

Claire's story

*Loving my body
it's taken some time
to look in the mirror
and see that I'm fine*

The best thing I ever did was to give my son up to my mum. Drugs, drink and men have been big problems in my life. My baby was best off out of it while I was working the streets.

Lying in hell houses. Sex at knifepoint with faces I don't care to remember but can still see when I close my eyes.

Money from men that bought my drugs. I took speed to lose weight. I was always thin in those days.

I was arrested 19 times for prostitution and loitering in public places. Fines and more fines. I must have paid £1,000 or more to the courts. I'd earn upwards of £20 a session from clients depending on what they wanted me to do. That was ten years ago, when I was 19. I did it for three-four years.

Doing things that no one with a shred of self-esteem would do in their nightmares. It's good that some of it is a blur now. But some of the pictures still live in my head.

If mum didn't take care of my baby then I would have lost him completely to social services. So I signed over the benefits books to her. She did him & me proud. He was only one year old. I got him back when he was two though.

I felt she sort of owed me though. Who took care of me when I was little? Seven men abused me when I was growing up. It started when I was seven. Where was she then? My dad disowned us when he left her. Or did she leave him?

Either way mum became an alcoholic. There were a lot of casual boyfriends passing through the house. They were abusive for her too. Dad remarried again but I haven't ever seen him since. By thirteen I was promiscuous and I'd go unconscious with alcohol. I started having temper tantrums and they stayed with me for the duration. I'm feel I'm managing myself a lot better now, though I do have some temper lapses.

I still drink too much. I've been arrested, charged and fined before for being drunk and disorderly.

I'm 30 soon – and I've pledged to myself to give it up completely on my birthday. I think I'm going to need some professional help because I've struggled with it lately.

The doctor says that I'm a binge drinker. I can go without, and then when I have a drink I don't know when to stop. I drink when problems get too much. That's when I took drugs too. But I think it is more of a habit nowadays.

I have been clean of drugs for five months. It has been a choice for me. I still smoke too many cigarettes too.

I have been to counselling before but never stuck the course through. I've always reached a point where I just haven't wanted to go on with it. All a bit too much.

School was a good escape for me because the home life wasn't brilliant. There was no stability or consistency. We were left at home with various watchers while mum went to the pub. I started to wag off school at 14 when I was bullied & that's when things went rocky. So I left school with no qualifications. I've been on income support for most of my life.

I did get a certificate in parenting from the probation service through a course they ran for prostitutes.

I've got a six-year-old son now too. I wanted another baby so I went out and got pregnant. It was a casual thing. I don't have anything to do with either of my sons' dads.

I don't believe in abortion but I had one three years ago. It was a casual encounter again. It really messed me up. I just got more and more drunk and re-started on the speed then too. I went seriously downhill from then on.

I got arrested and convicted for possession of a knife in a public place. I'd threatened some people who were hanging round where I lived. I got 12 months Community Rehabilitation Order and a £55 fine.

It's made me stop and think. I've had to open everything up to my Probation Officer and look at my behaviour and the consequences. I am starting to make changes. My mum comes with me to see my Probation Officer and she is very supportive and we have become closer and positive together.

Through my Probation Officer I'm working on my basic skills training for English and maths qualifications and have been referred to a specialist alcohol counselling facility. And I've just started the Women's Programme too – I've heard good things about this. And already I can see how it will help me approach things differently. I've just started seeing a Community Psychiatric Nurse (CPN) to talk through things that have happened. We're going to work together more after the women's programme is finished.

So I'm hopeful about the future. I'd like to work for a charity in some role.

My son is 12 years old & back living with me. We love each other. I'm seeing someone too. He's a really good friend to me.

I've started to like myself more. I used to take speed for weight loss, I thought if I was slim I would be confident and manage things better. But though I lost weight, speed made me lose my friends and family too. Being thin didn't attract men because I never felt a nice person.

Since I've put weight on, I've had men wanting proper relationships with me – not just meaningless relationships - casual one-night stands. But they want to spend time with me and get to know me. My boyfriend likes me wobbles and all. I've started to think that men can like women for who they are, with hips and curves and the odd bulge. It's more real somehow.

I was very anti-man because of past abuse. But now I feel much warmer and more sincere towards them. I can appreciate that they have feelings like me. My boyfriends tells me when I have hurt his feelings and so it makes me think twice about how I am with him, as I know what it is like to have my feelings hurt.

The answer between men and women is communication. All the time as much as you can. If you don't talk about what is happening and how each other feels then that is when problems start. And I think it's just as important to do this when you first meet someone as when you've been together for many years.

I'm really going to make a go of things now.

Ends