



Real People
share their stories of opioid
substitution treatment



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Foreword

Welcome to this collection of stories from people brave enough to share their experience of opioid substitution treatment (OST).

Why brave? Because the people who use opioids have historically been seen as ‘the worst’ – using heroin was seen as ‘the end of the line’ and unfortunately, for some, it was. But it’s not only those actively caught up in the tangled web of opioid dependence who have been maligned; so too have people in treatment who are accused of “simply swapping one drug for another.”

Methadone in particular has been misunderstood as a treatment – yet thousands of people have used or are using it as part of their recovery from a dependence on opioids. We know that thousands of Kiwis have regained their lives through the stability that OST offers. And the stories here are testament to the potential of OST.

Marc, Joe, Caro, Rangimokai, Sheridan and Rhonda

The Addiction Consumer Leadership Group

The authors have chosen not to use their real names



Photo by Kelly Sikkema/Unsplash. Posed by models.

Dana's story

It still thrills me, even after years of being on a program, that there's actually money in my wallet.

Like many people, I had tried a lot of different ways to stop using – without intervention, mind you. Many times throughout my 16 years (give or take) of substance abuse I wanted to stop and keep stopping. Many times I did try and many times I failed. I came to think it was all I was good for. That this was my lot. Getting high. Getting

a taste to feel functional. Doing all I could to get that taste to continue my day. And those days were filled with pain and dread.

I had reached a place of acceptance that the idea of starting my own family, the idea of a satisfying and accomplished professional life or a fulfilling life, was not for me. I would fill that hole in my chest with drugs and that would be all the happiness I would require.

I was heading towards my late 30s and I was seeing others in my life start families, accomplish dreams, laugh, have excitement, cry, enjoy bike riding . . . have money to plan trips, buy a car . . . enjoy going for a walk (weird). Just normal life stuff. I couldn't relate.

I had watched people die. I had watched the person I adored most in the world die.

There was no grand epiphany for me, no bright spark or spirit that turned on the lightbulb inside my soul to make me try one more time at life. I was desperate and miserable and was sick and tired of depending on everything that went with scoring to get by, so I reached out to the program. The idea of feeling clear-headed and having no cloud of protection around me was fricken scary and I wasn't into it, but I was desperate. I knew no one on any sort of program that was doing it all out, without using on top, so I was skeptical. I was dubious of the staff attached to the program, and the doctors, and the case workers – of it all!

And I couldn't have been more wrong.

It truly was the start of feeling life again. Of being a part of life and having a say this time. Having respect back in my life and in myself. Suboxone and the staff in the program meant I had support in figuring out this new way of life. I now had the ability to look at the other areas in my life that weren't doing so well, and slowly was able to tackle the bigger picture. It took a while to accept that I was still here

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(continued)

to feel and breathe life again, but it was also the only way I could respect those I had lost. To give it a shot.

I was also able to let in my family and friends. I am so thankful and feel so blessed that I have my family. That I have people that have become family, friends that are like family. This was the biggest gift.

Then came the next chapter, the biggest blessing. My own family. A few years of discovering life on my own again, and getting that joy back, and learning how to deal with sadness and disappointment – which is obviously a forever thing, not just a box to tick – gave me the opportunity to meet new and wonderful people. And I met my partner in amongst those wonderful people. I still pinch myself that we have our beautiful family, and the love and support of family and friends. Every day that I wake up to our beautiful baby I have that feeling of excitement in my whole body that I used to get as a kid on Christmas morning. That feeling of love just washes over me.

Most importantly, I can say one hundred percent my child comes first. They are my number one priority and I am so grateful that I have never had to compromise that love.

I never knew that taking a chance on this program would be the beginning of so much joy. I had forgotten what that feeling was. Even the down times. Being able to navigate the shit times is still amazing to me.

And it blows my mind that I get to take that money that's still in my wallet and put it in my baby's piggy bank.



Photo by Scott Webb/Unsplash. Posed by a model.

Jason's Story

"I'm no angel"

I started using to deal with pain after a serious accident. It started with the pills the hospital gave me, then what I could get from my doctor, then from a number of doctors, but that got harder and harder. Finally I was scoring heroin, homebake, palfium, whatever I could get my hands on. The problem was that eventually the drugs stopped working! After a long time thinking about it, I went on methadone and I've been on ever since. It helps with the pain as much as my affection for opiates 'cause the pain hasn't gone away. I just had to learn to live with it. Got help from the pain clinic. Now I use NSAIDs (non-steroidal anti-inflammatories) and they actually work! I never believed anything would work but opiates. Just goes to show you can teach an old dog new tricks aye? I like a smoke occasionally and I still like a beer after work on a Friday so I'm no angel you know? Now if I could get medicinal marijuana that'd be the icing on the cake. I'd rather get my dak like I get my methadone, all kosher. Fingers crossed aye?



Naomi's story

Kia ora!

Like many people, by the time I walked through the door of the alcohol and drug service, I was desperate. I was looking for a way to stop the rat race of the need to use opiates, developing dependence and having to fund the ever-increasing need for the drug. I had been funding my use by working as a prostitute. A couple of violent incidents with clients had left me feeling desperate. I had a big habit. Detox was not only physically painful but emotionally and mentally overwhelming. Without

It's not easy to live with the aftermath of addiction, and medication can be an important support.

drugs I was not numb, I had to feel the impact of trauma and I was just not ready for that.

I had some really good friends who suggested I try the methadone program, as I would not have to completely go cold turkey, and I'd still have a drug that kept me – as we put it – comfortably numb, until I was ready. What I really appreciated when I walked through the door was I felt as though the people who spoke to me understood my needs. I came to understand

that this was exactly what the methadone program was designed for, to help me stabilise until I was ready to make any change that would work for me. I felt that the people who worked with me understood the trauma I had experienced and the need to move slowly.

Over time I was able to stop using as I didn't feel the need. I was able to get counselling to address the trauma and I was able to successfully come off methadone and live life without any substance to buffer. All of this took time and lots of support. The key thing that really worked for me was that people around me did not judge me for needing to be on methadone and supported me to take my time. My family were able to spend time with me as I was not actively using. I could get takeaways and go on holiday with them. My family didn't judge me for needing the medication and just seemed happy to have me back. Reconnecting with my family made such a big difference to starting to feel and live like a normal person again.

I am now a couple of decades on from that time of my life. I still struggle with my mental health due to living with PTSD. However, the compassion and support I received during that time were essential in creating a life that I now love. I have children, family, friends and a job I love. Without OST I believe I would be dead, so I am always grateful for its role in my journey, and I encourage anyone else who may need it in theirs. I have friends who need it as a part of their journey and respect that decision. It's not easy to live with the aftermath of addiction, and medication can be an important support. This is why I'm happy to share my story with you, dear reader. I hope it helps you feel better about you or your loved one's OST journey.



Photo by Peggy Zinn/Unsplash. Posed by a model.

Jane's story

I always knew that I'd 'go off the rails', it was just a matter of time.

My initial response to one of those life events that changes you forever was to focus on the positives and build a new life. A few years on though and, sure enough, I started to go off the rails. The need to suppress feelings of deep sadness and powerlessness was aided and supported by my use of opioids. I realised that I was living in two worlds, and that if I continued along this self-destructive path I'd end up

either in the justice system or dead. Something had to give: I either continued along this path, or got help.

The idea of leaving my home, pets and job to go to 'rehab' wasn't an option for me. All I could think about was what would happen when I got out. Where would I live, and who'd look after my cats? I'd just spent five years building a life and I wasn't prepared to give it up to go to rehab. There weren't a lot of options for people addicted to opioids back then, there was either rehab or methadone.

At the time there was a waiting list, with some people waiting two years, and in some cases even longer, to get on methadone. I had the ability to coordinate things, so was able to get what I needed until I got onto the 'methadone programme'. Methadone meant that I didn't have to hang out, so I could spend my time and energy on other stuff, like going to university and getting on with life.

Like with most things, there's a downside. The frequent if not daily trips to the chemist and the seemingly endless rules. I did find the lack of flexibility around takeaways etc. really challenging, and from time to time they were more of a barrier than an enabler to improving my quality of life. While I'm familiar with the reference to methadone as 'liquid handcuffs', I viewed this less about methadone as a medication and more around how the opioid substitution treatment (OST) service interprets and administers the rules.

The reality is nothing is ever perfect, so even though I had to navigate service rules and requirements I've always been grateful for what OST/methadone has provided, the space to get on with my life. Everyone's circumstances and needs are different, so what works for one person might not work for another. For me it was always about quality of life, and that's what OST offered me.

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Andavar's story

My OST Journey – ‘one side of the tree – with less roots . . .’

My life, my friends, my family, the justice system, the neighbourhood, the government, the doctors, the chemist shops, the street, the people, nice and not nice, the animals (that may suffer), the houses, landlords, tenancy stuff. Gosh, what doesn't it affect – having a 'habit'? Sweating, leg-cramps, empty wallet, no energy, no life, closed curtains, zero-participation, outside of 'society', self-indulged, self-pity (victim-consciouness) worry, stress, unmotivated, not happy.

The other side of the tree – with more roots . . . OST

Life regularity, regular meals, sleep, accomodation, regular family contact, being able to hold a job, keep the car fixed and stickered, head held high, productive, balanced, deeper roots, hope, stability, peace, no body aches, equilibrium of emotion, body and mind, more soul-connection, more time, happier, healthier body.

Just a few thoughts of my time on OST in the early 1980's for a few years. Then in 1993 till 2003, working in a stable job.

Thanks OST for the lifeboat – literally, thanks for the lifeboat to sail into my new Life. Thank you for all the lessons (blessings) of OST. And thank you for integrating me back into society, into the realm of 'normal' everyday – back into goodness. I learned the difference between living and surviving. Choosing to just live now.

This positive side of the tree gives healthier, deeper roots.

I'm a full tree now, branches spread, thanks OST.

Feeling blessed.





Cin's story

At 23 years old I found myself sitting in a doctor's office waiting for pregnancy test results.

I weighed 50kg, had just been diagnosed with hep C two weeks earlier and had a daily opiate habit that required a relentless daily grind to find enough money to sustain it. In short I was one very sick girl and as it turned out also a pregnant one.

I turned up at the 'methadone clinic' two weeks later for my first appointment. The doctor took one look at me and asked reception to phone an ambulance. At the hospital they said I was so malnourished and dehydrated they were worried I would lose the baby.

So it was in hospital that I had my first dose of methadone, and what a relief. I don't think I'd been more grateful for anything in my life. It

was a turning point. OST was a godsend, it changed everything for me. It was the respite I never thought I'd have, the stable platform I could now build something from. It meant the toxic things in my life, like having to devalue myself in order to make the money to survive, could stop. Simple things like having money again meant I could look after myself properly, eat good food, become healthier and, in turn, happier. I could be the present mum I wanted to be in my beautiful son's life.

OST afforded me the stability to parent my sweet-hearted beautiful boy throughout this crazy life. It meant more clarity and peace of mind so I could start to process the traumas that had led me on a downward spiral. While he was growing up I was super honest with him about my addiction and where that had lead me. I felt ashamed sometimes but this kid wouldn't let me stay that way. He gave me love, compassion and empathy. I did worry as a teenager he may have the same issues with drugs as his father and me. But he was determined not to follow in our footsteps. He does have an addiction but it's to European cars, and I can live with that. I couldn't be more proud of the man I raised, he is my favourite human being. I could not have done it so well living in the chaos of my addiction.

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Jim's story

My experience of Opioid Substitution Treatment

Once I had acquired a serious opioid dependence I resisted OST for as long as I possibly could. At first because I thought getting on OST meant I had failed to control my drug use. Of course, after a while I had to accept that I had absolutely no control of my drug use . . . it was the other way around! Then I resisted OST because I didn't want to be tied to the service, told what to do, or talk to doctors and the like.

These two periods of resistance took about 10 years. It was a period of time when I was constantly starting and stopping using opioids. I used to exaggerate the duration, intensity and significance of the periods of abstinence. I had friends on OST and I would contrast my approach, thinking it better than theirs.

The truth was the harms from my addiction were piling up fast. Multiple close calls on the overdose front, massive financial harms to myself, friends and family, hepatitis C, the inability to hold a job, crime – the whole package really. It went on and on. I guess I was lucky to avoid prison and/or death.

Finally I put my hands up and approached the local OST service for treatment. It was not a silver bullet, and it didn't stop me using (at first). What it did do though was buy me the time and stability I needed to start recovering.

Nowadays I am grateful to the OST service for being there to help. If they were not, there is no way I could have survived another ten years the way I was going.

I hope that anyone who reads this who needs OST goes and gets it. From my personal experience, and from what I have gathered from talking to experts in the field, maintenance treatment is, for most people, the most effective treatment for opioid dependence.



Photo by Svyatoslav Romanov/Unsplash. Posed by amodel.

Mr X's story

For the purposes of this story, which is a genuine account of my journey through life and onto the OST programme, I will call myself Mr X.

In my mid-to-late teens I was introduced – as most people of my generation were – to gateway drugs, being pot/marijuana, acid/LSD (which in the late 90's was pretty good), and alcohol.

I enjoyed these as I was having issues in my life, and they were my friend and used them as a crutch, life being what it was and all things what they were. In my early-to-mid 20's I eventually made my way to the harder stuff (this was in the early 2000s), and a few years later, as I became a 30-year-old, I began using heroin daily, usually made from MST/morphine sulphate tablets and double/AA.

Also, I discovered the rise of methamphetamine and P. My addictive personality meant that I became a habitual user very quickly. After a while I was dependent on these drugs to function and have a normal routine.

Everything in my life suffered: the importance of relationships, family and other people declined. The drugs ruled my life and my thinking, they were number one and the most important thing. Also my health – both mental and physical – declined. I have a blood clot that may kill me, which formed from improper filtering of old BZP and at times even the coloured chalk pills.

Ritalin got a workout from me too, and I contracted Hep C. After interferon I was clean. In 2010 I started using MST and re-contracted Hep C. DUMBASS!

I am now in the process of breaking the habit. I'm almost on a stable dose of methadone, clean as a whistle, and my health is improving, along with my lifestyle and quality of life. I am taking Maviret to clean up Hep C.

My life is exponentially improving, my health is too – both mentally and physically – and, believe it or not, FINANCIALLY!

Awesome – I'm not saying it is a miracle drug or it will solve your problems, because it won't. You need to want to change and work hard. But the OST programme is making a positive difference in my life.

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Danni's story

I was so lucky to have a counsellor who believed in me and saw potential in me that I didn't see in myself.

She remembered me saying I was interested in going to university, although I was a hairdresser at the time. To cut a long story short she encouraged me to talk with her son who was at uni already and through that I made the decision to give it a go.

Once there I felt so different to everyone around me. I felt like an imposter, like I was walking around the campus with a neon 'junkie' sign flashing on my forehead. But of course that was my own stuff. If people looked at me sideways it might have been because of the cropped bleached hair, Doc Martens, leather jacket and ripped jeans. Or maybe it was because I would occasionally nod off in lectures. Not often but enough for people to ask if I was getting enough sleep. (Yes thanks!)

So I decided to come down on my methadone at least to a dose where I would stay awake and reasonably alert so I could concentrate in lectures and tutorials. Learning had become my new drug and as with any drug I wanted to take it all in.

Sometimes lectures were at times that clashed with picking up my 'dose' so I had to become more flexible in the times I went to the chemist. That was a real challenge to begin with because I was so used to having my dose at the same time every day. But the service also tried to make things easier for me, like making appointments that didn't interfere with my uni commitments. Over time, as the service realised I was 'stable' (their terminology, not mine), I got more takeaways, so this became less and less of an issue. They were prepared to support me in whatever way they could.

The day I graduated I visited my counsellor in my cap and gown to say thank you for her belief in me and for the practical support she had provided (and to have a laugh at the weird academic clothing). Without that I doubt I would ever have gone to uni, let alone graduated.

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Need help?

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

> 0800 787 797

Other helplines

Alcohol Drug Youth Helpline: **0800 787 YTH** (0800 787 984)

Alcohol Drug Māori Helpline: **0800 787 798**

Alcohol Drug Pasifika Helpline: **0800 787 799**

Lifeline: **0800 543 354**

METH HELP: **0800 6384 4357**

Gambling Helpline: **0800 654 655** or Text **8006**

1737 Need to talk? Call or Text **1737**

Online support

Alcohol Drug Help: www.alcoholdrughelp.org.nz

Aunty Dee: www.auntydee.co.nz

Drug Help: www.drughelp.org.nz

Living Sober: www.livingsober.org.nz

Whaiora Online: www.whaioraonline.org.nz



Community support

Alcoholics Anonymous: www.aa.org.nz | **0800 2296757**

Narcotics Anonymous: www.nzna.org | **0800 638632**

Family support

Al-Anon Family Groups: www.al-anon.org.nz

Kina Families & Addictions Trust: www.kina.org.nz

Family Drug Support: www.fds.org.nz

Other help and information

NZ Drug Foundation: www.drugfoundation.org.nz

Mental Health Foundation: www.mentalhealth.org.nz

Te Hiringa Hauora/Health Promotion Agency: www.alcohol.org.nz



www.tepou.co.nz