

DARA: IRELAND

I am a 39 year old male from the midlands of Ireland. My background is middle class and affluent. My siblings are all high achievers in their various professions. I was well educated but was not particularly academic. I have always been interested in outdoor pursuits and I play the classical trumpet up to level six and piano to level eight. My career background is in catering. I trained as a chef in London. I moved to Germany in 1997.

In Germany, I ran a very successful pub and restaurant. I was in a relationship for seven years. My son, now 13, was born there and still lives there. I made a lot of money. I had, by any standards, an enviable lifestyle. I had a beautiful apartment and friends. I drove a nice car. Then I discovered cocaine and with incredible rapidity my life spiralled out of control. I became addicted to it very quickly. It suited my lifestyle. The catering trade is a high energy business and cocaine matched it. It is a drug that comes with a lifestyle of glossy consumerism that I found very attractive.

After I returned from Germany I was still addicted to cocaine; still under the illusion that I could live the same lifestyle as before without having the money to support it. Aside from the immediate material gains that a criminal act like burglary gives you there is also an undeniable adrenalin rush in carrying out a criminal act. Like everything else in my life I became addicted to that. I was arrested for burglary in 2009. Once I left prison I entered rehab. I felt that I had got my life back in order, but I then began to use legal highs from head shops and again my life spiralled out of my control. Once again I entered rehab and this time, with the exception of some alcohol related 'slips' I have managed to get my life back in order.

There is more than one reason why I decided to stop offending. One was simple fear. In the last years of my time on the continent I encountered some truly terrifying people in the drug world. I was lucky to have escaped from it because there was a very real possibility that I could have been killed.

Also, prison is a truly horrifying place and I have no desire to go back there. In there I felt isolated by my background as much as anything else. I managed to survive it and to be left alone because of my own physical fitness and strength and the fact that I was able to write letters for other inmates. There may be people who accept stretches in prison as an acceptable risk in their life as a 'career criminal', but I suspect that they are rarer than popular mythology would have you imagine.

Another reason was, of course, that I had finally isolated myself from my family who had had enough of my behaviour and decided to let me stew in it rather than bail me out. I can only imagine how difficult a decision that was for my parents to make. I don't believe for a moment that it was taken lightly, or out of anger. It was a hard earned life lesson and I am grateful for it. In the years since then I have managed to rebuild a very strong relationship with my parents, one based, this time, on mutual respect.

My son was also another reason for me to stop what was a ridiculously reckless and damaging lifestyle. These days I have a very good relationship with him. As he gets older and more aware I want him to have a father that he respects as well as loves.

Another thing that has helped me enormously in turning away from criminality was my experience with the probation services. I felt that I had entered into a contract with them which I was and am reluctant to break for any short term gain that an act of criminality would provide. With the probation services I felt that I was treated with respect and fairness, as a human being, rather than a 'case'. It was made very clear to me what was expected from me and I began to feel that it was possible to turn my life around. It helped that my probation officer and I come from similar backgrounds, so we understand each other; that we share qualities of aspiration. I feel I don't want to disappoint someone who has treated me with the utmost professionalism and respect. All through the process, I have had the strong impression that I am not merely being passed through the system. I am very clear about what is expected from me and I have found that my past failures, while obviously acknowledged, given the nature of the relationship, are not held against me as I move on in my life. We continue to have a very good relationship and share a very good rapport. Should

I fail at this point in the process of putting my life back in order I feel that I will have failed someone who has invested their time and professionalism into me as a person.

I've been an addict all my life. Cocaine, alcohol, amphetamines, 'Head Shop' highs etc are really only the physical manifestations of a personality trait. These days my addiction manifests itself in a fitness regime and an unswerving discipline. I can't do anything else. I don't actually know what would happen to me if I let this self imposed discipline slip. It may not be the ideal regime, but it is the only one I know.

I set high but achievable goals for myself and the only way I can achieve them is by living a life of extreme discipline and order. I have very little money; every cent is counted and accounted for. I eat carefully, and well, but frugally. My house is cold because I cannot afford to heat it properly. I cycle home (62 kilometres) every weekend. I intend when my current college course is finished to pursue a career in outdoor adventure sports and set up a business between Ireland and Germany, using the language and business skills I already possess and the new skills I intend to acquire.

I train rigorously every day. I rise at five in the morning, jog for ten kilometres, and then I cycle 16 km to my college. After college I go to the swimming pool and gym where I swim for at least an hour and do a gym workout for at least an hour, after this I cycle another 16 km home. Once home I cook, then study and retire at about 10.30 in the evening.

It is only by continuing this regime, by having every minute of the day accounted for, to have purpose and goals, can I keep myself from a life of chaos and anarchy. I have had some 'slips', as AA refers to them, and the results have been frightening enough for me to be determined not to have another.