

## The drug experience: heroin, part 10

**In his latest Background Briefing, Professor David Clark concludes his look at seminal research from the 1980s, which involved interviews with people who had recovered from heroin addiction without treatment.**

The research conducted by Patrick Biernacki, with 101 former heroin addicts, showed some of the courses that people take in their lives when they give up using the drug without the aid of treatment.

When people resolve to stop using heroin, they face a variety of problems that go beyond the cravings for the drug and the temptation to use again. These additional problems are related to their attempts to fashion new identities and social involvements in worlds that are not associated with drug use.

As Biernacki pointed out: 'The manner of termination and the course [or courses] that follow withdrawal from opiates are closely related to the degree that the addicts were involved in the world of addiction, to the exclusion of activities in other, more ordinary worlds, and to the extent that they had ruined conventional social relationships and spoiled the identities situated in them.'

Former users of heroin may be reluctant to engage with ordinary people because they feel socially incompetent and stigmatised, and they may feel shame and guilt for past actions. Society has a very low opinion of drug addicts, which creates a formidable barrier for those wishing to move on from their heroin addiction.

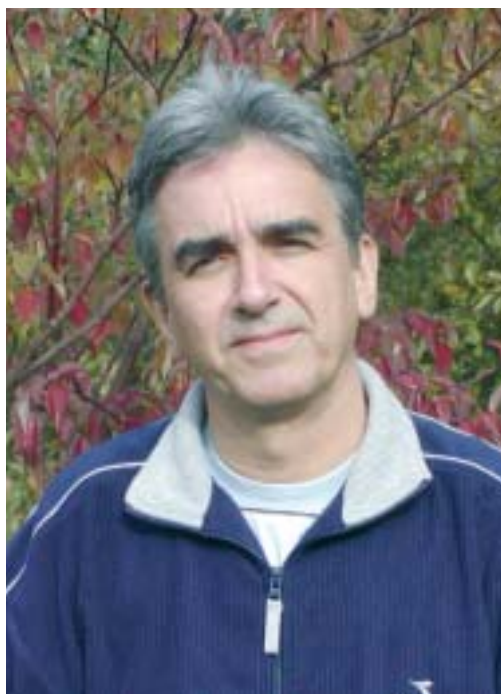
For some people, the transformation from being a problem heroin user to being a non-user can appear to happen abruptly and be quite simple. However, for many others the process is prolonged and very complex.

Biernacki described three major courses through which the interviewees naturally recovered from their addiction, involving different forms of identity transformation.

Some interviewees reverted to an old identity that had not been damaged too badly by the period of problematic heroin use. They had not ruined all their conventional relationships and therefore did not spoil the social identities situated in them. When they resolved to quit drug use, they attempted to re-establish an old relationship and revert to the identity rooted in it.

Other interviewees extended an identity that was present during the period of problematic heroin use and had somehow remained intact.

This course of transformation was typically taken by someone who managed to maintain other identities during their addiction – examples given were jazz musician and poet – that were not spoiled as knowledge of their addiction became widespread. Alternatively, the person may have compartmentalised different parts of their lives and maintained roles in



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social worlds unconnected to their drug use.

A third course of recovery involved the engagement of an emergent identity that was not present during or before the period of problematic heroin use.

Biernacki pointed out that a successful transformation of identity requires the availability of identity materials with which the non-addict identity can be fashioned. These identity materials are aspects of social settings and relationships (eg social roles, vocabularies) that can facilitate the construction of a non-addict identity and a positive sense of self. He emphasised that the availability of

these materials is in part related to the stigma associated with the addiction.

It is worth quoting the full last paragraph of this chapter of Biernacki's book, although I have broken it up into smaller paragraphs:

'Those addicts wishing to change their identities may first have to overcome the fear and suspicions of non-addicts before they will accepted and responded to in ways that will confirm their new status. Gaining the recognition and acceptance of the non-addict world often is a long and arduous process.

'Eventually, acceptance may be gained by the ex-addicts behaving in conventionally expected ways. Following "normal" pursuits, remaining gainfully employed, meeting social obligations, and possessing some material things will often enable non-addicts to trust the abstainer and, over time, to accept him and respond to him in "ordinary" ways.

'At the same time, the addict's feelings of uncertainty and doubt will lessen as he comes more fully to accept the new, non-addict life.

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Biernacki described several implications of his research in relation to therapeutic interventions. Firstly, addiction is not a uniform phenomenon, but rather, 'a variable condition reflecting different levels with the world of addiction and different courses of recovery'.

Secondly, addiction is not necessarily an irrevocable and everlasting affliction. Some people stop using heroin and do so through their own resolve and initiative.

Contrary to what might be expected, people who recovered on their own were relatively easy to locate and interview. Biernacki pointed out that natural recovery may be more common than often thought. Most of the people who recover on their own may not be socially visible because the stigma associated with heroin use prevents them from revealing this aspect of their lives.

Since these recovered addicts are not available as role models, people who currently have a heroin use problem rarely believe that they can successfully stop using drugs on their own.

*Recommended Reading: Patrick Biernacki (1986) Pathways from heroin addiction: Recovery without treatment. Temple University Press, US.*