

Mark, 30

Labourer, rigger, recovering addict & DARA rehabilitation advocate, OCEAN GROVE, VIC

Victorian labourer, rigger and recovering addict, Mark, 30, Ocean Grove, began dabbling in drugs at a young age.

By 12 years of age, he was smoking cigarettes. A year later, he was smoking marijuana. Influenced by many older kids at school, Mark soon began experimenting with other illicit substances, and by 15 years of age, was using ecstasy. By age 18, Mark was regularly using ecstasy and speed.

In his mid-20's, Mark was introduced to the methamphetamine, "ice," and spent the ensuing few years plunging deeper and deeper into drug use, which led to the destruction of many relationships, including the loss of his wife.

In July, 2015, after receiving a final job warning, Mark reached out in desperation to some of his colleagues at a work function, relaying his dire situation. Although none could quite fathom the extent of his drug abuse at the time, they offered their help to Mark, if and when he required it.

Mark spent most of the next weekend partying. The following Monday he woke up at 10am, and was almost certain he had lost his job.

However, given his earlier confession to work colleagues, and due to his hard work, his employer, the Construction, Forestry, Mining and Energy Union (CFMEU) informed him that in order to keep his job, he had to seek urgent help through rehabilitation.

In September, 2015, Mark boarded a plane bound for DARA, Thailand, determined to spend the next two months beating his addiction.

This is Mark's story.

"I'm very close to my Dad. He's my best mate," Mark said.

"When I was really into the drugs, I remember my Dad breaking down and crying.

"He's a strong man and very rarely cries, but on this occasion, he cried his eyes out and begged me to get help," said Mark.

"I remember sitting there blankly, feeling nothing. That's what drugs do to you. I got up, and said, 'I'm sorry mate,' and then I left."

Mark's experimentation with drugs began in high school, and grew over time. After dabbling with marijuana in his early teens, Mark embraced the nightclub and party scene, and began using drugs such as ecstasy and speed.

"I was 'well-connected', so was able to get drugs much cheaper and more easily than many people," Mark said.



However, it wasn't long until Mark's drug use became more frequent, and in his early 20's, Mark was using regularly at work, smoking and eating speed.

In 2009, Mark caught wind of "ice," and although he couldn't access it in Geelong, it was starting to penetrate nearby Melbourne.

"When ice entered Melbourne, I knew some people there, so was able to get it," said Mark.

"Soon I was hooked and was using regularly."

At the same time, Mark was working at a desalination plant in Wonthaggi, Victoria, and spending a lot of time away from home and his partner in Ocean Grove, returning only on weekends.

Often exhausted after returning home on weekends, Mark's partner, who was unaware of the full extent of his drug use, mistakenly attributed his exhaustion to long hours of hard work, rather than to lack of sleep due to being high on ice for the working week.

When at home, Mark would feign a sore stomach and sneak away from his fiancé to smoke, smoking and blowing the smoke into a fan filter in his bathroom.

In March, 2013, Mark experienced an almost fatal blow to the head, which led to a bleed on the brain, resulting in three near-death experiences. Serving as a major wake-up call, Mark chose to abstain from using drugs. However, his abstinence lasted only a month.

"I stayed off ice for about a month, but I had to start having brain scans which were making me anxious and stressed, so I got back on it," said Mark.

"I'd be sitting out the front of hospital in my car, about to have a brain scan, smoking ice. Eventually, my doctors stopped reporting on my brain scans."

Mark's next big wake-up call came with the breakdown of his marriage. After spending nearly a decade with a woman whom he married in July, 2013, Mark chose to abstain from drugs for nearly three months post-marriage.

However, at the first sign of trouble in his marriage, Mark soon plunged back into drugs – a dangerous addiction that once again, began spiraling out of control. Mark began lying to his wife and suffering from extreme mood swings and a serious change of character. His wife left him in March, 2014, seven months after they were married.

"When she left me, I flew to Broome to try to clear my head. I used a little bit up there too," Mark said.

"When I got back home, it hit me hard. I was hearing stories about my ex which were crushing. I tried to block them all out. It was probably the lowest point of my life."

Soon after returning home, Mark landed a new job and was working hard to improve his life. However he was persistently plagued by stories about his ex-wife, which plunged him deeper and deeper into a devastating spiral of drug use.

"I was using up to two grams of ice a day, and was starting to become immune to it," said Mark.

"So, I began using a new liquid version of GHB called 'Fantasy', to top it off. Things weren't good. I destroyed a car and was continuously letting work down, and soon I was on my final warning at work."

At a work function one evening, Mark's colleagues enquired about his health and wellbeing, to which he openly explained his drug use and need for help.

"I came clean to them. I had to tell someone about it all. They knew something was wrong from just looking at me," Mark said.

"I was falling asleep while trying to text on the phone. I hadn't slept in weeks."

Mark spent the ensuing weekend partying hard and the following Monday woke up at 10am after “a bender”. Assuming he had lost his job, Mark contacted his boss. However, he was surprised to hear that his boss wanted to help him by sending him to a rehabilitation clinic.

Around the same time, Mark heard about a leading, off-shore drug and alcohol rehabilitation facility based in Thailand, called DARA, from a friend who had returned home with glowing reports of spending three months’ rehabilitating at the facility.

“My friend, who had gone through DARA, was kicking goals back home. So I contacted DARA for help,” Mark said.

“I needed to get as far away from Australia as I could.”

The following week, in early September, 2015, Mark was on a plane heading for Thailand.

“I met some lovely people on the ferry on my way to DARA, Koh Chang, and was really eager to start my treatment, although I was still fairly out of it when I arrived.

“I was tested to see what drugs were still in my system, which was just about everything. But at least I had made the first step toward rehabilitation,” Mark recalled.

Mark spent the majority of his first few days at DARA asleep, while his assigned counselor contacted him regularly for meals and checked on him throughout the day. After the first few days, Mark began to participate in the various activities and classes offered by DARA.

“It was tough at first, and I didn’t understand the purpose of the classes, but I soon found myself relating to everyone and listening to their stories, and I started to recognise my own issues,” said Mark.

“I learned a lot. I had to write my life story and obituary to myself, which was really hard, but the DARA staff helped me through.

“I’m so thankful to everyone whom I met at DARA – the staff and all of the other amazing people who too, were facing their addictions, from all around the world. People in the same situation as me – people from whom I learned, and others whom I was able to help as well.

“DARA was a truly life-changing experience for me,” Mark said.

“DARA gave me a second chance at life that otherwise, I would have never had.”

Today, Mark is back home in Australia, continuing his recovery.

“My message to other Australians who are living with addiction is to realise that you’re not alone, and to reach out to others and ask for help,” said Mark.

“Help is available, and there is light at the end of the tunnel.

“I still have a long road to go, but I reached out to DARA for help, for which I’ll be eternally thankful,” Mark said.

“Now I need to walk the walk to full recovery.”

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For more information, or to coordinate an interview with Mark, please contact Kirsten Bruce or Mark Henderson from VIVA! Communications on + 61 (0)401 717 566 / + 61 (0)431 465 004.