go over and over things in my head that I might do, but I didn't do them.

*“I love her and can see that she is getting most of it right. She is a good mum. Shortly before the wee one was born I told her that I never wanted to be a full time grandma, but that if I had to I would.”*

A few months ago someone sidled up to me, and told me that she was dealing and using meth. That I should take custody of my grandson as his home wasn't a safe place for him anymore. She was involved with another unpredictable man who had spent nearly all his adult life in prison and was 18 weeks pregnant to him.

Well, bloody hell that was a conversation I didn't want to have! I was angry and finally at the point where I was going to ring Child Youth & Family (CYFS). I rang a friend of mine who suggested I talk to our 12 step sponsor. Amongst the wise words my sponsor gave me, was the fact that those of us who spend a lot of time around this crap have a much higher threshold for tolerance than 'normal' people do. We made a plan for an intervention the next day then rang my friend and asked her to come with me. We made a loose plan for her to be bad cop and me to be caring cop. The result we wanted was for her to agree to go to Community Alcohol and Drug Services (CADS).

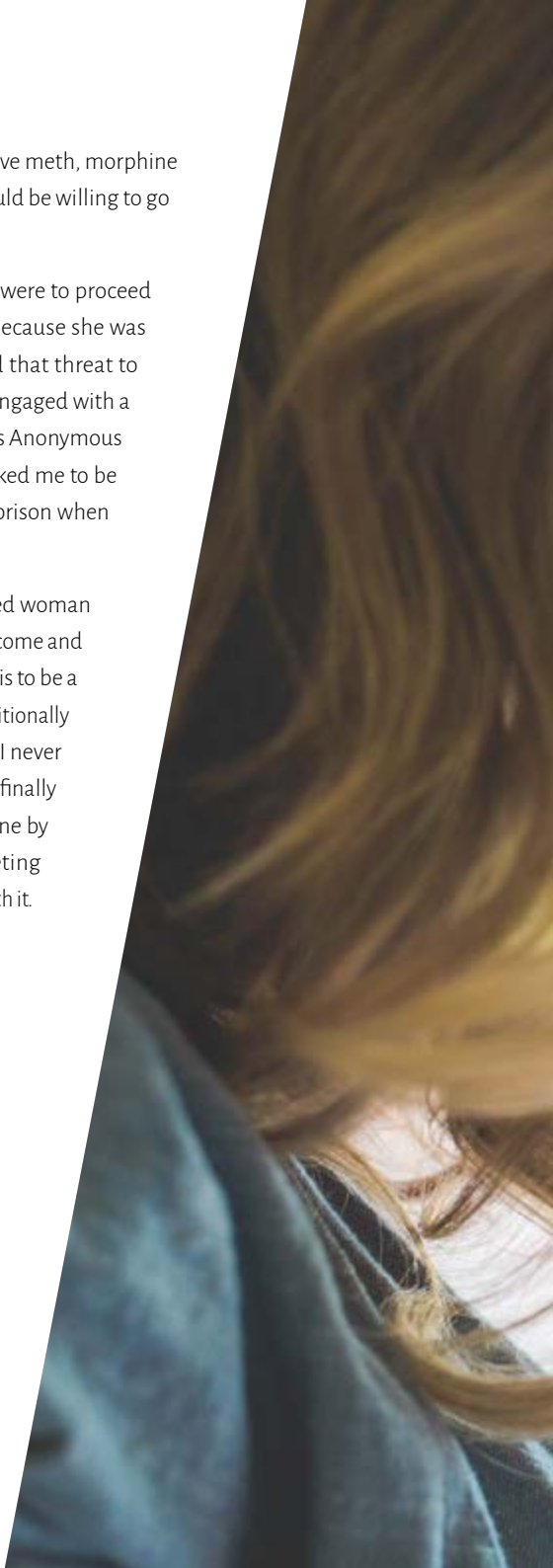
We arrived at the house and I explained that we were there to intervene as I was concerned she was using meth again. She started with wanting to know why I thought that, to denial, to anger. I said that if she was drug free then she wouldn't mind putting some hair in the ziplock bag I had with me. She admitted to having used meth at New Years and was worried it would still be in her hair. We explained that the test would show when she last used so a lapse four months ago wasn't going to show up. She started yelling and shouting and my friend had to be quite rude to get her to

shut up. She crumbled and said that she would have meth, morphine and marijuana in her system. I asked her if she would be willing to go to CADS with me and she said she would.

Once we got to CADs, they explained that if they were to proceed with the triage they would need to notify CYFS because she was pregnant. She said that was OK, that she needed that threat to make sure she would follow through. She is now engaged with a couple of groups at CADS and comes to a Narcotics Anonymous meeting with me at least once a week. She has asked me to be her birthing partner as her partner will still be in prison when the baby is born.

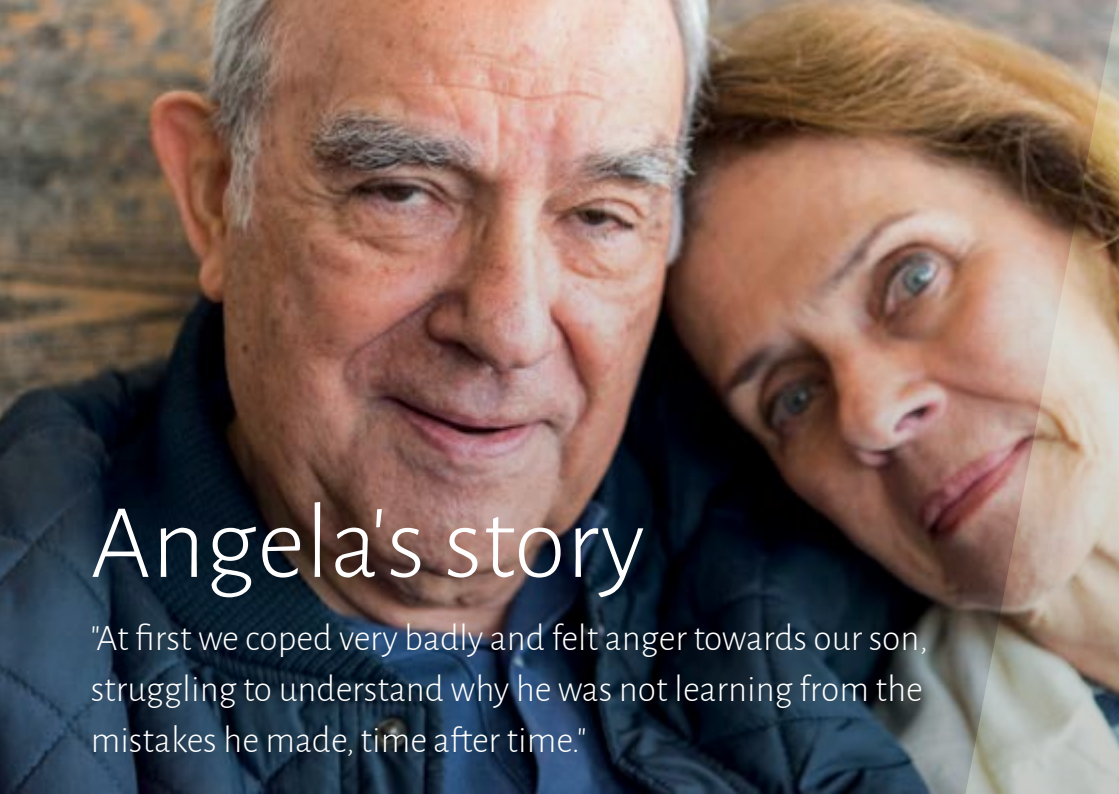
I get frustrated because she is a smart and talented woman who continues to self-sabotage. I encourage her to come and stay with me once a week so I can show her what it is to be a woman in recovery. I continue to support her unconditionally no matter how many times she messes up. I hope I never have to take her child but if I have to I will. I'm glad I finally had the guts to front up. I keep myself safe and sane by talking to my sponsor and keeping my own meeting attendance up. The road will be long but it will be worth it.

On we go.









# Angela's story

"At first we coped very badly and felt anger towards our son, struggling to understand why he was not learning from the mistakes he made, time after time."

My son was 17 when we began to notice he was 'different'. He started smoking marijuana halfway through Year 12 at school. He never felt that he fit in and we learnt later that this was his way of self-medicating as he was being bullied. When we realised that his marijuana use was not a stage, he was well entrenched and didn't have the same personality we once knew. He was often irritable and lazy.

The impact on our lives was huge. Our daughter who was away at university in the South Island would ask if we could talk about something else when we rang! That was a wake-up call for me as I hadn't realised how much this situation had consumed our lives.

My husband and I were extremely stressed, trying to make sense of the choices our son was making. In turn, this affected our relationship,

There was financial pressure as well – we enabled our son by giving him money, misguidedly thinking this was helping and bailing him out financially.

At first we coped very badly and felt anger towards our son, struggling to understand why he was not learning from the mistakes he made, time after time – why couldn't he see what he was doing to us and himself and the impact this would have on his future?

Thank goodness help came when I was desperate and rang the Alcohol and Drug Service and found out about a Family Alcohol and Drug Group. The facilitator has lived experience and we, as group members, offer each other support, advice and encouragement. I get amazing strength from this and am constantly learning. That is why I continue to

attend every Tuesday night, nine years on – not just when things are tough, but when things are going well too, as this is a huge part of being able to cope in general. I have also made some amazing friends who truly understand the journey I am on.

Number one rule of thumb, when on a journey with a loved one with addiction, is to look after yourself! For me, first and foremost, it is attending my FADs Support Group.

I practice self-care by doing physical activity – walking my dog and swimming. Socialising with my friends is also hugely important and I find pleasure in meeting friends for coffee and chatting – feeding the soul!

To complicate the addiction, five years ago my son was diagnosed with bipolar disorder, possibly rearing its head due to his use of marijuana, initially. Mental issues are such a common thread for so many of our loved ones with addiction – a double whammy! Once my son realised he had both depressive times and manic times, the battle was on with mental health services to have the condition recognised for what it was. Even then, there have been times when he has gradually stopped taking his medication (mainly through excessive marijuana use and therefore lack of responsibility). This then results in brushes with the law, police and court processes and then consequences.

It's not an easy journey but we are so much more empowered when we begin to understand the complexity of addiction. We have learnt so much about ourselves along the way, becoming stronger and definitely more empathetic and non-judgmental through this process.

*“I practice self-care by doing physical activity – walking my dog and swimming. Socialising with my friends is also hugely important and I find pleasure in meeting friends for coffee and chatting – feeding the soul!”*



# Emma's story

"Life without drugs is possible. We can do this.  
We can do this together."

Whenever there was a story of a drug bust in the media I would find myself searching for details of the gender and age of the people arrested. I never knew if it was a relief or not when the details didn't line up.

Several years had passed since we had heard from my partner's daughter who had been using drugs since she was a teenager. Years had passed and we didn't know where she was and whether she was OK. Any phone number we had would change. She would now be in her late 20s.

One day out of the blue a letter arrived. She had been arrested, was currently on bail and admitted she needed help and wanted to reconnect. Learning about the details of her charges was surreal – they were significant and it was hard to imagine that she would escape a prison sentence. "How did we end up here?" was a constant question in my mind.

We rallied around and did everything we could to help her get into treatment. It was a stressful time as we were trying to reconnect and help out. Meeting some of her friends was bittersweet as the realities of her lifestyle hit home to us. It was entirely centred around drugs. We were getting to know one another all over again.

Once she was in treatment, it was a relief. We all held our breath for the first few days not knowing if she would decide to walk out or not. She didn't. Over the next few months we saw her grow into her own

skin as she started to be drug free. She started to look quite different, and we were able to start to talk about things, laugh and have some fun.

The treatment service had a family group to work on issues as part of their family member's recovery. Having this

opportunity to hear other stories provided some perspective that we weren't alone and unfortunately our experience wasn't uncommon. Having a structure to talk about issues with others was such a turning point in our lives. This opportunity to talk to other families and to have some professional guidance in understanding our experience started to heal our relationships with each other.

Through this we also found hope. Life without drugs is possible. We can do this. We can do this together.

When things don't quite go as planned, the crash from hope can also be very hard. I remember the first time this happened. Seeing her go back to using drugs after treatment, I was beside myself, desperate to know what I could do that would help to keep the focus on her recovery. I learnt that hope continues regardless of the ups and downs. Having faith in people through our connections helps to keep hope alive. Regardless of what was going on we agreed to keep connected.

The reality of addiction means that when people use illegal substances, facing the criminal justice system becomes a reality. Going through the court process was quite stressful. I worried that the focus was on her criminal activity. What didn't seem to be so evident was the consideration given to her addiction. I learnt that it was possible to get an addiction assessment done for the court. This described some of the circumstances surrounding the drug offences. I do think this made quite a difference in the final sentence given by the court.

A prison sentence was inevitable. We visit, we keep connected. Sometimes it's hard to face visiting the prison – it's not a friendly place to go. Having been through the treatment services means we have a better understanding of recovery, we have hope and we have connection. With this we have possibilities.

*“Having this opportunity to hear other stories provided some perspective that we weren't alone and unfortunately our experience wasn't uncommon.”*



# Vanessa's story

"I've got issues..." Song by Julia Michaels 2017

Temporary. Everything is temporary. That's what I learned most growing up; people, places, feelings, even my sense of self, can be changed by others and without warning. I don't have a lot of memories of my younger years and for most of that time I didn't know what the problem really was. I still struggle with guilt and shame when asked to talk about myself. It wasn't OK to talk about things at home with anyone, not even to others in my family and it's only recently that I have talked with my siblings about what they remember. It has been a comfort to have my feelings and experiences validated by them. I spent a lot of time trying to anticipate other people's needs and failing, so I became a very anxious person and I was not very present, instead, always thinking ahead and planning for various outcomes. Even now, I usually have a plan B and an escape route ready; just in case. I tend not to get too attached to anything or anyone, and I have had to work hard at not managing my important relationships as if they have already gone. The upside of this as an adult, is that I don't usually sweat the small stuff, I'm decisive but flexible, and although I am still hard to get to know, once you're in, I am very loyal.

Being comfortable with chaos but always wanting stability, and then getting bored when I have it, is a remnant of the past. To avoid ruining good relationships or moving homes every couple of years like I used

to, I now manage this better by having a job with lots of variety, and just changing my hair while maintaining stability in other areas.

I didn't have anyone that I could talk to as a young person and to a great degree I didn't see that I had problems until my teens when I started to experience other significant relationships. Of course, I married someone who fit what I knew. My husband experienced alcohol

and depression issues and had enough anger for the both of us. Although it has taken time and patience with each other and was no easy ride, he has had enough strength for me to be able to relax and I've helped soften his edges a bit. We have tried to accept and support each other, knowing we are both a work in progress. Adapting the 12 steps to admit what I am powerless over and working through that process, has given me in turn the ability to accept myself and others as we are, quirks and all, and gives me a sense of hope for the future. I do try to maintain boundaries in my relationship with my mother, as I can quickly slip into feeling and acting very young and anxious when I am around her.

I was always aware that others had it much worse than me and were exposed to the worst of how people treat each other from a young age. So, I do approach each day with a sense of gratitude for not only being here but also for what life has taught me and the many blessings I have, and with that comes a responsibility to care for and stand up for those who have been given less. Although I do not go to a church, I do have a faith in God as my higher power and this helps my perspective; I need to just be the best me I was made to be (and not be a dick) and I'm ok with that.

*“To avoid ruining good relationships or moving homes every couple of years like I used to, I now manage this better by having a job with lots of variety, and just changing my hair while maintaining stability in other areas.”*

# Need help?

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

> **0800 787 797**

## **Online Support:**

Alcoholdrughelp.org.nz

Aunty Dee: [www.auntydee.co.nz](http://www.auntydee.co.nz)

Drug Help: [drughelp.org.nz](http://drughelp.org.nz)

## **Community support**

Al-Anon Family Groups: [www.al-anon.org.nz](http://www.al-anon.org.nz)

## **Family support and information**

Kina Families & Addictions Trust:

[www.kina.org.nz](http://www.kina.org.nz)

## **Other Help and Information**

New Zealand Drug Foundation:

[www.drugfoundation.org.nz](http://www.drugfoundation.org.nz)

Lifeline: 0800 543354