



## Sarah's Story

*When someone is facing addiction, it affects every aspect of their life. It also has a massive impact on their loved ones. The family may encourage the individual to work on their recovery, and watching their loved one struggle time and again can be emotionally draining.*

*It is important that family members have the opportunity to embark on their own journey of recovery so that they can deal with the difficult experiences associated with helping someone through addiction.*

*At the Rutland Centre, we provide support to the family and friends of people struggling with the reality of addiction. This is one story of someone whose life was touched by addiction.*

"My name is Sarah. I am going to share a bit of my story around addiction and recovery.

"I am the second eldest of five children. My own family life was ruled by fear, abuse, drink and gambling - a total dysfunction to start with. Had I been asked when I was a child 'How is your family life?' I would have answered 'Fine'. It was my normal, so it was fine to me.

"I met my husband Peter when I was a teenager and we married at the age of 22. I promised us both that our marriage and life would be totally different from my childhood. I wanted to be free from fear and gambling. I knew my husband had the odd bet and drink, but I was ok with that. I thought 'He's not like my father, thank God'.

"I was married nine months when I became pregnant. We were so happy; we had our own flat, he had a job, I was working. All seemed well. Then one evening he came in from work and told me his job was going on strike. We would have to live on my wages and his strike money. It was very difficult to make ends meet.

"After that, the bomb went off. I came home from work one day, 6 months pregnant, and Peter told me he had lost all our money. I thought he meant he lost some money from his pocket on the road, until he told me no, he had lost it on a horse. In that moment, my life changed forever.

"I remember feeling lost, afraid, sick, angry and shocked, but most of all betrayed. That day changed me forever. Until then, I had felt safe and loved with my husband. He was my best friend and I trusted him with my life. After that, I never felt safe again. My world as I knew it was gone."

From this point on, Sarah's relationship with Peter was altered. Even though they maintained a normal lifestyle from the outside, she struggled with losing the closeness with her husband.

"The next 25 years I spent controlling, begging, threatening, enabling and denying what was happening. We never lost our home or job or cars, or anything big like that. But the worst thing for me was my husband's inability to emotionally connect with me or the children. He always had a faraway, lost look in his eyes. He seemed to be always somewhere else in his head.

"Peter had his gambling and drinking under some kind of control. We had a few big rows over his lying. We could have had a good life but we were always just keeping ourselves above the breadline. I could never trust him to support me or the children financially. There was always the worry that he would spend the money, or 'lose' it, or some other silly excuse for his gambling."

As Peter's problems continued, Sarah became increasingly isolated.

"I was very lonely in our marriage and I felt like I was doing all the work. Our first child came along and everything seemed good to everyone outside. Sometimes even I thought we were the perfect family - but I always felt that there was something missing. I can't really pinpoint where it all started to go wrong, but I was unhappy and lonely. I was just letting the days pass as best as I could.

"After a few years I went back to work and this opened up a new world to me. I started meeting new people. At this time, I met a man and we became involved. I had a new, different life, separate to the one I was living at home. I felt alive and happy. That period lasted for a few years.

"While this was going on, things with my husband were getting worse. I know now that I had this affair to escape and my reasons were emotional more than anything else. I felt like it was all on me to cope with the kids and the house and the money. My relationship with Peter was falling apart. I was very unhappy in it. We were living in the house together but hardly speaking; just passing each other by."

Sarah felt betrayed again when things started coming to a head with Peter's addiction problems.

"At one point he had a sizeable sum of money and I never saw a penny of that. I found out that all the money was used to pay debts from gambling. Around this time he also tried to commit suicide and while he was in hospital I was getting letters from the banks, from credit unions I knew nothing about, and from the income tax company... I was in a state of shock when I discovered that the gambling was even bigger than I knew and that Peter had kept it hidden from me all these years.

"I was so angry and hurt, again. How he could do this to us? Peter went to get help in our local health centre and began going to meetings. We decided to start again fresh, so we moved from our home of 27 years. I was hopeful that this was it, that we would be ok now. He was going to his meetings, I was getting counselling, all would be well...

"When our house was sold, I went to clear it out and found a large amount of empty painkiller packages. When I asked Peter where they came from he gave some vague

answer that I must have believed. I was so unaware of any painkiller addictions that it never even crossed my mind. Long story short, it turns out he was addicted to painkillers. To say I was shocked is an understatement. This is the thing that finally led Peter to the Rutland Centre for help. We said that we would try and make it work - this had to be our rock bottom."

Sarah and Peter were now getting support from the Rutland Centre, and Sarah found this gave her a glimmer of hope.

"I was finally able to see the light at the end of the tunnel. My hopes and dreams started to come alive again. I was able to have hope for us and our family. In early 2006, Peter went into the Rutland Centre as a resident. I was on my own in a new town, with no family and no friends. I was trying to work and visit Peter and make time for my own one-to-one meetings and group meetings. I had faith that we could do this.

"I sat in group meetings and found myself saying 'We're not too bad, other stories are worse'. We were going to make it through. We had to make it work. I truly believed we would GET recovery, we would MAKE it.

"Well, it was not to be. After a few months of working with the Rutland Centre, Peter started missing meetings, not going to group meetings, all sorts of stuff. The biggest thing for me was the family confrontations. I found them so hard to deal with that I could not take any more and I ended my marriage."

After the breakdown of Sarah and Peter's marriage, Sarah was still extremely worried about Peter.

"Peter left the family home. I worked three jobs to try to pay the mortgage while he got further and further into debt; losing his home, his car, any money he had. Everything was gone and he ended up living in a hostel.

"He was self-medicating, drinking, gambling and not eating properly. Myself and our children tried everything we could to help. Peter attempted suicide a few more times and became so high on tablets that he was incoherent most of time. I dreaded taking his calls and worried about him constantly. This went on for a few years and eventually we got legally separated. All his money went on gambling, drink and tablets... "

After a while, things started looking up for Peter.

"At one point it seemed like Peter was maybe getting help and getting a bit better. He visited me and for the first time in years he seemed very well; clear, coherent and back driving. He stayed to have dinner. He told me he had met someone and was doing ok.

"I was so happy. I felt like he had turned a corner as we sat having dinner together for the first time in years. That was to be the last time we saw Peter alive. Only a week later, he died in hospital from a sudden illness, surrounded by his family. He was only 50 years of age."

Sarah found the period after Peter's death very difficult.

“Peter told me once that he had wanted to die from the age of 11, and 39 years later he got his wish. Did God take him home? Did his lifestyle lead to his early death? Did the hospitals neglect to find something? I asked all of these questions but most of all I asked myself: if I had stayed with him would he still be alive?

“For months I blamed anyone and everyone. I demanded his hospital records from three hospitals, only to discover that I could not understand most of it. The bit I did understand told me about Peter’s other suicide attempts. I was filled with guilt as one of those attempts was on the day of our separation.

“We buried Peter with the dignity he deserved. In the following months I went to visit where he had lived and the horror of that place has never left me. How could my kind, loving husband have ended up here, in a little hostel flat that smelled of smoke and urine in the hall? I was heartbroken and the guilt was nearly killing me.

“One day, in blind panic, I rang the Rutland Centre and spoke to Austin. He was a director there at the time and used to do counselling sessions with me. He had also done couples counselling with Peter and me.

“I was crying and gabbling all sorts down the phone and Austin listened without saying anything. After I had calmed down, he said ‘Sarah, it was you or your husband. You just saved yourself and he chose not to.’

“In those few words, I knew what Austin said was true. Peter was unable to be totally honest in his recovery. He carried his family’s shame and his own. He was unable to speak about it or deal with it. You get one chance in life. In recovery, it’s life or death. If you’re not honest in EVERYTHING, you just won’t get it. Even after his death the insurance company refused to settle on the mortgage; they found some information in his medical history that I had been unaware of at the time of taking the policy out.”

Sarah has been working on her own recovery from the difficult experiences she has faced.

“After a few hard years, and with the help of my partner, we have got a new house, have lovely grandchildren and are happy with life. I know what it is like to have lost everything; hope, love, family, money, morals, home, marriage. I have also learned how to cherish all that now.

“If I was to change anything it would be to have ended my marriage early on when I knew it was over. Because I was afraid, I stayed. I held onto Peter with everything I had, trying to stop him going down the road I knew he was heading down.

“I should have let go of the reins and let him find his own way. Maybe when he was younger he might have made it work, I don’t know. I also would change the affair I had. For me, I lost who I was, my beliefs and my morals in that moment. I changed and I regret that.

“Peter was a very kind man who would go out of his way to help others and had a lovely nature. Looking back I can see we married each other because we wanted to save each other and be saved. Like attracts like. Sure what would you expect, only to be attracted to what you know.

“Denial has to be the most powerful feeling ever. It kept me in a place where it was all darkness, lies and deceit and yet I could see none of it. I had done all the courses, meetings, groups, but I still chose not to see what was in front of me.

“My husband is gone eight years and we still miss him and love him. Such waste of a lovely man. I hated the disease, not the person. The journey was a painful one and without the help and support from the Rutland Centre, I’m not sure i would have made it.”